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Using internet video calls in qualitative (longitudinal) interviews: some implications for rapport

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ABSTRACT

Forming part of the new ‘methodological frontier’ the use of digital communication technologies has become increasingly commonplace in social research. Whilst audio-only online interviews and asynchronous means of communicating online has been discussed for over two decades, video capabilities; being able to see a participant face-to-face online (e.g. via Skype, Face Time, Google Hangouts) is a much more recent phenomenon. Discussion of such new opportunities has tended to centre on the practicalities and technicalities. Alternatively, this paper moves beyond the recent empiricist focus to reflect critically on the implications of using internet video calls on methodological matters of importance to qualitative (longitudinal) researchers. Drawing on a long-standing qualitative longitudinal study following lives of over 50 young people, the paper focuses on the potentials and pitfalls for rapport of using internet video calls for qualitative interviewing. The findings have resonance for short-term studies, and longitudinal endeavours.

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Introduction

The way we communicate in both our professional and personal lives has changed in recent years; digital technologies are now a feature of everyday interaction. Similarly, such technologies are starting to form an integral part of the toolkit of many social scientists (Hine, 2000, 2005, 2008; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Murthy, 2008; Gibson, 2010; Seitz, 2015). Whilst the use of audio-only online interviews and asynchronous means of communicating in cyberspace has been discussed for over two decades (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), video capabilities; being able to see a participant face-to-face online is a much more contemporary phenomenon. The increasing availability of a multiplicity of digital communication technologies coupled with technological advances in recent years present new and exciting opportunities for recruiting participants, carrying out fieldwork and publicising research findings (Murthy, 2008; Sullivan, 2012; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Whilst online interviewing or mediated interaction is commonly regarded as part of the new ‘methodological frontier’ (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014, p. 605), physical co-present interviewing has remained the accepted practice. Indeed, it is commonly seen as the ‘gold standard’ of qualitative research as it is said to afford ‘thicker information, body talk and communication efficiency’ (Rettie, 2009, p. 422; see also Boden & Molotch, 1994; Novick, 2008; Hay-Gibson, 2009; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

This paper draws on findings from an established Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) study to explore the implications for rapport of conducting interviews using internet video calls or real-time

audio/video link-up via Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) applications such as Skype or FaceTime.¹ By focusing on different dimensions of rapport in the interview encounter, the paper considers the implications of introducing remote interviewing into a study that has previously employed physical co-present interviews. Working with the same sample of young people presents a unique opportunity to compare experiences of using different modes on the interview encounter. In so doing, the paper focuses on what is a largely uncharted methodological territory and aims to address the lack of critical reflection on the implications of mediated interview modes on rapport, thereby moving beyond the recent empiricist emphasis on the pragmatic (Rettie, 2009; Sullivan, 2012). The paper begins by outlining briefly the salience of rapport to qualitative work prior to detailing the study on which I draw. Remote modes of interviewing are compared with physical co-present encounters using both participant feedback and a Goffmanesque interactionist approach, which regards social life as accomplished through everyday actions in which participants uphold shared definitions of reality through coordination and mutual monitoring. The paper focuses on the (re)establishment and fostering of rapport using mediated interview modes, along with issues surrounding the interaction order and flow, and the dangers of over-disclosure. The findings have resonance for both short-term qualitative studies, and longitudinal endeavours.

Rapport matters

Rapport, conceived conceptually as an orientation towards ‘euphoria’ or ‘ease’ in interaction, a harmonious connection or a ‘working consensus’, is both an aim and established element of quality in one-off and repeat qualitative interviews (Oakley, 1981; Keegan, 2009; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Duncombe & Jessop, 2012). Although often overlooked in formal processes, rapport is essential to ethical practice, particularly in terms of building a research relationship founded on respect (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). It is widely regarded as a pre-requisite for minimizing social distance and establishing trust, and researcher efforts in this regard are important for candid disclosure and the richness of the stories participants narrate, and thus data quality (Oakley, 1981; Jorgenson, 1992; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Duncombe & Jessop, 2012). For James Spradley (1979) the establishment of rapport suggests that ‘... a basic sense of trust has developed that allows for the free flow of information’ (p. 78) to such an extent that it is a shared encounter (Jorgenson, 1992) experienced with ease, comfort and perhaps enjoyment. Jane Jorgenson (1992) points to the particular significance of rapport in asymmetrical relationships such as those involving a researcher and participant, whilst Duncombe and Jessop (2012) talk of the “‘ideal feminist research relationship’ where spontaneous and genuine rapport supposedly leads more naturally to reciprocal mutual disclosure’ (p. 120). In these terms, the quality of the relationship between the researcher and participant is essential to the quality of the data in both short term and QLR studies, with rapport key to this connection (Chu, 2014). With respect to the role of rapport in ethical research practice, Guillemin and Heggen (2009) argue that ‘The researcher’s ethical responsibility is to maintain “a fine balance between building sufficient trust to be able to probe participants for potential rich data, while at the same time maintaining sufficient distance in respect for the participant”’ (p. 292). What matters then, for (both short and long-term) qualitative work is the fostering of a connection with participants in which the relationship, various forms of interaction, and rapport are mutually supportive thereby enabling the detailed discussion of their lives.

In considering the potential of using internet video calls in qualitative interviewing, the nature of rapport has seldom been scrutinised with emphasis often placed on technicalities and efficiencies (for exceptions in other areas of online interviewing see, for example, James & Busher, 2012). Remote modes of interviewing have well documented advantages, for instance, enabling cost efficiencies to be made in travel, subsistence and researcher time over co-present collection. Remote techniques reduce expenditure in working with large nationally distributed samples allowing the flexibility to break and/or resume discussions thus overcoming the challenges of one-off visits, particularly to isolated areas (Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003; Fielding & Fielding, 2011). Whilst Seitz (2015) suggests that a loss of intimacy is a potential hazard with reference to Skype interviews, questions

around the implications for remote interviewing – where participant and researcher can or cannot observe one another – on rapport remain neglected despite its centrality to the qualitative interview. Moreover, sparse attention has been paid to the introduction of such methods into studies with an established history of physical co-presence in repeat interviews, with discussion often confined to one-off or snapshot studies.

Lessons from a qualitative longitudinal study

The ‘Your Space’ project² has been following the relationships and identities of a diverse range of 52 young people born in the late 1980s to mid-1990s, for over 10 years documenting their lives as their individual and family biographies unfold (for further details please see Weller, Edwards, & Stephenson, 2011). The sample was nationally distributed across a variety of locations in England, Scotland and Wales. Fifty-two young people took part in Waves 1 and 2, 45 in Wave 3, and 36 in Wave 4.³ Although some change in the composition occurred over time, at Wave 4 the sample comprised: 58 per cent young women; 42 per cent from minority ethnic backgrounds; and 39 per cent from working-class backgrounds. Between 2003 and 2009 three waves of data, comprising a range of creative activities and consolidated, each time, by an in-depth interview, were generated with the researcher visiting participants in their homes. Willing participants also completed online and postal activities between these main waves (see also Weller, 2012). The most recent phase (2013–2015, funded as an ESRC National Centre for Research Methods ‘Methodological Innovation Project’) marked a methodological departure, the rationale for which was both methodologically and practically driven. It was, in part, founded on the lack of discussion around the use of remote interview modes in QLR. Practically, the shift was fuelled by the need to maintain contact with a sample of young adults, many of whom were transitioning between school, college and work and living between households (e.g. parental home/university residence). Widely available VoIP platforms, that have the potential to mirror physical co-present conversations with two-way real-time communication comprising both audio and video elements, were used. Skype and FaceTime were selected as they were both free and readily available. Participants ($n = 36$) could elect to be interviewed via Skype-to-Skype ($n = 12$), FaceTime-to-FaceTime ($n = 3^4$), Skype-to-landline ($n = 6$) or Skype-to-mobile ($n = 15$) calls. The choice of technology was determined by the availability of VOIP-enabled devices and the busyness and/or transiency of participant’s lives.

The most recent phase of the study sought to assess the potential of internet video calls for two purposes: (i) providing ‘catch up’ data about participants’ lives between researcher visits, thereby helping to ensure their long-term engagement; and (ii) as a time-efficient/cost-effective alternative to, or augmentation of, face-to-face co-present interviews. Much of the sample took part in a succinct catch-up discussion lasting approximately 30 minutes, that focused on change and continuity in their lives, relationships and identities since the previous interview. Ten young people, representing the diversity of the sample, participated in more in-depth interviews akin to those conducted during the physical co-present encounters. These discussions focused on change and continuity in key relationships and life circumstances, with an emphasis on the impact of the economic recession; their perceptions of choice and the opportunities available to them, as well as, their formal and informal resources.

The project adopted two approaches in tandem to assess the implications of introducing internet video calls. The first, a participatory approach, explored participants’ views of the shift from physical co-present to remote interviewing on relational (e.g. rapport, willingness to divulge) and practical issues (e.g. quality of online connection, ease of use of technology). This approach sought to provide an alternative to common comparisons that tend to rely on researchers’ judgments of the successes and drawbacks of the interview interaction in terms of data quality (exceptions include Fielding & Fielding, 2011). Feedback was gathered from all participants at the end of the interview ($n = 36$) and, to increase the chances of obtaining candid responses, anonymously via an online survey ($n = 12$).⁵ Along with comments garnered at the end of the previous physical co-present interview feedback was

analysed thematically exploring any similarities and differences between participant's perceptions of the two modes. These themes have shaped the structure of this paper

The second phase drew on Erving Goffman's interactionist conceptual tools (1971, 1974, 1983), extending his work beyond a focus on everyday interactions, to include mediated communication (Rettie, 2009). Such tools concentrate analysis on the minutiae of interaction and include, for example, scrutiny of greetings, interruptions, and moments of connection or distance, thereby providing a means of assessing differences in the interaction order between interview modes. In 'The Presentation of Self' Goffman (1956) outlined his dramaturgical approach, likening everyday interaction to a theatrical performance. Similarly, the qualitative interview scenario is akin a theatrical production with scripts (questions and responses) and roles with the interviewer and participant each interpreting the script and presenting themselves accordingly. This metaphor tunes the ear to considering the interview encounter as a performance. Inconsidering the potentials and pitfalls of remote interviewing using mediated communication it is important to explore any differences in the performances of interlocutors between modes and how participants interpret the stage and present themselves (Roberts, 2012). Using such tools, diachronic (analysis over time) case analysis was conducted across the 10 in-depth cases, comparing participants' online discussions with their previous physical co-present interviews⁶ (for further details see Weller, 2015).

Building rapport: supportive interchanges

Establishing, or re-establishing rapport, as is often the case in QLR, at the beginning of any interview encounter is fundamental in shaping its outcomes (King & Horrocks, 2010). Building rapport in mediated interaction without having met a participant can prove challenging although there is evidence to suggest that the groundwork can be laid prior to the interview by, for example, exchanging emails or photographs (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Seitz, 2015). A key concern for qualitative work is whether there are differences between the way the researcher and participant relate to, understand and trust one another in internet video interviews when compared to face-to-face physical co-present discussions. Through participant feedback and diachronic case analysis, I sought to understand differences in the sense in which both researcher and participants felt both connected and at ease during supportive interchanges such as 'greetings' and 'leavings' at the beginning and end of the encounter. Many of the survey respondents rated their experience as 'good' with 83 per cent ($n = 12$) regarding it as 'good as a home visit' and all described feeling comfortable with a remote interview.

In his 1981 work 'Forms of Talk' Goffman argued that everyday talk was perfunctory; that conversations both formal and informal comprise 'identifiable procedures for completing various interactional tasks ... However trivial this game appears to be, it structures our view of the social world, and we spend our lives playing it' (Manning, 1992, 14). In the 'Your Space' study examining 'supportive interchanges' – or interpersonal rituals such as 'greetings' or 'leavings' – permitted the illumination of differences in interaction and the workings of rapport across the modes. This aspect of the analysis might seem to direct attention to the mundane or trivial, yet such interactions are vital in scaffolding both short- and long-term research relationships. Initial impressions and the building of rapport, along with the (albeit temporary for QLR) exit from an interview has a bearing on participant's perceptions of their worth and the researcher's general interest in their lives, as well as, degrees of understanding and empathy.

Much work occurs prior to the commencement of any interview not least an internet video or phone call. Christian Licoppe & Julien Morel (2012), in their writings on mediated communication, talk of pre-openings that

... provide an occasion for participants to rearrange their body and thus to display (a) how they orient with respect to the spatial frame of the shot, perceivable through the control image; and (b) their expectations regarding how they should appear properly (p. 405).

The aim of this is to achieve a position enabling the other participant to view a close-up facial image in what they describe as a 'talking heads' orientation. Whilst the camera lens may be altered during

the course of the discussion to display different aspects of their environment, the remote video interview, as was the case for the majority of 'Your Space' participants, usually commences in the 'talking heads' orientation and periodically returns to this during the course of the interview. Licoppe & Morel (2012) argue that this orientation is the closest replication of Goffman's 'eye-to-eye huddle'. For some interviews then, mediated forms of communication can facilitate a more intimate connection and a feeling of close physical proximity, conducive to the building of rapport. This more intimate focus detracted attention from any diversions in either the participant or researcher's locale enabling the (re)forging and/or strengthening of the connection.

That said, for some of the internet video interviews 'greetings' were, at times, truncated as the interview encounter with Felix highlights. Felix, is a White, middle-class, young man, who took part in an extended Skype interview. All previous interviews were conducted in his family home. As in many of the other internet video calls when a connection was established there were often some hesitant exchanges as the audio and video clarity were checked. Felix and I established an audio connection with relative ease but there was a momentary delay in the video meaning that our initial greeting was without facial expression or body language; two important features in the establishment of rapport (Keegan, 2009). I then sought clarification of the connection quality, instead of continuing with the exchange of pleasantries and the (re)building of rapport:

Interviewer: Hello! [Picture appears after 4 seconds]. How are you?

Participant: I'm good thanks.

Interviewer: Can you see and hear me okay?

Participant: I can ... yes. It's fine.

The detail of the greetings and leavings during the physical co-present interviews were largely unrecorded digitally as they occurred prior to the commencement of the interview. Reflection documented in field notes did log in relative detail the nature of pleasantries, small talk, and the exchange of hospitality. These notes served to highlight their absence during the remote interviews. Rather, the initial focus in the internet video calls was on ensuring a good quality video connection, and in phone interviews auditory clarity. Returning to the introductory sections of the interview with Felix what was also apparent was the way in which I focused on pursuing the purpose of the interview, rather than continuing with small talk; interaction in which I would have engaged whilst setting up equipment or receiving refreshment in a participant's home. My prologue continued for another few minutes whilst I covered issues of importance such as consent. On reflection, whilst Felix demonstrated ease and rapport, my focus seemed stilted, not akin to a more 'natural' flow of conversation. It was, at times, hard to do justice to the introductory section of the interview as many, in pursuit of a more natural conversation, seemed impatient to tell me about their lives thereby reducing the time spent discussing this important element of the interview. In some of the discussions, this aspect felt amplified by the remote nature of the interviews and indeed, as Deakin and Wakefield (2014) remark, interview prologue, whilst necessary was not always conducive to fostering rapport.

At the end on departing, I became attuned to the distinctive nature and subtleties of the interaction in the remote interviews, particularly internet video calls. For QLR 'leavings' are as important to rapport as 'greetings' in terms of fostering a long-term connection. Skype 'leavings', more so than phone 'leavings', were often protracted as it was not always easy to gauge the appropriate moment to say the final farewell and to press the red button to terminate the call; an action that either party can make. In physical co-present interviews 'leavings' can also be drawn out with discussion and hospitality continuing with the participant or other members of the household after the recording has ceased. Nonetheless, the researcher generally directs the action of leaving. As I began to realise the multitude of differences between supportive interchanges in the physical co-present remote interviews the universal 'Skype wave' stopped escaping my notice. It was not an expression of closure that I would have used on exiting a participant's home, but it was something that was exchanged in many of the internet video calls. A wave commands to be reciprocated; otherwise it may be deemed as a snub. In some of the phone interviews I noticed a difference in tone, with my voice reaching a crescendo as I tried to

achieve closure, with the participant's voice fading. In many of the interviews, my final remarks often included a sense of optimism that the project would continue in the future and in response many wished me success or asked me a variety of questions about the study. Until reflecting on this process I engaged in such interactions 'on autopilot', overlooking, in Goffman's terms (1956), the abiding by sets of 'rules' that shape the way we do things and what these two aspects of qualitative interviewing reveal about rapport in mediated interview modes compared to physical co-present encounters. Analysing seemingly trivial supportive interchanges was illuminating especially the taken-for-granted conventions around them and how the introduction of a technology to facilitate such interaction can shift the emphasis or introduce new facets. Drawing on the work of Goffman elucidates such interactions; that do not form the focus of the interview, yet encase the encounter. They are vital to the establishment and maintenance of rapport and, of salience to QLR work, the long-term research relationship.

Fostering rapport: being and feeling present

I now focus on the fostering of rapport during an interview exploring the salience of presence and remoteness. Importantly, in assessing the implications of shifting from physical co-present to remote issues what seemed to matter was visible co-presence or the feeling of co-presence rather than being physically situated in the same place (see also Fielding & Fielding, 2011). With a good quality video connection, and where the participant felt comfortable and at ease with the circumstances, an encounter comparable to the physical co-present interview was achieved. 'Your Space' participant Anne for instance described her experience of a Skype interview as:

... pretty much like you sitting in the kitchen with me [laughs] ... it's been nice, I like it.

For some it was, therefore, a sense of co-presence that transcended the actual physical locations of researcher and participant to a more emotional connection that was of importance in building and sustaining rapport.

One of the most striking observations made by participants was that whilst remote online interviews felt less formal or personal they were also experienced as 'less daunting' (see Fielding & Fielding, 2011 for a similar observation with a different technology). One participant Carl used the term 'pressure of presence', commenting that:

... there's less of a pressure of presence if you like ... nothing against you or anything (laughs). It's like when you doing interviews for unis ... when you're sitting in a room with someone opposite you, you feel a lot more under pressure than when it's over the computer, so I guess it does give you the freedom to sit back and actually think so in that way I think it was quite nice actually as pressure does get to me a little.

Others also likened the formality of a home visit to a 'professional interview', experienced as more intrusive, anxiety inducing or pressurised. Alternatively, the remote interview was conceived as a more informal, and indeed flexible, contribution to the research project akin to communicating with friends or peers. Ideas around the 'pressure of presence' were located in the spatiality of the encounter with many feeling more relaxed that they were in their own space separate from the researcher. In his work 'Relations in Public' Goffman (1971) differentiated between alternative 'territories of self' referring to 'personal space'. For many participants mediated forms of communication reduced encroachment into their own physical, personal spaces which aided their sense of comfort in the encounter. This sense of ease is echoed in Paul Hanna's (2012) work in which he argues that '... both the researcher and the researched are able to remain in a 'safe location' without imposing on each other's personal space' (p. 241, see also Seitz, 2015). This sentiment, reinforced by many 'Your Space' participants, chimes with Goffman's (1967) argument that physical co-presence runs the risk of exposure or embarrassment.

To avoid embarrassment brought about by co-presence some expressed a preference for audio-only communication arguing that they felt more comfortable not being able to observe my reactions to their responses as summarised by 'Your Space' participants Lady Loud and Lizzie:

... because I can't see your facial expressions and ... so I feel like it's much easier speaking to you [face-to-face]

No I think it might be easier [to talk] on the phone ... because I can't see your reaction [chuckles].

For participants there were both advantages and disadvantages to observing expressions ‘given off’. Lady Loud and Lizzie’s concern did not relate to physical but visible co-presence. For them this also ran the risk of embarrassment thereby having implications for rapport. Less pressure was also felt because the props of the research encounter, the interview schedule and recording equipment for instance, were hidden and clearly shows how a different interview mode can shape the resultant conversation (see also Rettie, 2009), thereby highlighting one of the greatest potentials of remote methods.

In framing my analysis I have been particularly interested in the salience of ‘settings’ across physical co-present and remote modes. Over the course of the study I have gained much from wandering around the areas in which participants live, absorbing myself in the scenery of their homes, experiencing customs and hospitality, and meeting family and friends. The valuable contextual material that enriched my understanding of participants’ lives was missing from the interviews recorded remotely (see also Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). This had implications not only for my understanding of context but also rapport. There is an interrelationship between rapport and setting articulated through participants’ assumptions about (a shared) understanding of the broader spatial context in which their lives were located. ‘Your Space’ participant DJ Kizzel, a White, working-class young man, took part in an extended Skype-to-mobile discussion for our fourth wave of interviews. The previous interviews were conducted in his home during which he had expected and assumed that I would know something of his local area when narrating his life. My, albeit sketchy, knowledge undoubtedly helped to re-establish and reaffirm rapport. The following extracts from his second (physical co-present) interview alluded to this, although the presentation of his words in written form does not convey the way DJ Kizzel gesticulates to indicate the location of different places. I have underlined where this occurred:

Participant: I sometimes go to ... basically stand in the *street* and go to the shops and go *next door*.

Interviewer: Okay, the friend next door, in this street here ... in this bit ... and down to the local shops.

Participant: Yeah ... Also I will go down to the *woods*

Viewing the spatial context of participants’ lives ultimately shaped what I asked of them. The most recent interview with DJ Kizzel was however, conducted by phone. He was located in his grandmother’s house, but had just moved into a hostel for homeless young people about 20 miles from his previous home. I had no sense of the area or the new context to his life and an understanding of his new setting could not be ascertained using audio-only remote modes. Interviews conducted using video calls did offer me some insights into spaces within the home that I might not have otherwise seen, although such glimpses were shaped by the devices used, the reach of the webcam, and positioning of the lens (Licoppe & Morel, 2012). Participants also had the opportunity to view a little of my workplace, notably the very formal setting of a meeting room with a large boardroom style table; not the impression I wished to offer participants in terms of both fostering rapport and helping to mitigate inequalities in power relations between us.

The types of ‘presence’ afforded by different interview modes can both help facilitate and hinder the fostering of rapport with remote interviews offering some advantages over physical co-present encounters relieving many of the pressure of presence. In these terms, internet video/audio calls have the potential to be more conducive to the fostering of rapport. For researchers the lack of opportunity to engage with the spatiality of the encounter and participant’s settings can be detrimental especially if participants expect some familiarity with the spatial context of their lives.

Sustaining rapport: disruptions

Deakin and Wakefield (2014) argue that facets such as pauses or repetitions are not markedly different in physical co-present and online interviews. Yet, little work has taken a nuanced approach to exploring such interactional differences between interview modes and their implications for rapport. In ‘Relations in Public’ Goffman (1971) refers to ‘breaking rules’ and ‘remedial interchanges’ which can be drawn upon to consider whether different modes encourage/mitigate disruptions to the interview order that break the frame (e.g. researcher asks/participant answers) and repair work (e.g. apologies).

In mediated communication, a sustained audio and preferably video connection is essential for mitigating disruptions and interruptions in the flow of conversation. Otherwise, both interlocutors in listening diligently consume much energy.

In considering the implications of disruptions on rapport across the interview modes drawing on the example of ‘Your Space’ participant Misha is insightful. Misha is a British Asian young woman from a socially mobile background who took part in an extended Skype-to-mobile discussion for her fourth interview. Each of the previous encounters had taken place in her home in North London. During the internet audio interview, we experienced a poor-quality connection from the outset and a delay to the start of the interview due to a fire evacuation in my office. On establishing a connection, I asked Misha to confirm whether she was happy to take part. Reflecting on my field notes highlights the disruptions we experienced:

The first line of questioning opened and Misha had to ask me to repeat what I was saying as she temporarily lost mobile phone reception. The pause and what I was doing was documented. I let out a ‘tut’ followed by very practical response; the frantic tapping of keyboard as I tried to reset and redial. It was obvious that I was frustrated and impatient not with Misha but the technology. I could detect frustration and impatience in my tone of voice but (hopefully) an outward presentation of a calm but determined self. We reconnected and I donned the mask of a ‘professional researcher’; or at least my perception of one, putting aside my irritations when my audience came into ‘view’.

I had felt apologetic and perhaps a little incompetent even though the issues were out of my control. She responded with ‘these things happen’ and blamed her own mobile phone. Throughout the interview the audio-quality impeded interaction despite our best efforts to improve the situation. We frequently had to ask one another to clarify what had been said or to apologise. As an exemplar, Misha said quite tersely:

Okay ... you’ll have to repeat that as we lost reception halfway.

Such challenges undoubtedly had an adverse effect on rapport disrupting our emotional connection, causing unease and frustration. This resonates, to some degree, with Kathryn Roulston’s (2014) article on interactional problems in research interviews. Her work showed

how keenly interviewers and interviewees monitor one another’s talk – continually orienting to what came before in efforts to understand one another, and demonstrating turn-by-turn orientation to the categories employed and the sequential work of asking and answering questions for the purposes of doing research interviews. (p. 289)

For Misha the technical issues we faced rather than the shift in mode meant that she felt she was unable to concentrate on thinking through her responses but rather focused on making sure she had captured the essence of the question:

I was more concentrating on listening to what you were saying rather than thinking about my answers ... It was maybe a little bit distracting but otherwise I had no problems with it at all, no.

Misha believed that had she participated in another physical co-present interview she would have divulged more detail about her life. She attributed her reticence to the technical issues, which resulted from the false start to the interview, the truncation of some parts of the conversation and a greater propensity to talk over one another; hindrances to interaction we did not encounter in the previous physical co-present interviews. She said:

I think maybe in person I probably would have extended a bit more.

This has obvious implications for data quality and demonstrates how the workings of an interview mode shape rapport and the resultant conversation.

For Misha it was not the case that physical co-presence risked embarrassment, in Goffman’s (1967) terms, but rather would have enabled more detailed offering of her life experiences. The lack of visible co-presence encouraged disruptions that essentially broke the frame. The propensity to interrupt one another was far greater in the audio-only interviews. Challenges centred on our ability to judge when the other had finished speaking. This was determined partly by technology and the audibility of Skype-to-mobile calls, where in several cases an echo hindered the audio or participants experienced

intermittent reception. To apologise during a phone interview would have disrupted the participant again as it would have involved a verbal apology rather than a gesture that would encourage continuation.

Speech is interpreted visually as well as audibly, so seeing a participant speak aids understanding. Barr (2013) points to the potential for misinterpretation when communication is mediated by technology (see also Seitz, 2015). She also argues that ‘Anything that disrupts our ordinary speech rhythms, as well as the way we process tone of voice, facial expression and other physiological cues, can affect interpretation of the speech act and transform meaning’ (Webpage). If the interview is audio-only or the video patchy then the interview lacks the richness that comes from non-verbal communication (see also Saumure & Given, n.d.). Indeed, Fielding and Fielding’s (2011) work, utilising Access Grid technologies, points to participants’ preference for video over audio-only communication because it permits the observation of body language. For authors such as Boyd (2007), Goffman’s work does not speak so well to mediated interaction and how it reconfigures social encounters. She argues that in many respects

people have more control online – they are able to carefully choose what information to put forward, thereby eliminating visceral reactions that might have seeped out in everyday communication. At the same time, these digital bodies are fundamentally coarser, making it far easier to misinterpret what someone is expressing. (p. 129)

Misha’s most recent interview was a definite example of an unreliable mode that altered the interaction order and was detrimental to rapport, disclosure and, therefore data quality. Akin to the previous interviews, we also experienced interruptions from family members. These disturbances did not appear to affect the flow of conversation to the same degree. The key issue is the unpredictability of some of the technologies. The danger for QLR research is that a poor experience of an interview mode new to the study could have implications for rapport in future encounter and the likelihood of continued engagement.

Over-doing rapport: disclosures

I now turn to consider the implications for rapport of mediated modes on disclosure. For Goffman ‘accessibility’, or what we permit others to know of ourselves, constitutes one of the assumptions underlying everyday interaction. He argued that we generally afford access to friends and sanctioned strangers and that we constantly monitor encounters (Manning, 1992). This concept, taken with his aforementioned work on ‘involvement shields’, is particularly apt for thinking through the implications of shifting from physical co-present to remote modes on issues of disclosure; that an alternative mode of communication shapes the rapport between a researcher and participant affecting what or how much a participant is willing to divulge. ‘Your Space’ survey respondents stated that they all felt they got on with me just as well during the remote interview as they had done online and believed they were able to tell me as much about their life as they had during my home visits. For QLR, the pre-existing relationship offers the researcher a resource, likely to be absent in one-off interviews, which may mitigate against any disruptions attributed to technical difficulties.

With almost half of the sample using a social networking site to stay in touch with the project ‘Your Space’ participants might commonly, although problematically, be viewed as ‘digital natives’ and therefore well-versed in sharing parts or versions of their lives online. Indeed, Miller and Sinanan (2014), who also draw on the work of Goffman, highlight the role of the ‘always on’ nature of the webcam in shaping everyday interaction. The ordinariness of mediated communication is likely to be implicated in participants’ willingness to disclose the detail of their lives. The following exemplar is illustrative of continuity of rapport regardless of interview mode. It also highlights the distinct nature of some QLR relationships and the dangers that mediated communication bring to re-shaping the frame. ‘Your Space’ participant Daniel had been involved in the study since 2003 and I had visited him in his parental home on three occasions; believing there to have been good rapport between us each time. We kept in touch between interviews, as Daniel was a member of the project’s Panel of Advisors. He elected

to take part in a Skype-to-Skype call, which for the most part was clear and audible. The interview lasted for just under one and a half hours. Daniel sat at his PC in his bedroom in close proximity to his webcam and, reflecting Licoppe and Morel's (2012) 'talking heads' positioning, I could view his head and torso, thereby making the encounter, from my perspective, more intimate than in instances where the participant sat further away. We discussed the challenges of establishing and maintaining eye contact during our Skype interview (see also Fielding & Fielding, 2011 who discuss a different technology) I was looking at Daniel the entire time but I was aware that my screen, fixed high on the meeting room wall, and webcam set to one side of the screen, were not in alignment. Whilst I felt I was making eye contact this was not necessarily what he experienced. Daniel commented on this saying:

That's another thing as well ... you're not talking eye-to-eye.

Through the lens of the webcam(s) eye-to-eye contact becomes refracted giving the recipient a different impression to that perceived by the giver. That said, in the case of a small minority of the physical co-present interviews the space and location of seating was not conducive to eye contact.

What Daniel divulged and the way in which this was articulated did not appear vastly different from our encounters in his home. What did differ was our experiences and view of the setting in which the interaction occurred, and Daniel's feelings of ease. The interview did not feel like a simple flow of questions and answers but was more akin to a conversation between friends with Daniel enquiring after my life; an albeit asymmetrical exchange as I asked more of him than he did of me. Good quality audio and video, along with the participant's ease and experience of communicating online and his proximity to the webcam made for an intimate research encounter; one in which he was afforded greater privacy from intrusion by family members and one in which the rapport between us was reminiscent and not vastly different to that experienced during home visits. Likening it to a home visit Daniel said:

... it's just like you are in front of me, so it's cool.

In reflecting on Goffman's work, Manning (1992) argues that '...talk is not only about the exchange of knowledge and the performance of acts; it is also a way of affirming relationships, and what organises these also organises talk ...' (p. 93).

What participants understand of the encounter may differ between modes. As previously mentioned, many experienced the internet video/audio calls as more informal encounters and, even if made explicit, the operation and presence of the recording equipment was not so apparent. One danger is that some may divulge more than they would have done in a physical co-present encounter. Duncombe and Jessop (2012) talk of the dangers of 'faking friendship' in relation to the commodification of researchers' skills of 'doing rapport' to encourage disclosure. This they contrast to the aforementioned 'ideal feminist research relationship' (p. 120) suggesting that most research fits somewhere along the spectrum. Regarding QLR work Ruth Patrick (2012) argues that 'with repeated research interactions, it is inevitable that the level of personal involvement between researcher and participant will increase and this must be carefully managed such that some professional boundaries are maintained while allowing opportunities for researcher disclosure and reciprocal offers of help and assistance to flow from researcher to participant' (p. 3). Indeed, the temporal nature of QLR muddies the waters somewhat and whilst connections may not be intentionally 'faked', power relations and the very particular nature of the QLR research 'friendship' needs to be acknowledged. As such, as research 'friendships' (generally) blossom over time participants may be more willing or open in what they disclose. In these terms the boundaries between researcher-participant and intermittent research friend become more fuzzy, echoing perhaps the notion of 'presence bleed' regarded as a blurring of the boundary between personal and professional lives that is exacerbated by wireless technology (Gregg, 2011). Remote modes then have the potential to downplay the interaction as a research encounter. 'Your Space' participant Daniel was likely to be less aware of me glancing at the interview schedule and certainly of operating the recording equipment (see also Deakin & Wakefield, 2014); a point on which he commented when reflecting on the previous interview:

... you're so used to using Skype with your friends so it's just like I'm talking to a friend at the moment ... I use it constantly with talking to friends from abroad so it's no different when I'm talking to you.

In these terms such remote modes using mediated forms of communication may encourage participants to divulge more than they would have been willing to do in a physically co-present interview. One of the ethical challenges for QLR work is the negotiation of the research relationship over time. Mediated modes of interviewing might further mask the purpose of both the conversation and the relationship. There is, then, an inherent danger that with the regularity of contact the 'frame' and focus of the interaction is lost and rapport is almost (inadvertently) established on 'false pretences'; as a close acquaintanceship or friendship.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to build on recent empiricist reflections regarding the use of mediated modes of communication in qualitative interviewing to consider the implications of conversing with participants via internet video (and audio) calls on matters of importance to qualitative researchers. Drawing on a long-standing QLR study that has used both physical co-present and remote modes and taking 'rapport' as the primary example, the paper revealed how the ordinariness of mediated communication amongst many young people can aid disclosure, with many believing they were as likely to divulge the detail of their lives online. Furthermore, the informality associated with mediated communication can counter the 'pressure of presence' with remoteness and physical separation fostering a greater sense of ease. The physical absence of the researcher and equipment reduced the risk of exposure or embarrassment. Rather than physical, it was visible co-presence, or the feeling of temporal and emotional connection brought about by the use of (good quality) video telephony, that was salient in determining the richness of interaction.

Mundane interactions such as the 'greetings' and 'leavings' that encase the interview, vital in scaffolding rapport and the long-term QLR relationship, were markedly different in the remote modes, focusing on technicalities rather than rapport-building small talk. The observation of non-verbal gestures, essential for understanding and interpretation, was only partial even in (good quality) internet video calls, and moulded by the reach of the webcam(s) and the commonplace tendency for the camera to focus on headshots. The invisibility of research 'props' (documents, equipment) put participants at ease but also increased the likelihood of losing sight of the conversation's purpose and over-disclosure; a risk is all the more probable in QLR. Fostering rapport during the remote interviews hinged, in part, on the long-term nature of the research relationships I had with participants. In these terms the QLR nature of the project facilitated the acceptance of the introduction of a new mode of interviewing. That said, the advantages of remote interviewing for rapport, such as, the provision opportunities for less confident participants to speak without the pressure of the presence of a researcher, along with more pragmatic issues of access and convenience have resonance for those conducting one-off interviews.

The relationship between mediated forms of communication and rapport are therefore complex. Remote modes do not necessarily mean that rapport is more challenging to establish or maintain. 'Remoteness' shifts the encounter in such a way that the physical separation between researcher and participant can facilitate a greater (emotional) connection through participants' increased sense of ease with the setting and mode. In short, internet video calls are a valuable tool for both QLR and one-off interviews and should not be viewed as second rate to the 'gold standard' of physical co-present encounters.

Notes

1. This paper builds on arguments presented in Weller (2015).
2. Conducted with Prof. Rosalind Edwards, University of Southampton.
3. Attrition was mainly attributed to a loss of contact rather than refusal to participate in a remote interview.
4. All attempts to use Face Time failed due to technical difficulties with participants' equipment and alternative means used.

5. The low response rate to the online survey is likely to be accounted for by: (i) participants' lack of familiarity completing such surveys as part of the study; and (ii) the lag between the online discussion and receiving a link to the survey via email or letter.
6. To ensure that any differences were not simply due to time, younger and older participants were selected so that any age implications could be identified cross-sectionally, across waves.

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Notes on contributor

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