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Sociology from a Distance: Remote Interviews and Feminist Methods

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many aspects of life, including how social scientists develop and conduct research. Transitioning to remote interview methods was one methodological adjustment made by many qualitative researchers. In this article, we draw on in-depth interviews (N=106) and fieldnotes from three qualitative research projects conducted remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which center the experiences of women across a wide range of topics. In this article, we consider the opportunities and challenges of remote interviewing as a feminist method of research, analyzing how remote interviews impact both those who participate in and conduct research. We find that remote interview methods offer potential advantages for conducting participant-centered research, as they provide an opportunity for new forms of emotional engagement and options for privacy. In addition, remote methods have the capacity to increase accessibility for both participants and researchers alike. As such, remote interview methods address several feminist methodological and epistemological concerns about qualitative social scientific research, including those related to accessibility, privacy, and relationality. We weigh these advantages with the unique challenges that remote interviewing brings, including potential technological difficulties and additional considerations regarding privacy. We conclude by discussing the future of remote interview methods and consider their ability to address structural factors that shape feminist qualitative research.

Keywords Qualitative Research · Remote methods · Feminism · Embodiment

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many qualitative researchers into new modes of data collection. While remote interview methods are not new, the pandemic

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prompted many scholars to employ them for the first time. Norms of research and taken-for-granted assumptions often portray remote interviewing as inferior to in-person interviewing, the traditional standard for qualitative interview research (Gerson and Damaske 2020; Orgad 2005; Owens 2022; Rubin and Rubin 2012). However, these norms are shifting, as the pandemic has pushed many qualitative social scientists to reevaluate and reconsider the value of remote methods (Averett 2021; Howlett 2021; Lane and Lingel 2022; Liegghio and Caragata 2021; Small 2022). Moreover, feminist sociologists have long urged social scientists to reflect on how normative methods in the discipline uphold institutional inequalities (Harding 1987; Smith 1987; Ward 2018). In this article, we contribute to the emerging conversation about remote methods in the wake of the pandemic by considering the opportunities and challenges of remote interviewing as a feminist research method.

We draw on data from three qualitative research projects conducted remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. These projects center the experiences of women across a wide range of stigmatized topics: access to abortion, child marriage[1], and polyamorous relationships. While the substantive areas of our projects are distinct, many of the challenges women face regarding these issues are exacerbated in the ongoing pandemic. For example, scholars document how the pandemic intensified many structural issues women face, including access to healthcare (Frederiksen et al. 2021), violence in intimate relationships (Piquero et al. 2021), and childcare support (Bariola and Collins 2021). Feminist methodologies center the needs of participants both in the design and implementation of research that involves inter-personal and community engagement (DeVault 1996: Hesse-Biber 2012; Sprague 2016). We engage this work by examining how remote interviewing may address a range of participant (and researcher) needs throughout the interview process.

In addition, we contribute to feminist scholarship that highlights how embodiment influences the interview process across many issues, including gaining access to participants, managing and processing trauma in the interview, and dealing with the potential for harassment and harm (González-López 2006; Hanson and Richards 2019; Winfield 2021). We follow feminist scholars who attend to the relationality of the interview process (González-López 2006; Oakley 1981; Sprague 2016) by examining the unique context of the remote interview. Furthermore, we also analyze how the remote environment impacted us as researchers living through the pandemic.

Using interviews from three projects (N=106), we explore the relationship between remote interviewing and ongoing feminist methodological considerations around privacy, access, and relationality. Apart from increasing accessibility for participants and researchers, remote interviews enabled participants and researchers to draw on additional options for privacy, which allowed participants to enact greater control over the interview process. However, these potential advantages must be moderated by some of the logistical challenges of remote interview methods and

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[1] Throughout this article, we use the term "child marriage" to refer to marriage including at least one person who is under the age of 18. This term is somewhat misleading, since most child marriages in the United States involve older adolescents between 15 and 17 years old who are not typically considered children. However, "child marriage" is the term used by policymakers, activists, and scholars to draw attention to the structural vulnerabilities that minors face within the institution of marriage, and we want for this research to honor their professional and intellectual legacies, so we use it here.

the risks of harm in remote approaches, including the ethical concerns of continuing research during a time of crisis for participants and researchers alike. We conclude by outlining the potential for remote interviewing as a tool for feminist research that may provide advantages for both participants and researchers.

Literature Review

The Gold Standard

In-person interviews are regularly referred to as the "gold standard" for interview research (Gerson and Damaske 2020; Orgad 2005; Owens 2022; Rubin and Rubin 2012). In *The Science and Art of Interviewing*, Kathleen Gerson and Sarah Damaske state, "Of course, online and phone interviews, even at their best, can only approximate the intimacy that in-person meetings make possible" (Gerson and Damaske 2020, 133). They argue that in-person interviews enable researchers to attune to participants' body language and facial expressions in ways that may not be possible during video- or phone-based interviews. In addition, they contend that in-person interviews make it easier to hold silences with interviewees, which is often important for encouraging participants' thoughtful reflection.

While this lens highlights some strengths of in-person interviews, it also presupposes in-person interviews as a pathway to greater intimacy than remote methods. In doing so, this approach ignores the ways participants may value different interview formats and how different modalities may promote closeness or trust through varying, but equally valuable, means. At the same time, interviews conducted online and via phone interview are gaining status, or at least frequency, and some have referred to them as valid research methods with their own advantages and disadvantages (Averett 2021; Hanna 2012; James and Busher 2012; Owens 2022; Stephens 2007; Thunberg and Arnell 2022). Efficient use of time and resources are among the advantages, as researchers can quickly connect with people across geographic locations and with minimal lost resources when interviews are canceled or rescheduled (Archibald et al. 2019; Deakin and Wakefield 2014; Hanna 2012; Sedgwick and Spiers 2009; Thunberg and Arnell 2022). Additionally, remote interviews can increase accessibility for researchers with disabilities (Wood 2017), safety for both the interviewee and interviewer (Deakin and Wakefield 2014), and privacy for populations who experience high levels of surveillance (Holt 2010). These concerns were particularly relevant during the pandemic, when researchers turned to remote methods in order to continue their research projects and reduce their risk of illness (Lane and Lingel 2022; Thunberg and Arnell 2022).

Remote methods also present certain disadvantages. Cin and colleagues (Cin et al. 2021) note that, while online interviewing allows for researchers to conduct international research more easily, researchers carry with them their own biases and may fail to recognize local place-based norms around interviewing, even in the online space which can appear deceptively "placeless." And although remote interviews may overcome barriers of transportation, access to fast internet and cellular data still renders accessibility as an axiom of inequality that shapes interview

samples (Cin et al. 2021). Additionally, the lack of visual cues or poor reception in phone interviews can interfere with communication over the phone (Archibald et al. 2019; Holt 2010; Stephens 2007; Thunberg and Arnell 2022).

Even so, other researchers find no substantive difference in quality between in-person and remote interviews. When Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) compared transcripts from phone interviews with those of in-person interviews, they found that across methods, interview transcripts were similar in length, key themes remained consistent, and the depth of responses to interview questions were comparable. In contrast, other research finds that remote methods offer certain advantages, particularly for sensitive topics. For example, interviewees may disclose more on sensitive subjects due to feelings of anonymity over the phone (AlKhateeb 2018; James and Busher 2012; Thunberg and Arnell 2022). Some participants may feel more open to sharing embarrassing or shameful stories if they can avoid the direct gaze of the researcher. Remote methods not only differ from in-person methods, but also from one another, with unique strengths and weaknesses between phone, video, and written online communication. While some researchers find that they prefer audio-only methods for sensitive topics, others worry that the lack of visual cues decreases the richness of their data (Thunberg and Arnell 2022). Taken together, the literature suggests that remote interviewing, like all other research methodologies, has unique advantages and disadvantages as a modality.

In their introduction to the special issue on digital ethnography in *Qualitative Sociology*, Lane and Lingel encourage scholars to think about the ways that "'the digital' points us to the need to update, rethink, and grow qualitative sociology" (2022, 319). In this paper, we contribute to "grow[ing] qualitative sociology" by considering how digital methods can align with feminist epistemologies. Feminist sociologists caution that disciplinary norms maintain systems of inequality (Collins 2000; Sprague 2016; Ward 2018). Further, some feminists suggest that new strategies are necessary for studying marginalized populations that are often excluded from or rendered invisible by social scientific research (Compton 2018; Moore 2018). We consider these challenges and opportunities for researchers and participants in our analysis of remote interviewing across three research projects.

Qualitative Interviewing and Feminist Methods

Feminist sociologists have made major interventions in how social scientists approach their research. In particular, in her foundational essay "Is There a Feminist Method?," Sandra Harding (1987) encourages social scientists to disentangle method, methodology, and epistemology in order to fully appreciate the contributions of feminist inquiry. While methods are the "techniques" of data collection, methodology is a theory of those techniques—an analysis of "how research should proceed" (Harding 1987, 2). Epistemology, then, is the broader theory of knowledge that informs those methodologies and methods (Collins 2000; Harding 1987). Joey Sprague builds on Harding's intervention, explaining that "a methodology works out the implications of a specific epistemology for how to implement a method" (2016, 5). Feminist epistemologies grapple with how power shapes the knowledge production process, with a focus on both methodologies and method (Collins 2000; DeVault 1996; Davis and Khonach

2020; Harding 2004; Luna and Laster Pirtle 2021). In this paper, we consider feminist epistemological concerns to further understand the method of the remote interview. We focus on one specific method, arguing that remote interviews are a valid and useful technique of qualitative inquiry, one with benefits and drawbacks. This method also addresses some epistemological concerns that feminists have long had about social scientific research, including accessibility, relationality, and privacy.

Feminist epistemologies emphasize the importance of grounding research in the standpoints of women and other people whose genders are marginalized in society (Collins 2000; Hesse-Biber 2012; Smith 1987). This means that, first and foremost, participation in interviews must be *accessible* to these individuals. Individuals who are white, middle and upper class, straight, and cisgender tend to be overrepresented in social scientific research (Brewer 1989; Compton et al. 2018). Often individuals from groups that have historically been underrepresented in or excluded from research are labeled "hard-to-reach" (Moore 2018). A major early intervention of feminist sociology was for researchers to go to women, meeting them in their homes to ask them relevant questions that mainstream sociology had ignored (Oakley 1981; Taylor 1996). Remote methods both extend and invert this precedent, allowing researchers to be virtually present in women's homes. In doing so, remote interview methods can be seen as a part of the legacy of feminist researchers creatively finding new ways to talk with and to listen to participants (DeVault and Gross 2012). Moreover, feminist epistemologies prioritize studying marginalized communities in order to align with these communities in seeking structural change (Collins 2000; Harding 1992; Hesse-Biber 2012; Oakley 1981; Smith 1987).

Researchers' own access to interviews has also been a concern of sociologists, since structural inequalities impact researchers who face marginalization, both within the discipline and in broader society. Structural factors lead to inequities in institutional support for qualitative research on marginalized topics (Compton et al. 2018), particularly research on sexualities, which Janice Irvine (2014) has argued constitutes a form of "dirty work" within sociology. We build upon feminist considerations of access by considering how remote methods impact access to interviews for both participants and researchers.

In this article, we attend to the process of interviewing, focusing on access and how power is distributed in research (see also Connell 2018; Fields 2016; Reich 2021). Interviews are relational, meaning that data is produced through the unique relationship between interviewer and respondent, which itself is mitigated by larger structural factors (DeVault and Gross 2012; Oakley 1981). This relational work is inherently embodied work. Researchers' embodied identities, as well as how they are positioned in relationship to power within intersecting systems of inequality, shape their relationships to participants (Adjepong 2019; Robinson 2022). Researchers also face the risk of racialized and gendered harm and harassment in the field site, highlighting the ways embodiment influences researcher interactions with participants (Adjepong 2019; Hanson and Richards 2019).

In addition to centering the well-being of participants, Black feminist epistemologies delineate the importance of attending to this relationality, promoting an ethic of care in research that understands interviews as intimate embodied experiences, attends to participant emotions, and considers ethics and values within

the research process (Collins 2000; Luna and Laster Pirtle 2021). Further, Gloria González-López's "mindful ethics" prompt us to remain "aware of the taken-for-granted social contexts and circumstances that shape research participants' lives," enabling us to "become more conscientious and alert to the emotional, physical and political safety and well-being" of participants (González-López 2011, 449). González-López (2011) notes that being responsive to unexpected circumstances and remaining flexible with data collection methods is key to enacting mindful ethics that best support participants. In this article, we extend feminist scholarship on emotions, relationality, and ethics in interview research, understanding how remote methods shape the interview experience for participants and researchers and have the power to address structural inequalities faced by participants and researchers.

One way that researchers center the well-being of participants is by respecting participants' desires around and/or concerns about privacy. Privacy is inextricably tied to participant safety and well-being. While this, of course, includes maintaining confidentiality (ensuring that there are no characteristics that could potentially identify participants included in research), feminists have also demonstrated that participants navigate privacy within the process of the interview itself. For example, in their interviews with Black women about police violence, Gonzalez and Deckard (2022) found that participants navigated privacy during interviews by requesting that the interviewer turn off the audio recorder when disclosing certain information. As participants speak about difficult and/or stigmatized topics, including violence, abortion, and sexuality, feminist researchers have prioritized attending to the privacy needs of their participants (Jones 2020; Linabary and Corple 2019; Meadow 2018). In this paper, we consider how the remote environment shaped how both participants and researchers navigated and negotiated privacy prior to and during interviews. More broadly, we analyze to what extent remote interview methods are aligned with feminist methodological considerations regarding access, relationality, and privacy.

Methods

When in-person research came to a halt in the spring of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were all in various stages of qualitative data collection. To continue our research, most of us made significant modifications to our study protocols, both for our own health and for that of our research participants. The following analysis emerged from a series of conversations about methodological and professional concerns for research conducted remotely. Since disciplinary norms suggest that in-person interviews are superior to remote interviews, we worried about the quality and legitimacy of our projects. In spite our collective concern, over the course of the pandemic, we discovered that this new mode of socially distanced research presented new opportunities for practicing feminist ethics of care. In particular, we found remote interviews useful when discussing gender-based violence, a topic that spanned our projects. We began to recognize the distinct ways in which the remote environment shaped the interviewer-respondent relationship and the data that was co-constructed in this remote context.

This article represents the culmination of those discussions. We draw from interview transcripts and analytical memos to illustrate the methodological and ethical

strengths of sociology from a distance. We provide a behind-the-curtain view of data collection from three separate research projects, described in Table 1. Collectively, we conducted 106 remote interviews with women on stigmatized topics. The interviewers consist of two white women (Broussard and O'Quinn) and one white non-binary person (Goldstein-Kral). One of us (Broussard) was pregnant and gave birth while conducting interviews, the analytical significance of which we discuss in our findings section.

Broussard conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the flow of information and resources among women seeking abortion near the US-Mexico border. She interviewed 55 women between the ages of 17 and 41 who attempted to end a pregnancy outside of the formal healthcare setting, an event known as self-managed abortion. Over half of the sample identified as Hispanic or Latina (n=30), 11 as white, 1 as Black, 3 as Asian, and 6 as multi-racial or other. Sixteen participants were born outside of the United States and 16 completed the interview in Spanish. Participants were given the option to participate in the interview via phone (n=51) or Zoom (n=4).

Goldstein-Kral's project investigates power in polyamorous relationships through an analysis of decision-making, emotion work, and domestic labor. Following a series of in-person focus-groups, Goldstein-Kral transitioned to remote interviews. They conducted separate interviews with 20 women in polyamorous relationships (which we draw on in this article) and 10 of their partners. Participants were between the ages of 22 and 48 and were living in Central Texas at the time of study. Nine participants chose to complete the interview over Zoom and 11 chose phone interviews. Four participants identified as Asian, 3 as Black, 4 as Hispanic or Latina, and 9 as white.

O'Quinn's project describes the sexual life histories of 34 women who were married before the age of 18 in the USA. Her participants ranged in age from 13 to 17 years old at the time they were married and 18 to 83 years old at the time of the interview. Twenty-four participants identified as white, 4 as Hispanic or Mexican American, and 3 as multi-racial. Three interviews were conducted in-person before the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining 31 interviews that we draw on in this paper consist of 16 phone interviews, 14 Zoom interviews, and 1 interview that was completed via a written form online, the unique circumstances of which we discuss in our findings section.

For the purposes of this methods paper, we engaged in flexible coding, in which the development of codes resulted from iterative reflections between our discussions with each other, the data, and the literature (Deterding and Waters 2021). We discussed our experiences conducting remote interviews, including surprises about the process, benefits that appeared, and what troubled us about this developing method. Through these discussions, we identified three themes of participant access, privacy, and relationality, which mirrored central concerns of research on feminist methods. We coded our interview transcripts by identifying data that pertained to these themes and reviewed our analytical memos and fieldnotes based on the codes generated in the interview transcripts. We also coded the mode of communication and instances in which data emerged in ways that were unique to the remote interview process (e.g., a child appearing on the screen and a subsequent

Table 1 Demographic Table

Author	Project Topic	Sample Description	N	Age Range	Highest Level of Education Completed	Race and/or Ethnicity	Remote Method
Broussard	Women's experiences of self-managed abortion in the United States	Women living in the United States near the Mexican border who attempted to end a pregnancy outside of the formal healthcare setting	55	17-41 years	High school or less: (n=21) Some college /Associate degree: (n=18) Bachelor's degree: (n=13) Graduate degree: (n=3)	Asian (n=3) Black (n=1) Hispanic or Latina (n=30) Multi-racial or other (n=6) white (n=9)	Phone (n=51) Zoom (n=4)
Goldstein-Kral	Women's experiences of polyamorous relationships	Women in central Texas who are in a relationship that allows for more than one sexual/romantic tie	20	22-48 years	High school or less: (n=1) Some college /Associate degree: (n=4) Bachelor's degree: (n=7) Graduate degree: (n=8)	Asian (n=4) Black (n=3) Hispanic or Latinx (n=4) white (n=9)	Phone (n=11) Zoom (n=9)
O'Quinn	Women's experiences with child marriage in the United States	Women who were married under the age of 18 in the United States.	31	18-83 years	High school or less: (n=4) Some college /Associate degree: (n=14) Bachelor's degree: (n=6) Graduate degree: (n=7)	Hispanic or Mexican American (n=4) Multi-racial (n=3) white (n=24)	Phone (n=16) Zoom (n=14) Online form (n=1)

conversation about childcare). Next, we discussed our codes and initial findings as a research team. Within these conversations, we found that our own experiences of these themes were also key to understanding the intersection of remote methods and feminist methodologies. We found this non-linear method to be useful for coding such expansive data from diverse research projects.

Findings

Access to the Interview

Remote interviewing techniques allowed us to connect with people we otherwise might have been unable to interview, including mothers with family care and paid work responsibilities and participants living in rural or isolated geographic locations. In this section, we trace how the remote environment allowed participants to access the interview and made the research more accessible for us as researchers.

During the pandemic, many people navigated health issues, fluctuating childcare responsibilities, and other scheduling conflicts. Despite these ongoing challenges, and to our surprise, our respondents still wanted to participate in the interview process. Many identified their participation as a form of activism, indicating their hope for their story to contribute to social change. For example, when O'Quinn asked Alice[2] (58 years old, white, college graduate) why she decided to participate in the research study, she stated, "I've been involved in some lobbying for laws to ban child marriage in the US and things like that. So, I would do anything to help this be more understood." One participant (Kendra, 38 years old, white, some college), told Broussard that she hoped her participation would help dispel stigma for other women seeking abortion, stating:

> The reason why I spoke out on this particular survey is because I really hope that at some point abortion is no longer a topic of conversation. It's taboo.... [People] should know that there are people out there that care, that will help them, but we shouldn't have to do it privately. We shouldn't have to do it secretly.

Repeatedly, women told us their hopes that participation would lead to increased understanding and might influence policy changes to improve other women's lives. Therefore, for many of our participants, being a part of our research represented a form of political action that they prioritized despite the ongoing global crisis.

When our participants were sick and still wanted to continue to participate in an interview, remote methods made that possible. For example, one of Goldstein-Kral's participants reached out right before their scheduled interview time to alert them that she was not feeling well. When Goldstein-Kral confirmed that the participant wanted to move forward, she explained that she would still prefer to do the

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[2] All participant names that appear in this article, including those of participants' cats, are pseudonyms.

interview since she would be sick at home either way. Similarly, one of Broussard's respondents received a positive COVID test immediately before their interview over the phone. After Broussard suggested that they reschedule, the respondent declined, saying that she still wanted to participate. When these instances occurred, we were surprised that our participants still wanted to be interviewed. We were concerned about the potential for remote methods to contribute to the exploitation of participants, enabling them to engage in this labor even when ill. However, we ultimately chose to entrust our participants with the decision and honor their desires to participate, especially since many identified their participation as politically motivated.

Remote methods also allowed participants to juggle interviewing and childcare responsibilities simultaneously. Each of us saw and/or heard children in the background while conducting remote interviews. During Goldstein-Kral's interview with Susan (38 years old, white, graduate degree), a 7-year-old child popped into the frame several times to look at the screen and see who was on the Zoom call. It was clear to Goldstein-Kral that Susan, a stay-at-home mom of three, was caring for multiple children throughout the interview.

When scheduling her interview, one of O'Quinn's respondents (Taylor, 35 years old, white, some college) said that her scheduling was flexible but that she had "a lot of kids," so weekdays and an interview over the phone worked best for her. As O'Quinn documented in her fieldnote after the interview,

> I could hear the baby crying intermittently throughout the interview, as well as other kids coming in and out of the room and asking her questions. It hit me again how I'm not sure if I would have been able to do this interview if it wasn't remote, as Taylor had so many childcare responsibilities, especially with a 1-month old baby, and likely wouldn't have been able to make an in-person interview and leave her kids at home.

We conducted multiple interviews like this one, which were only possible because our participants were able to take care of children while being interviewed.

As with most people in the USA who have had abortions, most of Broussard's respondents were mothers (n=29), and they were often at home with their children during the interviews. In a fieldnote after her interview with Aleah (29 years old, multi-racial, some college), she explains,

> I conducted this interview over the phone at night. [Aleah] is a mom of 3 and just recently gave birth to her third, whom she was holding throughout the interview. I could hear the baby crying and cooing a lot at the beginning of the call, but the respondent didn't seem to mind. She was very calm, open, and easy to talk to throughout the interview.

As researchers, we were repeatedly grateful that remote interviewing offered the flexibility for our respondents to be able to participate in interviews while also taking care of children.

Remote interviews also allowed flexibility in format. Some of our participants preferred interviews over the phone, finding this technology to be more accessible

than Zoom. For example, one of O'Quinn's participants (Ingrid, 83 years old, white, post-graduate or professional degree) preferred doing a phone interview to Zoom because she was not comfortable using video chat technology. Ingrid explained, "I've never been able to get the Zoom working." Other participants preferred Zoom to phone interviews. Another of O'Quinn's participants (Faye, 49 years old, white, some college) preferred video calls because it is "more personal" and "you can see people's reactions and facial expression." Broussard found that although she offered interviews via phone or through Zoom with optional video, the overwhelming majority chose to interview by phone (n=51/55) because it did not require them to obtain a strong, wireless internet connection and allowed for more privacy. We discuss the specific benefits of remote interviews for privacy in the next section.

Remote interviews also enabled us to conduct our research amidst an array of everyday and pandemic-related challenges, including conducting interviews when navigating our own health-needs and care responsibilities. Broussard became pregnant at the beginning of the pandemic, which was also when she had planned to begin her fieldwork. Remote interviewing relieved pressures around scheduling and traveling while pregnant, and later when she had an infant to care for at home. Conducting in-person interviews at this time would have required Broussard to travel shortly after giving birth. While remote interviews are no substitute for structural support for parents in the form of paid time off and subsidized childcare, they do provide people caring for children and recovering from childbirth greater flexibility for navigating constraints that impact their ability to carry out research—constraints that feminist research has shown disproportionately impact women.

In addition to adopting remote interviews for our projects, two of us shifted our research scope because of the pandemic. We found that this shift allowed us to be more flexible in research design and broaden the geographical scope of our research projects. Upon adopting remote methods, O'Quinn transitioned her project to interviewing women who had been married as minors across the country, instead of just three communities in Texas as she originally planned. Traveling across the country to do in-person interviews would not have been feasible given financial and logistical constraints, but remote interviewing made it possible for her to interview women from diverse geographic locations. Similarly, Broussard expanded the scope of her project. She originally planned to travel to three cities near the US-Mexico border and conduct as many interviews as possible within a two-week period in each city. Remote interviews offered more flexibility, allowing her to take more time to reflect on the interview questions and structure between interviews, as well as interview women in California on the same day that she interviewed a participant in Texas. Remote interviews, then, benefitted the larger research goals.

Remote interview methods enabled us to navigate the material conditions that often inhibit people from marginalized groups from participating in and conducting research. We find that remote interviews allowed participants to share their stories despite ongoing health concerns, childcare and family responsibilities, and unexpected travel. In addition, participants were able to choose between different remote platforms (e.g., telephone, Zoom) to meet their specific preferences and needs. Remote methods enabled us to navigate similar constraints, particularly regarding care responsibilities, and allowed us to reach a wider pool of participants

by expanding the scope of our research projects. Taken together, these examples demonstrate how remote methods shape both participants' and researchers' access to interviews.

Privacy

In addition to broadening access to interviews, the use of remote methods also fundamentally shaped the experience of the interview process for both researchers and participants. One way the remote environment shaped these experiences was in how participants and researchers navigated privacy during interviews. Remote interviews generate different options for privacy, allowing participants to adjust aspects of the interview to align with their preferences and comfort. Since data was collected during the height of the pandemic when we were sheltering in place, most respondents participated in interviews from their homes. In the case of video interviews, participants established privacy and exerted control over the interview process by dictating what researchers could see in their homes during interviews. For example, one of Goldstein-Kral's participants (Amy, 27 years old, white, some college) mentioned that she had decorated a corner of the house as a "Zoom corner" for her and her partner to use for online meetings. The corner was well-lit and the patterned background created texture on the Zoom image without showing much of the house. In displaying this space and commenting on it, Amy revealed the gendered labor she did in its curation while also presenting her home in a restricted manner that she controlled. By comparison, in-person interviews either require participants to travel, imposing a degree of labor for the participants, or they require participants to allow researchers into their homes or personal spaces, which can be a physically and emotionally vulnerable experience.

Other participants controlled whether and to what extent to show their faces in interviews. For interviews across modalities, it is often easier for individuals to share their stories with strangers than people they know (Small 2017). Remote interviews take this one step further, allowing participants to share their stories to a stranger while also remaining invisible or less visible to the researcher while doing so, which may make them feel more comfortable opening up about sensitive topics. In an email before an interview with Broussard, one respondent (Cecily, 23 years old, Hispanic, some college) requested a phone-based interview, saying: "I still see my situation as very private, and although I want to help and participate, I don't want to show my face." In another of Broussard's interviews, Sofia (27 years old, Hispanic, some high school) stated that she was concerned about the stigma of abortion and strategically positioned herself in relation to the camera, making only the upper half of her face visible. This allowed her to see Broussard's face and show Broussard some of her face while simultaneously maintaining more privacy. This control is particularly important for participants from marginalized groups, who may feel they will be judged by the researcher for the state of their home.

In addition to establishing privacy from the researcher, participants also exerted control over the degree of privacy they achieved from family, neighbors, and community members during remote interviews. However, the level of privacy they were

able to achieve was shaped by the material conditions of their living situations, which sometimes presented challenges for participants and researchers to navigate. For example, participants had varying access to spaces that they felt afforded them enough privacy. One of O'Quinn's participants (Olivia, 18 years old, white, some college) could not participate in a phone or video interview because she was quarantining at home with her extended family, and did not have access to a private space where she would not be overheard. Rather than omit Olivia from the study, O'Quinn interviewed her via two online surveys consisting of open-ended questions. The first included O'Quinn's initial interview questions, and the second consisted of follow-up questions and probes based on Olivia's initial responses. Although this interview may not have provided the same level of detail and opportunities for probing that a phone or video interview might have, it did allow O'Quinn to capture Olivia's unique experiences, which otherwise would not have been included in the study. Jolene (56 years old, white, high school graduate), another one of O'Quinn's participants, noted that her apartment complex had thin walls, so she participated in a phone interview from her car so that her neighbors could not overhear her. However, because she was using the air conditioning, Jolene's car battery died during the interview and she needed to call roadside support to have it jumped before the interview could continue. While remote interviews can offer additional options for privacy, privacy is an unequally distributed resource. As our participants made decisions about how to engage in interviews with privacy in mind, new challenges sometimes emerged for how to find suitable spaces from which to participate in the interview.

Participants navigated the issue of privacy during interviews in unique ways that revealed different understandings of and relationships to privacy. For example, Broussard's participant, Aleah (29 years old, multi-racial, some college), was interrupted by her son during her phone interview and continued by answering Broussard's questions with simply "Yes" or "No" until he left, rather than openly talk about her abortion in front of him. Alternatively, another of Broussard's participants, Jacinta (33 years old, Hispanic, college graduate), drove around town and ran errands during the phone interview but still gave rich, detailed responses, seemingly unbothered discussing her self-managed abortion in public.

The experiences referenced above demonstrate the flexibility and challenges that remote interviews can offer in terms of privacy. Researchers are often taught that it is their job to anticipate and protect participants from any potential breach in privacy during interviews. In fact, it is an explicit requirement from Institutional Review Boards to consider this before beginning research with human subjects. While we took seriously the protection of participants' confidential data, we also trusted our participants as experts in their own safety and invited them to make their own decisions about privacy during the interview.

To do so, each of us provided participants with a description of what topics we would be discussing in the interview during our scheduling conversations. This practice is standard for obtaining informed consent—making sure that participants know exactly what participation in the research study will entail before deciding to take part—but we also found that alerting participants to the topics that would be covered ahead of time enabled them to determine the time and location of the interview based on what level of privacy they desired in the context of

our specific interview topics. As a result, participants could make determinations around comfort, privacy, and convenience without the interviewer controlling what privacy "should" look like. For Aleah, discussing her self-managed abortion was something she was comfortable doing with her children at home but not with her child in the same room. For Jacinta, openly discussing her self-managed abortion at the grocery store provided no discomfort.

Remote interviews also offered researchers greater privacy while conducting interviews. Phone interviews provide researchers with privacy to react without having to consider the impact of their facial expression or body language on the participant. This can be especially useful when the researcher may disagree with participants or experience discomfort during the interview. For example, during an interview, one of Goldstein-Kral's participants (Isabella, 28 years old, white, graduate degree) described her difficulty with using they/them pronouns, continuously misgendering someone throughout the interview. For Goldstein-Kral, who is nonbinary and uses they/he pronouns, listening to Isabella mis-pronoun someone while discussing her difficulty gendering them correctly caused them discomfort. However, conducting the interview over the phone allowed Goldstein-Kral to privately react, which they found more comfortable. In a fieldnote, they wrote, "It was nice to just be able to have my emotional reaction in my face and not worry about managing it in the moment. Then I had time to recompose my tone and respond."

The privacy to react that phone interviews offer researchers is also valuable for situations in which researchers learn about violence. Broussard interviewed Genevieve (18 years old, Hispanic, high school graduate), who disclosed that when she was 16 years old and attending a residential youth treatment facility, she had sex with one of the counselors. In a fieldnote, Broussard wrote:

> I was feeling really angry about the situation with her partner—the fact that he was a staff member of the treatment facility and was having sex with somebody under his care was infuriating. Genevieve mostly defended him and described him as a really nice person who would give his number out to students whom he felt he could trust. This made me feel sick when I heard it.

In this interview, Broussard felt angry at the counselor. Conducting this interview over the phone allowed Broussard to react in a way that may have been visible in her facial expressions without displaying this response to Genevieve, who may have felt judgment or shame at Broussard's emotional response.

Goldstein-Kral had a similar experience when interviewing Analyn (27 years old, Asian, bachelor's degree), who described experiencing controlling behaviors in her current relationship. In a fieldnote, Goldstein-Kral writes:

> I had trouble staying "present" in this interview. She brought up multiple indicators of intimate partner violence and knowing that the situation was ongoing and hearing that she had no intention or want to leave the relationship was really hard.… I don't know what my facial response was and if the interview were to be in person, I'm worried that my facial expressions could have come-off as judgmental or disturbed.

In this interview, it was easier for Goldstein-Kral, and perhaps beneficial for Analyn, to be speaking over the phone. Here, Analyn was able to tell her story without seeing Goldstein-Kral's reaction. The privacy afforded by phone interviews holds space for researchers to have emotional responses that can remain hidden to participants, allowing for the interview to remain centered on the participants' experience.

Taken together, these examples show several benefits of remote methods for shaping participants' and researchers' experiences of the interview. In particular, the flexibility of remote interviews allows respondents to tailor the amount of privacy they have during the interview to fit their needs, although their options for doing so are constrained by their unique circumstances. Phone interviews also allowed researchers to privately process and react to participants' stories. In the next section, we show how participants and researchers established intimacy and related to one another in the remote environment, which is inextricably linked with our attention to our embodied needs.

Relationality

It may seem counterintuitive to examine the embodied experience of remote interviews, as remote methods are often framed as a dis-embodied experience, inhibiting rapport or the observation of a participant and/or their environment. Our evidence challenges this perspective, demonstrating opportunities for individual bodily autonomy and control, as well as personal connection. In addition to providing participants with different options to control their privacy than are available during in-person interviews, remote interviews also provided participants with greater control over what comforts they could access during the interview and how they might orient themselves in space. Far from impeding rapport, which is often how remote methods are framed by researchers, we were able to establish intimacy with our participants, as well as attend to our own emotional safety and privacy during the interview process.

For example, one of O'Quinn's participants (Ava, 31 years old, white, college graduate) was nervous at the onset of the interview. Participating via Zoom on her phone, Ava spent the beginning of the interview pacing around her home, moving in a circular path through the living room and into the kitchen and back again. About 25 minutes in, she asked:

> Ava: …do you mind if I smoke while we speak?
> O'Quinn: Oh, not at all! Yeah, oh my gosh.
> Ava: It usually helps with settling my nerves. *(chuckles)*

At this point, Ava sat down in front of her unlit fireplace and began smoking a cigarette. Immediately, she exhibited more comfort in her body language and began giving longer, more detailed responses to the interview questions. Because tobacco use is rarely permitted indoors and is stigmatized in the USA, it is possible that Ava would not have felt comfortable requesting to smoke if the interview had been in-person. In this case, participating in the interview remotely allowed Ava to draw

on strategies she had already developed that made her feel more comfortable when sharing her experiences with gender-based violence.

Another participant, Donna (66 years old, Native American and white, postgraduate or professional degree), described her surroundings at the beginning of the interview prior to recording. O'Quinn documented this interaction in a fieldnote:

> We laugh and talk a bit about the weather…. She tells me she's sitting outside on her porch with a full pot of coffee and is enjoying the sunlight. I can hear birds chirping in the background and I'm grateful again for remote interviews…

Donna was able to share details of her life over the phone with a stranger while enjoying a cup of coffee in a place that made her feel comfortable and relaxed. Taken together, the flexibility of remote interviewing grants respondents the ability to wander around their home while they talk, to drink or eat what they would like, and to access the comforts of home.

While remote interviews are often perceived to present greater challenges for rapport-building than in-person interviews, participants expressed feeling closeness and openness with the interviewers. When reflecting on the experience of participating in the interview, Sofia (27 years old, Hispanic, some high school) told Broussard:

> I know I don't know you, but I think—like, I'm having a conversation with a friend that's listening to me and not judging me. That's something that I didn't have. I couldn't talk to anyone. All the things I've mentioned, some of the stuff no one knows, and it's the first time I've opened myself up about it…. It's nice to let it out, so I want to thank you for that. I didn't honestly think it [the interview] was going to happen.

Here, Sofia explains the importance of participating in the interview in dispelling stigma about abortion in general and self-managed abortion in particular. Like many in-person interviews, Sofia's phone interview enabled her to speak about her experiences without fear of judgment, the process of which she describes as therapeutic and like "having a conversation with a friend."

One of O'Quinn's participants (Elena, 33 years old, Hispanic, some college) spoke explicitly to experiencing closeness during their phone interview even without being able to see O'Quinn. As they ended their call, Elena said:

> I didn't know what to expect. But um, I feel good, I feel empowered. I'm very… I know I don't know you. I don't know how old you are. I don't know anything about you, but I feel like I'm proud of you.

Here, Elena notes how little she knows about O'Quinn. She does not know what she looks like or how old she is, both of which would have been clearer if the interview had been over video or in-person. Elena references that not knowing this information did not impede her ability to feel empowered by the interview process; in fact, despite not knowing O'Quinn, she mentions that she is proud of her and the research project. Moreover, it is possible that Elena, who occupies many different social positions than O'Quinn, might not have felt this level of closeness had the interview

been conducted in-person or with video, since O'Quinn's social location as a white, queer woman would have been more readily apparent.

In some cases, remote interview methods enabled participants to share intimacy with researchers that they might not have had otherwise. For example, O'Quinn and her participant Alice (58 years old, white, college graduate) discovered an unexpected commonality that was prompted by Alice's cat interrupting them approximately 2 ½ hours into their Zoom interview. When discussing adopting her children, Alice said:

> Alice: We adopted them seven and a half years ago, and their trauma was very triggering to me. I did not get into therapy until after we adopted. *(meow in the background)*
> O'Quinn: Okay, yeah, so it was triggering.
> Alice: Oh, big-time. I did not expect it. I didn't know my husband... *(cat walks into frame)* Oh, that's Eddie.
> O'Quinn: Oh, did you say Eddie?
> Alice: Mm-hmm.
> O'Quinn: My cat's name is also Eddie.
> Alice: Really?!
> O'Quinn Yeah! …. my Eddie is also a Siamese.

After chatting for a few moments about their cats of the same breed with the same name, they discovered another commonality:

> O'Quinn: Yeah, so we have a Lynx Point and we have a Seal Point like your Eddie, but her name—
> Alice: Yeah, we have Melody. Melody is our—
> O'Quinn: *(shocked tone)* No, you don't.
> Alice: Is your [other] cat Melody, too?
> O'Quinn: Melody. Melody and Eddie are my two cats.
> Alice: That's my cats' name!
> O'Quinn: Oh my God, Alice. That's so nuts. Yeah, our Seal Point, she's Melody.
> Alice: Wow…. Yeah, that is funny! Oh, wow. That's hilarious, actually. That's weird.

In the interview, O'Quinn and Alice were able to bond over the fact that they both had two Siamese cats with the same names. While O'Quinn and Alice would have likely shared this connection had the interview been conducted in-person in Alice's home where the cats were present, it is very possible that the topic would not have come up if the interview had taken place in any other location. The remote environment, therefore, provided an opportunity for O'Quinn and Alice to connect based on their shared experiences and further build rapport.

For other participants, remote interviews also allowed them to construct the researcher in ways that were useful for them. For example, when talking with Broussard about her experience seeking information about abortion care at an OBGYN clinic, Jacinta (33 years old, Hispanic, college graduate) described

feeling very uncomfortable being around pregnant women and children in the waiting room. Jacinta stated that the staff member behind the counter used the pregnant women in the waiting room to shame her for her desire to obtain abortion information:

> It felt like she was looking at me like I was a sinner, or I don't know. She said, "No, no, no. We can't help you here." And there were many pregnant women there and people with their babies. And she told me, "Look! There are people here with their children!"… She was giving me a really bad look.

At the time of the interview, Broussard was 8 months pregnant, a fact that would have been evident if the interview had been conducted in person and may have discouraged Jacinta from sharing this particular experience. In addition, since Jacinta mentioned that she was not comfortable obtaining information about abortion services around pregnant women, it is also possible that Jacinta would not have been comfortable speaking with a pregnant woman about her experience of self-managing an abortion, impeding her participation in the interview altogether. Jacinta's story demonstrates one way that participants may make assumptions about researchers during phone interviews, as well as how those assumptions potentially shape their stories.

These assumptions have the potential to shape not only participants' decisions to disclose their stories, but also how they frame their stories when they do disclose. For example, when discussing her dating history during their phone interview, Donna (66 years old, Native American and white, post-graduate or professional degree) told O'Quinn: "I will never understand women." When O'Quinn probed, Donna said:

> Men are simple. Men really are simple. Men tend to say what they actually think. Women are fucking complicated! Women are complex. Most women do not say what they mean. Most women want you to figure *out* what they mean [emphasis hers]. Most women expect that because you love them, you will know what they mean, even though they've never said it … women expect men to know what they're thinking and feeling without ever telling them. Well, women do that with women too! *(laughs)*

Here, Donna, who identifies as a lesbian, uses broad generalizations to explain to O'Quinn how she understands dating women. Regarding this portion of the interview, O'Quinn wrote in an analytical memo:

> I really got the sense that Donna was letting me in on a secret about dating/being in relationships with women. I think that likely because I'm a woman doing a research project on different-gender marriages that she thought I was a straight woman or didn't know anything about dating women.

Because the interview was conducted over the phone, Donna did not see any of visual cues that often signal O'Quinn's queerness to other people in the LGBTQ+ community, such as her short hair, tattoos, and facial piercings. Thus, by participating in the interview on the phone, it may have been more likely for Donna to

assume that O'Quinn had not had experience dating women, and therefore, provide a richer and more detailed explanation about the differences she attributes to dating men and women. Despite assertions that the inability to see someone during a phone interview impedes intimacy, our interviews with Jacinta and Donna reveal that participants disclosed stories and opinions that they might not have, given that their statements implicated the researcher's identity, presentation, or parenthood status.

These examples shed light on the ways in which remote environments impact how participants and researchers relate to one another and navigate the embodied realities of socially distanced communication. In particular, remote interviews provided participants with the ability to draw on comforting practices during interviews and construct the researcher in ways that were useful for them. We found that these modes of relation did not impede rapport or intimacy, but rather facilitated new forms of intimacy between participants and researchers.

Discussion and Conclusions

As feminist qualitative scholars, we learn about participants' perspectives, how they view their worlds, and the stories they want to tell using a variety of methods, each with advantages and disadvantages. While we felt ambivalent about asking women to participate in our research projects during a time of crisis—when they were already overburdened with care responsibilities and often facing health crises and/or precarious employment—we recognize that the social issues and contexts that structure women's lives did not stop due to COVID-19. In fact, many were exacerbated due to the pandemic, rendering sociological research more important than ever.

For Broussard's participants, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated health inequalities by creating additional barriers to abortion care (Aiken et al. 2020). People seeking abortion encountered greater risk of COVID-19 infection by seeking clinic-based care, and many were forced to reckon with state policies that effectively suspended abortion access (Bayefsky et al. 2020; Sobel et al. 2020). The pandemic also compelled many people who engage in polyamorous relationship structures—which often span multiple households—to make challenging decisions around which partners to see, especially at early stages in the pandemic when US health officials recommended reducing connections to only those in one's household (Manley and Goldberg 2021). Child marriage rates have also risen globally since the onset of the pandemic due to school closures and food insecurity (Shaw 2021). In light of these concerns, participants expressed the importance of participating in our research despite the structural constraints that shaped their daily lives during the pandemic.

We argue that remote interviewing is not simply a means to "approximate the intimacy that in-person meetings make possible" (Gerson and Damaske 2020, 133), but rather facilitates a new form of intimacy altogether. Like other qualitative approaches to learning about people's lived experiences of social structures, remote interview methods are messy and imperfect in addition to being useful and revealing. In particular, we find that remote interviews enable us to engage in mindful ethics during fluctuating circumstances for participants and researchers

(González-López 2011). Practicing mindful ethics prompted us to offer participants the choice of participating through a variety of remote methods. While for many of us the transition to remote methods was originally intended to protect participants' and researchers' physical safety by eliminating the risk of COVID-19 transmission during the research process, we discovered that this transition offered additional emotional and political safety to participants and researchers.

The benefits that we found in remote interview methods are not limited to this methodology. For example, some of the benefits described in this article could be replicated in in-person interviews by going on a walk with participants while they discuss difficult topics or encouraging them to draw on comforting practices like smoking during the interview. However, doing so may present logistical challenges on behalf of the researcher. For example, researchers would likely be unable to take notes during interviews while walking, and practices like smoking that produce comfort for participants may produce discomfort for researchers. Remote methods are unique, therefore, in that they allow for participants and researchers to participate in the interview in spaces in which they both have their individual needs met, even if those needs do not align.

We also recognize that remote interviews come with unique challenges, including participants' and researchers' access to certain technology, a stable internet connection, phone reception, and private space. These challenges also vary across technology, with audio-only interviews and video interviews offering different possibilities for connection and challenges with disconnection and missed cues. Despite these limitations, remote interview methods provide an opportunity for transforming feminist qualitative research and, as such, have implications far beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote methods impact participants' and researchers' pathways to the interview by providing flexibility for navigating various constraints, and thus have the potential to address some forms of inequality within social scientific research. For example, remote methods enable researchers to reach a broader range of participants, including people who lack access to reliable transportation, do not have time to participate in an interview without also multitasking, or who cannot participate in person due to childcare responsibilities, all of which are more likely for economically marginalized individuals.

Remote methods enabled us to interview our participants across disparate geographic locations, which would have required considerable time and money had we conducted them in person. While more structural support for childcare is needed for researchers who are pregnant and/or parenting during data collection, remote methods also enabled Broussard to continue her research when pregnant and parenting. Remote methods, therefore, have the potential to address resource and access concerns for researchers with limited mobility and/or institutional and financial resources. Thus, remote interviews can expand who is able to conduct research.

When researchers used phone interviews, they also had the space to privately process participants' stories without having to manage facial expressions. By highlighting the benefit of phone interviews for allowing researchers to react privately, we do not mean to reinforce an ideal of interviewers as "blank slates," absorbing information and "collecting" data from participants. Rather, we point to our ability to bring our full humanity to interviews without fear of

our participants feeling judged by our reactions. Remote interview methods thus offered some surprising benefits, creating a different experience of privacy not just for respondents, but also for interviewers.

Based on what we have learned from conducting remote interviews with women during the pandemic, we have two recommendations for future interview research in all settings. First, our findings reveal the benefit of providing participants with options for interview modality. Remote interview methods offer additional options as potential participants navigate their unique needs regarding access, privacy, and comfort when deciding if and how to participate. We all interviewed women about stigmatized topics and, unsurprisingly, gender-based violence emerged as a topic across multiple interviews in all of our projects. In the specific case of research on violence against women, participants often describe experiences when they have had control and agency taken away from them. For interviews with survivors of violence, then, reallocating additional control over the interview modality is one way participants can exert control over their own narratives—how, to whom, and under what conditions they share their stories. Moreover, while the data included in this article centers women's experiences with sensitive issues, trauma can be present in all research, regardless of topic. Offering participants multiple options for interview modality as a pathway to participation—whether those options are both in-person and remote, or different kinds of remote options—therefore has the potential to provide benefits to participants across research areas and disciplines.

Second, it is necessary for researchers to attend to modality of interviews as part of the reflexive practice on how our data is produced and how we interpret meanings in our data. Victoria Reyes (2020) argues that qualitative researchers draw on their unique "ethnographic toolkit," strategically choosing to present themselves in certain ways or share certain details about their lives to facilitate access to and/or rapport with participants. Our findings show that interview modality further shapes researchers' abilities to draw on their "toolkits." For example, Broussard's late-stage pregnancy would have been a "visible" trait in in-person interviews, but remote interviews enabled it to remain "hidden" from participants, which shaped their disclosure (Reyes 2020). Our reflections on remote interviewing shed light on the various constraints that can impact all interviews, whether remote or in-person, as well as how modality impacts the data produced in interviews. This provides an opportunity for researchers to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their interview modalities, including in-person interviews, which often go uninterrogated due to their hegemonic status.

While many researchers have begun using remote methods out of necessity due to the ongoing pandemic, this article demonstrates how sociology from a distance provides both opportunities and challenges for feminist methodological research. Far from exhaustive or complete, the lessons that we have learned from conducting remote interviews with women serve as a starting point for considering the larger implications of remote methods for feminist qualitative research. We hope, then, that our experiences shed light on the need for greater methodological inclusion within social science research.

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