Researching with Qualitative Methodologies in the Time of Coronavirus: Clues and Challenges

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Abstract

In late 2020 and the first semester of 2021, in Santiago de Chile, five women researchers who work with qualitative methodologies, based on their reflections on how the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on their doctoral research or their role as thesis advisors, conducted a reflective exploration of the conditions and challenges for qualitative research amid a global crisis. In this context, they convene once per week to explore how other researchers conduct and document their research processes, based on a purposive and thorough bibliographic exploration of qualitative studies on the pandemic and remote methods published in qualitative research journals. During these meetings, they reflect on and analyze the impacts and challenges of research in today's world, identifying possibilities and challenges in the methodological and ethical domains. Thus, they organize the present paper around two axes: one on the effects of the pandemic on academic and research practices, in general terms, and another on the specific methodological challenges facing qualitative research during the pandemic. These challenges are largely caused by difficulties in accessing and recruiting participants; the conditions of participation, influenced by vulnerabilities or barriers that constitute factors of inequality; the data production strategies and methodologies used in virtual contexts; ethical considerations; and the effects of the pandemic context on quality and rigor criteria. The article concludes with reflections and questions on the meanings, underlying logic, and practices of qualitative research, which are interrogated and re-signified in light of the COVID-19 pandemic while also illuminating research in post-pandemic settings.

Introduction

December 2020 in Santiago de Chile, five researchers at different points of their research careers, nearly 1 year since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown measures, and the prospect that socio-sanitary conditions were not going to change immediately. High infection and death rates. Uncertainty, exhaustion, anxiety. Questions and more questions regarding our academic duties: will we be able to resume our doctoral work on-site? Will we be able to teach in-person lessons ever again? How does one supervise doctoral research processes remotely? Will we be able to meet our estimated data production deadlines? Is it possible to construct a doctoral research proposal in these conditions?

Qualitative methodologies have gained relevance in research over the last few years, since they offer epistemological approaches and practical tools that make it possible to address

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the multidimensionality of various social and individual situations and problems empirically, stressing the value of subjective processes and the meanings constructed by people and groups. Although today it seems that we are leaving behind the most critical situation in relation to COVID-19, the global context generated by the pandemic stressed both the logics and the practices of qualitative research. This prompts questions about how to conduct research; what to adapt, how to do so, and when; and whether changes in study design also affect the very question that we seek to explore.

According to Cuenca and Schettini (2020), some of the questions that have emerged with respect to research in a pandemic context are: "What type of information do we collect? What new challenges result from this change in methodological strategies and their association with ICTs? What new and old epistemological and methodological debates actualize this reality? What new research practices will be adopted in the social sciences?" (p. 2).

Pondering these and other questions, and with many uncertainties regarding our professional and personal future in mind, we decided to implement a group environment to share our doubts and reflections, and also to study how other researchers were thinking about and conducting their research processes. Doubtlessly, it was better to reflect on these issues as a group, given the advantages of collective and inter-subjective processes and the need for opportunities of this type to train future researchers. Two researchers were submitting their doctoral research proposal for approval, using solidly grounded methodological designs that had been initially devised for in-person settings. Two researchers ─who had already decided to employ qualitative methodologies─ were constructing their research questions, collecting conceptual information to outline their research problems, and starting to define the characteristics of their methodological design. The last researcher, for her part, is a doctoral thesis supervisor and is currently planning a new study on her specialization topics.

So, since March 2021, when Santiago was again placed under strict lockdown, we met weekly to engage in discussion, reflection, and analysis, and also to support one another. All this work was done remotely, utilizing the Zoom platform, until late July 2021. We began with a review of multiple journals of qualitative methodology journals, searching for publications about research within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We purposively read the papers found, examining them for insights into how this context puts pressure on the implementation of studies and which questions the authors sought to answer.

We gradually established thematic axes that enabled us to systematize and organize the proposals contained in the papers and that also allowed each of us to continue making progress in our research projects. Through our readings and group interactions, what first seemed like a tragic development for our studies ─to the point of threatening their continuity─ led to a more optimistic outlook, filled with opportunities and

challenges that reasserted the value of our qualitative and collective approach.

Specifically, two main threads emerged from our purposive readings and discussions. The first addresses recent articles on the general effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and those focused on the conduction of academic activities in this context, especially research tasks. This axis ends by taking up general challenges about the meaning of the times of the coronavirus for qualitative research. The second axis specifically addresses the methodological challenges of qualitative research during the pandemic, which have been grouped into phases or key moments: access to participants and recruitment; participation conditions; data production strategies; ethical considerations; and effects on quality and rigor. The paper concludes with reflections on the meanings and new questions elicited by the logics and practices of qualitative research and how they are put in tension and re-signified in light from the context imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Time of Coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019 and which, according to international health organizations, seems to be coming to an end, impacted the entire world, claiming many lives. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2022), at the beginning of October 2022, 6.5 million deaths had been registered worldwide due to this cause. In South America, a figure of 63,838,420 deaths was reached and, specifically in Chile, 61,339 deaths (Chilean Ministry of Health, 2022). In addition, important changes were imposed in our daily life, being perceived in every domain, but especially in the social sphere, in those activities that involve meeting others.

In this section, we review some of the changes produced by the COVID-19 pandemic in general terms, especially in the academic field and research activity, and specifically in the conduct of qualitative research.

Experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic

In his virtual diary about the pandemic, entitled *Chronicles of the Psycho-Deflation*, Berardi (2020) asserts that the main effect of the virus was a "relational palsy", the imposition of "stagnation" as a long-term regime, a transit towards immobility, to which we could not get used to. For Žižek (2020), this catastrophe made us rethink the basic characteristics of the society in which we live.

The changes that were installed in our daily lives, the new health practices, and the closure of schools, universities, and stores, along with the social isolation imposed, have transformed this period into an "unprecedented time" (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 384) and in which, for many people, the home was designated as the only safe space for learning,

working, and living (Eigege & Kennedy, 2021). However, this possibility was not feasible in contexts of greater vulnerability, where job options or social conditions did not facilitate isolation in housing.

According to the literature (Chen et al., 2020; Drefahl et al., 2020; Havnen et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2020; Lewis, 2020; Liang et al., 2020; McCracken et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2020; Qin et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020), the pandemic has had a major impact on people's mental health, resulting in more anxiety, isolation, sleep disorders, fears of becoming infected or infecting others, anguish, depression, and stress. These effects have been linked to the virus as well as to its social consequences. The literature also warns that these consequences are especially severe for the most disadvantaged sectors of society (Eigege et al., 2022). This manifests itself, for instance, in the strong association between socioeconomic status and COVID-19 mortality in Santiago de Chile (Mena et al., 2021).

Such a connection means that the pandemic was not only a health emergency, but also a psychosocially impactful event that has brought to light various forms of inequality and discrimination while also revealing collective actions and solidarity (Teti et al., 2020). It should be noted that qualitative social research has also been impacted by the times of the coronavirus.

The Crisis Of Academic-Research Activities

As noted above, the crisis derived from the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a large-scale redefinition process (Keen et al., 2022). In order to adapt to the new conditions, millions of people restructured their work arrangements; therefore, the impact on academic activity and research tasks was evident since the beginning of the pandemic (Mwambari et al., 2021).

Palliative measures adopted in response to the pandemic, especially lockdowns, posed challenges for academic institutions. Both professors and students had to adapt to telework and improve their knowledge about the technological resources necessary for engaging in virtual activities. In fact, this suggests that a digital society requires more than just access to on-line platforms: each person must also develop skills to adapt to the new modes of communication in an innovative and swift manner (Ossiannilsson, 2021).

Graduate students, especially at the master's and doctoral levels, were affected by this global challenge (Falter et al., 2022). The use of research laboratories, in-person studies that involve other human beings, academic events aimed at disseminating scientific findings, or exchanges with tutors were some of the activities that have been limited since the pandemic began. Furthermore, in this pandemic context, doctoral students have encountered even more loneliness in their duties given the closure of shared research facilities and the loss of collaboration and interchange opportunities with other professionals and academics.

Scientific writing also become particularly challenging in this context. According to Yoo (2021), when everything is shaken by the impact of the pandemic, it is extremely hard to deal with the blank page. This has been especially hard for women academics, who have been forced to deal with the multiple demands associated with caring and the lack of boundaries between the spaces and tasks of the home and the workplace.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that doctoral research, across all the branches of science, has helped to expand our knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, this situation grants doctoral students a unique chance for conducting research, since their findings can shed light on the virus, the disease, and the social and personal changes derived from the global pandemic (Hayes, 2020). The extended use of remote methods during the health crisis has also encouraged collaboration and coordination among academics from multiple countries (Eigege et al., 2022; Howlett, 2021). Even virtual conferences seem to be more inclusive, as participants living anywhere in the world can take part in the same scientific event (Meskell et al., 2021).

New Challenges for Qualitative Researchers

Social distancing changed how we conduct qualitative social research. Issues associated with the suspension of trips, field work, and conferences, as well as limitations on their access to reading, analysis, and publication resources, are among the obstacles that researchers had to ─and still must─ deal with. This hindered many projects, which were put on hold or underwent a redefinition of their methodological strategies, data production techniques, and access to participants (Howlett, 2021; Lawrence, 2020).

Researchers, forced to rethink the design of their projects, either changed or limited their initial proposals and sought to identify safe, appropriate, and feasible techniques in view of the new conditions. In this context, the only option available to them was to resume their studies remotely. According to Howlett (2021), this mode of operation was swiftly integrated into researchers' work, even if technologically mediated methods were not part of the original designs, or the researchers had no prior training or experience in their utilization.

In this regard, it is worth noting that research through virtual means is not new in the social sciences. In fact, the academic world has produced a wealth of research on data production in remote settings prior to the pandemic (Envuladu et al., 2022; Lobe et al., 2020), with the literature describing a number of technologies that facilitate production and identifying the most suitable ones depending on the participants' needs and the characteristics and requirements of each study. Despite this progress, the adoption of remote methods still arouses serious methodological and epistemological concerns regarding aspects that play a key role in qualitative social research (Howlett, 2021).

At the same time, the demand to generate urgent responses to the pandemic sparked international collaboration in several large-scale research projects (Eigege et al., 2022). Research efforts aimed at generating information within a short time span require that design, recruitment, and data collection and analysis processes be exceedingly rapid. These needs seem to run counter to and challenge the standards of traditional qualitative research, which typically requires long periods to offer sufficiently profound insights into the phenomenon studied (Tremblay et al., 2021).

Several authors have pointed out that, within the framework of qualitative social research, participatory research based on collaboration and the establishment of close bonds between researchers and participants is the most affected (Hall et al., 2021). With respect to these projects, Valdez and Gubrium (2020) note that the transition to remote methods has had several adverse effects, including the difficulties in establishing solidarity-based bonds and generating trust between researchers and community members.

Likewise, it has also become more complex to conduct research with groups faced with exclusion, disadvantages, or economic, social, political, and health-related struggles. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this also includes people hit the hardest by the negative effects of the so-called "digital gap". This gap affects those who, due to their social status, cannot freely engage in virtual contact, such as homeless people, as well as those who have been excluded from due to social isolation measures, such as older adults and children (Howlett, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021).

Apart from its negative effects, the forced transition to virtual research can also have advantages in terms of cost, time, and ─of course─ the ability to continue studies planned before the pandemic (Mwambari et al., 2021). In this regard, authors have highlighted the ability to contact multiple users from a variety of countries or communities who would have remained inaccessible otherwise (Lobe et al., 2020). In addition, the literature has highlighted the flexibility in terms of clothing and location that virtual media afford, which can be beneficial for participants and researchers with transportation difficulties associated with financial limitations, disability, or the burden of family or work obligations (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020).

Authors have also pointed out that growing familiarity with technology has made it easier to adopt remote methods, with studies indicating that relationships have become increasingly symmetrical, since both participants and researchers are affected by the same crisis and are sharing their private spaces online, which has granted the former more agency and power compared to in-person interactions (Howlett, 2021; Lobe et al., 2020; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). Research also shows that, for participants, it is significant to be interviewed during the pandemic, since this enables them to discuss topics unrelated to COVID-19 and talk to people outside of their home environment.

Undoubtedly, this global context had the potential for re-imagining new norms for qualitative research in the social sciences, particularly in sensitive contexts (Mwambari et al., 2021). The obligation to reconceptualize, contrast, and make pragmatic adjustments can not only enrich methodology, phenomenology, ethics, and rigor in research, but can also help to generate and/or strengthen certain skills in the researchers conducting studies (Lawrence, 2020).

Qualitative Research During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Methodological Reflections

Many phases of the research process were stressed and challenged by the pandemic. Based on a literature review, we have focused on particular aspects that we consider are essential and warrant analysis given the situation resulting from the pandemic: access to participants and recruitment strategies; the conditions of participation; and data production techniques and devices. Lastly, we will examine ethical considerations and rigor in research, two overarching aspects of the design and implementation of qualitative studies which also need to be revisited and updated in the light of this context.

Access to Participants and Recruitment Strategies

Written research literature during the pandemic has revealed several changes in how researchers gain access to participants and how they publicize their studies (Campbell, 2021), all of which has had an impact on data production strategies altered by social isolation measures.

Roberts et al. (2021) underscore that, even though the use of web-based tools has certain advantages for participant recruitment, such as greater dissemination speed and access to geographically distant populations, rural communities, or people with mobility problems, it remains difficult to access populations marginalized due to the digital gap noted above. To overcome these obstacles, the authors, in a study with homeless people, made certain adaptations such as extending the data production deadline and implementing resources and choices that facilitated the participants' access to the Internet.

Lawrence (2020) for this part, discusses the need to reflect and make an effort to determine how to communicate with the participants in order to generate trust and credibility while also allowing the researcher to achieve ethical legitimacy.

Participation Conditions

Regarding the necessary conditions for data production, the literature stresses the importance of reviewing the set of requirements associated with the use of technologies and platforms for remote meetings between the researcher and the participants. The first step of these preparations should be to verify the presence of Internet connectivity and access to a

technological device with the selected platform already set up (Hall et al., 2021; Howlett, 2021; Retamal, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021).

The literature (Hall et al., 2021; Howlett, 2021; Lawrence, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020) also identifies a number of alternatives for communicating with participants within a social distancing context. To select the most suitable one, researchers must consider: a) The number of participants who can take part in a single session, audio or video recording functionality, the participants' ability to access the application, and any privacy concerns; b) That not all participants may be familiar with the application that the researcher uses or prefers; c) The specific conditions of each socioeconomic status group or characteristics of the participants; d) Certain restrictions on accessing certain applications, depending on each participant's country of origin and the online monitoring policies in force.

Another sphere of participation conditions is related to the space from which researchers and participants interact. As noted by Campbell (2021), the online research format has caused both parties to share their homes, and other aspects of their domestic life, which the author refers to as "unexpected intimacy" (p. 576).

The fact that all interaction is remote means an intrusion into other people's lives, which had never been so exposed. Revealing this part of our life can lead to a bonding process or an uncomfortable intrusion into our intimacy (Meskell et al., 2021). There are ways of regulating this intrusion, such as keeping one's camera off. In this context, Howlett (2021) suggests initiating each meeting with the question "where are you right now?" which should generate a new socially meaningful space for interacting remotely in research settings.

Thus, conducting social research during the pandemic not only entails a transition to virtuality, but also a jump into the domestic sphere. This leads to a loss of control over the externalities or conditions of data production, since peace and quiet cannot always be guaranteed in this sphere. Therefore, it is worth asking what additional measures must be adopted in this jump into the private sphere, not only by participants but also by researchers, who may encounter the same difficulties when attempting to find a private and quiet place to work.

Data Production: Techniques and Devices

According to Howlett (2021), technological advances have yielded new and useful tools for conducting qualitative research, which were very valuable given the social distancing protocols generated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and whose advantages and disadvantages must be analyzed in order to ensure the integrity of the research process. Nevertheless, after decades of studies on the usage and feasibility of technologically mediated methods, there is limited consensus on their suitability and validity, and it remains unclear whether these interactions can adequately replace in-person methods (Howlett, 2021). Despite the possibilities that they afford,

Deakin and Wakefield (2014) argue that mediated approaches are a second-rate choice compared to the "gold standard": face-to-face communication.

Synchronous remote methods have become popular ways of holding interviews and focus groups not only due to their similarities with the face-to-face approach, but also because there exist multiple platforms (e.g. Facebook, Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, Viber, Instagram) where it has become increasingly usual to interact with research participants (Lawrence, 2020). Hall et al. (2021) assert that one of the main challenges posed by these methods is to preserve the "spontaneity" of face-to-face meetings in remote interactions. Adom et al. (2020) agree that interviews conducted over a videoconferencing platform, by virtue of being synchronous and including some elements of traditional communication, can allow researcher-participant interaction to reach a high degree of naturalness. Lawrence (2020) adds that, during online interviews, it is important for researchers to remain committed and let participants know that their voice is heard and understood by means of nods or encouraging remarks.

Gruber et al. (2021) distinguish four means of communication that can be used to conduct remote qualitative interviews: telephone, video, e-mail, and instant messaging, note that the choice of which type of interview to conduct must be based not only on practical reasons, but also on the characteristics of the participants and ⁻crucially⁻ on the research question.

Deakin and Wakefield (2014) also point out that remote interviews encourage a low-pressure, comfortable, and relaxed environment where participants can share intimate details about themselves. Another aspect to consider is that the participants tend to forget that the meetings are being recorded, unlike in the face-to-face modality where they are more aware of the recording device. This allows the process to flow better while also limiting the interviewees' tendency to give socially desirable responses (Howlett, 2021).

With respect to focus groups conducted over videoconferencing platforms, authors recommend reducing the number of participants and encouraging the use of desktop or laptop computers instead of mobile phones to allow the participants to see one another (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020). Also, sites like Reddit make it possible to conduct focus groups asynchronously using text. Among its potential advantages, this approach allows people to choose when to participate and makes it easier to transcribe the ideas shared (Richard et al., 2021).

Immersion in the research context and the generation of trust and empathy ⁻which are highly relevant in studies on phenomena or situations affected by conflicts or sensitive topics in general⁻ are hindered when on-line interaction is adopted (Mwambari et al., 2021). In their review of studies recently published during the pandemic, between July 2020 and January 2021, Hall et al. (2021) identify the common need to find innovative methods that make it possible to preserve a close and collaborative relationship between researchers and

participants. The authors exemplify this point with the study conducted by Liegghio and Caragata (2021), who employed the photovoice technique and found that it strengthened the participants' personal and collective resilience and mitigated the negative effects of the pandemic. The literature offers another specific suggestion related to the context: to address the impact of the crisis on the participants by devoting some time to discuss this topic when contacting them (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Beyond Remote Research: Relational Aspects. All remote studies involve a number of ethical challenges. However, the pandemic deeply changed how remote research must be conducted. It is necessary to consider not only the implications of how access to participants has changed, but also the emotional impact that studies can have on both participants and researchers (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). Campbell (2021) suggests that, in the midst of social isolation, online meetings were valued by the participants as an opportunity to talk with another person, seeing the space as similar to counseling.

The above entails ethical dilemmas, especially regarding the limits of the researcher's role and how it differs from other roles, such as that of a counselor, or, as noted by Kvale (2006), what separates it from a therapeutically-oriented conversation. In this context, it is relevant to develop risk mitigation protocols or define what measures should be adopted if the participant exhibits any emotional disturbances due to the research. It is relevant not to dehumanize the data production process, which requires adopting an active listening role, beyond the topics of interest of the study, and being sensitive enough to notice whether the participant is capable of taking part in the interview or, as Guillemin and Gillam (2004) indicate, if he/she exhibits vulnerability or discomfort.

In this relational domain, Valdez and Gubrium (2020) indicate that it is important to plan in advance how to deal with sensitive topics in spaces where privacy cannot be ensured and how to prevent the participants from adjusting their responses, which they might do to avoid being heard by those around them. Campbell (2021) adds that virtuality can also make it more difficult for us to express empathy and warmth ─or keep us from finding the right way to do so─ when people show fragility or emotion. A measure suggested by the author is to pause, show interest and respect the pace of the participant.

Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Respect for Intimacy. According to the literature (Lawrence, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020), the ethical issues that researchers must consider in a remote study are common to all qualitative projects; however, some considerations are specific to online studies, especially considering the current pandemic context. In technologically mediated studies, it is worth noting that confidentiality and anonymity cannot be wholly guaranteed, most of all in group activities in which it is impossible to keep a participant from recording the session or taking screenshots. Thus, the first recommendation is that boundaries regarding both aspects must be clearly stipulated in the consent form.

With respect to videoconferencing platforms, even though they may be the most straightforward and feasible choice for many projects, it is necessary to evaluate them vis-a-vis participant comfort, anonymity, and ethical integrity. If any doubts exist regarding the safety of both participants and researchers, the literature suggests adopting a different mode of qualitative research. Authors also recommend taking additional safety measures with videos: they should be encrypted and preferably stored locally instead of in the cloud (Lobe et al., 2020).

Hall et al. (2021) and Lobe et al. (2020) note that, when utilizing online platforms, it is necessary to review their privacy, confidentiality, and data storage policies. Risk mitigation measures include removing all personal identifiers to guarantee confidentiality and avoiding any links between the data collected and the participants' e-mail addresses.

Additionally, when conducting a remote study, consideration should be given to the ethical and political challenges associated with State surveillance in some countries. With respect to participants, what matters is whether they perceive that they are being eavesdropped on or "captured" (Mwambari et al., 2021). In this regard, participants often express concerns and criticisms which are not overtly present in their narratives (Fujii, 2010) and which are harder to "read" in remote interactions; therefore, researchers must be attentive, listen carefully, and quickly detect nonverbal cues.

In brief, studies in remote contexts should encourage qualitative researchers to examine their protocols more thoroughly. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic can have a positive impact by leading researchers to review, reformulate, and expand their existing ethical and care practices (Mwambari et al., 2021).

Effects on Research Quality and Rigor

Multiple positions on the worth of qualitative studies have been advanced since the 19th century, with some scholars attempting to incorporate quantitative criteria and others calling for the introduction of new criteria linked to the nature of qualitative social research (Cornejo & Salas, 2011; Tracy, 2010). In this regard, Flick (2015) highlights the importance of using the potential of qualitative research to conduct socially relevant studies that make vulnerable groups visible, a goal that gained relevance during the pandemic as a result of the intensification of prior vulnerabilities. Other markers of quality, such as the value of the topic studied or the significance of the contribution made (Tracy, 2010), prompt questions on the role or preponderance of a number of research topics at a time when the pandemic appears to take priority over every other issue.

As mentioned, in the pandemic context, qualitative research has been forced to rethink the encounter between the subjectivities of the researcher and the participants. In order to preserve this intersubjective process, reflexivity emerges as a key activity in research (Berger, 2015). This is conceived as a quality control strategy that can be utilized throughout the knowledge generation process in which the pandemic could have affected, such as the data production process, but also the data analysis process, which means that researchers must take this impact into account.

Tremblay et al. (2021) note that, despite the growing popularity of virtual interaction methods, questions have been raised about the methodological rigor of studies that adopt these approaches. Among other concerns, authors have noted that data production may be limited by the researcher's difficulties in probing and detecting nonverbal cues as well as by the lack of contextual data, since the researcher's access is limited to what is visible onscreen. The fact that some researchers are not present in the contexts that they study can have major implications. For instance, this carries the risk of conducting an evaluation that is not sensitive to the real conditions of vulnerable contexts or being unable to generate a safe space for the interview and the participant (Mwambari et al., 2021).

Therefore, special care must be taken when selecting the best and most appropriate virtual platform, given the cultural context of the people and the generation of data, ensuring the same quality as in face-to-face research (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

In relation to the latter, Richard et al. (2021) assert that there are no differences between remote and face-to-face research in terms of the quality of the information yielded. Likewise, Howlett (2021) reports that she found no noticeable differences in terms of conversation content or connection quality when using a variety of digital platforms for her research. Nevertheless, the data produced in face-to-face interviews and focus groups undoubtedly differed from those produced remotely during the pandemic; yet, this difference lay not in the content of the data but rather in the observations made on the participants and the settings. Therefore, the author states that remote techniques are not necessarily adequate for every research project.

Lastly, Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) indicate that remote research does not necessarily introduce biases into participants' responses, however, they consider that face-to-face meetings can be richer and yield more insights, especially when personal or sensitive topics are discussed (Jenner & Myers, 2019). This view is not shared by Richard et al. (2021), for whom virtual platforms that make it possible to conduct focus groups and share information anonymously do facilitate the discussion of sensitive topics.

Final Remarks: the Meaning of Qualitative Studies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Beyond the advantages and disadvantages resulting from the transformations of qualitative research during the COVID-19 pandemic, the main effect of this global crisis fundamentally raised the need to problematize the significance of research. In this regard, Vindrola-Padros et al. (2020) state that the first ethical dilemma that researchers had to address in this context was to ask themselves: Should we do research? Should we do research at this time? Could our study cause more harm than good? These questions are associated with doubts about the social role of qualitative research.

The reflection and analysis work that this team of researchers devoted to this issue ─which we report on here─ allowed us to conclude that, despite the difficulties that the COVID-19 pandemic initially caused for qualitative studies, this crisis period has also posed a challenge for creativity and research implementation. The crisis must not be viewed as a barren field for researchers (Adom et al., 2020). Like many other disciplines, social research had to adapt to the new conditions by modifying both its areas of interest and its research designs and methodologies.

Eigege and Kennedy (2021) also note that the pandemic has offered an opportunity to document people's experiences and narratives amid the crisis, while also constituting a period ripe for exploring non-traditional research methods. In this vein, Teti et al. (2020) remind us that qualitative studies have been extensively employed during crises, catastrophes, or pandemics. Furthermore, they are useful for studying the vulnerabilities of specific populations. Indeed, we must not forget that these pre-pandemic vulnerabilities, which probably formed the basis of multiple research problems, have neither become milder nor disappeared; rather, they have become invisible or more acute, or have been put on hold. This situation is present across all research contexts, but especially in ours, since Latin America, and particularly Chile, still exhibit marked and complex social inequalities that the pandemic has undoubtedly compounded.

This makes it necessary to continue doing research, given that qualitative research offers opportunities for strengthening the capacities of excluded communities, which can foster our understanding of their experiences. We think that, to vindicate qualitative social research, we as researchers cannot halt our efforts. Thus, we ask ourselves: is research being conducted in the same way as before? Certainly not.

First, the humanization of the research process has become even more relevant. Valdez and Gubrium (2020) propose conducting research that respects the times and emotional affectation of participants and researchers, since ─like never before─ both researchers and participants share a common context: the pandemic and its associated experiences. Furthermore, we must bear in mind that this emotional impact can be accentuated by structural inequalities in the class, sex, gender, or ethnicity domain, while also considering the extent to which communities can engage in collective actions given the safety restrictions imposed by governments to control the pandemic (Cuevas-Parra, 2020). Thus, due to its impact on the social life of participants and researchers alike, we believe that it is relevant to take the pandemic factor into account not only

when planning data production methods, but also when analyzing the data collected.

Second, it is worth reflecting on the pertinence of our methodological proposals and opening the door to new ways of doing research while safeguarding the rigor and quality of the process. We must consider that certain types of studies have been more severely affected by the current situation, such as those involving groups with larger digital gaps, those conducted in educational settings ─as a result of the closure of institutions in several countries─, those focused on the community sphere, and particularly those that involve participatory techniques. Nevertheless, the pandemic context may result in the strengthening of certain types of research. For instance, Roy and Uekusa (2020) agree that, during this global pandemic, researchers must collaborate to take on the challenge of collecting and systematically analyzing autoethnographic and self-reflective data to construct an archive that can enrich future research. The authors propose collective autoethnography as a method whereby qualitative researchers can use their own experiences during the pandemic as a data source. This enables authors to study social reality through themselves, without depending on others, which makes it a useful and ethical research method. In line with the views advanced by Chang (2008) with respect to autoethnography, our working group and research approach benefited from this advantage, enabling us ─as a group─ to engage in intentional self-reflexivity and evaluate how our own situations had been strained by the pandemic as a way of shedding light on our research processes and our stance as researchers.

In addition, given our transition to remote data production, it is worth asking how we can preserve essential aspects of qualitative research, such as the ability to access participants' subjectivity while establishing trust-based, collaborative bonds in our interactions with others in order to gain access to this subjectivity. This is a particularly relevant point, especially when conducting studies on sensitive topics (Cornejo et al., 2019; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Sullivan, 2012). On the other hand, even though most of the restrictions have already been lifted, the ways of cohabiting have undoubtedly changed, with fears of becoming infected and/or infecting others being likely to curtail the interaction opportunities that we used to enjoy.

Third, sharing reflections, difficulties, and challenges associated with the pandemic became a highly enriching activity for us as researchers, especially for those of us who are pursuing doctoral studies. The intersubjective processes that nurtured our meetings and which ultimately allowed the latent meaning of our readings to emerge, resulted in an active, reflective, and dialog-rich interpretative practice. This interplay of subjectivities constituted, in itself, a criterion of quality and rigor in our research work. We generated consensus, constructed knowledge collectively, and acquired said knowledge in a holistic and contextually situated manner. At the same time, our group-based approach emerged as a source of education and support in the research sphere at a time when,

as we have discussed, the meaning of life ─and research─ had to be re-thought and re-imagined. The latter issue, together with the reduction in spaces of this type, poses a challenge to universities and training programs, since they are expected to grant support to researchers who are learning their craft.

Lastly, we must consider that people's experiences surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects are likely to constitute research topics in the future. As noted by Staller (2020), the pandemic is a significant global event that will be remembered, studied, and analyzed for years to come. According to the author, qualitative research has much to offer to studies on these memories.

Therefore, we wish to ask the following questions to close and reopen this discussion:

What will be the role of qualitative research in the post-pandemic context that is already emerging? What challenges must we, as researchers, overcome to avoid dehumanizing ourselves and our research processes, and to ensure that our research efforts be sensitive enough toward the participants and also toward those conducting studies in times of crisis? We think that, in order to answer these questions, reflexivity and opportunities for group analysis emerge as unavoidable tasks that also test the flexibility, creativity, and tolerance of uncertainty that researchers must strengthen in any adverse context.

Post Scriptum

In Chile, since August 2021, in-person academic activities have gradually begun to be re-implemented. As of March 2022, universities have almost fully returned to their pre-pandemic operational status. In October 2022, Chilean authorities lifted the obligation to wear face masks and removed occupancy limitations for public places and educational institutions.

We, the researchers in this team, have resumed our academic and research activities, incorporating what we have learned during the pandemic into our practices.

Marcela has resumed her in-person qualitative methodology courses and restarted her study groups for the discussion of research-related topics. She has continued to supervise students working on their doctoral theses both in Chile and abroad; furthermore, she has started a new research project.

Javiera, who initiated her doctoral studies in 2020, devoted 2 years to the theoretical review for her research. Her studies during the pandemic had an impact on the development of her research methodology, as she considered integrating a range of data production approaches in the current situation, which is still uncertain. She will soon present her project before the thesis committee.

Marais identified a conceptual framework that supports her study and designed a qualitative device for data production. She prioritized flexibility as an essential element, considering that the current social and health conditions may change. The project has already been approved by the thesis committee and

is currently being processed by Ethical Review Board; upon receiving its approval, she will start recruiting participants and producing data.

Ximena, throughout the 11 months of research, applied a set of qualitative data production techniques remotely, via Zoom and telephone: participant observation of one therapeutic session (6 observations in total); in-depth interviews every 3 months (12 interviews with primary caregivers and 12 interviews with social workers, 24 interviews in total); session-by-session interviews with each participant (approximately 2 monthly contacts per participant, 240 contacts in total); a final interview with each participant to discuss preliminary results (12 interviews in total); a discussion group with three participating social workers, which covered the preliminary results; and a review of the reports delivered to the courts (6 family files). All data having been analyzed, she is currently writing her thesis.

María Soledad, during the pandemic, produced data through individual interviews conducted over Zoom. She held a total of 36 interviews with 19 participants. She is currently analyzing the information obtained and writing two articles: one detailing the preliminary findings of her doctoral research and another –of a methodological nature– about the narrative approach in family and trauma research.

The challenges in our research careers are ongoing, and so are our studies.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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