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Katherine Waugh

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Katherine Waugh

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a reconsideration of oral history practices, at a time when face-to-face contact was widely discouraged. This article draws upon a small sample of oral history interviews conducted remotely using video-calling software, to reflect upon the longer-term place of the video-call as a tool for oral historians. There are both practical challenges and benefits in relation to online interviewing with regards to security, accessibility, and comfort. More specifically, however, this article discusses the different ways in which memory and emotion may be shared on a video call and the wider implications of the virtual setting for rapport-building and shared authority between interviewer and interviewee.

With restrictions regarding face-to-face interactions, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a reconsideration of oral history practice, primarily where and how interviews can take place safely for both interviewer and interviewee. During the first year of the pandemic, the *Oral History Review* published a special issue dedicated to some of our field's immediate responses to the changes we confronted as part of this global upheaval. Within this issue, several oral historians discussed considerations for documenting the pandemic itself, juggling the desire to record immediately with the need to protect both interviewees and interviewers from both physical and emotional trauma. Jason Kelly noted the importance of "rapid response" oral histories in times of crisis to "witness and record" something valuable in ways that recognized the social, cultural, political, and emotional complexities of the crisis.[1] Cautioning against this scramble to record in the midst of a crisis, Jennifer Cramer called for oral historians to take a breath first, noting the traumatic potential of this health crisis and reminding us of the do-no-harm principle that should underpin every interview. Cramer recommends continual reflexivity on the part of the interviewer and rigorous implementation of shared authority and informed consent to protect the privacy and well-being of narrators.[2]

During those early months of COVID-19, Stephen Sloan suggested returning to the project design phase before conducting oral histories remotely, considering the fundamental differences between face-to-face interviews and video calls.[3] In his article, Sloan used the example of silence, something we are likely more uncomfortable with via video call than when interviewing in person, to demonstrate how key components of oral histories may be changed by this new medium, but he went no further in exploring how these changes may affect the testimony that is shared.[4] Now, three years in, there is a great amount of guidance about conducting remote interviews, with a focus upon the practicalities of setting up a digital interview in terms of equipment and digital connections, but less has been said about how this new way of working changes the dynamic of the interview-interviewee

relationship and the impact of this upon what interviewee and interviewer share during the process.[5] Now, with the experience of several years of remote interviewing, we can consider the influence of the video-call medium on the intersubjective and dialogical encounter of the interview, to explore how this specific technology can alter, enhance, or damage the communication of memory, meaning, and emotion within an interview.[6]

Attention to the digital potentials of oral history is not, however, a spontaneous reaction to the current crisis, for discussions of oral history's place in the digital age have been ongoing for much longer. As Michael Frisch recognizes, the potential for web-based archiving of oral histories places the interview recording in center stage, allowing, in theory, instant access to the primary audio for anyone, anywhere in the world.[7] Such ready digitization has also changed how museum exhibits and public history have displayed and disseminated oral interviews; the integration of digital audio has the ability to bring hidden histories into public historical discourse in novel ways.[8] Yet the discussion of the digital turn has remained largely focused upon either the practicalities of storage and exhibition, or the ethical implications of digitization in relation to the dissemination and interpretation of interviews.[9] While these considerations are of course essential, less attention has been devoted to understanding how the digital technology itself may alter the intersubjective relationship formed during the oral history process, altering what is shared simply because of the different ways video calls mediate the encounter in comparison to the physical recorder.

Here, I suggest that remote interviewing using video-call software may have significant methodological implications for the oral history interview, offering new opportunities and challenges for both practitioners and participants, from initial recruitment of interviewees to how both communicate and behave during the interview. This article looks first at the initial practical implications that the shift to remote interviewing may have for participant recruitment and engagement in the oral history process. The reflections here are based on the very small and specific research context of three former mining villages in the United Kingdom's North East, but the issues of confidentiality, digital access and digital literacy, ageism within the interview process, and interviewing within contexts where there have been high levels of outward migration are applicable more broadly. Likewise, too, I discuss the potentials for increased accessibility, comfort, and flexibility, suggesting that the knowledge gained regarding remote practices during the pandemic may well be beneficial in future scenarios.

However, this article suggests that remote interviewing has methodological implications for oral histories beyond the practicalities of software, sound quality, and Internet access, although these logistics are all vital things to consider. The article also interrogates how the intersubjective encounter between interviewer and interviewee may change within this digital context. I draw on the work of human geographers and computer scientists concerned with the entanglement of "real" and "virtual" space within online interactions, asking how the video call, with its capacity to transport the real space to the virtual, may impact relationship building between interviewer and interviewee, and subsequently what participants share within the interview itself. I examine the influence of interview setting on this rapport building and memory sharing, exploring ideas of power, trust, and affect within the interview. Here, in particular, I consider the impact of the alternative sensory environment on these remote encounters and how this may change not only how interviewees share

testimony, but also how we as interviewers adapt to emotional and affective cues within our questioning.

The research for this project is situated specifically in County Durham, a semirural county in England's North East that formerly constituted a significant proportion of the Great Northern Coalfield. During the past six decades the region experienced dramatic changes due to waves of industrial closure; as in other locales, the legacy of deindustrialization continues to be felt by these communities in the present day.[10] The oral history project examines lived experiences of deindustrialization within individual communities in County Durham, and in particular, it approaches deindustrialization as a process rather than an event, and one which has significant emotional repercussions within communities beyond the loss of employment. Accordingly, life-narrative oral histories constitute the methodological basis of the research, but the arrival of social distancing measures demanded significant adaptation of these methods to ensure they functioned remotely.

With this in mind, my reflections within this article are upon a small sample of only six interviews carried out during the first six months of the pandemic beginning in the United Kingdom. I conducted interviews via video-call software, but only recorded the audio. As I discuss below, my reflections emerged during the initial shift to remote practices, in which concerns about accessibility and digital exclusion became apparent, but also following the completion of an initial two remote interviews. In particular, it was my failure to adapt in-person practices sufficiently that led to two rather pointed, transactional interviews that opened up consideration of the broader issues and potentials attached to this mode of interviewing. Thus, while this article contains references to some interview material, my analysis is the result of general reflections upon interview practice and project design rather than a close examination of particular failures within specific interviews. Indeed, some of the issues discussed here were not raised during my research, but may well have been raised for other researchers, or will be in future interviews, and it is for this reason that continued reflexivity around remote interviewing practice, and adequate planning tailored to this specific setting during project design, are vital.

Participant Recruitment and Digital Accessibility

At the most fundamental level, the ability to conduct interviews using video-calling software allows for the retrieval of the oral source, amid circumstances in which face-to-face communication is limited by social distancing and advice to stay at home. For research such as mine, concerned with the everyday experiences of a much broader process—deindustrialization—oral history provides a valuable methodology for accessing evidence largely omitted from the written historical record. Indeed, to return to Kelly's rapid response oral histories, the Coronavirus pandemic is one such event in which oral history can elucidate individual experiences of what is still an ongoing global experience.[11] It is the ability to obtain not just factual evidence of historical events, but to hear and record the meaning of these events in the words of those experiencing them, that Alessandro Portelli contends makes oral history so different from other historical methods, and therefore why it is so crucial to retrieve it through means of remote practice.[12]

One of the primary concerns about moving to online interviewing was that it would exclude people who did not have access to the Internet or suitable technology.[13] Scholarship has tended to address the digital divide as a concern for access rather than for the collection

of oral histories, yet the latter has begun to receive wider attention because of the heightened prominence of the Internet in all aspects of life during the pandemic.[14] In discussing the shift to online interviewing, one potential narrator immediately said that they "didn't do" Zoom, and another stated they felt it would be too long talking over a phone or computer to be enjoyable. I identified participants by making use of local history and community groups on social media, which already risked excluding those without digital access. My original project plan had included conducting in-person interviews in communities and using the snowball method of gaining introduction to other narrators who were otherwise missed because of little or no digital access. Moving the process entirely online meant that there was no opportunity to either meet or interview these other people.

With digital exclusion often overlapping with social exclusion, remote interviewing presents a real risk of failing to capture the testimony within the most marginalized communities, although this intersects with broader socioeconomic inequalities that may be impossible for individual researchers to mitigate. For instance, in 2018 a study classified 10 percent of the adult population in the United Kingdom as "internet non-users," with the North East region having the highest rate of nonusers in the UK mainland at 12.1 percent.[15] As other recent studies outline, this is not simply a generational issue but one tied intrinsically to socioeconomic inequalities and patterns of deprivation. In two of the three villages in which my research is situated, the 2019 index of multiple deprivation demonstrates that a significant proportion of the population fell into the first or second percentile, experiencing the highest levels of deprivation nationwide.[16] There exists no data regarding Internet access at village level, but the link between deprivation and digital exclusion is a concern when shifting to remote interviewing. Indeed, it is worth noting that all those I interviewed remotely for my research were either current or retired white-collar professionals, with all but two participants from my initial ten interviews either currently studying for or having obtained university-level qualifications.

In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised important questions about ageism and the marginalization of older populations in an increasingly digital world, whereby they account for a significant proportion of people without digital access.[17] While this still remains a prominent concern, the Centre for Ageing Better has found that "COVID-19 has spurred many more people to get online or to use the internet in new ways," and I was fortunate to meet one of my participants this way.[18] Maureen, aged eighty-three, had been encouraged to download Zoom in order to attend church services during lockdown and had been using social media to keep in touch with her family, which is how she came to know about my research and got in touch.[19] Maureen thus contradicted age-based assumptions that a shift to online working would exclude all older people, as in fact it was our online correspondence that made an interview possible in the first instance.

While it is crucial, therefore, that we bear in mind the potential implications the digital divide may have for older people, it is also essential that we abandon the age-based assumptions and stereotypes that prevent us from seeking older participants for remote interviews. To return to the findings of the Centre for Ageing Better, digital exclusion of elderly individuals often results from a fear of "doing technology wrong" or a lack of self-confidence in their technological ability, and because of this, we must ensure that the process of the remote interview is one that does not exacerbate these feelings and can instead facilitate more inclusive participation.[20] Although not discussed here, as they consistute a different methodology with its own advantages and challenges, telephone

interviews may sometimes be preferable and more accessible for those without Internet access who would still prefer or require a remote format.[21]

Beyond these issues of digital literacy discussed above, moving to video-call interviews also requires us to consider other barriers to participation caused by, or even mitigated by, the remote setup. While my interviewees had all chosen initially to be interviewed in person in their homes, there will be many participants for whom the home is not a preferred or even safe location to share confidential testimony. Indeed, this is a concern that, unsurprisingly, appears to be shared among medical professionals and therapists who have also made the move to video consultations during the pandemic.[22] In particular, the presence of other household members may be a concern that prevents some from participating in video-call interviews or may limit what they feel able to share.[23] Not only may individuals worry about those within their own home who may eavesdrop, but they also must trust that their words are not being overheard by others in the interviewer's location, too. Although an apparently small gesture, wearing headphones or earphones while interviewing may alleviate these anxieties a little.

Likewise, some may feel concerned about the security and confidentiality of the software being used. The increased use of video-calling software throughout the pandemic has been accompanied by the appearance of so-called Zoom-bombers, individuals who join calls uninvited, often with the intention of causing disruption.[24] Despite *Zoom-bombing* becoming the shorthand term, reports of this occurring are not limited to Zoom calls, as users of other video-calling software such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Skype have reported uninvited guests too.[25] Video conferencing services have also implemented enhanced security features to limit such occurances. Individuals and organizations may have their own opinions on which software feels the most secure and which they are most accustomed to using; a few hours spent familiarizing myself with the practicalities of using and recording with some of the most common video-calling software allowed me the flexibility to give participants a choice of platforms on which to record. Thus none of my participants raised any concerns regarding potential disruptions to the interview, likely because they were using software that they were accustomed to and were aware of the security measures in place, often being able to control these themselves. Simple steps such as setting a meeting passcode, locking the meeting, or enabling a waiting room on calls may also provide reassurance as to the meeting's privacy. Offering these options to participants allowed them a choice over how much security they preferred.[26]

The need to make these adaptations, and the additional considerations of moving online, have meant that some participants consider the remote oral history interview as an inferior option, chosen only through necessity as a last resort.[27] Despite this, remote methods may prove useful in postpandemic situations by offering a preferred or safer location for participants. In the immediate future in particular, despite the easing of social distancing and a supposed return to normal, many continue to feel anxiety or fear at the thought of resuming face-to-face contact.[28] Importantly, too, as oral historian Sarah Dziedzic argues, remote interviewing can offer greater opportunity to consider disability justice within our research and achieve a cocreation of the interview process that is accessible and safe for all. She suggests that interviewee and interviewer should reach a decision mutually regarding the modality of an interview, taking into consideration health and physical access.[29]

Significantly, as Dziedzic's work so pertinently highlights, we should not be too quick to dismiss the knowledge acquired during the pandemic through remote options once social

distancing restrictions ease.[30] Indeed, many of the remote practices developed during the pandemic may well be useful in the future to increase accessibility and flexibility to the benefit of interviewers and interviewees. Without the need for me to travel, it was more straightforward to reschedule at short notice when interviewees were faced with unexpected care or work commitments; evening interviews to work around these commitments were much more manageable, too. Social scientist Susie Weller similarly observes these benefits, citing a respondent's assertion that Skype proved easier because she was "really busy so just being able to still be in my pyjamas or have dinner and be able to talk to you is much better than actually arranging a date."[31]

For interviewers, too, both time and financial constraints limit the potential geographical range in which we can collect oral history interviews, which in many instances severely restricts the scope of projects. For instance, although looking specifically at experiences of coal mine closures in three County Durham villages, I was acutely aware that there was a degree of outward migration from the area that was linked to industrial closure, attested to in interviews with statements such as "I know a lot of people growing up who their main aim was to just get out—is to get away from the North East."[32] Interviewing remotely allowed me to reach individuals who had done just that, such as Jacqueline, who had left County Durham to attend university in Lancashire and stayed there to work. Jacqueline noted that she would have been unable to record an interview in person because of the geographical distance.[33] Indeed, although not a widely adopted approach, remote interviewing has been used by oral historians since well before the recent pandemic as a tool to overcome geographical distance, as well as to accommodate the accessibility and safety needs of marginalized demographics.[34] Particularly in unstable settings, where populations may have experienced humanitarian crises such as environmental disaster, forced displacement, or persecution, remote and digital methods have provided an opportunity for participants to engage with research beyond the constraints of a face-to-face interview.[35]

In bridging physical and geographical barriers to research, conducting oral history interviews remotely is a valuable method in exploring ideas of place-attachment and belonging when migration or displacement means we cannot physically be present with participants in the place being discussed. Jacqueline, for instance, could not join me in County Durham to reflect on her childhood there, but the remote interview offered her the opportunity to do so from her current home. As psychologist Maria Lewicka suggests, "memory is a 'glue' that connects people to place," and often, disruptions in our emplacement, either by choice or force, can enforce rather than diminish the affective bonds to place by illuminating emotional memories and attachments.[36] In some cases, as it seemed with Jacqueline, being able to record an oral history that reflected on her childhood and hometown as a result of remote methodologies may prove a valuable and emotional experience. However, as this article will explore, I found that to provide an experience built on trust, with comfort and rapport for sharing detailed life narratives, I had to adapt my interviewing practice to this new virtual setting.

The location of interviews matters. We portray ourselves differently in different locations, and, within the microgeographies of an interview site, questions of power may arise.[37] The power dynamic of an interview has often hinged on the potential for research to be exploitative, but an interviewee's ability to have choice in the interview's location and schedule, and the ability to end the interview or refuse to answer a question, can shift that balance of power. Thus, the video-call interview may present a number of significant

advantages in equalizing this balance of power, although there are new challenges to building rapport in order to be successful. Yet in thinking about place and power, I also reflected upon my own positionality and its place in the power dynamics of the interview. Beyond being a researcher, I also carry with me the various other layers of identity and personal experiences that are significant in my life beyond research. In particular, on this project I was highly conscious of my status as a lone female researcher, and although there exists advice on how to mitigate potential risks to lone researchers during fieldwork, I wondered how frequently these anxieties about safety and personal comfort, even if eventually unfounded, prevented me from being as attentive and empathetic an interviewer as I could potentially be.[38] Even the typical precautions that women often take, such as sharing their location with others or remaining in public places, can become unfeasible or unethical during research.[39] The ability to remain in my own home to interview released me from a number of these anxieties, granting more capacity within the process to engage with interviewees and their testimony.

Narrators likely felt lessoned anxiety about participating in interviews as well. Geographers Robin Longhurst and Gail Adams-Hutcheson found, while investigating the use of Skype as a platform for qualitative interviews, that many interviewees noted feelings of greater safety or comfort as a result of the video-call setting.[40] In face-to-face situations, when the interviewer typically arrives with a recording device that is physically present in the room, an interviewee may feel keenly aware of the device between them, to the extent that it may impede sharing.[41] Of course, a constant awareness that the encounter is being recorded can be beneficial in ensuring participants do not unintentionally share anything they do not wish to be on record, but too great an awareness may be distracting or reinforce the idea that the interviewer holds greater control over the interview by knowing the equipment and being able to switch it on and off at will. In remote settings, interviewers can share control over the recording button, and in doing so "power is reconfigured, whereby the participant can turn off, tune out or disengage, choosing to seamlessly reinstate their desired distance and space."[42]

Moreover, the possibility of controlling which elements of ourselves and our surroundings are visible within the interview, allowing us flexibility over how we sit, dress, and move during the video call, may help to introduce an element of informality or greater comfort that can facilitate more open sharing and discussion.[43] While video-calling software often allows for the simultaneous recording of video, I was concerned that in recording the video I would introduce a pressure to perform that may negate any increased informality or comfort. To avoid this, I chose only to record the audio of the interview, and not the accompanying video. In retrospect, this was a decision I should have made with my participants, allowing them authority over whether the video was also recorded too, as this is fundamentally based on the individual requirements and wishes of interviewees.

Rapport and Relationship Building

Although the video call can provide a viable and sometimes advantageous setting for oral history interviews, it is vital to consider how the remote setting influences rapport building between interviewer and interviewee, including how it may alter what narrators choose to share. In particular, the comfort and safety that come with the physical distance of remote interviewing in some instances may hinder or otherwise alter the relationship building

required to share detailed life narratives. Here, I reflect more specifically on the lessons I learned from the initial errors or omissions I made in my early remote interviewing that were detrimental to rapport building and ultimately impacted the depth and quality of a number of interviews.

In order to explore this, we must move beyond the discussion of the practicalities of interviewing and examine more closely the interview encounter as an intersubjective performance between two people. In the words of communication scholars Kate Willink and Salma Shukri, doing so follows the understanding of "interviews as unscripted occurrences that unfold relationally between bodies, memories, language, and the environment that affect, and are affected by, one another through the transmission of affect."[44] In short, an interview's setting and modality impact affect, the subjective emotional encounter that occurs during an oral history interview. Within a remote atmosphere, in which video and voice transmit digtally, it is difficult for either party to an interview to read behavioral cues. Although both participants are present within a virtual space, there is no shared encounter of real space during the video call through which an affective atmosphere can emerge, and so our usual behavioural cues may become muted or invisible through the screen.

Yet, it is often these cues that help outline what feels comfortable to share or what feels appropriate to ask; being attentive and respectful to these cues is essential in building trust and rapport. Indeed, recounting one's life story often is a new experience to narrators, one that typically requires vulnerability and a kind of intimacy usually reserved for confidants rather than strangers. The process might provoke recollections which an individual has never shared before.[45] Katie Holmes explores the intersection of memory and emotion, noting the potential for an oral history interview to generate intense emotional reactions in which our past and present emotional states come to the surface. As she notes, attention to eye contact, body language, and nonverbal gestures such as smiles and nods are all crucial, as narrators often display such emotions without words.[46] Although the video call does allow us to observe these nonverbal cues to a certain extent, more subtle emotion or gestures may go unnoticed or be more easily and deliberately hidden from view. While this ability to hide emotion may be preferable for some narrators, for fear of embarrassment or awkwardness, it proves challenging to interviewers when attempting to elicit detailed life narratives while remaining attuned to participants' emotional states.

For instance, during moments in interviews when interviewees discussed issues of grief, displacement, and loss, I realized that I could not see their faces clearly enough—because of lighting, poor video quality, or the position of their camera—to read the emotions in their faces. In one particular interview, in which the participant did not have a camera for the call, it felt almost impossible to guess how they were reacting to my questions and whether it would be acceptable to probe further on sensitive topics they raised. As already noted, had I recorded the video element when possible, I perhaps could have returned to scrutinize these interactions more closely. However, video recording has the potential to exert undue pressure to perform, and this in turn may have created further discomfort in expressing visible emotion or unease. Without the ability to observe a significant proportion of body language, or draw on a shared affective atmosphere, both interviewee and interviewer must rely heavily on only verbal cues and adjacent silences. Narrators, then, may need to orally express their emotions if they feel uncomfortable with questioning or wish to pause or end the interview. For this to be possible, it is important to ensure that interviewees feel

sufficiently empowered to take such actions during interviews, and that enough rapport has developed to make this a simpler step to take.

Moreover, the heavy reliance on verbal communication also made silence difficult to negotiate, and yet, as historian Alexander Freund notes, "Silences are a constitutive part of oral history interviews." Many of us find silence uncomfortable in everyday conversation, but as oral historians we are trained to make space for "forgetting, collaborative remembering, discomfort, reluctance, (self) censorship, noncompliance, confrontation, reticence, politeness, fear, anger, deceit, taboos, secrets, contemplation, concern for the other, reflection, conformity, or that which need not be told."[47] Yet at moments during video calls, it was more difficult to determine if individuals had paused for thought, if they were waiting for me to ask the next question, or if their connection had simply frozen. Once again, signals that might convey the purpose of the silence, such as body language, facial expressions, and eye contact, were harder to observe. And in the case when the narrator's camera remained off, it was sometimes impossible to tell when she was finished speaking, let alone read her nonverbal communication. At times I inadvertently interrupted her just as she began talking, and at others, she had to prompt me to ask the next question. Silence, therefore, often serves to highlight or heighten feelings of disconnection within remote interviews, or disrupt the fragile flows and rhythms of narration and questioning as they began to emerge. Such discomfort, or frustration at being interrupted, may be harmful for rapport and generate a more stilted interview process.

These issues of silence, emotion, and other forms of quiet communication may be particularly difficult to navigate if a sufficiently trusting relationship and adequate rapport has not been developed before the interview begins. Indeed, it is often during the time before the recording equipment is switched on, when both interviewer and interviewee orient themselves to the encounter, that initial rapport emerges. When interviewers ask participants to choose a comfortable and convenient location for the interview, they likely will opt for somewhere familiar—their home, their workplace, or a known public place. In such familiar places, habits, routines, and rituals exist that generate a sense of comfort. Through the embodiment of the familiar physical place, the forthcoming interviews' cocreators generate and transmit affect, setting the tone and atmosphere for the dialogue to come. Everyday gestures, such as accepting a cup of tea, removing shoes to enter a home, or traversing through an office or public place, help to build a relationship between interviewer and interviewee and may assist in putting both parties at ease. Longhurst and Adams-Hutcheson assert that by being in a home, or a similarly comfortable location, interviewers become embedded, for a time, within these familiar rhythms, in a way that helps to build rapport and facilitate the environment needed for the sharing of life stories. [48]

Likewise, many of these routines, rituals, and gestures are performed through the cooperation of our senses, particularly our more proximate senses such as touch, taste, and smell. Touch, in particular, is so ever-present that we often pay it no heed, but it is our principal way of grounding the other senses of sight and hearing in a physical reality, and a way to assert our bodily presence within a space.[49] Humans employ touch in its most literal sense in common ways that build rapport, like shaking hands as a culturally appropriate greeting.[50] Yet geographer Paul Rodaway extends the idea of touch to experiences beyond such skin-to-skin exchanges, conceptualizing it instead as a way to comprehend the social process of the research interview in relation to the mutually experienced embodied encounters and bodily performances that construct and convey meaning, influencing how

we interact, relate, and share with the other person.[51] Although remote interviewees may find themselves carrying out some of the same rituals and routines within their homes before a remote interview as they would in person, such as making themselves a cup of tea, the mutuality of the experience between interviewer and interviewee is missing. These shared haptic moments that may make an interviewer feel more familiar to participants through their engagement with everyday rituals; they may allow rapport to develop more easily, and they cannot be easily recreated through a video call.

Within the atmosphere of the video call, these brief moments of orientation before the interview are missing; there is little of the natural small talk as the equipment is set up, or time for the interviewer to find their place among the rhythms of an interviewee's daily life, or the opportunity to experience a mutuality based upon the shared sensory environment in which the interview takes place. As a result, interviewing remotely may be more streamlined and can be less time consuming on account of these missing minutes of pre-interview arrangements. But in many instances, those moments before recording begins are essential in putting both interviewer and interviewee at ease and laying the foundations of rapport between the two. I swiftly realized the impact of these absent moments after my first two remote interviews, in which I rushed headlong into recording after a brief explanation of the project and opportunity to ask questions, culminating in a number of short answers from the narrator that merely skimmed the surface of the in-depth life narratives I had hoped to achieve.

Of course, this is not an inherent flaw in the video-call interview, but a failure on my part as interviewer to adequately consider how this change in setting would alter the process of building rapport. Rather than viewing the initial minutes of orientation during an in-person interview as a helpful element of the interview itself, instead I had seen them as just practical and necessary steps to get to the moment when I switched on the recorder on, and so did not see the significance of establishing new pre-interview routines when online. In my first two interviews, I did not deliberately withhold information about myself, but neither did I draw attention to it for fear that discussions of my positionality might distract from or derail the interview. While there was typically little informal conversation during interviews, most interviewees remained on the call once the recording software was switched off, allowing for a more relaxed discussion between us. Other small talk focused on the pandemic and its implications for our lives, or was otherwise unrelated to the interview. Yet almost every participant emailed me after the interview, referring to the informal conversations we had after the recording was finished; these emails crucially contained more formal notes of things I might want to consider investigating and offers for follow-up interviews as they had more to say.

Upon realizing my mistake, I resisted the rush to hit record during my next interview, instead allowing ten to fifteen minutes of conversation before the interview itself; we discussed the pandemic, made pre-emptive excuses for noisy pets, laughed about remaining in pyjamas all day while working from home. Although I could not become embedded within the rhythms of their routines as initially intended, these conversations allowed us to share information about our own everyday rituals that we could not engage in together and granted time for a new rhythm to emerge within the remote interview space and reduced the formality of the encounter to a more comfortable and relaxed level prior to conducting the interview. On two of these occasions, our fathers had worked for the same employer at the same time. I would not have shared this within the recording for fear of disrupting the

interviewees' narrative, but acknowledging this commonality before the interview created a sense of rapport based on shared experience that was incredibly valuable. I was fortunate that my participants and I were able to include this in our time together, but it could also be achieved through pre-interview sessions scheduled on a different date, to ensure there has been enough time dedicated to rapport and relationship building before the interview begins.

Researchers conducting interviews should recognize the need to strike a balance between what historians Susan Armitage and Sherna Gluck refer to as "academic naval gazing, that is, the tendency for the interviewer to grab centre stage" through a preoccupation with our own positionality, and allowing a degree of self-disclosure to facilitate a greater degree of trust.[52] These informal conversations proved essential in building rapport between me and my interview partners, and yet I had factored no time for such discussions into the design of each interview, leaving them to become almost an afterthought once the recording software was turned off. Importantly, beginning with this conversation established the shared authority of the interview, allowing the interview itself to be a collaborative dialogue throughout, as opposed to the rather stilted question-and-answer exchange that had occurred in earlier interviews without this foundation.

When I entered the video call for my next interview after my first two remote attempts—with Eric, who had left County Durham at a young age as his father migrated for work—we spent around fifteen minutes before the interview discussing the pandemic, his interest in history and my research more generally, his expectations for the interview, and our concerns that technology might fail us. During this conversation, my own self-disclosure allowed us to learn that Eric had known my grandparents and that we had a shared knowledge of the village at the center of the interview. As we transitioned to the formal oral history, these insights had unintentional but highly useful consequences that allowed for the elicitation of memory based on an imagined walk together along the village high street. Elissa Rosenberg suggests that walking can evoke "memory through a visceral, haptic engagement of the body with place."[53] Often used to stimulate this relationship between self, memory, and place, walking interviews exist in a much more conventional methodological sense, whereby interviewer and interviewee walk together, often in a predetermined location, while recording and using the place as a prompt.[54] Although this cannot be entirely replicated remotely, imagining such walks can offer a remote alternative. Although I did not do so in this instance, imagined walks could be enhanced with further mnemonic cues such as photographs, which, if digitized, could easily be viewed simultaneously using the share-screen function available in most video conferencing software.[55] Instead, both Eric and I paused to imagine the same street, at times with eyes closed to picture it better, and even this process appeared to elicit multisensory place-based memories for Eric, easily conveyed to me because I had those shared points of reference.

In short, these informalities and memory techniques serve to animate the space beyond the small square of the video-call window, reminding us that the image we see within a virtual space is an embodied person, interacting synchronously with real space as we are. Reminding each other during the interviewing process that we are human beings, often with a degree of shared experience in one way or another, can help open up avenues of conversation and memory for the interview to come. Although typically used by computer scientists and roboticists to assess virtual-reality programs or technology, the idea of *telepresence*—the act of being virtually, but not physically, present in a digital space—is

useful here too, albeit in a much more everyday encounter.[56] Indeed, presence, whether virtual or physical, matters for rapport and relationships in the interview. During in-person interviews our presence may be taken for granted; we appear as an embodied individual, physically present within an interviewee's proximity. While we cannot replicate this during a video call, we can emphasize our presence by fleshing out the virtual space with our real space presence, reminding each other that it remains an encounter between two embodied individuals who are present with each other for the duration of the call.

Remembering and Sharing

Asserting our presence within the video call, however, relies heavily on what we are able to vocalize, as telepresence cannot replicate the sensory environment that we typically rely on to feel present in a situation—for instance, what we can smell, or feel, or taste. Likewise, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, "Storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone," but instead is the cooperation of "words, soul, eye, and hand."[57] Oral history brings storytelling into the realm of historical interpretation, and drawing on Proust's concept of involuntary memory, Paula Hamilton argues for the centrality of sensory triggers in the process of memory recall within the oral history interview.[58]

Place matters in regard to interviews, not simply for our comfort or convenience, but because the place we are located in and inhabit helps us to construct and recall our memories.[59] Although my remote participants were in familiar places—their homes—and were ostensibly surrounded by the same potentially mnemonic cues as they would be had I been physically present, the video call creates in itself a new virtual place, and it is within that place that we as interviewers must adapt both our practice, to facilitate remembering, and our expectations, as both interviewer and interviewee adapt to their presence in real and virtual space simultaneously. To borrow again from computer science, the extent of our telepresence is dependent upon our immersion in the virtual space on the other side of the screen. Here, too, we must strike a balance: when we are too immersed in the virtual space we may miss the cues and sensory triggers occurring in the real space that help us to remember and engage with the affective atmosphere of our environment; when too immersed in real space we may become distracted from the online conversation and interrupt lines of cognition as they emerge.[60]

During my interviews, there were times when the closing of a door too loudly, or someone passing through the room off-camera, was a cause for profuse apologies on the part of my interviewee. Rather than facilitating further sharing, these occurrences seemed to distract and hinder the speaker's process of thought, likely because it split their attention between the real space around them and the virtual space before them in which they were expected to be fully present. Thus, while they may be physically present in their homes during remote interviews, narrators may become detached from the social processes and interactions around them which might assist in the recall of memories and grant access to the realms of a collective, shared memory from which to easily affirm individual testimony.

Indeed, for many, memories and the emotional meanings attached to these are constructed within a network of social and familial relations. A number of oral historians have commented on the influence of others, primarily family members, on a narrator's testimony; historian H. R. Kedward references "the woman in the doorway" who corrected or prompted the memory of her male relative being interviewed, while Lenore Layman notes

the role of a wife in dispelling an interviewee's reticence.[61] With such prompts, individual and collective memory interplay with one another within an interview, often enhancing the ability to remember and relate.[62] For Kedward, these interactions and dialogues, unsolicited by the interviewer but influential for the dialogue itself, provide greater understanding of the dynamics of a narrator's life and a richer insight into the narratives recounted.[63]

Of course, such interruptions may still occur on a video call, and our work-from-home Zoom era has resulted in many instances well documented via social media in which children or pets made unexpected appearances in professional video calls. As noted, these moments may in fact be useful for rapport building, as they dispel the formality of the encounter and remind us of an individual's emplacement in real space, showing their normal bodily interactions within their wider location and animating them beyond the image on the screen. However, these moments also detract from the immersion within the interview process, diverting attention from patterns of memory and recall. During an in-person interview, family members or other interjectors may be invited to stay and participate in the process—as with the interviewee's wife during Layman's interview—but this is more problematic during a video call, where the camera's frame better suits one person. Once again, flexibility and adaptation on the part of the interviewer may be useful. For instance, an interviewer can suggest prior to the interview that other individuals can join the video call if their presence would put a participant at more ease or help them to recall specific memories.

Oral historians and other interviewers have found material objects useful for the elicitation of memory or as prompts for lines of questioning.[64] Particularly within homes, or other inhabited and private places, physical objects such as photographs and mementos can trigger personal memories and became a way to represent and affirm identities and beliefs.[65] As anthropologist Anat Hecht suggests, to enter a home to conduct research is to be invited into someone's world of "memory and meaning," their "private museum" interpreted through our embodied, sensory interactions in the space.[66] During the pandemic, artists Chong Gua Khee and Bernice Lee facilitated the online participatory performance "Touch You Later" in which audience members were invited to engage in creative tasks within their own rooms, showing meaningful objects from home to the camera and performing together at a distance.[67] The resulting testimonials attest to increased feelings of togetherness, increased awareness of the three-dimensional spaces that lay beyond the screen, and a successful blending of digital and real spaces during the performance.[68] Such performances serve as a reminder that there is the potential to bring the real into the virtual and dispel some of the strange feelings of disembodiment and disconnection that a video call may bring, while still remaining focused on the screen and people on the other side of it.

Of course, the artists intentionally designed "Touch you Later" as a performance to enhance the video-call encounter in a way that brought participants together. People participated knowing that it would be an interactive performance. If we are to incorporate any of the "showing practices" utilised by Chong and Lee, interviewers should be sure to articulate this during the project design stage and be clear about the purpose when requesting significant material objects be shown during the remote interview.[69] The logistics of sharing items such as photographs may be difficult due to camera angles and thus could prove counterproductive for the flow of a life narrative. One interviewee, for example, stated that they had boxes of photographs and videos that they would be happy to share, but felt there was no practical way to show me unless I were there in person. Others may have

nothing they wish to show on screen and should be able to bow out gracefully from this request.

Beyond this, as interviewers, we may not fully appreciate the items being shown, simply because we would not typically interact with them solely through the mediation of the webcam. For objects that rely on a more intimate sense, such as touch, such proximity is simply not possible in a remote interview. For example, a narrator may describe an object using the relative term *heavy*, but without lifting, the context of this adjective is lost. In person, we can ask to hold or feel an object, relying on the proximate sense of touch to experience the object's weight. Shared interaction with a physical object through the senses can help to create understanding and convey meaning more easily. In turn, such feelings may facilitate further sharing or recall, as interviewees feel confident that they are being understood and able to pursue specific lines of thought without frustration.

We are limited in sharing these intimate senses over a video call, and instead, in remote settings, we must rely on what we can communicate in words alone. Yet our senses, particularly sounds, smells, and tastes, give meaning to what surrounds us and provoke our affective response to our material surroundings.[70] In particular, engagement with our sensory environment may trigger involuntary memories, acting as mnemonic cues within the sharing of life narratives.[71] It is important within the video-call interview, therefore, to be attentive to this possible disengagement from sensory triggers and memories, and as interviewers we can plan to probe these areas directly within questioning. Writing about research into health-care settings, Anna Harris and Marilys Guillemin suggest that incorporating simple prompts and questions into an interview is one of the most fundamental ways to incorporate sensory awareness.[72] I found inserting questions such as "Can you remember what it smelled like?" would elicit unprompted discussions of sensory memories later in the interview. For instance, when asked if his children knew much about the place where he grew up, Eric responded:

> But, no, they don't—because there are things you've experienced, you go through and you feel, which you can't readily transmit, you can talk about them and bore people to death. . . . You can't share the sense of holding it, knowing it, smelling it.[73]

In fact, Eric succinctly sums up the challenge of sensory memories—they are highly individual and embedded within us, making them difficult to share both remotely and in person. However, to return to Paula Hamilton's discussion of Proust's concept of involuntary memory, probing these sensory memories may assist in eliciting recollections that are highly individualized and personal, creating a path for narrators to delve into their emotional response to such memories and share if they wish.[74] In the remote interview, when we cannot rely on a shared embodied experience of sensory triggers, we must instead incorporate sensory awareness into the design of interviews, most fundamentally by use of direct questions and verbal prompts.[75] Once again, the successful implementation of this relies on the development of ample rapport between the interviewer and interviewee, enough to establish trust and generate the confidence needed to share personal or emotional memories. This process is specific to each interview and narrator, but we must take care to ensure that it becomes a process central to the project design.

Conclusion

Without doubt, the implementation of lockdowns and social distancing policies as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic has significant implications for oral history as a methodology. As Anna Harris reminds us, oral history is more than just "the rather mundane act of conversation" that public historian Perry Platz suggested it to be.[76] Instead, the typical oral history interview is an embodied encounter between interviewer and interviewee, a combination of spoken and unspoken exchanges within a multisensory and affectively charged environment. Interviewing remotely fundamentally alters the encounter, changing the intersubjective relationship between interviewer and interviewee and thus also changing what is shared.

While the ability to interview remotely allows for the most fundamental component of oral history, that of the spoken historical source, it is in no way a direct replication of the face-to-face interview. This is not to suggest that the remote interview is of inferior quality, but rather that it requires a different approach to interviewing that considers alternative approaches to the elicitation of memory and gives attention to the altered dynamics between participants. Indeed, we must design the remote interview in a way that allows the unfamiliar and transient space of the video call to be as comfortable and secure as possible. To do so is to resist the rush to record, as both Sloan and Cramer suggest, in order to make space for the informal conversations and elements of self-disclosure within the project design.[77] This reshaping of project design for the remote interview is essential in generating the trust and rapport required when asking individuals to share the narrative of their lives—and important, too, for both interviewee and interviewer to orient themselves to the encounter.

I do not suggest that we as interviewers play a passive role in the process. Rather, we should be prepared to adapt to what is being shared and to reflect on how this sharing can be made easier by considering how best to elicit memory within a setting that does not immediately lend itself to deep introspection. My imagined walk with Eric was one such response to the challenge but was highly specific to this interview and occurred predominantly by chance. Without the usual mnemonic cues taken from photographs and other objects in the home, and acknowledging the isolation from our more mnemonic senses within the virtual space, we can intentionally consider how to create a remote environment for remembering. Moreover, oral historians in the near future may also find themselves recording testimony that includes memories of virtual encounters, given how much of recent life has occurred online during the COVID-19 era. We can develop questions to elicit responses regarding how our narrators construct new memories in virtual places and how they process these memories in the altered sensory environment of the video call.

Indeed, remote interviewing, specifically using video calls, presents a strange setting that mixes real and virtual spaces and demands that we question the bodily performances and affective dynamics within them. Remote interviewing has forced oral historians to rely on verbal cues alone, complemented by visual elements from the webcam when possible. This limitation highlights the ways we typically observe and interpret emotion and affect during the interview process with all of our senses. Being aware of these differences and incorporating considerations of these into project design is therefore essential before undertaking remote methodologies.

Within every oral history interview there are dynamics involving power, authority, and accessibility. Building rapport and trust within the process is always, to an extent, specific to the individual intersubjective encounter we find ourselves in with each interview, and the techniques that work during one interview may fail us in the next. This is the same for remote practices as it is for in-person interviews, but there is a more fundamental difference between the two. Specifically, the move to remote interviewing may have been a reluctant shift for many, with valid concerns about digital exclusion, ageism, and the security of online platforms dominating discussions. Yet in conducting remote interviews and reflecting on the new techniques and routines needed to do so, there may also be an increased awareness of the method's positive potential to increase accessibility, ensure interviewer safety, transcend geographical distances, reduce the formality of the encounter, and take some steps towards reducing the ableism inherent in face-to-face practices. As the field continues to embrace remote interviewing, we can take what we learn from remote practice and consider how these lessons can inform our flexibility, accessibility, and embodiment in face-to-face scenarios also.

Oral history's somewhat reluctant shift to remote interviewing has highlighted some of the potential issues that have settled latently in typical oral history practice and may have shown many of us the beneficial outcomes when we reflect, adapt, and recenter the intersubjective encounter with interviewees. Indeed, as the pandemic continues and morphs, and whatever stage of normalcy returns, remote practices may continue to offer these benefits and should be considered another tool in our methodology. After three years, many of us find ourselves more comfortable with the technology we had to adopt, and this is likely the case for many potential participants too. Moving forward, a greater familiarity with remote meetings and technological aids may mean that both interviewer and interviewee enter a remote interview with a great deal more confidence about its usability and security than may have been felt prepandemic. If not, as has been shown in these reflections, there is certainly room to continually assess, adapt, and learn new practices in order to continue practicing oral history within changing or challenging circumstances.

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Notes

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Katherine Waugh is a final-year PhD candidate at Newcastle University, funded by the Northern Bridge Consortium of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Her research uses life-narrative oral history interviews to examine cross-generational experiences of deindustrialisation in County Durham, UK, exploring the intersections of memory, place, and identity within communities in the present day.