Researching Parenting in Pandemic Times: Tips and Traps from an Italian Experience

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Abstract

Italian sociological studies exploring parenting in challenging circumstances from material, cultural, or relational perspectives are still few. Therefore, in 2019, the national interest project Constructions of Parenting on Insecure Grounds (CoPInG) was launched with the aim of analyzing the construction of parenthood and practices of "doing family" in uncertain circumstances. It is a qualitative study, which, using the grounded theory approach, aims to give voice and visibility to some of the most vulnerable parent groups (for example, parents living in poverty and precarious economic conditions; parents with forced migration backgrounds; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans parents; and parents facing violent conflicts).

The advent of COVID-19 upset the initial research design of the CoPInG project, making it even more difficult to recruit Italian parents and carry out the scheduled interviews. In this scenario, the research group identified and adopted alternative solutions to continue the project regardless.

This paper examines the impact of digital technology on research that was originally designed to be offline, focusing in particular both on the possibilities offered by new communication channels to intercept vulnerable subjects and on strategies to be implemented to conduct the foreseen interviews. Thus, the global aim of this work is to introduce a series of critical reflections on digital innovations in social research on parenting in Italy, presenting the practical limits and possibilities for concrete research.

Keywords: COVID-19, hidden population, parenting, social research, digital society.

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1. **Introduction: pandemic and social research**

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 can be defined as an unprecedented crisis since its global reach has forced us to confront a new perspective of the world and everyday life. Its disruptive character is testified to by the fact that it has not only resulted in a state persistent emergency in the management of health care systems but has inevitably changed the idea of "normality," redefining systems, schemes, values, and priorities in many areas of life (e.g., Barbieri et al., 2020; d'Orville, 2020; Di Nicola, Ruspini, 2020; Favretto, Maturo, Tomelleri, 2021; Khan et al., 2020; Lombardo, Mauceri, 2020; Miller, 2021). In the field of *disaster research*, several scholars (Alexander, 2005; Bolin, 1982; Collins et al., 2007; Cutter, Boruff, Shirley, 2003; Forthergill, Peek, 2004; Peacock, 1997) have already pointed out that extreme events socially, economically, and culturally change communities in unexpected ways, with consequences that are not foreseeable *a priori*, in many cases exacerbating some of the main tensions underlying the social order.

Unlike previous epidemics that were geographically limited, coronavirus has gradually spread throughout the whole world, affecting all territories without distinction. Health authorities around the globe, in line with the recommendations from the World Health Organization, promptly provided their citizens with a series of useful information in order to prevent and contain the contagion. In particular, various governments insisted on two aspects. The first is related to personal care and hygiene. In other words, people have been encouraged to pay much more attention than in the past to their own cleanliness and the sanitation of the premises they frequent. On the empirical level, people were asked to wash their hands more often; use sanitizers and detergents, when possible, to clean their environments; and practice respiratory hygiene (for example, sneezing and/or coughing into a napkin or their elbow crease to avoid hand contact with respiratory secretions). In addition to other hygienic/sanitary individual protection measures, the second aspect on which many prevention and containment measures rested concerned interpersonal relationships. Specifically, the public were asked to avoid close contact with unknown people or those they did not know the health status of, and more generally, to respect a minimum social distance (e.g., Qian, Jiang, 2020; Thunström et al., 2020; Zaccaria, Zizzari, 2020).

These indications – born in response to the fact that human coronaviruses are transmitted from one infected person to another primarily through respiratory transmission, even by asymptomatic subjects, or by touching contaminated surfaces – has progressively led to a vague growing mistrust towards strangers. In other words, especially in the most acute phase of the pandemic, a sort of social phobia was unleashed, wherein strangers were seen

as possible sources of infection (e.g., Baldi, Savastano, 2021; Bennett, 2021; Monaco, 2021; Rothmüller, 2021). This state of circumspection has also been encouraged by the greater potential for widespread mobility compared to the past. As is known, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread via different entities and at different times in various countries across the world. Consequently, the containment measures in place have differed according to the virus's level of penetration in each territory. Simultaneously, there were total closures of productive activities and lockdowns, while in other countries, life went on as normal. Additionally, this territorial differentiation has been linked to various political positions that have been taken towards the pandemic. For example, recall the willingness of some governments (especially in the initial phase of the virus's spread) to achieve so-called herd immunity, while more cautious and preventive stances were adopted in other parts of the world (e.g., Figus, 2021; Linka, Peirlinck, Kuhl, 2020; Randolph, Barreiro, 2020).

However, in general, arguably at a global level, a new social context has arisen in which all the world's citizens have engaged in the fight against the new invisible enemy, at least until the arrival of the first vaccines, the effectiveness of which are still variable and have yet to be tested on variants that are developing as the virus continues to spread.

This attitude has had several repercussions. The most evident concern is the implementation of distance learning for students and working from home for many workers internationally.

Inevitably, the world of research has also been affected by the pandemic, especially regarding field research. Indeed, social research has faced a huge dilemma. In a historical moment in which social interactions have been discouraged and people's willingness to meet with researchers has greatly diminished, social research has been called upon to ask "what are the paths to take?". In this scenario, the pandemic has evidently put a lot of ongoing social research to the test. Particularly affected were studies designed requiring direct interaction between researchers and respondents. Face-to-face interviews as well as focus groups, ethnographic research, and other similar investigations have been confronted with the impossibility of proceeding as intended.

The two possible paths have been 1) pause the studies, wait for the end of the crisis, even if no one could say when this would be, or 2) find alternative solutions to proceed with data collection, even if this meant in some way betraying or distorting the initial research project.

Many research groups all over the world have found themselves facing this dilemma, evaluating the most appropriate solution to adopt on a case-by-case basis, in line with their scientific purposes.

This paper contributes to reflections pertaining to the pandemic's consequences on social research and its specificities in the digital age due to the

impossibility of being physically present. In particular, this paper focuses on an Italian qualitative research project on parenting that was forced to find alternatives to the original research design because of the pandemic.

Starting by analyzing this experience, the paper ends with a series of critical reflections on innovations in social research, presenting practical limits and possibilities for concrete research.

2.   Studying parenting in uncertain terrain: the CoPInG project

In the current dynamic and varied social context, "the family" has taken on an increasingly fluid character, configuring itself as a plural and diversified reality. Despite the evident break with a normative and prescriptive past, there remain today more or less implicit social expectations of "good parenting," which propose predefined standards and models of family adequacy (Doepke, Zilibotti, 2019; Fargion, 2021; Geinger, Vandenbroeck, Roets, 2014; Hays, 1996; Ramaekers, Suissa, 2012). Parents who live in difficult circumstances due to material, cultural, or relational issues are far from the static stereotype of the so-called "cereal packet family," an outdated functionalist concept according to which the idealized version of the family is a white middle-class nuclear family comprising a mother, father, and two children. This is an idea based on the 1950s version of society that ignores the fact that families have changed in both structure and diversity (Morgan, 2011).

Italian sociological studies exploring the perspective of parents who experience some kind of social vulnerability since they do not fit the stereotypical mold of this rigid family structure are still few and far between (Fargion, 2022). As argued by Castells (1997), social vulnerability can be defined as a state of ordinary insecurity experienced by some social groups as a result of their characteristics as a consequence of a social system that determines unprecedented (cultural, social, spatial, institutional and economic) difficulties that can make everyday life insecure (Negri, 2006). According to the French sociologist Castel (1995), vulnerability progressively leads to a weakening of the insertion of social actors in the main systems of integration that correspond to the family, work, and welfare state.

With the aim of analyzing the construction of parenthood and practices of "doing family" in uncertain circumstances in contemporary Italy, in 2019 the qualitative study Constructions of Parenting on Insecure Grounds (CoPInG) was launched. The study focuses in particular on four categories of parents who, for very different reasons, find themselves parenting in vulnerable situations.

These categories are parents facing violent conflicts; parents with forced migration backgrounds; parents living in poverty and precarious economic

conditions; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) parents. Using the grounded theory approach, the study of the construction of parenthood and parenting of each group was entrusted to a specific research unit involved in the study.

Regarding the first group of parents, the national data on marital instability in Italy (ISTAT, 2021) indicate that numerous Italian families have resorted to legal separation (97,474) and divorce (85,347). These spousal splits often affect parenthood and consequently the development of any children. In fact, the literature on the subject shows that parental separation is not predictive of serious problems for the offspring's well-being itself, but this aspect is sometimes linked to elements in the context of relationship development after the fracture (e.g., Fargion et al., 2021; Ismail, 2021; Moretto, Mauri, 2021; van der Wal, Finkenauer, Visser, 2019). One of the main elements of complexity in the management of separation is the high level of conflict between parents. Several studies suggest that parents living in conditions of high conflict are often considered far from the model of good parenting, since they expose their children to complex, sometimes even traumatic, experiences, failing to fulfill their protective parental task (Bertelsen, 2021; Elizabeth, Gavey, Tolmie, 2010; Johnston, 2006). In the case of the most critical situations, social services may intervene in various capacities on behalf of the court (Mauri, Moretto, 2020).

In the CoPInG project, these aspects have been studied by the local research unit from the University of Trento, which is the project's lead partner.

Different challenges concern parents who experience forced migration. The local research unit from the University of Calabria paid particular attention to the parental challenges of refugee and asylum seeker families, who – as the literature on the subject highlights (e.g., Roda, 2016; Roizblatt, Pilowsky, 1996) – often experience an aggravation of difficulties due to the loss of the support offered by their social network, and the need to adapt to a new social and cultural context. More specifically, migrant parents feel that they live in uncertain conditions since their migratory experiences do not allow them to parent as they would like; instead, they are tasked with juggling new languages, traditions, and social expectations (Jurado et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, the University of Trieste's research unit has focused on parents who are poor or who live in severe economic difficulties, since in the collective imagination, good parenting requires an economic investment accessible only to the upper-middle classes (Lareau, 2011). According to various scholars (Gambardella, Morlicchio, Accorinti, 2013; Guidicini, Pieretti, Bergamaschi, 2000; Morlicchio, 2012; Negri, Saraceno, 2000), starting from the end of the 1980s in Italy, the dimensions of economic vulnerability have widened, since the institutional framework has not been able to respond to the needs of the poorest families (especially in some areas of the country, characterized by a high

unemployment rate and a low level of economic dynamism). Studies on economic vulnerability have also underlined that in the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist society, the problem was not only the lack of economic resources or their unequal distribution but also their unequal circulation (Sen, 1994). Part of the scientific literature on economic vulnerability agrees that families' economic disadvantage and income precariousness significantly affect the present and future lives of children, both in their psychological and physical well-being, and their potential for development, influencing their future social integration and their work opportunities (e.g., Backwith, 2015; Craig, 2002; Morris et al., 2018). For this reason, low incomes often have a pervasive effect on relational, cultural, and expressive dimensions, which some authors refer to as "multidimensional poverty" (e.g., Alkire et al., 2011; Bourguignon, Chakravarty, 2019; Tsui, 2002). This concept refers not only to the condition of low income but also to other factors, such as the actual deprivation of goods, social exclusion, and the poor subjective perception of well-being.

Finally, regarding LGBT parents, including them as a group of vulnerable parents was necessary because being an LGBT parent in contemporary Italy still represents a great challenge. Not only is being LGBT not yet fully socially accepted but, in the Italian collective imagination, in the typical family parents are married heterosexual and cisgender partners (e.g., Corbisiero, Monaco, 2021; Lingiardi, 2016; Scandurra et al., 2019). Consequently, the different forms LGBT parenthood and parenting can take are not yet fully recognized either socially or from a legal point of view. This occurs because LGBT parenting greatly diverges from the mainstream family model, thus inherently questioning a supposed universal prototype (e.g., Carone, 2021; Scandurra et al., 2021). As amply demonstrated by anthropological, sociological, legal, and psychosocial studies, the family cannot be considered a natural entity. Rather, it can be defined as an institution in constant evolution, in close relationship with the sociocultural processes in which it is inserted, or as a sociocultural and historically defined product, subject to continuous modifications. However, this awareness is not yet fully rooted in Italy. These aspects have been explored in the CoPInG project by the local research unit from the University of Bozen-Bolzano.

The research path was structured with the aim of exploring and understanding, through parents' narratives and reflections, their representations of parenthood and parenting practices, and the possible role of professionals and social services in supporting the parents.

In the context of social research, the different categories of parents that the CoPInG project focuses on fall into the so-called category of hidden populations due to the different conditions of uncertainty they experience in their daily lives. In other words, because of the difficulties they experience and

their lived experiences of parenthood, which are often considered different from social expectations, they tend not to expose themselves and do not take part in social studies for discomfort or fear of being judged (e.g., Syed et al., 2018; Witherspoon, 2020).

Considering this condition, on a methodological level, the research group had thought of collecting these parents' life stories through 200 in-depth interviews, meeting each of them in person, in the belief that face-to-face interaction is the most suitable data collection strategy when the phenomenon under investigation is considered sensitive or concerns particularly vulnerable categories of individuals.

To create a more intimate and informal environment, the research group also reflected at length on the characteristics that the interview setting must have. Researchers were to suggest to the parents that they conduct the interviews in neutral, familiar, quiet, and uncrowded environments.

Participants had to be recruited mainly thanks to the support of parents' associations, social services, and through word of mouth.

The advent of COVID-19 upset the initial research design of the CoPInG project, making it even more difficult to carry out the scheduled interviews. In fact, to reduce the transmission probability, many parents, even if they had declared that they would join the project, withdrew following the health emergency for fear of physical contact.

In this scenario, the research group questioned what possible path to take to proceed with the research, despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic. More specifically, researchers reflected for a long time on the possibility of identifying solutions by evaluating various alternatives. Given the spread of digital technologies into most areas of everyday life, including social research (e.g., Callegaro, Manfreda, Vehovar, 2015; Cipolla, De Lillo, Ruspini, 2012; Lombi, 2015; Punziano, Delli Paoli, 2022), the research group thought about trying to exploit the possibilities offered by the so-called digital society to avoid having to wait for the end of the pandemic.

The following paragraphs describe the main solutions that have been adopted, and an explanation is provided as to how these solutions have been useful for continuing with the research with some groups of parents and, conversely, not very profitable for other target parental groups.

3. Redefining social research when being physically present is impossible

Sociology has been aware for some time of the new opportunities digital society offers in the form of possible solutions in the field of social research,

envisaging alternative paths and new goals to be achieved (e.g., Barratt et al., 2015; Matthews, Cramer, 2008; Miller, Sønderlund, 2010; Molteni, Airoldi, 2018). In fact, the advent of the online community has favored the development of so-called "e-methods," also known as virtual methods (e.g., Cipriani, Cipolla, Losacco, 2013; Hine, 2005) or online research methods (e.g., Fielding, Lee, Blank, 2008; Lobe, 2008). These expressions refer to the use of the internet as a tool for conducting different phases of social research.

However, although there is now a rich body of scientific research conducted (in whole or in part) online (e.g., Granello, Wheaton, 2004; Hooley, Wellens, Marriott, 2012; Monaco, 2019; Masullo, Coppola, 2021; Roger, 2013), in the specific case of the CoPInG project, the possibility of digitally transposing the study turned out to be an almost forced necessity, which most likely would not have been considered were it not for the pandemic. In other words, the adoption of this logic was prompted by the dramatic change of social scenario caused by COVID-19.

On this topic, during a webinar organized by the Arne Næss Program at the University of Oslo, Giddens introduced the term "digidemic," to underline how an indirect consequence of the pandemic has been the fast and unpredictable digitization of societies and many practices of daily life all over the world. According to the sociologist, due to social distancing, almost all human interactions have undergone a sociotechnical reformulation made possible by an increase in the use of technological devices.

Therefore, in the first months of 2020, CoPInG researchers took action to find new digital paths to continue to recruit and subsequently interview parents belonging to the four categories identified.

Certainly, the communication conveyed online has represented an important tool to activate the recruitment process. Regarding this specific aspect, albeit with different times and methods, the four research units tried to reach the target parents by sending emails and creating posts on the main social networks. In other words, by contacting parents' associations as "gatekeepers" (Salmons, 2012) and contacting individual parents through their private profiles, researchers reached an important number of subjects, to whom they were able to provide all the necessary information on the research at a later stage.

As reported elsewhere (Monaco, 2022), this mandatory transition to digital methods has forced researchers to identify new and diversified communication strategies. They have therefore prepared different specific messages depending on the interlocutor to contact and the means of communication used. Similarly, they enriched the project's website with a lot of information so that curious or interested people could independently search for further details not released directly during the initial contact.

Another aspect the research group was further confronted with when it decided to translate the research online was the ethical dimension. This is an issue that has its roots in the 1990s, when Jones (1994) published a paper stressing the need to define the domain of ethics in research in virtual environments. Since then, given the growing number of searches conducted online, this aspect has been increasingly discussed (e.g., Eynon, Fry, Schroeder, 2017; Fedeli, 2016; McKee, DeVoss, 2007; McKee, Porter, 2009; Roberts, Smith, Pollock, 2003; Warrell, Jacobsen, 2014).

Given the physical distance, the scholars agreed to find strategies to better identify themselves as researchers, effectively inform the participants about the research's objectives and main characteristics, obtain the participants' consent, and ensure their anonymity. Regarding the first point, the researchers not only used their university email and institutional social profiles for recruitment but also included links to their institutional pages in each communication to emphasize their positions as scholars through the communication channels already open. The research group also prepared a document containing a detailed description of the project, the methods for carrying out the interview, and the steps for data collection, analysis and dissemination as well as how the information collected would be treated and anonymized. Participants were to sign this document as evidence that they were aware of the nature and purpose of the interviews. Despite this wealth of detailed information, before conducting the interviews, the researchers decided to repeat the information in this document to the interviewees to ascertain whether the parents genuinely gave their informed consent to participate in the research. These documents had previously been validated by the individual ethics committees at the universities involved in the study.

Regarding the online interviews, the literature on the subject identifies different ways of carrying them out (Bauman, 2015; Janghorban, Roudsari, Taghipour, 2014; O'Connor, 2015; Salmons, 2010; 2014). In fact, they can be synchronous (when there is an interaction in real time between the interviewee and interviewer) or asynchronous (taking place when the researcher and interviewee are connected online at different times). In order to remain as faithful as possible to the original research design, researchers proceeded by conducting video interviews in real time. This allowed, albeit in a mediated way, access to a series of elements that are usually part of a face-to-face interview, namely, facial expressions, gestures, and the use of objects and spaces.

This possibility has made evident the power of virtuality not to give up the dynamic nature of interviews (Crichton, Kinash, 2003). As Fedeli (2013) suggests, spaces in a virtual world can be defined as "real" because they are perceived as such by all the participants in the experience of interaction. In this perspective, virtual research spaces can be experienced as other territories,

outside the physical world, in which social research can proceed as it would in any other physical place.

Before conducting the online interviews, researchers looked for suitable environments (either at their universities or in their own homes) that would not distract the interviewees (therefore with neutral-colored walls, without frills or particular furnishings), which were sufficiently soundproofed and were served by a good internet connection. Furthermore, to guarantee the success of the interviews, researchers verified that the technological equipment in their possession was adequate to support long-lasting video calls. The main elements to check included the battery status of the tablets and laptops, the resolution of the webcams, and the audio quality of the microphones.

A final consideration concerned the topics to be covered during the interview. The list of questions to be asked had been prepared before the COVID-19 emergency; however, clearly, the pandemic has affected everyone's lives, in many cases redefining daily life. In fact, due to the pandemic, many inequalities among social groups have been exacerbated. For example, the effects of the employment crisis due to the health emergency in the most acute phase of the pandemic have primarily affected the most vulnerable components of the labor market, such as young people, women, and foreigners, but also workers with less protected job positions and people living in the south of Italy (Saraceno, 2021), an area of the country which, even before the emergency, had the most challenging employment conditions. Furthermore, the persistent closure of educational services and schools, and the uncertainty about the times and methods of school recovery negatively affected the working lives of parents, especially working mothers (Dello Preite, 2021; Depalo, Giorgi, 2021; Leonini, 2020).

Faced with a world so upset by the pandemic, starting with family life and touching on aspects linked to new concerns, behaviors, and collective feelings, the research also explored the new conditions experienced by the parents and how this new situation could contribute to the construction of their parenting. During the interviews, researchers encouraged the participants to divulge their points of view and experiences as parents considering both the pre-pandemic time and the exceptional moment they were experiencing. Furthermore, in the analytical phase, as is usual for any social sciences study, the information collected was analyzed considering the space–time context of reference.

4. Advantages and disadvantages of transferring the research online

The idea of transferring the research on parenting in insecure conditions online has achieved partially satisfactory results. In fact, even if it is a unique

study, as anticipated, this research involves four different types of parents. For this reason, online recruitment has proven very useful for some research units but been unsatisfactory for others. More specifically, it has been particularly effective for reaching parents living in high conflict situations and LGBT parents. Within a few months, the two research units focusing on these demographics, respectively, managed to reach the number of interview slots they had set and proceeded with the theoretical sampling they had prepared with little difficulty. In both cases, the participants intercepted online, despite parenting in difficult conditions, have shown that they are equipped with the resources and skills necessary to access the internet and participate in the research.

Different situations have arisen for recruiting parents in financial straits and parents who experienced forced migration. In the first demographic, due to their socioeconomic conditions, some of these parents have not been traced online because they lack devices with which to access the internet. Despite these structural specificities, several parents were interviewed online following both online recruitment and the support of local social services.

Furthermore, there is a specificity concerning parents who had experienced forced migration. Many of them do not know any language, such as Italian or English, other than their own, so they needed support from social workers or cultural mediators to proceed with the interviews as intermediaries. This necessity made recruiting even more difficult. In this specific case, researchers preferred to wait for the end of the national lockdowns and proceed with in-person interviews, in full compliance with the anti-contagion rules imposed by the Italian government.

A major concern for all the research teams was the duration of the interviews. On average, they lasted about an hour. Researchers feared that such a lengthy interview might be too difficult to be run online. However, the interviewees who decided to join the project did not show signs of fatigue or inattention during the interviews. This may have been due to several factors. The first concerns the contingencies of the pandemic. Indeed, it was a period of increased availability of time and online presence due to forced isolation and reduced mobility. In the same way, as in-person interactions were limited to a minimum, a different trend developed where people have become increasingly connected through video chat apps and messenger services for the first time (Nguyen et al., 2020). Finally, many parents declared, during the interview or after its completion, that they willingly joined the study because they felt the need to express themselves, to make their voices heard, in the light of the marginalized conditions they experienced. Thus, many of them recognized the importance of social research and declared that they joined the study with the hope that their testimony would be useful in identifying possible strategies to

improve their social condition, and possible plans and solutions to receive more support from social work professionals.

Regardless of the number of subjects that each research unit was able to recruit and involve in the study during 2020 via the internet, some critical issues affected all the researchers across the board.

First, using the internet as a medium for recruitment meant excluding all parents who were not online, who did not use social networks, or who did not know how to use them. Consequently, to address this lack, all the research units have combined the use of telephone calls and some in-person meetings with the online search for parents as well as asking the representatives of the associations if they could intercede for them. Furthermore, after the first interviews, researchers also activated snowball recruitment, asking the interviewees if they could support the research team in identifying other parents with their same characteristics.

Another critical aspect concerned the digital knowledge of some parents. In fact, even though some people consented to participate in the study, not everyone knew how to use the technologies well. To make their participation in the research as easy as possible, researchers tried to adapt to the needs and previous knowledge of the participants. On the empirical level this meant that, although Zoom was identified as the best platform for carrying out the online interviews, when someone declared that they did not know how to use it, researchers proceeded to use other videoconferencing apps (such as Skype, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams). Some parents asked to conduct the interview via video call on WhatsApp, which is one of the most downloaded instant messaging apps in the world. To a lesser extent, some parents asked to conduct the interview through Facebook Messenger's video call feature.

Additionally, not all parents had high-performance devices or excellent connections. Consequently, the audio and video quality of some interviews suffered. For example, some interviews were interrupted and then resumed at a later time due to the poor quality of the participants' connection. In a few cases, some interviews were postponed for technical reasons.

At the same time, it is important to note that carrying out online interviews offered a number of advantages.

In the first place, it was possible to create a busy schedule of online appointments. This made it possible to manage the interview agenda with maximum flexibility. Some interviews were scheduled at unusual times (such as late in the evening or very early in the morning) in order to respond to the organizational and family needs of the interviewees. Similarly, rescheduling interviews was no problem for the researchers who, without moving from their workstations, could replace the postponed interviewee with another parent who was immediately available.

In addition, the research units that managed to work with parents equipped with technological skills and devices were able to find savings in economic and temporal terms when achieving the set number of interviews. In other words, it would have taken the researchers longer and cost more money if the participants had been recruited and interviewed in person, partly because the participants were from all over Italy, given the research's national nature.

Another interesting result concerns being able to interview some people who would not have given their availability for face-to-face interviews. In particular, this situation refers to some gay parents interviewed by the research unit from Bozen-Bolzano and some of the parents in financial straits recruited by the University of Trieste. In both cases, the parents wanted to take part in the study, allowing the audio recording of their interview but without activating the webcam during their video call, as they felt the need to tell their experience but did not want to expose themselves publicly. Some of the parents living in poverty made this request, explaining that the online interview without a webcam would mitigate their feelings of embarrassment. In the specific case of gay parents, some of them explained that this decision was due to the fact that in some areas of their life they had not come out and, for this reason, they preferred not to show their faces even to the researchers.

5. Conclusions and implications: a look to the future

In social sciences, when scholars plan a study, they try to anticipate and prevent challenges and errors that could affect its success. To do this, researchers work carefully on the methodological framework of their studies, even though they are aware that all empirical studies have their limitations.

However, the extraordinary and unpredictable COVID-19 pandemic is such an unimaginable event that it could not be taken into consideration in the planning phase. So, CoPInG had to unexpectedly remodel itself. Faced with the need to at least try to transfer the research online in order to avoid pausing the study altogether, the group of scholars reexamined the project and identified the most suitable strategies and actions to implement to obtain satisfactory results capable of answering the research questions.

From this critical angle, the pandemic could be considered an opportunity for further epistemological and methodological reflection on the future of social research.

As anticipated in the previous pages, for example, the digital turning point of the CoPInG project had differentiated outcomes. In fact, for some categories of parents, the recruitment and online interviews obtained excellent feedback. However, the same strategies were not suitable for other groups of parents due

to some of their sociodemographic characteristics. This example shows how the analysis of certain phenomena and the involvement of specific social groups require other in-depth reflections for the identification of alternative analytical paths capable of going beyond traditional surveys, hybridizing with digital technology.

Today more than ever, social researchers are called upon to face and overcome the challenges posed by digital methods, making the most of their advantages and developing adequate epistemological and methodological solutions, together with efficient procedures to test the reliability, validity, and quality of the research tools used (Bania, Dubey, 2020). This online transfer must also be accompanied by new questions of an ethical nature, which are inextricably linked to the specificities of virtual environments.

Understanding and welcoming the potential of online research is only possible if a renewed vision of the digital scenario is rooted within the scientific community. It must be understood as a space that is not opposed to the offline environment, but which, on the contrary, stands alongside them, greatly reducing physical distances. Only by starting from this reconceptualization of the internet, social scientists can grasp the opportunities that online spaces offer and understand that some target research populations can be identified, and quickly and easily reached without sacrificing the quality of their results.

In addition, knowing how to move in these online spaces allows researchers to reach participants even with specific profiles and characteristics, in compliance with their research's inclusion criteria, identified to ensure the heterogeneity of the sample. However, this also implies a commitment on the part of researchers, who must acquire or enhance their digital skills to make the most of the possibilities the online community already offers.

Starting from these considerations, the experience presented here supports the argument that online research cannot be considered wholly valid or ineffective in itself but must be clearly calibrated with respect to each specific research project, considering for example the object of study, the research question, the characteristics of the subjects that the study intends to involve and so on. Therefore, thinking that traditional tools are interchangeable with digital ones appears to be an inapplicable utopia.

Similarly, the partial success of the CoPInG's transfer online also shows that within the same research, different solutions can be implemented based on their ability to adapt to the scientific objectives.

These are lessons that can and must be applied in the future as part of other research experiences. COVID-19 has highlighted that the social sciences can and must reflect on themselves, using the tools available to face possible challenges if they want to survive. The alternative would be to stop research and wait for critical issues to pass. But this solution is not feasible, especially

considering that the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, are called to respond to the needs of the moment and adapt to changes.

In this sense, the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for digital innovation in social research (Velotti, Punziano, Addeo, 2022) and should represent a stimulus for researchers to consider how to shape both the discipline and research questions in the future.

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