Conducting Social Research Online: Empathetic Concern and Sociability

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3. **Article accepted for publication**
   Date: January 2021

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Abstract

As of February 2020, all access to the research field has taken place online out of necessity and, as a consequence of this, it seems that there are many questions which must be tackled by methodological research. The paper will discuss some of these, starting from a focus group experience: what elements of the interview situation change? What comes into play in the dynamics of the relationship that is established? Do the typical dynamics of a focus group also develop, even among people who look at each other from a screen, who only see each other's faces or little more, and who have never met before? What must the facilitator of the discursive production take into account? The reference is to two important authors, Edith Stein and Georg Simmel. The hypothesis discussed concerns the reduction of the possibility for empathy in the interaction and the affirmation of sociability, which almost seems to fill the space left by empathy.

Keywords: digital research, empathy, sociability.

1. Internet for social research

For some years now, there has been much discussion on the great potential and possible fallacies regarding the use of the Internet in social research. There are many different positions on this issue: some suggest that this innovation generates techniques, tools and data that can act as surrogates for more traditional quantitative and qualitative research projects, such as experiments, sample surveys and biographical interviews. Others argue that digital communication technologies reorganize social research around new objects,

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populations and techniques of analysis, such as the study of emotions (Serrano-Puche, 2016) or so-called Big Data (Stefanizzi, 2016; Bichi, Martire, Stefanizzi, 2018). There are also some people who believe that digital social research increases the opportunities for gathering information, but that it should be used together with more traditional methods (Edwards et al., 2013); in today's social world, all fields of social life have taken on different and rapidly mutating formats because of increased access to information thanks to the Internet, most notably marketing (Martins Goncalves et al., 2016), and even the way in which death and mourning are experienced alters in relation to the ease of online access (Walter et al., 2012). The literature shows that scholars have begun to reflect on the many open epistemological, methodological and technical issues regarding digital social research. (Carrozza, 2018; Amaturo, Aragona, 2019).

However, it can certainly be stated that the Internet has now acquired a key role in the practice of social research that was inconceivable before the 2020 pandemic. It allows us to overcome the problem of physical distance imposed by the possibility of contagion, refines the tools available and bypasses some of the obstacles and limitations that researchers encounter in their fields of investigation.

Even the more traditional techniques, such as interviews and focus groups, have now been transferred to the Internet; the software enables people to meet without the physical presence that can become awkward and without contact that can become dangerous, using Internet connections – some more stable than others – and images created by video cameras from the most diverse places, most often private homes.

Conducting individual or collective interviews online is certainly not something new; however, researchers preferred to continue with the face-to-face mode for as long as it was possible, even for standardised interviews such as the questionnaire, although for several years this has usually been carried out using the remote method of administration, mainly due to scarcity of resources: money and time are in chronic short supply for research. It is not by chance that scholars have produced literature on the web survey for well over a decade and have dealt with the many issues that this modality has opened up at all levels of sociological knowledge and survey phases, from the sampling operation to the response rate, and from the type of questions to the possibility of combining the procedures.[1]

Within this framework, as of February 2020, all access to the research field has taken place online out of necessity, and even those who, like the writer, have

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[1] To name but a few authors in the now vast bibliography: Bichi (2007); Dilman, Smyth, Christian (2009); Couper, Miller (2008); Anduiza, Galais (2017); Kreuter, Presser, Tourangeau (2008); Liu, Wang (2015); McClain C.A. et al. (2018).

always favoured the face-to-face mode have had to deal with this fact. As all the methodology manuals still state, physical co-presence guarantees a higher quality of the survey, whatever the instrument used, be it a questionnaire or a biographical interview, in terms of reliability of the instrument and therefore of the information collected. In my research experience, the relationship between interviewee and interviewer was developed with interaction modalities that gave prominence to the physical presence itself and therefore all the components of interpersonal communication, which not only faithfully reproduce the usual ways of sociability in everyday life, but also welcome the many possibilities that physicality allows to be put into play in the interview situation (Bichi, 2002). On the other hand, it is from the very experience of research that, in my work, methodological reflections have always arisen. It is my firm belief that it is from the practice of research that those principles of the method necessarily emerge, which are not rules but shape the work of the researcher, who has to contend each time with a different research situation and a different research object; we cannot ignore the fact that this object becomes a subject in the form of a person, whatever foundational approach we adopt, whatever strategy we use and whatever instrument we intend to utilise.

Recently, I happened to run an online focus group consisting of eight young people who had been invited to talk about spirituality. It was certainly not an easy subject – a rather non-directive assignment with a lot of space for brainstorming; it was an attempt to quantify with an attitude scale within a poorly standardised tool.[2] I was anxious as this was something I had never done before; I could see technical difficulties to overcome, and I was concerned about the unknown factor of the relationship mediated by software that enables the meeting and the verbal exchange, and which also enables video recording, thus multiplying the possibilities of grasping interpretative elements from the interactions that take place during the process, but which excludes physical co-presence.

I asked myself the following questions: what changes in the interaction? What elements of the interview situation change? What comes into play in the dynamics of the relationship that is established? Do the typical dynamics of a focus group also develop, even among people who look at each other from a screen, who only see each other's faces or little more, and who have never met before? What must the facilitator of the discursive production take into account?

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[2] The focus group mentioned is part of a survey on the subject of the spirituality of young people, commissioned by the Youth Observatory of the Giuseppe Toniolo Institute.

The differences, if there are any, certainly do not concern the objective that the researcher sets out to achieve, which is the same, nor the people involved nor everything that precedes the event; the preparation does not change. Of course, some more problems can arise if easy Internet access is not available to the population one is working with, so different paths have to be chosen; however, this problem has often concerned the research contexts in which sociology operates.

Some may point out that the techniques, or even simply the individual questioning tools need to be changed; however, it is enough to modify them to make them suitable: in my case, the assignment involved brainstorming and I used the Zoom white page; there were cards with a scale of attitudes, and a file exchange on chat enabled them to be completed (but the same could also be done with an email exchange). Many other examples could be given to support this statement: the questions may change the type of transmission medium but they remain unaltered in their content and the possibility of response.

So, the question may become: is there anything that would have been present in the face-to-face interaction that is not there in the online meeting, or has it been modified to such an extent as to influence the course of the interview and therefore the outcome of the interaction?

Needless to say, what is not there is the physicality. However, the consequences of this missing feature can be significant. Regarding this missing element, the context in which the interactions in the interview take place changes radically.

Each interview situation, whether personal or collective, is different from all others due to an infinite number of factors (Bichi, 2002). This can be explored in any type of interview, with a questionnaire or other format, whether or not it takes place face-to-face, but the implications of using an Internet connection, a screen and a microphone to communicate seem to be relevant especially for those types of interview that involve interaction with a medium-low level of directivity. That is, when 'the words of others' assume status and relevance in the work of understanding and explaining the social world.

Certainly, in the absence of physical co-presence the system of turn-taking in the conversation changes and there is a lack of important signals regulating interactions, for example silences, body movements, proxemics and the use of space in general.

So what are the most relevant differences? Or rather: which ones change the processes in the making of interactions, perceptions and the capacity to learn, and elaborate the meanings produced on an individual and group level? What influence does the mode of interaction have on these meanings that excludes some of the opportunities of communication and seems to reduce the possibilities of communication itself?

There are many questions which must be tackled by methodological research. To begin with, I would like to propose two factors from my personal experience that bring into play some implications of the online interview interaction: the reduction of the possibility for empathy in the interaction and the affirmation of sociability, which almost seems to fill the space left by empathy. In order to strike up an initial reflection on these issues, I would like to refer to two important authors: Edith Stein (2020) and Georg Simmel (1997), who published their essays for the first time at the beginning of the twentieth century, more than one hundred years ago, in 1917 and 1911 respectively. It is interesting, and fascinating to me, that these concepts can be used – hopefully not entirely unnecessarily – in this modern age to try to understand the dynamics of a type of interaction that was unimaginable at the time, and in a field, that of social research methods, for which they were certainly not conceived, except *in nuce* and with regard to empathy by authors whose work preceded Stein's treatise.

2. Empathy and the online interview

Empathy is an overused conceptual term, sometimes even used inappropriately, confused and abused, which has come back to the fore through the interest developed by neuroscience (Rizzolatti, Vozza, 2007), but which has always seemed necessary for reflection on understanding and meaning, what Dilthey (1922) calls the *imaginative reconstruction of experience*, based on which social action becomes intelligible, according to the Weberian tradition.

Empathy, as a conceptual term, was even used by Einstein, and recalled by Popper (1970) in his work *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. The German term is *Einfühlung*, literally 'feeling into' or empathy. According to Einstein, there is no logical way that leads to the formulation of scientific laws; they arise from this human capacity. Empathy, therefore, is recalled by Popper and Einstein as an instrument of understanding, the basis of any process of explanation and an instrument that somehow precedes and establishes the possibility of scientific knowledge.

Moreover, it is perhaps necessary to remember that empathy does not necessarily imply that the same primordial feelings as those emphasized should arise in the subject. Empathy should not be confused with emotional contagion. The person who empathizes may not respond to the emotional message he or she receives, but this does not prevent him or her from fully understanding the state communicated by the other.

For Stein, empathy, *Einfühlung* is the way to access the whole person of the other; it represents the condition of the possibility of multiple forms of

understanding of others; in other words, it is that act through which one grasps an extraneous experience in a non-original way (Stein, 2020: 71). As a good student of Husserl, she declares that:

> imprisoned in the barriers of my individuality, I could not go beyond the "world as it appears to me", and in any case it might be thought that the possibility of its independent existence – which could still be given as a possibility – always remains unproved. However, as soon as I cross that barrier, with the aid of empathy, and come to a second and third appearance of the same world, which is independent of my perception, such a possibility is demonstrated. Thus empathy, as the foundation of the intersubjective experience, becomes the condition of possibility for knowledge of the existing external world. (Stein, 2020: 158).

According to Stein, the empathetic act is therefore a complex movement of the subject towards the object, which includes an indispensable movement of the return of the subject towards him or herself. The person's whole being is involved in the empathetic knowledge, and the body assumes a particular importance: Edith Stein uses the expression *Einfühlende Vergegenwärtigung* (empathetic envisioning): the person is perceived by the subject first of all at the level of corporeity; it is a vital experience that involves the biological body. It is the flesh and blood body that enables the sensory fields to operate, as in the author's example of the foreign hand (Stein, 2020), which is perceived as a part of one's own body to the extent that empathized sensations that are in continuous contrast to one's own are perceived as foreign sensations.

Therefore, the mere physical presence of another person provokes an experience, which in turn establishes communication, which enables understanding and therefore the communicative exchange. It goes without saying that this is circumscribed in the online interaction: it is reduced to the mere vision, often not even of good quality, of a part of the body that is limited to a certain extent.

Stein herself states that, obviously, empathy does not necessarily occur regardless of verbal communication; on the contrary, it is unlikely that from the mere observation of the body posture it is possible to understand the emotion that directed it, so the verbal production in the interaction has a role and keeps it in its entirety, contributing to the production and exchange of meanings.

In any case, the screen also functions as a screen to empathy: it reduces possibilities of empathy; the empathetic capacity is reduced; and in verbal production it no longer plays its full role of facilitator and multiplier of the exchange in interaction. There are several risks for the cognitive purpose for which the exchange was intended: the impoverishment of the production of

meanings; the sterilization of the social relationships that develop in the course of the interview; and the participants remaining "strangers" to each other, in the sense given to this *Extraneousness* by Stein.

3.   Sociability in an interview situation

However, reflecting on my interview experience, not only did the reduced action of the empathetic ability emerge during the focus group, but also, in the analysis of the video and the transcript of the interaction that developed, the evidence emerged that there was a much more marked form of Simmelian sociability – sociability as a playful form of sociation – than in my previous experiences of the face-to-face situation.

According to Simmel, if sociation is interaction in general, then its purest and most stylized form is achieved when it takes place between equals, in the same way that symmetry and balance are the stylized artistic forms that illuminate visual elements (1997).

Sociability is the game in which "one acts" as if everyone were equal and, at the same time, as if one esteemed each person in a particular way (Simmel, 1997). In interaction, one enters a game in which one part of the self gives way to others, who are placed by the self in a position of equality that is otherwise difficult to experience. The scarcity of signals sent by the other and the reduced possibility of grasping the complexity of the otherness of the person with whom one is relating, give way to a modality that would otherwise be difficult to implement, linked as it is to corporeality, to the activation of signs, symbols and the multi-sensory perception of the other. In this situation, the others are interpreted on the basis of a few visual elements and on what the discursive production makes clear. Thus, one's self enters a necessarily equal relationship with another person about whom little is known.

Simmel states:

> in the truly personal, intimate and friendly company of one or a few men, a lady would not want to appear in such low cut dresses as she would do without any qualms in society. For in the latter situation, she does not feel implicated as an individual to the same extent as in the former situation, and can therefore let herself go as if she were behind the impersonal freedom of a mask, for she is indeed only herself, but not all of herself, but only an element in a union that is held together formally. (Simmel, 1997: 45).

The partiality of involvement, due to the lack of corporeality, frees one from certain conditionings and rules, lightens the self, reduces differences and brings discretion into play as a mediation between the self and others, allowing

collective identity and individual identity to coexist in interaction, excluding everything that has objective importance for the personality (status, success, fame and wealth) (Turnaturi, 1997) and, indeed, facilitating that understanding put in check by the empathetic concern that has decreased. In another passage, Simmel states:

> in sociability, discourse becomes an end in itself, not in the naturalistic sense, as in chatter, but in the art of entertainment which follows its own artistic laws. In purely sociable conversation, the topic is only the indispensable support for the stimuli that enable the mutual exchange between those who converse to take place in a vital way. Disputation and appeal to norms recognized by both sides, the conclusion of peace by compromise and the discovery of common beliefs, the acknowledged acceptance of what is new and the dismissal of that on which an agreement is not desirable are the forms in which this exchange takes place. (Simmel, 53, 54).

> Coexistence and real exchanges, in which all the commitments and burdens of life are shown, are here enjoyed almost in a game that is artistic to some extent: in those sublimations and rarefactions in which the forces endowed with the content of reality still resonate only as if from afar and their weight is diluted in an enchantment. (Simmel, 1997: 61).

It is to some extent the possibility of bracketing the heaviness of life's complexity and processing it in a playful, light form. In the interview situation, this characteristic of Simmelian sociability is expressed by transforming the conversation, which focuses on specific topics introduced by those who facilitate discursive production, and keeping out anything that slows down or could block the conversation. This is evident in many ways: in the facial expressions of the participants when they address the others; in the system of taking turns to speak – as a rule, no-one should speak when someone else is speaking and this tends to be observed; in the fact that it is impossible to form dyads or triads within the group; in the absence of explicit conflicts and in the rapid reduction of disputes in favor of a compromise and in the quest for a possible understanding, sought by all; in the way in which each person addresses another or everyone; and in the tone of the voice of each individual.

This is empathy that recedes in favor of sociability, which is capable of limiting the focus on the "I" that becomes lighter by engaging processes of reciprocity that involve all participants, who reveal their social experience nevertheless, freed from the heaviness of bodies and the constraints of co-presence, allowing each other to self-impose limits to place themselves in a mutual state of listening, which becomes – and could only be so – once more empathetic.

4. Concluding remarks

Face-to-face interviews vary a lot, even if – obviously and as we have already mentioned – the interaction that takes place during the social research interviews, whether they are face-to-face or otherwise, necessarily involves a departure from the modalities of a conversation that takes place without any cognitive or research purpose.

However, in the digital relationship that is established in online research, the shift emerges in a particularly evident way, both in relation to the lack of corporeality and the emergence of processes to compensate for this deficiency.

Many reflections can be made from these initial remarks. The investigation should continue and the accuracy of these initial statements should be examined using a large number of interviews. However, we can conclude with a comment on the role of the researcher.

What is left for the person moderating/conducting the conversation to do? He or she may enter the "discourse machine," facilitate discursive production, become part of the game and play with others, perhaps by doing what Anna Pavlovna did in Tolstoy's (1974: 13) War and Peace, in the example also recalled by Turnaturi (1997: 27) "Just as the master of a spinning mill, having settled the workers in their places, strolls through the factory and, noticing a spindle that has stopped or makes a sound that is unusual, shrill and too loud, rushes over and fixes it, so too Anna Pavlovna, strolling through her drawing room, approached a group that was silent or too animated and with a single word or movement restarted the regular and effective mechanism of the machine of discourse."

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