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DISTANCE DISCOURSES

The focus group through digital platforms

Miguel Ángel Sánchez-García, Isabel María Cutillas Fernández and Marta Latorre Catalán

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the incorporation of digital applications into social science research. In the case of qualitative methodologies, the use of tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams have made it possible to adapt qualitative techniques to confined settings, enabling remote conversation between researchers and subjects of study. As has been the case in all areas of social life, social research has not escaped the challenges and changes imposed by the confinements and restrictions on mobility and concentration of people, as well as the reduction of research funding.

Indeed, qualitative research has been particularly conditioned and restricted in this context. Given that this type of research requires the physical presence of the researcher in the field, who, as Taylor and Bogdan (1987) put it, has to "go to the people" to collect empirical information first-hand through words and behaviors (Sabia and Figueredo 2022), measures of social distancing have forced qualitative researchers to adapt to a new scenario. Enrique Martín Criado (2014) pointed out that "immersion in the field" (leaving the usual circle of social relations, interacting with different people, participating in their scenarios) protects the researcher against the "prenotations that inevitably accompany it" (93). With the pandemic, therefore, the challenge was to achieve "immersion in the field" without leaving home.

However, the COVID-19 crisis has also generated new opportunities for the social sciences, such as the possibility to participate in online conferences around the world or to analyze the impacts that the pandemic has had on citizens, institutions, and even on the practice of social research itself (Molinari and De Villiers 2021). Consequently, and as this chapter demonstrates, like all crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has also become an object of research, allowing for a rethinking epistemological positions in respect to research methods and methodologies (Ryan et al 2024, this volume). Indeed, as Najmah et al (2024)

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show in this volume, qualitative research was also able to contribute to improving government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chapter aims to contribute to the literature that examines the limits and potentialities that the COVID-19 pandemic has generated for qualitative research. Specifically, we aim to analyze the way in which focus group practice has moved to an online setting, and how this has affected the development and results obtained through this technique.

The research we took as a reference was carried out between March and June 2021 and its main objective was to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on families with minors in the Region of Murcia (Spain) at risk or in a situation of social exclusion.[1] The methodological strategy combined quantitative and qualitative methods. On the one hand, a survey was designed for families with children in the Region of Murcia at risk of social exclusion, which was completed online. According to the characteristics of the survey, the most appropriate procedure for collecting information would have been by means of surveys in the family home once the households had been randomly selected. However, the pandemic situation prevented the implementation of this procedure. To try to overcome these difficulties, an adaptation strategy was designed that included several steps.

Firstly, the directors of the selected schools were contacted by mail and telephone to request their collaboration. This collaboration consisted of presenting the study and distributing the survey link. A total of 84 educational centers were contacted, of which 69 centers agreed to distribute the survey among households. In addition, four schools located in particularly vulnerable areas were selected. An interviewer-mediator collaborated in the completion of the survey in these centers. Likewise, contact was made with various Federations of Parents' Associations, requesting their collaboration in the distribution of the survey in different areas of the Region of Murcia. The collaboration of NGOs was also requested in order to disseminate the surveys and carry out support and advisory tasks. A total of 667 surveys were collected, of which 638 households remained in the sample once the process of filtering them for various reasons (repetitions, non-response, etc.) had been carried out.

The qualitative approach was organized around two research techniques: the focus group and the in-depth interview. Although both the interview and the focus groups are two qualitative techniques that require co-presence and their execution has therefore been conditioned and limited by health restrictions, for this work we took only the focus group as the object of study and theoretical reflection. In total, four focus groups were carried out. The first was made up of technical staff from NGOs that develop intervention projects in the socio-educational field; the second was made up of school directors; the third was made up of school teachers; and the fourth was carried out with representatives of Parents' Associations.

According to Alonso (2003), we could define the focus group as "a socialised conversation project in which the production of a group communication

situation serves to capture and analyze the ideological discourses and symbolic representations associated with any social phenomenon" (93). In this sense, the fundamental objective of the focus group is to learn about the social representations, that is, the systems of norms and values, as well as the images associated with institutions, collectives, or themes that social groups have and which emerge from the discursive confrontation between their members. Thus, in the controlled and guided group conversation of the focus group, through communicative and linguistic processes, the subjects display their social perceptions as subjective representatives of objective positions (Alonso 2003).

From the above, we can deduce the importance of social and group interaction among the participants at the time of the group. As Martín Criado (1997) explains, the participants, with their statements and those of others, as well as through all the metacommunicative clues – gestures, tone of voice, body position, etc. – negotiate a definition of the situation and of the legitimate schemes of interpretation. This intersubjective and collective construction of meaning differs to a large extent from what happens in an interview. In an interview, the interviewee's discourse is negotiated only, and implicitly, with an interviewer, who can exercise a certain kind of structural censorship over what he or she says and how he or she says it. However, when answering questions, the interviewee does not have to contrast and confront his or her discourse with members of his or her own social, professional, ethnic, etc. group.

Participants' interactions during the focus group where a socially constructed naturalness is recreated (Schütz 1993) make explicit the ideas circulating tacitly within the group under study. This means that its translation to an online scenario has greater repercussions, as we said, than in the case of the in-depth interview, which is why the article focuses exclusively on our experience with the online focus group. Thus, the first section is devoted to the limits that the online focus group has for the intersubjective construction of discourse. In a second section we point out some nuances and differences observed according to the profile of the participants, the time of the pandemic. or the type of application used. The chapter closes with a section of conclusions.

Limits to the intersubjective construction of discourse at a distance

Martín Criado (1997) points out in his work on the focus group technique that "every discursive product is the result of the relationship between two systems of relations: the interpretative schemes of the participants and the social situation in which they find themselves" (104). The author draws on Blom and Gumperz's (1986) reading of Goffman's (1963) work to identify the three elements that regulate any social interaction: place, situation, and event. These three elements define the type and number of participants who can intervene in an interaction; the topics that can be talked about; a margin for changing the subject; the type of verbal and non-verbal actions allowed (body movements, position, tone of voice); and a margin for divergence of opinions (Martín

Criado 1997, 84). Therefore, when organizing a focus group, these three elements must be considered. Indeed, the place where the meeting takes place; the way in which the situation is defined, that is, the pattern of behavior within the interaction (formality-informality of the meeting, role of the moderator, communication among participants); and the event, which refers to the limited set of topics marked by routines of opening and closing by the moderator, are crucial aspects in this type of technique.

Alonso (2003) suggests that the focus group is designed so that the discussion does not revolve around the individual, particular, and private memories of the participants, but rather on their social and shared memory, which is activated in the conversational process. For this reason, he points out that the appropriate number of participants is between five people – which allows for a socialized group situation, thus avoiding the intimate situation of three people or two couples in cross-conversation – and nine or ten participants. Within this range, the group members tend to perceive that they are part of a collective discussion where they are addressing an audience, and at the same time it is a controllable number that prevents the conversation from breaking up and dispersing into subgroups, giving rise to overlapping interventions (102). The organizers and moderators of the focus group therefore aim to create a framework, a spatial and temporal context, in which communicative interaction is possible, i.e., a dialogical situation where the participant does not do so as a private individual but as a transactional and relational individual (Bruner 1990, 81–95).

Although at the time of convening the focus groups the situation of confinement had ended in Spain, health measures of social distancing meant that the groups had to be conducted through the Zoom application. The first element that was altered when conducting the groups online is what we could call the *social setting*. From a neutral and spacious meeting room with all participants sharing a common physical space, built, as if it were a stage, for the occasion, we moved on to the different private and professional spaces from which the group members connected.

The members of the first group, made up of NGO employees working on socio-educational intervention projects, mostly participated from their workstations, not in isolated rooms but at desks in a shared space with other colleagues or even with their own bosses. School and high school principals, on the other hand, did participate in all cases from a private and isolated space, either in their individual offices or in an empty meeting room. On the other hand, participants in the group of primary and secondary school teachers, as well as parents of pupils linked to school associations, did so preferably from home, in some cases when there was no one at home and in others with family members present, to whom they had to attend to. This diversity of spaces and companies had an important impact on the development of the groups and on the discourses collected.

Thus, one of the main limitations of conducting online groups has to do precisely with the difficulty of maintaining the definition of the situation. In

focus groups, as Martín Criado (1997, 96–97) points out, a certain balance must be achieved between exceptionality and involvement. The group should function as a relatively exceptional situation that prevents participants from reducing their discourse to a series of clichés and stereotypes common in everyday conversation among peers. On the contrary, the focus group should facilitate making explicit what is usually implicit in an everyday interaction between acquaintances. In order to generate this exceptionality that goes beyond the knowledge background (Garfinkel 2006), it is important to control some elements. For example, it is important that the participants, although they may share objective positions in the social space, do not know each other beforehand. Other aspects, such as the presence of the tape recorder at the table, also help to define the situation as atypical, so that it is clear that the aim of the meeting is to collect a discourse for research. What is involved, therefore, unlike what happens in an informal chat with friends – where values such as wit, fun, or a comfortable retreat to the dominant discourse of one of the group members can circulate – is to collectively construct a "truth" about the topics discussed.

However, this exceptionality, while important, should not be excessive, since too much attention to external details may prevent participants' involvement in the conversation (Martín Criado 1997, 98). In other words, we must be able to create a space that is formal enough to encourage engagement and interest, but in which participants feel comfortable to express their opinions, even if these deviate from the general consensus of the group.

What we observed when conducting the Zoom groups is that the exceptionality of the online conversation was such that in many cases it prevented a "natural", even honest, intervention by the participants. In the case of those who took part from the workspaces, there were multiple interruptions during the meeting that broke the attempts to build a framework for dialogue: excessive background noise, phone calls, quick questions or queries from other colleagues to the participants, etc. The same was true for those who took part from home, especially if they were women, who at many points in the meeting, which lasted two hours on average, were obliged to be absent for care reasons, as other research has shown (Romero 2021). In this sense, as Sabia and Figueredo (2022) point out, based on Goffman (1997), there are basically two actions to avoid problems of defining the situation in an interaction: corrective practices and preventive practices. The former anticipate the existence of a problem of definition, while the latter remedy cases of discredit that could not be avoided. In our case, there were cases of preventive practices such as making it obvious from the outset that it was a "busy day at the office" or that "the children were at home". There were also corrective practices, such as when a colleague of a participant joined the focus group and had to be asked to leave the meeting.

This exceptionality increased or decreased depending on the participants' familiarity with the tool. In the case of NGO employees and younger teachers, who were already accustomed to Zoom and the use of technological tools, mastery of the application contributed to the naturalness of their interventions,

but not so in the case of parents of pupils and even head teachers, who often had to be reminded how to intervene, how to ask for a turn to speak, or how to turn off the microphone if there was background noise in the room. All these elements provoked an interaction which, in most groups and at most moments, favored extensive individual interventions, with a game more typical of motivated questions/answers directed not at an audience but at the moderator, who ended up acquiring a more invasive role in the group conversation. This is a dynamic that did not favor the dialogic process in which the group members elaborate, negotiate, and confront each other, and are guided and controlled by a moderator who takes on a more passive, less directive role, leaving the framework of interpretation to be generated by the group (Alonso 2003).

In order to reduce this effect in our fieldwork, we endeavored to avoid what Bourdieu (2007) called, albeit in his case in relation to the in-depth interview, "the logic of the double game in the reciprocal confirmation of identities" (535).[2] That is to say, the interviewee, in this case a member of the group, responds diligently to the questions posed by the moderator; while the moderator, for his or her part, satisfied to receive an elaborated and constructed discourse that fits his or her *preconceptions* or hypotheses, allows the interviewee to take control of the conversation, forgetting the very meaning of a focus group.

On the other hand, and in general, there was a scarce and intermittent linking of participants with each other during the meetings, which is explained both by the scarce interpellation and by the absence of metacommunicative elements typical of face-to-face interaction such as gestures, closeness, or glances through which the cognitive and discursive interweaving that contributes to the collective construction of the discourse is achieved (Jaspal and Breakwell 2024, this volume). As Cáceres et al (2017) point out, when communication takes place face-to-face, where the subjects are accessible to each other in the interaction, it is impossible to ignore the presence of others because it is within the cognitive field. This fact favors the degree of involvement of the individual in a situation of co-presence over a computer-mediated communication, where the individual can cut the connection, stop responding, lose his or her attention, measure his or her involvement, and control, in short, the progress of the interaction (238).

However, it could be seen that in the cases of the participants who were more familiar with the use of Zoom and who intervened from a private space without interruptions, the conversation reached moments of more dialogue, of greater discursive cooperation. This facilitated, for example, the contrast of opinions and dissent, and helped to confront and bring to the surface legitimate and illegitimate representations of issues within a group.

In short, the interplay with the various elements that make up the focus group situation – meeting space, degree of exceptionality of the situation, role of the moderator – are particularly altered when conducting the focus group online. The ability and challenge for researchers is to generate an interaction that allows for dialogue, confrontation, or balanced participation without interruptions or censorship due to the presence of co-workers/partners/bosses.

In the following section we will delve into the factors that can facilitate and hinder the intersubjective construction of discourse in online focus groups.

Nuances, inequalities, and dilemmas of online focus groups

As Cáceres (2017) describe, the widespread presence of technology in everyday life makes the internet a space for meeting and sociability that no longer needs co-presence. The pandemic, for its part, has had a major impact on this process, accelerating and amplifying it even further (Manzanera and Brändle 2022). A survey by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas during the COVID-19 crisis revealed that during the confinement 23% of Spaniards bought a computer or other computer equipment and more than half, 53.4%, declared that they had increased their time on the internet during this period (CIS 2021).

However, as Sabia and Figueredo (2022) point out, although ICT tools are widespread and used on a daily basis, this is not uniformly the case. For example, in the case of Spain, almost half of the population does not have basic digital skills and only one third has basic skills above this level (European Commission 2021). During the confinement, this digital divide became more evident and visible, especially affecting people over 65 years old – despite their efforts to adapt to digital tools during the pandemic – (Manzanera and Brändle 2022) and the population with fewer educational, economic and technological resources (Losa et al 2021). Thus, among households with the lowest incomes (900 euros net monthly or less), almost 9% of households with children do not have access to the internet. Moreover, the lack of access to a computer is almost 20 times higher in the poorest households, especially affecting single-parent households (Manzanera and Brändle 2022, 4; Gobierno de España 2020; INE 2021).

Parallel to inequality in access to and use of technological applications, the COVID-19 crisis also revealed other dynamics that were not so visible until then. For example, the psychosocial damage resulting from longer working hours and the blurring of the boundaries between work, leisure, and care time, especially in the case of working-age women (Romero 2021; Manzano 2018).

During our research, these situations created several limitations for the implementation of the online focus groups. On the one hand, when it came to drawing up the sample, older people, especially in the case of teachers and head teachers, and parents of students with fewer resources, did not participate in the research because they did not master the Zoom application, did not have a personal computer, or because of work-life balance problems. Even this inequality also had an impact during the focus groups, as people with greater knowledge and control of digital tools tended to participate more and for longer. However, if these limitations affected the configuration and development of our fieldwork, they would have done so to a much greater extent if our target population occupied more subordinate positions in the labor market and social structure, such as migrants in an irregular situation, precarious workers, seasonal agricultural workers without a stable residence, etc.

At the time the focus groups were designed, Spain was in the second year of the pandemic – a phase in which both teleworking and the use of digital applications were fully installed and, therefore, the perception of exhaustion and tiredness of workers in relation to permanent videoconferencing was significant (Manzanera and Brändle 2022). According to recent work (DeFilippis et al 2020), the confinements led to a significant increase in the number of emails exchanged and meetings held. The most striking increases were in the number of meetings (up 12.9%) and the number of attendees (up 13.5%).

Thus, while these "teleworkers", who are generally in the middle age of working life, have a high level of education and full access to digital technologies, were more willing to participate in the research, they tended to perceive the focus groups as "just another Zoom work meeting". A definition that in a sense reduced their involvement in the conversation and the exceptional nature of the conversation compared to other online interactions in the workspace or at home. In this scenario, it is essential that during the phase of contacting the participants, the particularities of this meeting and what is expected of those who connect to it should be insisted on with much greater vehemence than if it were a face-to-face focus group, even if this means an added difficulty in complying with the planned sample. In the digital environment, the moderator's tools to solve the shortcomings of the contact phase are substantially reduced.

Therefore, it is important to note that the limitations of conducting online focus groups are not only limited to the time of the conversation, but also to the selection of people who can participate in this type of remote research, either because they lack skills and resources or, especially during the pandemic, because of digital saturation or exhaustion.

On the other hand, at the ethical level, the use of digital tools and applications also poses some dilemmas. As Abad (2016) points out, qualitative research, beyond legal compliance with certain standardized protocols, always requires a situated and pragmatic ethics, which "demands a permanent critical and creative attitude to resolve situations of moral conflict as they arise in the research process" (115).

During the focus groups there were some moments when "reactive ethical strategies", as Neale (2013, 8) calls them, which involve making decisions in the face of dilemmas or unforeseen events, had to be applied. For example, during the focus group with school and high school teachers, one of the participants, who had confirmed that she would take part from her workplace, finally connected to the call from her private car while driving home. Faced with this setback, the participant introduced what we previously defined with Goffman as *preventive practice*, explaining that she had to return home due to an unforeseen event and that it was a long journey without much traffic. At first, given that the participant did not inform the research group beforehand, we had to make a decision at that moment and, despite the fact that she was an essential profile for the sample, that ruled out her participation in an attempt to be ethically responsible in view of the multiple risks that this circumstance generated.

On the other hand, for the research group, it was essential for the participants to have the camera and microphone turned on during the interventions in order to encourage bonding between them. This requirement, in addition to discouraging some profiles – mostly women with dependents at home – was also difficult to maintain during the group. For example, when participants were called upon by a co-worker or another member of the household, forcing them to turn off the camera and microphone and leave the conversation for a short time. Despite these interruptions, we decided to continue with the focus groups, noting when the participant's absence occurred and for how long, without applying corrective or reactive practices.

Moreover, the obligation to keep the camera on implies that the participants in the group could at all times pay attention to their image and physical appearance, which undoubtedly hinders the involvement and concentration of the participants in the meeting. In other words, it is not only that there may be reluctance for video recording, which was already a common practice in face-to-face focus groups, but that the participant, constantly exposed to the image he/she projects, is as much, if not more, attentive to it as to his/her words. This video dysmorphia (Brändle and Manzanera 2022, 2), we consider, detracts from the naturalness and spontaneity of the interventions.

As has been pointed out, the online focus group generates symbolic and ethical ruptures in the definition of the situation to a greater extent than the face-to-face group, which hinders the dialogical and intersubjective construction of the discourse. In addition to the difficulties in controlling the definition of the situation, there are other dilemmas that appear at a later stage: during the analysis of the discourses. As we have noted above, in many cases the participants intervened from spaces shared with co-workers, bosses, or members of the household. The ethical and methodological dilemma caused by this contingency when interpreting the discourses revolves around how the presence of the *close other* – not socially, but in terms of work, family, or friendship – can lead to structural censorship that denaturalizes the discourse and brings it closer to stereotyped and frayed statements, without elaboration or explicitness.

For example, in the group made up of NGO employees working on socio-educational intervention projects, we noticed that the connection from the workplace, surrounded by colleagues and even bosses, prevented several of the participants from detaching themselves from their role as representatives of their organization. Thus, it was difficult as moderators, on the one hand, to prevent the interventions from being limited to a list of the projects and actions developed by their NGO and, on the other hand, to encourage a common debate on the needs, covered and not covered, of families with children at risk of or in a situation of social exclusion, as this could reveal the shortcomings not detected or covered by the organizations. The solution we tried to find to this problem was to always keep in mind the behind-the-scenes of the research process (Wainerman and Sautu 2001) and to point out in which cases interventions could be conditioned by this fact, adding this circumstance to the reasoning and interpretative analysis.

Finally, one of the requirements of the focus group is, as Alonso (2003) points out, that the participants do not know each other beforehand, in order to favor the exceptionality of the situation, the cooperative construction of meaning, and to avoid stereotyped discourses. As is the case with the appearance of unforeseen events and interruptions that crack the definition of the situation, this condition is also difficult to fulfil in the case of the focus group at a distance, given that the participants may be exposed to the judgement of a person from the same circle. This condition is undoubtedly aggravated when the other person listening to your message occupies a position of greater hierarchy or control. In these cases, we believe that the ethical and methodological response of researchers should be pragmatic, reflexive, and adapted to each context and research situation.

Conclusions

With the return to "normality", the possibility of returning to face-to-face fieldwork in social research has also returned. Interviews, focus groups, or discussion groups have returned to face-to-face interviews and in physical spaces that meet the appropriate conditions for this purpose. However, the use of technology and virtual environments has not been totally abandoned. The facilities offered by the development of online research techniques (lower costs, time saving, simplified logistics, increased success rate in the contact phase, among others) have made this method another resource for the researcher.

In this new scenario of coexistence between the online and the face-to-face, we consider it interesting to make some reflections, based on the experience presented in this chapter, that attempt to contribute to the debate on the potential shortcomings when carrying out qualitative research through digital applications. According to Kerr-Cumbo et al (2024, this volume), it's important to avoid hasty studies of dubious long-term scope outside the immediate context forced by the pandemic, and to aspire to promote a methodological legacy and lasting improvements in the scope and quality of research: a legacy that will have to pose a different epistemological and ethical framework (Calvo et al 2024, this volume).

Firstly, the specific characteristics, and the final objective, of each of the qualitative research techniques generate different obstacles for their virtual development. In this sense, we consider that the importance of interaction in the construction of a group discourse conditions the translation of the focus group to an online scenario to a greater extent than that of other techniques such as the interview. An interaction in which not only the words (what is said), but also gestures, silences, interruptions, space, or the ease of leaving the group condition the involvement of the participants with the technique, the moderator's ability to conduct the situation, and, of course, the final discourse obtained. In this way, we understand that the virtual environment obliges the researcher, to a greater extent than the face-to-face one, on the one hand, to a

continuous critical vigilance of the design of the fieldwork and, on the other, to anticipate responses to possible setbacks that may arise. The following is a brief review, which is neither exhaustive nor complete, of the limitations we have encountered during our work.

On the one hand, it seems clear that the relevance of online fieldwork will be greatly conditioned by the profile of the population under study. This is not only because of the possibility of constructing a more fluid and uninterrupted space for interaction, but also to avoid exposing our informants to the symbolic violence that requires knowledge of certain tools or the availability of material goods such as a computer or a good internet connection. Thus, the focus group conducted with school principals, who were familiar with the use of these applications and computer media, allowed for greater discursive construction than the focus group conducted with representatives of Parents' Associations, in which the participants presented very unequal resources.

In the same sense, the research carried out has shown that sharing space with other people (work colleagues, partners, or family members) while the group is being conducted conditions, and in some cases even censors, the discourse of the participants. We consider that this limitation of the technique must be considered especially when the research carried out deals with subjects that may be sensitive or compromise the informant. However, this conditioning of the discourse by the presence of people close to the interviewee/participant can also occur when the fieldwork is carried out in person, for example, when the informant comes to the interview or focus group accompanied by another person who will participate or listen to the conversation. However, we believe that this limitation can be better controlled and is less common in a face-to-face context than in a virtual one.

Research in virtual settings brings us closer to informants, who can participate in our research with very little impact to their routine and obligations; however, it is just as easy to leave the group or to participate without real involvement (by combining it with other activities, for example). This, moreover, is intensified in a scenario such as the current one in which most of us are saturated with participating in meetings, courses, and activities virtually. At the touch of a button, the informant can leave the group without being subjected to the scrutiny or judgement of the other participants and the moderator. Therefore, as noted above, the characteristics of the research technique and what is expected of the participant must be emphasized during contact. In this attempt to ensure the participant's involvement, it would be appropriate to return to the classic debate on the relevance or otherwise of remunerating participation in the group, traditionally with a gift or gift voucher. This consideration for attendance, which, as Martín Criado (1997, 99) points out, "is closer to a commercial relationship than a gift", can give formality and commitment to the situation.

Related to the previous point, the importance of the figure of the moderator in the development of the focus groups became visible in the fieldwork presented. The making of important decisions during the sessions (such as not

incorporating informants who did not meet certain requirements, even if this went against the sample; or silencing members of the group, to avoid noise), or the need to develop a more active and directive role than desired to achieve group interaction, recommend that the moderator has sufficient knowledge of both the focus group technique and the population under study. As Bourdieu (2007) points out, "the sociologist can help them (the informants) in this work (discourse construction) in the manner of a midwife, provided that he possesses a thorough knowledge of the conditions of existence that produce them and of the social effects that the survey relationship (the research technique) can exert, and through it, their position and their primary dispositions" (539). Social research shows itself more clearly as a craft to be learned by doing.

In short, to use a cliché, technology is here to stay in qualitative research as well. The restrictions established in response to the COVID-19 health emergency favored and accelerated the incorporation of digital applications in qualitative fieldwork, a process in which quantitative research had already been immersed for years (for example, with telematic surveys). However, the ultimate aim of qualitative research, which is none other than to capture the discourses, intentions, expectations, and interpretations that subjects make in regards to a phenomenon or situation, complicates its translation to the virtual. To the extent that we are not looking for numerical data, but rather to construct and reconstruct collective imaginaries, the face-to-face interaction is more vital than in other methodologies and, especially, in research techniques such as the focus group. In this sense, it is the researcher's task to try to anticipate and control the limitations of the online space, making the most of its advantages.

Notes

1 Losa, Antonio (Ed.) 2021. "Evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 on families with children in the Region of Murcia". Murcia: EAPN-RM. https://eapnmurcia.org/pandemia/.

2 As Bourdieu (2007) points out, the interview implies a certain type of social relationship that also generates effects on the results obtained. Although the interviewer has no intention of exercising any kind of symbolic violence capable of affecting the answers, the truth is that it is not possible to rely exclusively on the goodwill of the interviewer, because in the very nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee are inscribed all kinds of relational distortions, such as, for example, those that have to do with the social asymmetries derived from the social positions occupied by one and the other (2007, 528). It would certainly be interesting to analyze how the social relationship between interviewer and interviewee is affected by the online interview compared to the face-to-face, in-depth interview: would symbolic violence and structural censorship increase or be more controlled, would responses be more or less distorted? Answering these kinds of questions, we think, would be very interesting, although the contrasts to observe these differences would be more complex than in the case of the explicit negotiation and confrontation that the focus group allows.

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