



InterAcción y Perspectiv

Revista de Trabajo Social

ISSN 2244-808X
D.L. pp 201002Z43506

Octubre-diciembre 2024
Vol. 14 No. 3



Universidad del Zulia
Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Políticas
Centro de Investigaciones en Trabajo Social

ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Impacto de las emergencias de salud pública de alcance internacional en la investigación en ciencias sociales

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11163251>

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Resumen

La investigación cualitativa durante una emergencia de salud pública (ESP) como la pandemia de COVID-19 va a la zaga de otros enfoques de investigación en términos de entrega, confiabilidad y oportunidad de los hallazgos. El distanciamiento social y a las limitaciones de viaje, a los investigadores de las ciencias sociales, especialmente a los cualitativos, les resulta difícil planificar y realizar investigaciones durante la pandemia y surge la pregunta de cómo la investigación cualitativa, que se basa en la conexión humana, la escucha comprensiva y la "descripción rica", puede crecer en una cultura en la que los individuos están socialmente desconectados unos de otros. Los investigadores en ciencias sociales se ven obligados a renunciar a realizar trabajo de campo, que es el componente más importante de la investigación cualitativa, y a recurrir a la recopilación de datos en línea. Al llevar a cabo la investigación durante esos momentos, los investigadores se enfrentan a obligaciones contradictorias de preservar los derechos del sujeto con respecto a la realización del estudio y el uso de los resultados. Esta investigación examina el papel de la investigación cualitativa y las metodologías y estándares éticos que pueden ser adoptados por los investigadores en tiempos de Emergencia de Salud Pública (ESP) para superar los desafíos que se enfrentan en situaciones como la del analfabetismo digital y las normas de distanciamiento físico de los entrevistados. Se argumenta que, existen beneficios potenciales del uso de la recopilación virtual de datos durante las emergencias sanitarias.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, Emergencia de Salud Pública de Importancia Internacional, investigación cualitativa, investigación en línea, investigación en ciencias sociales, pandemia

Abstract

Impact of International Public Health Emergencies on Social Science Research

Qualitative research during a public health emergency (PSE) such as the COVID-19 pandemic lags behind other research approaches in terms of delivery, reliability, and timeliness of findings. Due to social distancing and travel limitations, social science researchers, especially qualitative ones, are finding it difficult to plan and conduct research during the pandemic and the question arises as to how qualitative research, which relies on human connection, sympathetic listening, and "rich description," can grow in a culture where individuals are socially disconnected from one another. Social science researchers are forced to forgo fieldwork, which is the most important component of qualitative research, and resort to online data collection. In conducting research during those times, researchers are faced with conflicting obligations to preserve the subject's rights regarding the conduct of the study and the use of the results. This research examines the role of qualitative research and the methodologies and ethical standards that can be adopted by researchers in times of Public Health Emergency (PSE) to overcome the challenges faced in situations such as digital illiteracy and physical distancing norms of interviewees. It is argued that there are potential benefits of using virtual data collection during health emergencies.

Keywords: COVID-19, Public Health Emergency of International Concern, qualitative research, online research, social science research, pandemic.

Recibido: 9/03/2024 Aceptado: 29/04/2024

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1. Introduction

The Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) is a formal declaration made by the World Health Organization (WHO) of an extraordinary event that constitutes a serious, sudden, unusual, or unexpected public health risk beyond the national border of the affected state through the international spread of a communicable disease, thus requiring immediate international attention and concerted effort from the international community (David N. Durrheim, et al., 2019). Proclaiming PHEIC is a core part of the International Health Regulations (IHR) established by World Health

Organization (WHO), which is the governing framework for ensuring global health security (Lawrence O. Gostin, et Al 2019). The IHR establishes a comprehensive legal framework that specifies the rights and duties of nations in the management of public health crises and emergencies with the potential to transcend international boundaries (Durrheima, N. D. et al. 2019). It is the duty of the WHO Director General to determine whether an occurrence falls into this category. To do so, the IHR Emergency Committee, a group of highly qualified individuals, must first be assembled (Wilder-Smith A, Osman S., 2020). PHEIC might include not only infectious illnesses but also incidents that were induced by chemical agents or radioactive elements. All PHEIC announcements have ever since been made for infectious illnesses caused by viruses, and in the last 15 years, a total of six PHEIC announcements have been made, including COVID-19 in 2020.

Epidemics quickly traverse international boundaries and pose danger to the economic and geographical stability of area (Verikios, G., et Al (2015). Pandemics have detrimental effects on society, the economy, and politics in addition to the incapacitating and leaving deadly effects on individuals who are directly impacted by them. For instance, in 2009, the pandemic influenza, commonly known as H1N1, had a significant influence not only on the death rate but also on healthcare systems, animal health, agricultural practices, educational institutions, transportation networks, tourism, and the economy. Because of global health crises, people from many walks of life are confronted with challenges; many of these challenges are overcome by adopting innovative ways with the help of scientific and technological advancements. These types of public health crises bring about significant setbacks for research institutes of every kind which include delay or cessation of ongoing research activities, disruption of conferences and seminars etc.

The qualitative research that emerged in the early 20th century by sociologists and anthropologists has challenges and advantages at every point in time (Denzin, N. K. et al. 2005). During 1950–1970, often referred to as the “golden era of qualitative research,” there were different coding systems used for materials, most of which were gathered via participant observation, which in turn drove data analysis (Becker, H. S., et al. 1961). Between 1970 and 1986, the first computer-assisted data analysis software emerged (Geertz, C. 1973). During 1986–1990 the researchers had difficulty locating themselves and their subjects in reflective writing, known as the crisis of representation and it became more important to obtain the data than to isolate linear relationships (Strauss, A., & Corbin, J., 2008) Qualitative research entered the postmodern era between 1990 and 1995 and this was the time for innovative and novel ethnography (Dustin G. Gibson, et Al., 2017). Post-experimental research covers the years 1995–2000. During this time, qualitative research connecting democratic politics has grown in popularity. In the years after 2009, researchers had to deal with the pushback against the evidence-based social movement's methodology. As evidence-based practice became the new criterion for social science's relevance, a new conservatism emerged in the United States and qualitative research shifted its emphasis to it (Dustin G. Gibson, et Al., 2017).

However, off-late, qualitative researchers are facing an altogether different set of challenges as the world is experiencing many health emergencies, such as the pandemic

of influenza A (H1N1) that occurred in 2009, the Ebola epidemic that broke out in West Africa in 2014, and the most recent pandemic caused by COVID-19 in 2020, which has taken a toll on almost every part of the world. Therefore, public health mandates and social distancing measures restrict qualitative researchers to carry out their investigations and studies using traditional methods of data collection, such as participant observation, face-to-face interviews, class observations, and immersions, resulting in a transition in data collection from physical to virtual.

2. Impact of PHEIC on social science research during PHIE

During the PHEIC, research is crucial to enhance the response to global health problems, aid in immediate reactions, and future learning. Most of the research is usually concentrated on medical aspects regarding investigations of clinical characteristics, pathological findings, and therapy design, as well as the preparation of care facilities and infection control. However, social science research is largely ignored. Exploring, describing, and explaining how policies and practices throughout the pandemic can be modified and implemented while listening to the voices of healthcare professionals and patients should be studied through qualitative research. Qualitative methods are useful during a pandemic because they provide people with a safe space to talk about their experiences and feelings without fear of judgment. These experiences may include coping with the loss of a job, feeling alone, anxious, feeling ill, receiving less support than usual, and caring for loved ones (Palinkas L., 2014). To guarantee awareness of the diverse settings and to determine the most suitable response to the pandemic, qualitative research is essential, and it is complementary to the other forms of research undertaken during a pandemic (Johnson G. A., et Al., 2017).

Qualitative researchers look at events as they occur in the real world and try to decipher or understand them based on the responses that people give them. Therefore, researchers, working in the area of qualitative research, are affected during pandemics. Social distancing and travel restrictions prevent them from conducting field research during such emergencies. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, WHO released a report on the need to focus research on actions that can save lives during pandemic, highlighting the need for prioritization of research support in a way that leads to the development of global research platform(s) pre-prepared for the next disease X epidemic, thus indicating the need for accelerated research. This study stressed on the need for social science research to assess how reacting to the epidemic and adopting public health measures impacts the physical and mental health of people treating COVID-19 patients so as to identify their urgent needs. In addition, it highlighted the need to determine, via the application of social science research, the underlying causes of fear, anxiety, and stigma that feed misinformation and rumours, especially through social media.

A scient metric study was conducted to investigate the state of social science research on COVID-19 and identify topics and research fields relevant for social science researchers (Frid-Nielsen, S. S. et al. 2019). This study used keyword co-occurrence analysis and revealed that public health, health literacy and education, telemedicine, mental health and psychology, social media and infodemics, physical activity, and prison reform were the most relevant topics during pandemic. Besides, this study also revealed that a pandemic is much more than a health crisis, but also a human, social, and economic crisis. The answers to pressing social and economic problems, which can only be found through social science studies, are in dire need of immediate attention. Since enormous psychological loads are imposed on people, insights that may be gleaned from studies in the fields of social and behavioral science can be valuable in helping to match human behavior with the needs of situations (Baicker, J. B. 2020).

3. Qualitative research methodology in social science

In qualitative research, the researcher actively seeks significant information by asking questions about the phenomenon under investigation that is taking place in their natural environments, to gain insight into specific groups of people or geographic areas by collecting, processing, and analyzing non-numerical data (Strauss, A., 1987). Such studies are successful because they allow researchers to hone in on the finer points of their subject through real experiences by delving into social processes and environmental elements that contribute to a group's marginalization with the help of primary data sources, and involve observation of the world in its natural context (Creswell, J. W. 2009).

Researchers who focus on qualitative methods are presented with opportunities and difficulties due to the tremendous changes and upheaval brought about by the pandemic. The pandemic may be seen as a "social event," which is upsetting the established social order (Teti M., et Al., 2020). It is important for scholars to investigate people's experiences during these tough times. The capacity to conduct qualitative research is hindered by public health regulations and social distancing policies.

4. Challenges faced by Qualitative Researchers during PHEIC

Research amid the pandemic necessitates adaptability; it is difficult to ensure the quality of qualitative research methods because quality varies depending on the archetype on which the inquiry is based, the research technique, and the topic of study (Sparkes A. C. & Smith B., 2009). The clarity of research question, rigor of research method, and transparency and completeness of the reporting process are factors that should be considered when evaluating the quality of a piece of work (O'Brien B. C., 2014). When the researcher shows that their epistemology, theory, methodology, and methodologies are in line with each other, trust is built into the research (Morse J. M., 2015). The following are some of the challenges faced by researchers while conducting research during the pandemic:

Pressure of Time:

There is a lot of pressure to come up with quick solutions to the pandemic; therefore, researchers across the world are working together on a few different initiatives to speed up research. In contrast to the conservative and traditional qualitative research standards, which normally require a vast amount of time to capture the characteristics of the phenomena under investigation, pandemic situations demand time-sensitive research outcomes that require accelerated phases of planning, participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis (Lancaster K., et Al., 2020). Time restrictions have led to a rise in the popularity of rapid qualitative research efforts, which provide high-quality data that can be utilized to influence decision making (Johnson G. A., Vindrola-Padros C., 2017). Within a short time, frame (between four and five days and six weeks), rapid qualitative research can shed light on a specific issue. This method also allows for a more thorough examination of the data, which may ultimately result in fewer resources being needed to conduct research. Rapid qualitative research has been praised for its advantages; however, some features have been criticized. In such research, time is conserved methodologically by doing away with some of the study procedures, slowing down the conversation naturally, and reducing the time commitment required by the research team and participants. Unfortunately, these methods may not provide a sufficient and thorough examination of, or an accurate depiction of, complex human and societal phenomena, and may result in less trustworthy conclusions owing to the researcher's limited time spent in the study.

Although the results of quick qualitative research are encouraging, there are still areas where the method needs to be improved. Meaningful, credible, and trustworthy qualitative research investigations demand better ways to improve existing data collection methods, preserve the ethical aspects of the data collected, and use participatory methodologies.

Physical Distancing:

One of the most effective ways to prevent the transmission of the virus is to minimize opportunities for intimate social interactions or physical distancing (Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S., 2005). Qualitative research is motivated by the desire to understand a phenomenon rooted in the subjective and contextualized experiences of subjects as individuals or groups. Rules of engagement in qualitative research aim to place the researcher and subjects as close together as possible to facilitate rapport building. Because of physical distancing, researchers are compelled to look for alternative and novel methods of data collection, mainly the use of technology to provide synchronous or asynchronous virtual engagements. Although virtual means of engagement have been utilized for years, such means have certain limitations, such as catching up on nonverbal signs and lack of access to contextual data. Geographical location is restricted to what can be seen on the screen, whereas traditional methods of data collection have the advantage of establishing rapport with the participants and also choosing a comfortable location prior to the initial data collection, creating an understanding of the openness and disclosure of the researcher on the goal of the study and the rights of the participant, informal conversations, or unplanned encounters that encourage familiarization between

the researcher and the subject, which can play a major role in revelation of vital information about the setting and context of the study (Creswell J. W. 2018).

Digital Divide and Inclusivity

Participation in online focus groups conducted through videoconferencing software requires access to a device such as a laptop, mobile, or computer with video and audio facilities, a steady internet connection, and a quiet space to limit interruptions and outside noise. Moreover, the ability to use computers and videoconferencing software requires high digital literacy (Beaunoyer E, et al. 2020). Social exclusion and digital exclusion often intersect, and digital differences influencing these characteristics have been observed both within and within nations, even before COVID-19 (Watts G., 2019). During the COVID-19 outbreak, the National Commission for Women (NCW) in India saw a 94% increase in complaints involving women being assaulted in their homes during the lockdown. Conducting a study on this by reaching out to these women through digital media becomes difficult for the researcher, especially if the women are from a socially backward class that lacks access to technology. The United States Department of Commerce reported that in 2019, only 57% of households with earnings below \$25,000 utilized the Internet at home as compared to 82% of those in the top income quintile. Disparities in social and economic positions and geographic isolation have been documented in studies conducted in Russia, China, and the United Kingdom (Grishchenko N., 2020).

A recent survey conducted by the Global System for Mobile Communications Association reported disparities in mobile phone ownership among genders across the world. South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have the biggest gaps, whereas the rest of the world has much fewer. Only half of Pakistani women, but three-quarters of Pakistani males, possess mobile phones, making Pakistan the country with the largest gender difference in mobile ownership among the nations examined. By the end of 2021, only 84% of women in low-income countries will have a cell phone, compared to 89% of males. More than 372 million women in low-income countries do not have phones, whereas only 239 million males do. This is despite widespread belief that mobile phone ownership is universal. Gender differences in mobile phone ownership have remained essentially constant since 2017, and growth has been slow for both men and women. The top barriers to mobile ownership for men and women in the surveyed countries were issues concerning affordability, literacy and digital skills, safety, and security ((Grishchenko N., 2020).

Ethical considerations:

The methodology for conducting research online is still in its infancy, and there are various ethical considerations while conducting research online. According to the British Psychological Society (BPS), research investigators should inform participants of the objectives of the research and all aspects of research that may influence their willingness to participate in the study (Lobe B., 2017). A popular alternative to a participant's oral declaration of informed consent when collecting data digitally is to send the participant a permission form through email (usually as an attachment) for their confirmation of

approval by sending back a reply to the email. However, this method limits the possibility of acceptance for the study by the prospective interviewee, as it leaves little scope for clarity regarding the scope of the study being communicated effectively before consenting to participate.

Another major concern is the privacy of the respondent. Although online communities actively encourage users to share private information, these spaces are open to the public and provide minimal protection for users' privacy and anonymity (Murray M & Fisher J.D., 2002). In addition, since the Internet is open to the public, it may be difficult to prevent anyone who is not a part of the focus group study from seeing the replies of the participants, which would constitute a violation of privacy.

Finally, after data collection is complete, it is crucial that researchers adhere to a stringent code of ethics. Data de-identification and confidentiality, storage of research files such as transcriptions, field notes, personal information, password protection, possible encryption of data stored on the researcher's local computer, and timely deletion of audio-visual recordings are all examples of issues that can arise from online data collection beyond the standard procedure (Lobe, B., et Al. 2020).

5. Other major challenges

In 2021, a study was conducted on two online focus groups on the low-social economic status of African American adults during COVID-19, and a few were identified as participant privacy; in order to take part digitally, they had to be comfortable sharing their everyday lives on screen that may be seen as vulnerable (Lorraine Lathen & Linnea Laestadius, 2021). During the interviews, some participants' family members wandered out of sight of the camera, while others sat in the backseat. Multitasking is another issue encountered in the use of videoconferencing technology: users have to keep their attention on the conversation while also muting and unmuting their microphones, raising their virtual hands, typing in the chat box, responding to opinion polls, etc. The occasional disconnection of focus group members prompted the study team to refine its focus group techniques and clarify its incentive distribution principles. Support and time allocation were a particular concern for parents who also had to help children with their online classes. The absence of childcare created not only privacy issues but also made it difficult for participants to focus on the discussion.

Another study on the feasibility of using mobile texting on smartphones as a fresh approach to eliciting group-level insights was carried out in Singapore, wherein researchers compared in-person focus groups to those conducted using the messaging app WhatsApp (Julienne Chen, et Al., 2019). Although the research found that WhatsApp groups might produce detailed replies and group engagement, especially among younger, more tech-savvy participants, the study also found that the number and complexity of the discussion was not equal to that of the in-person focus groups. Another web-based qualitative study was conducted in 2021 with respect to heart disease awareness, where the focus groups were adolescents and young adults. It was

found that for researchers whose subjects are adolescents and young adults, web-based groups may prove to be a helpful tool as adolescents and young adults are often tech-savvy, prefer electronic communication, and are time- and location-constrained (Courtney A, et al. 2021). In another study, Facebook was used as a tool to collect in order to record the experiences of third-culture children, and it was found that the use of a Facebook-based online focus group was useful for this investigation. Researchers were able to recruit adult subjects from all around the world and connect with them on Facebook, enabling them to obtain rich data augmented by other forms of communication, such as photos, text, video, emojis, and lists of relevant websites. Facebook made it easier to recruit hard-to-reach participants globally (Lijadi, A. A. et Al. 2015).

Another study investigated the role of persons who have had suicidal ideation in the development of healthcare services and treatments using synchronous web conferencing technology-based online focus groups (W-OFGs) (Han J, et Al., (2019). This study reveals that the nature of technology poses certain challenges. Those who are inexperienced with digital technology, such as the elderly, or who live in places where internet connection is costly or limited may be less likely to use the W-OFG to participate in research. The W-OFG prioritizes participant safety. The lack of nonverbal clues and contextual information may hinder focus group behaviour and emotional evaluation. This complicates W-OFG support for conducting research. Although the possible strength of W-OFG is overcoming the physical location and lack of privacy of face-to-face focus groups, the data suggest that W-OFG participants are less inclined to expound on others' comments (Schneider S.J. et Al., 2016). None of the W-OFG participants voiced privacy concerns; however, digital data collection through video conferencing might pose privacy and data breach risks. Video conferencing has inherent weaknesses, such as hacker assaults, user illiteracy, and lack of clarity.

6. Potential benefits of online qualitative research

Researchers have solved travel restrictions imposed during pandemics through the use of advanced technologies, such as asynchronous, synchronous virtual communication, and field access. In cases where face-to-face interaction is difficult, alternatives, such as chat-based or video-based online focus groups and interviews may be explored (Dodds S. & Hess A. C. 2021). There are three primary types of online focus groups: those that allow for audio and video, those that allow for audio alone, and those that exclusively allow for text-based communication. There is an option of synchronous or asynchronous communication while conducting focus groups through text. Asynchronous conversations are available for a certain amount of time, during which participants may log in to answer moderator queries and converse. Synchronous groups are fixed-duration conversations in which members must access the platform and answer questions in real time. Synchronous communication is the norm for both the audio-only and video-enabled groups (Courtney A. Brown, et Al., 2021).

Accessibility:

Most researchers and participants found that participating in online focus groups was more convenient than attending in-person focus groups. Online communities are not restricted to working hours or to a single location, and users (including research personnel) may join any device at any time. Researchers who lack the time, money, or resources to physically visit remote regions of the world might benefit from this method by connecting with participants remotely. In-person groups, on the other hand, need members to go to a certain place at a specified time, and are therefore more limited in scope. Adolescents have many competing demands on their time, which makes it difficult for them to commit to in-person organizations because of difficulties in travel and traffic (Tates K., Zwaanswijk M., et Al 2009). Collaborators in remote or underprivileged areas may recruit and assist participants via video chats with researchers from other parts of the world.

Useful for techno-savvy people:

Online qualitative research is particularly useful for researchers who are adolescents and young people. The vast majority of adolescents and young adults today have access to smartphones and laptops.

Theoretical validity

In addition to the obvious practical benefits to researchers and interviewees alike, theoretical improvements to qualitative research may also be made via the use of virtual technologies, such as more ethical and fair interview settings for a variety of social groups. Participants who have jobs may find it more convenient to attend interviews through video conferences because they may schedule them as per convenience.

Cost efficient:

The costs associated with in-person focus groups included remuneration for participants, reimbursement of participant travel expenses, food and drinks, fees associated with venues and equipment, transcribing fees, and moderation charges. However, when researchers opt for online research methods, most of this cost can be reduced, which results in cost efficiency. There is a plethora of choices when it comes to web-based platforms, many of which come with zero or low fees connected with their use. Therefore, web-based groups may be more cost-effective for researchers depending on the platform being utilized.

Anonymity:

In qualitative research involving sensitive or personal health matters, anonymity may be a key concern, and a project's capacity to ensure anonymity may boost the participants' willingness to provide sensitive material. It is possible that participants in

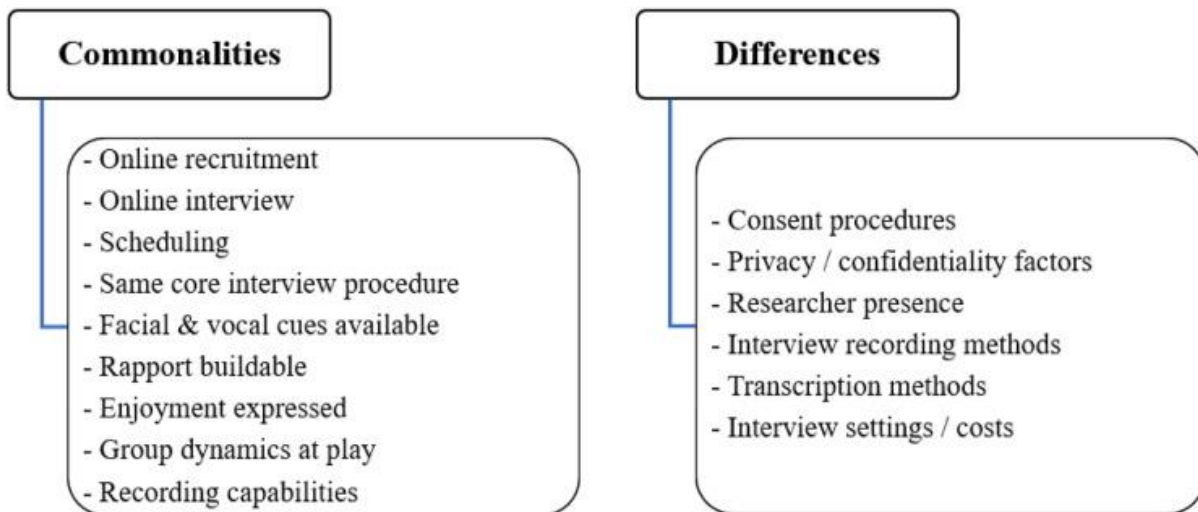
online groups are less susceptible to social status prejudice, social desirability bias, and groupthink, all of which may lead to an increase in involvement from historically underrepresented groups (Nicholas D. B., et Al., 2017). It is possible that participants and researchers might feel more comfortable using text-based or audio-based groups to investigate sensitive subjects, because participant identities are better secured in these types of groups (Graffigna G. & Bosio A. C. 2017).

7. Comparing Virtual and Face-to-face Qualitative Research

Sl. No	Factors	Virtual
1.	Flexibility	Virtual data collection is more flexible as it allows the researchers to schedule interviews of many participants from all the world at the same time.
2.	Geographical access	Virtual data collection can offer more geographical access as the researchers can have access to more participants across the globe in less time.
3.	Cost	Virtual data collection offers more cost efficiency as the researchers need not spend money on travelling and accommodation.
4.	Knowledge of technology and inclusiveness of the participants	The most important aspect of virtual data collection is the use and knowledge of technology in order to reach the participants. Here the use and knowledge of technology are not just with respect to researchers but also the participants. The researchers here have to make sure that the participants have access to technology and also have sufficient knowledge to use it. If the participants do not have access to technology, then the burden falls upon the researcher to make it available to the participants as a result the researchers may incur additional costs. In doing so, the research may exclude many participants who do not have access to technology.
5.	Body language	In virtual data collection, since the researchers are not physically present with the participants, sometime the researchers may miss on the minute body language or capturing different emotions that the participants express which may hamper the quality of data collected
6.	Anonymity	In virtual data collection, participants feel much protected as the researcher can hide the identity of participant from the rest of the participants. This results in participants sharing even sensitive information to the researchers.
7.	Controlling power of the researcher	In virtual data collection, the power to control and give instructions to the participants may be

		considerably less as the researcher is not physically present.
8.	Potential distractions	In virtual data collection, there are more chances that participants may get distracted easily especially if they are at home. Such distractions may include child care, presence of other members in the home and other domestic chores. Sometimes even technology can cause distractions to the participants.
9.	Obtaining consent	One of the most essential elements of qualitative research is to take proper consent of the participants. In virtual data collection, the consent form is usually sent through email. There is absence of two-way interaction where the researcher may not be in a position to explain the terms of the consent and also participants may not be in a position to ask questions in real time. This hold good especially with participants who are illiterate and technologically disabled

8.Virtual versus face-to-face data collection: commonalities and differences (Keen S. et Al., 2022).



9. A Way Forward for Qualitative Research

The continuation of research during times of public health emergency is considered ethical for researchers because it is the only way to find answers to some problems that

can only be studied during an emergency (Wright, K. & Harvey, K., 2020). Recent technological advances have made it possible to communicate in a variety of new ways using a broad range of media. In-person meetings are gradually being phased out in favour of more convenient communication methods such as video chatting, emailing, and texting. Recently, notably Covid 19 has required innovation in many facets of our life, and qualitative research is no different. Conducting interviews in person has traditionally been seen as the "gold standard" for qualitative research because of how central they are to the methodology. However, qualitative research conducted digitally allows academics to analyze crisis environments while protecting participants and researchers amid the current pandemic crisis and social distancing in place. The following are some of the ways forward for qualitative researchers to make their research more trustworthy, reliable, and efficient in times of health emergency.

- a) The importance of the goal, strategy, and methodology alignment in the context of the pandemic:

During PHEIC, the researcher formulates research questions and selects methods of data collection in a manner that is congruent with the goals of the virtual study and its overall design. The decisions made by the researcher when conducting the research should not only be in accordance with the goal, methodology, and design of the study, but should also be in accordance with the requirements and concerns of the participants at each given point in time.

- b) Taking into account the technological aspects:

When conducting qualitative research, researchers must carefully consider the characteristics of various virtual platforms. Due consideration needs to be given to participants' choices, in contrast to the researcher's choices. For instance, a study was conducted using a virtual mode to examine the state of homeless students in Texas (J. Kessa Roberts, et Al 2021). In this study, the researchers initially selected ZOOM as a platform to conduct interviews, as they had an institutional license to conduct interviews through this platform. However, when the researchers contacted most of the participants, it was found that most of them were users of Microsoft Teams. Therefore, the researchers later opted for Microsoft Teams over ZOOM, thereby making it convenient for the participants to participate in the interviews. Thus, paramount importance must be given to the needs of participants, especially when the research is being conducted online (J. Kessa Roberts, et Al., 2021).

- c) Employ second researcher:

While conducting research through the virtual mode, it is advisable to employ a second researcher whose work is to solely assist in the technical aspects. In doing so, the main researcher can exclusively concentrate on the participant's interaction, and the second researcher can take care of all the technical glitches that may arise during the interview. Further studies have found that using a second researcher also helped build rapport with the participants, as the interviewer was able to pay close attention to the participant, make eye contact, use appropriate facial expressions, and use other non-

verbal cues to show their attention, all of which are crucial for establishing rapport in virtual interviews because a second researcher took extensive notes and attended to technical issues (Archibald M. M, et al. 2019).

d) Promoting Research Integrity and Ethics:

While conducting research through the virtual mode, one must be deeply concerned with the ethical challenges that one faces.

e) Obtaining participant's consent:

When conducting online research, the most frequent method for substituting in-person permission processes with electronic consent procedures is to obtain consent via email. Since obtaining consent is one way, the researcher has to make sure that they provide a platform for the participants to ask additional questions with respect to the consent form. Further, the researcher is required to add a line in the permission form that informs participants that they are free to withdraw from the research at any time throughout the collection of data, and that they are not obligated to do so.

f) Privacy issues:

Maintaining confidentiality on an invitation-only basis is essential. For instance, because Skype requires each participant to sign the conversation on their own, it is difficult for unauthorized individuals to listen. This feature of Zoom should also be on, because if it is not, unauthorized individuals may discover a method to join meetings that are open to the general public. The "waiting room" function of Zoom is another useful tool. This function enables the person who organizes the meeting to have control over who joins the video conference.

Another problem that might occur with video-based conversations is the possibility of the backdrop of the participant's surroundings being seen on the video, which is particularly problematic if the participant is interviewed in their own house. It is possible that this may be more of a problem during group interviews, in which the participants would have the opportunity to peer inside the houses of each other, and it is feasible to at least partly remedy this issue with an internal option inside the application that blurs the backdrop in the video; however, it is still recommended that participants position their device in an environment with a plain background whenever it is practicable to do so.

g) To establish a separate research ethical committee (REC) during PHEIC

Ethical questions are often prompted by situations, such as pandemics. Since the pandemic demands a lot of research to take place in a very short period of time, a lot of stress has been put on RECs to review an ample amount of research. It is not only that there is more work for them to do; the pace at which they have to evaluate it has to increase so that research can be undertaken to combat the epidemic. For instance, Chinese RECs reportedly have four monthly meetings with an average approval time of

two days (Zhang, H., et Al., 2020). There have also been calls for RECs to improve productivity without lowering ethical review standards (Luo Q. & Qin T., 2020). Therefore, during the pandemic, separate ad-hoc RECs have to be formed that are time-sensitive and meet more often. Reconsidering the REC assessment metrics in light of the pandemic. It is important to consider the opinions of all parties involved in the study, including the participants, researchers, and review committee.

h) Increasing access to vulnerable and technologically disabled participants

One of the biggest challenges faced by researchers while conducting online research is the barrier to reaching vulnerable participants and technologically disabled people. The research must be as inclusive as possible to put it into use. Therefore, the researcher must ensure that they can reach the target participants. Flowing is a way in which research can be made more inclusive.

- 1) Locate key allies to help make gadgets and tech more accessible to focus group members. Include costs associated with participants' access to necessary technology and hotspots in research funding and contracts.
- 2) Before starting the focus groups, create procedures to moderate the discussion and provide incentives to members who are willing to work through technical difficulties.
- 3) Determine how to get mobile hotspots into the hands of those taking part in the focus group.
- 4) To arrange workshops for the participants before starting the research in order to make the participants under the process more thoroughly, especially those who were digitally illiterate.

10. Conclusions

The PHEIC has highlighted the need for adaptation and flexibility in research, both of which have been essential for a very long time. The pace with which a shutdown was implemented worldwide has highlighted the need for flexibility in the research structure. The emerging conversation on research and research methods during the pandemic has produced a number of important insights, one of the most important of which is the realization that the pandemic has made it abundantly clear that significant improvements in the way social science research is conducted are required to address the global emergency.

During PHEIC, much research takes place in the field of medicine, as it is considered to be very important in the fight against the disease. However, the role of social science is equally important, as it helps policymakers regulate human behaviour in such tough times. It is time for institutions to recognize the importance of social science research and fund the same. In addition, there is a lack of literature available to assist qualitative researchers in conducting their research during PHEIC, as they face many challenges while doing so.

Even though there are many challenges that qualitative researchers face in transitioning from face-to-face data collection to virtual data collection, there are potential benefits of collecting data virtually, especially when travel restrictions are imposed as they can reach people across the globe. However, researchers have to ensure that they are able to reach the most vulnerable and digitally illiterate people to make the research more effective.

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