Adapting research methodology during COVID-19: lessons for transformative service research

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Abstract

Purpose – Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has created a challenging, yet opportunistic, environment in which to conduct transformative service research (TSR) and assess research methodology. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate and gain important new insights of a group interviewing method with vulnerable people and their support group, adapted and transferred online during COVID-19.

Design/methodology/approach – This research examines the experiences of 35 participants (nine family groups composed of parents and young people), involved in a research project that explores a sensitive topic, youth alcohol consumption and family communication, that was moved online during lockdown. Researcher reflections on running group interviews face-to-face prior to COVID- 19 and online during lockdown are included in the data.

Findings – Thematic analysis of participant interviews and researcher reflections reveals four key benefits and three limitations of online group interviews with vulnerable people and their support group. The benefits include being comfortable, non-intrusive and safe; engaging and convenient; online communication ease and easy set-up. The limitations relate to lack of non-verbal communication, poor set-up, and privacy and access issues.

Practical implications – The global environment is uncertain and being able to implement effective qualitative research online is essential for TSR and service research in the future. This paper provides a step by step procedure for an innovative online group interviewing technique that can be used by TSR and qualitative service researchers.

Originality/value – Conducting research during a pandemic has provided unprecedented insights into qualitative research approaches and methodology. This paper contributes to literature on service and TSR methodology by providing a framework for researchers to investigate vulnerable groups online in an effective, safe and non-intrusive way. The framework also has the potential to be applied to other service contexts.

Keywords COVID-19, TSR, Online group interview, Vulnerable group, Methodology

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is a need for transformative service research (TSR) that focusses on the outcomes and impacts of services on the lives of vulnerable people (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015; Blocker and Barrios, 2015; Henkel *et al.*, 2020; Sajtos, 2015). Research that is able to explore the complexities and issues of vulnerable people and provide insights for services and service design, can contribute to improving the lives of those individuals, their families, as well as the wider community and society (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Fisk *et al.*, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2017). Vulnerable individuals (e.g. adolescence), whose physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual and financial well-being are most at risk, are critical to understand (Mechanic and Tanner, 2007; De Chesnay, 2008). Yet, these individuals are hard to reach and effectively engage in research (Flanagan and Hancock, 2010; Hepi *et al.*, 2017), and often feel vulnerable, intimidated and have a lack of trust in the research process (Newman *et al.*, 2017; Kirkevold and Bergland, 2007). Further, the issues or topic surrounding these individuals tend to be very sensitive adding an extra level of complexity (Marsh *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, there is a need for research techniques that facilitate fruitful discussion and alleviate discomfort around sensitive issues for vulnerable groups (Batat, 2016; Batat and Tanner, 2019).

Traditionally, service and TSR researchers have relied on well-known methodologies, such as surveys, experimental design, meta-analysis and qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and case studies (Larivière and Kandampully, 2019; Witell *et al.*, 2020). However, these traditional research methods are limited and problematic for vulnerable groups (Baker *et al.*, 2016; Blocker and Barrios, 2015; Mulder *et al.*, 2015). To ensure the intricacies, nuances and insights of real world experiences and perspectives of the issues relating to well-being and vulnerable people, and problems relating to services in general, there is a need to adopt innovative research methodologies (Azzari and Baker, 2020; Dodds *et al.*, 2018; Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020). Recent special issues advocating novel research methods for service researchers' highlights this need (see Larivière; Kandampully, 2019; Witell *et al.*, 2020). Despite these calls for diverse and innovative methods, there appears to be a gap in the use of online group interviews as a potential methodology, particularly with vulnerable groups.

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) presented an opportunity to evaluate and gain important new insights into online group interviews with a vulnerable group. Enforced social distancing practices meant field research originally being conducted face-to-face, had to be transferred online during COVID-19. To our knowledge, no one has investigated "online group interviews" (as opposed to "online focus groups"), where participants are familiar with each other and seated together on one device. Furthermore, no research to date has studied "online group interviews" with vulnerable people surrounded by a support group, a setup that could potentially be suitable for vulnerable participants. Triggered by COVID-19 this research aims to fill this gap. The key purpose of this research is to uncover the benefits and limitations of online group interviewing, and provide a flowchart outlining the research steps along with a framework for future service research interested in using online group interviews.

We contribute to TSR, service research and qualitative research methods (Dodds *et al.*, 2018; Gebauer and Reynoso, 2013). Specifically, we contribute to the growing area of TSR (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Anderson and Ostrom, 2015; Ostrom *et al.*, 2015) by enabling service researchers to effectively investigate vulnerable people in a non-intrusive, sensitive and overall more effective way. Significantly, we answer the call for innovative qualitative research methodology (Azzari and Baker, 2020; Witell *et al.*, 2020) by outlining the benefits and limitations of conducting online group interviews, and providing a framework including a blueprint for moving forward that can be used in various contexts. This paper is structured by firstly outlining the background and research context. This is followed by an overview of the methodology, including the adaptions made during COVID-19. Finally, a discussion of the findings in relation to extant research, an overview of the research framework proposed, and recommendations for TSR and service researchers is given.

Background

This paper reports on the use of an online group interviewing method we adapted from de Ruyter's (1996) group interviewing technique, as an alternative to online focus groups. Refer to Table 1 for an overview of the differences between group interviewing and focus groups, face-to-face and online (also highlighting the gap this research is filling). The group interviewing technique originated from the "nominal group technique" (NGT) which was developed in management as an organisational decision-making technique to compensate for the limitations of focus groups (de Ruyter, 1996; Muridan *et al.*, 2019). The limitations of focus groups, revolve around managing group dynamics, potential conflict and social anxiety (Farnsworth and Boon, 2010; Smithson, 2000), in particular, the loss of minority voices due to group interactions which can inhibit the discussion of opinions and ideas (Gordon and

	Offline		Online	
	Focus group	Group interview	Focus group	Group interview
Shared characteristics	Individual respondents participate together as a group Add depth to data and allow shared meanings to emerge, which is not possible in individual interviews Effective way to explore and/or gain new ideas on a particular topic or new phenomenon through both individual participant and group responses			
Group size	5–12 people	2–6 people	5–12 people	2–4 people
Participants Relationship	Mainly unknown to each other	Either unknown or known to each other	Mainly unknow to each other	Known to each other
Interaction	Strong interaction between participants Interviewer facilitates group discussion and develops the topic with some direction from participants Group interaction may stimulate and generate an interplay of responses that yields in-depth knowledge	Strong interaction between interviewer and participants Interviewer takes a central role asking participants specific questions Participants may be stimulated by hearing the views and ideas from fellow group members	Interaction between participants, yet lower levels of participant engagement due to physical distance Interviewer facilitates group discussion and develops the topic with some direction from participants Group interaction may stimulate and generate an interplay of responses that yields in-depth knowledge; yet lack of depth due to difficulties in probing and facilitating discussion online	Strong interaction between interviewer and participants Interviewer takes a central role asking participants specific questions Support amongst participants Participants may be stimulated and encouraged by hearing the views and ideas from fellow group members
Group dynamic	Encourages group dynamics Group discussions may be dominated by one or more individuals Risk of group conformity	Limits group dynamics Prevents dominant people (or those with perceived high status) from controlling the group	Encourages group dynamics Group discussions may be dominated by one or more individuals, yet higher ability for each participant to interact equally Lower risk of group conformity	Supportive group environment Prevents dominant people (or those with perceived high status) from controlling the group
Location	Neutral facility	At participants house or workplace	Connecting from different remote locations	Connecting from one remote location and computer/device
Setup	Participants and researcher are seated facing each other	Participants seated together facing interviewer	Participants and interviewer are seated in different panes	Participants are seated together in one pane and researcher in another

(*continued*)

	Offline		Online	
	Focus group	Group interview	Focus group	Group interview
References	Gordon and Langmaid (1988) Crabtree and Miller (1992) Hedges (1985) MacPhail (2001) Finch and Lewis (2003) Edmunds (1999)	Delbecq *et al.* (1975) Gallagher *et al.* (1993) Gaskin (2003) Jones (2004) Aspinal *et al.* (2006) de Ruyter (1996)	Stewart and Williams (2005) Woodyatt *et al.* (2016) Tuttas (2015) Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2015) Abrams *et al.* (2015) Moore *et al.* (2015) Adams Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017) Reid and Reid (2005)	This paper

Table 1.

Langmaid, 1988). Focus groups generally involve 5 to 12 individuals, usually not known to each other, where the interviewer explores and/or gains new ideas on a particular topic or new phenomenon by facilitating individual participant and group discussions (Cyr, 2016). The key purpose of a focus group is to gain insights by observing the extent and nature of participants' agreement and disagreement (Morgan, 1996). In this sense, focus groups require a certain amount of heterogeneity amongst the group to stimulate discussion between participants. However, this traditional focus group setup is not conducive for vulnerable groups, who often find the research process intimidating (Kirkevold and Bergland, 2007). The group interviewing technique on the other hand consists of two to six people, usually known to each other, and where the interviewer directs questions at each participant, enabling each person to contribute (de Ruyter, 1996). The key benefit of the group interviewing technique is the opportunity for all participants to share their experiences and knowledge on a particular issue or phenomenon, without feeling intimidated or dominated by others in the group (Muridan *et al.*, 2019).

The group interviewing technique is typically conducted face-to-face and therefore very little research exists that investigates online group interviewing. The majority of literature centres on the benefits and limitations of online focus groups; nevertheless, this literature provides some good insights into the potential of online group interviewing. Online platforms can address some of the limitations of face-to-face (Tuttas, 2015) by generating shorter yet more substantive responses from participants (Bruggen and Willems, 2009; Woodyatt *et al.*, 2016), enabling each participant to interact equally and importantly providing a more comfortable environment to share sensitive information (Woodyatt *et al.*, 2016). Logistically the key benefit is the ease of recruitment and ability to recruit from various locations (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015). Limitations, on the other hand, include potential lack of depth due to difficulties in probing and facilitating discussion online (Abrams *et al.*, 2015; Moore *et al.*, 2015; Woodyatt *et al.*, 2016), lower levels of participant engagement because of physical distance (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Reid and Reid, 2005), and inability of the researcher to formulate impressions and pick up on non-verbal cues (Reid and Reid, 2005). Another key limitation is that it excludes those with little or no access or know-how to technology (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015).

We posit that the use of online group interviews can leverage the benefits of the online medium (recruitment, comfort) and mitigate some of the limitations of online focus groups (social anxiety, level of engagement, probing), and thereby offer an ideal platform for researching vulnerable groups.

Methodology

Research overview

Initiated due to COVID-19, this paper investigates the use of online group interviewing in a study that involved young people as vulnerable participants (Batat, 2016), surrounded by a support group (parent/parents), while investigating a sensitive topic (alcohol consumption and family communication). The research explores the experiences of 35 participants (nine family groups composed of parents and young people aged 12–22 years – please see Appendix for a description of participants), who participated in online group interviews during COVID-19. At the end of the online group interviews participants were asked to share their thoughts and experience of participating in a group interview online. Further, with the need for greater reflexivity in consumer and service research (Jafari *et al.*, 2013; Thompson, 2002), researchers' reflections and experiences were also documented and utilized.

Research context

Globally there is a need to understand youth alcohol consumption, not only from a health perspective but also from a family and societal well-being outlook, and an industry and healthcare services standpoint (Pechmann *et al.*, 2012; WHO Expert Committee, 2007; Jernigan and WHO, 2001). In our research context, young people are considered "vulnerable" because of their impulsive, self-conscious nature and risk associated with alcohol (Pechmann *et al.*, 2005). Group interviewing was an appropriate method to use because it was an effective way to gain data about feelings and opinions from a vulnerable group (i.e. adolescents) about a sensitive topic (alcohol consumption), while being supported by their parent/s (Scharlach *et al.*, 2006). The parent/s participated in the interview, but also acted as a co-facilitator, by encouraging and prompting their child to participate.

COVID-19 – methodological reconsiderations

Prior to COVID-19, the research consisted of face-to-face group interviews in participant's homes. In order to comply with "social distancing" policies during COVID-19, data collection methods were adapted to enable family group interviews online using an online video conferencing platform. The research procedure implemented is outlined in Figure 1. Two researchers were involved in the initial face-to-face group interviews, with one primary interviewer and the other acting as a scribe. This format continued online with both researchers, separately, joining the video conference. From an ethics point of view, there were no key differences between face-to-face and online as both required the usual ethical procedures, such as, gaining informed consent and ensuring anonymity, privacy and confidentiality of the participants' identity (Rodham and Gavin, 2006).

Benefits and limitations of online group interviews

Thematic analysis of participant interviews as well as researcher reflections reveals four key benefits, and three limitations, of conducting group interviews online versus face-to-face. Refer to Table 2 for an overview. These are now discussed in relation to extant research and using participant's quotes to support.

Benefits of online group interviews

    (1) Comfortable, non-intrusive and safe

By far the most important benefit of online group interviews, similar to online focus groups, was that participants felt comfortable, enabling them to share more sensitive information (Woodyatt *et al.*, 2016). Importantly, we extend this understanding by teasing out the
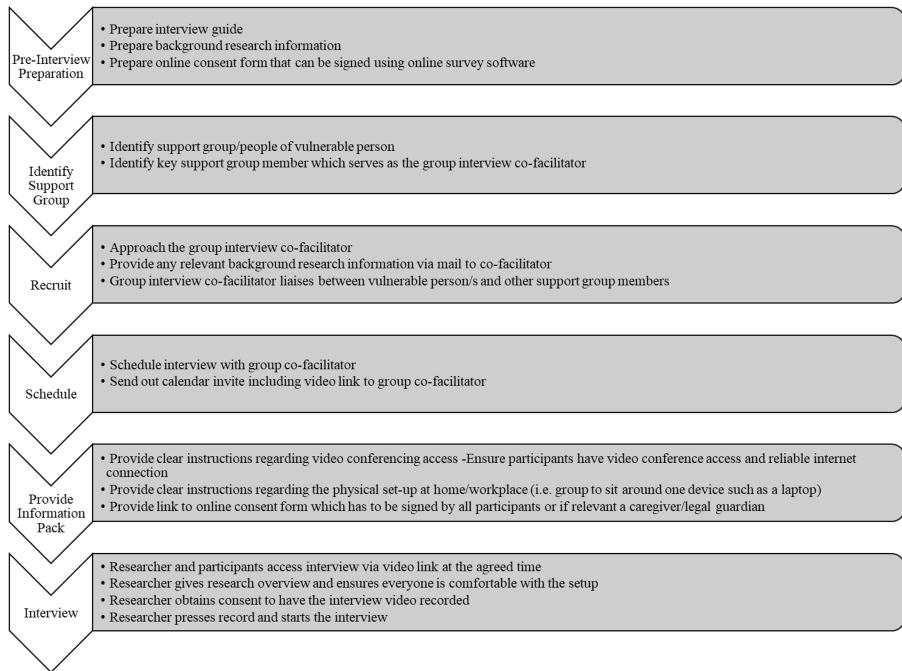
Figure 1.
Flowchart on how to
execute an online
group interview

underlying reasons why participants feel more comfortable in an online group interview. Our research reveals that participants, particularly the younger participants (vulnerable group), felt more relaxed and less intimidated because the online group interview felt safe and non-intrusive. This finding counteracts the usual feelings of intimidation, lack of trust and being shy to speak up for vulnerable participants (Newman *et al.*, 2017). The key factors that contributed to them feeling comfortable included being in a safe environment (i.e. their own home), participating with familiar people who were supportive (i.e. parent/s), and not having the researchers in their environment. Ashleigh (20 years) comments *"I think when you're in your home environment with just you and your family I think you're more open... its less intrusive."* David (18 years) notes *"you can say whatever you want"* because you feel safe, and Logan (18 years) says *"I did not feel so intimidated."* Parents echoed this saying *"it's like a confessional"*, and without having the researchers *"in our own space maybe you'll get people sharing more"*. Chris (parent) sums up *"I think because of proximal distance or physical distance, people might feel safer to say things that might feel a little bit more risky or they might confess things that they would not confess face to face."*

In this study, the researchers found conducting group interviews online versus face-to-face easier to manage in terms of group dynamics and social anxiety (Farnsworth and Boon, 2010; Smithson, 2000). The researchers noted that shy participants, for example George (15 years), could hide by being partially out of sight of the camera, giving them a perceived safety barrier, enabling them to speak without having to look directly at the interviewer. Whereas in a face-to-face setting, younger participants who were shy, tended to avoid eye contact and speak less. In comparison to face-to-face, there was noticeably more sensitive information shared, for example, issues around drinking behaviour and personal experiences with alcohol, when interviewed online. For example, Leah (15 years) opened up about her experiences with alcohol at parties, Katie (14 years) shared about her Grandmother's drinking

Benefits	
Comfortable, non-intrusive and safe	*Participants* – Comfortable in their own home, more relaxed, therefore more open. No researcher in their space, felt less intrusive, invasive and intimidating. More likely to share more, particularly sensitive issues. Feels safer to say things that are perceived to be risky. Like a confessional, so more likely to confess and say what you want *Researchers* – felt less intrusive and safer not going into people's homes, less judgements made about people's homes. Shy participants could hide to the side of the camera. Depth of data – participants shared more sensitive information about their experiences
Engaging and convenient	*Both* – Convenient in terms of organisation of family members, setting up suitable times. Online is user friendly, quick and easy to set-up, yet creates an engaging environment *Participants* – Professional, with little side tracking, keeps interviewing to the "task at hand" and engaging *Researchers* – less wear-out and fatigue, no travel time for researchers, recruitment easier, possible to recruit further afield
Online communication ease	*Participants* – Clear communication *Researchers* – Interviewer conscious of speaking clearly. Research scribe write comments and probes for the interviewer in private chat, ensuring all questions are covered, enhancing data collection dependability *Both* – Use to using video conferencing during lockdown, so feel at ease with online
Easy setup	*Participants* – Technically easy to setup, liked being together as a group *Researchers* – See all the participants at the same time, rather than in different panes, felt more cohesive, easy to record
Limitations	
Communication	*Participants* – Conversations would possibly flow better face-to-face, have more edge, more interaction *Both* – Reading body language and facial expressions is more difficult, hard to gauge and rely on facial expressions and body language
Set-up issues and no field data	*Both* – If not well set up, then lose the flow, e.g. using an ipad and passing it around each participant *Researchers* – Group layout sometimes meant some participants were hidden or could not be heard easily. Relies on good WiFi connections. Difficult to gather field data as cannot often see physical environment
Privacy and access issues	*Participants* – Worried about privacy issues online *Researchers* – Conscious of access issues for those without Internet connection and/or access to an appropriate device

Table 2.
Benefits and
limitations of online
group interviews

issues, and Logan (18 years) shared his first experience of getting drunk. Previous research has shown that lower levels of participant engagement and less information is given online because of physical distance (Adams, Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Reid and Reid, 2005), however, we found the opposite to be true.

(2) Engaging and convenient

Our study found conducting online group interviews generated shorter and more immediate responses from participants and yet more depth (Brüggen and Willems, 2009; Woodyatt *et al.*, 2016). Participants also found the online group interview to be engaging, mitigating a key issue of traditional focus groups online (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017; Reid and Reid, 2005). Participants commented that the interviews were *"professional"*, *"to the point"* and as Jack (20 years) explains, participating in an online group interview *"hits the interpersonal of sitting down with the person but also the convenience of a survey. . . I was still engaged."* Keeping

young people engaged in research is critical and online group interviewing keeps the interview focussed, interesting and interpersonal, reducing wear-out. Participant and researcher wear-out and fatigue is an important consideration, particularly, research with vulnerable people and topics that are sensitive and emotional (Jafari *et al.*, 2013).

Logistically it was easier to recruit vulnerable people for an online interview, via their support group (i.e. families), because of the convenience and the opportunity to recruit further afield, i.e. different cities and towns (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015). Converting to online group interviews alleviated the logistical limitations of face-to-face focus groups, including time constraints and access, particularly recruiting vulnerable participants, such as, young people (Farnsworth and Boon, 2010).

(3) Online communication ease

An important positive impact that COVID-19 has had on research methodology is the increased use and confidence with video conferencing (Batat, 2020). Both participants and the researchers had been using online platforms during quarantine (lockdown), making it easier to communicate online. A number of participants commented that they are *"getting used to Zoom®"* and that *"before lockdown"* some had never heard of it, let alone used it. As John comments *"I'm getting used to Zoom® now, it's far more common place."* The newly found confidence with video conferencing due to COVID-19 is a key reason why previously thought limitations of online focus groups, such as, lack of depth due to difficulties in probing and facilitating discussion online (Abrams *et al.*, 2015; Moore *et al.*, 2015; Woodyatt *et al.*, 2016), were mitigated. As Susan commented there was *"nice clear communication between everybody"*, which enabled conversations to flow between the participants and the interviewer. Jane remarked *"there's not much of a difference [between Zoom® and face-to-face] because I can see you, I can hear you."*

From the researchers' perspective using an online platform enabled a second researcher to act as a research scribe who sat in the background and prompted the interviewer using private chat. This allowed the interview to flow seamlessly, enabled greater depth of data and provided more dependable data. Additionally, having the participants together on one screen or in one case two screens (in contrast to focus groups where participants are usually on various screens), meant that communication flowed easily amongst the group and between participants and interviewer.

(4) Easy set-up

The technical set-up, such as downloading and accessing the Zoom® link, did not create any issues for the participants. Participants commented that *"it was easy to set up."* With regards to the physical set-up, all the family groups, with the exception of one participant, were together in the same space and on one device. As Barbara (parent) points out *"you can look at us all at the same time and we can see you and know when you're going to ask us questions, rather than us be in six or seven different panes."* This physical set-up was optimal because the researchers could see all the participants at the same time, as opposed to being in different panes, which felt more cohesive and enabled the conversation to flow more easily. Another important aspect from the researcher's perspective is that both audio and video recordings could be made providing an opportunity to view the video recording for further analysis.

Limitations of online group interviews
There were very few limitations from the participants' perspectives. A couple of participants thought there would possibly be more interaction (e.g. more informal conversations) as

Joanne (parent) expressed *"you would have got more interaction"*, but then qualifies that *"this is possibly more efficient, we would not have got it done faster [as we did with Zoom®], we would have gone off task."* Only one family thought that *"conversations would be able to flow better, especially with us having to pass around an iPad"*, if they had been face-to-face. This limitation was primarily due to a poor-set up. The family used an iPad that had a virtual background therefore you could not see the group together. Each member passed the iPad around when it was their turn to talk. Only one participant was worried about privacy.

From the researchers' perspective, a couple of limitations arose. First, there were a couple of family group interviews where reading body language and facial expressions was problematic (Reid and Reid, 2005). These situations occurred when participants sat away from their device which made it difficult to see facial expressions and body language, highlighting the importance of the physical set-up. Mostly, this limitation was alleviated through the online group interview set-up (small number of people in one pane) and the ability to review the video recording later to pick up cues and body language previously missed. A second limitation of online group interviews is the inability for researcher's to take field notes and the loss of valuable information about the context. In our original face-to-face method we gathered onsite information, e.g. home environment and observing where alcohol is stored. Lastly, we were conscious that using an online platform could exclude those with little or no access to technology (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015). However, the group interviewing technique we implemented, where a support person co-facilitates and is responsible for the technical set-up, can help alleviate this key limitation with vulnerable groups, particularly, those with poor access to technology and Internet connections. In our research we had no issues with access to technology as the parent/s were responsible for the group interview set-up.
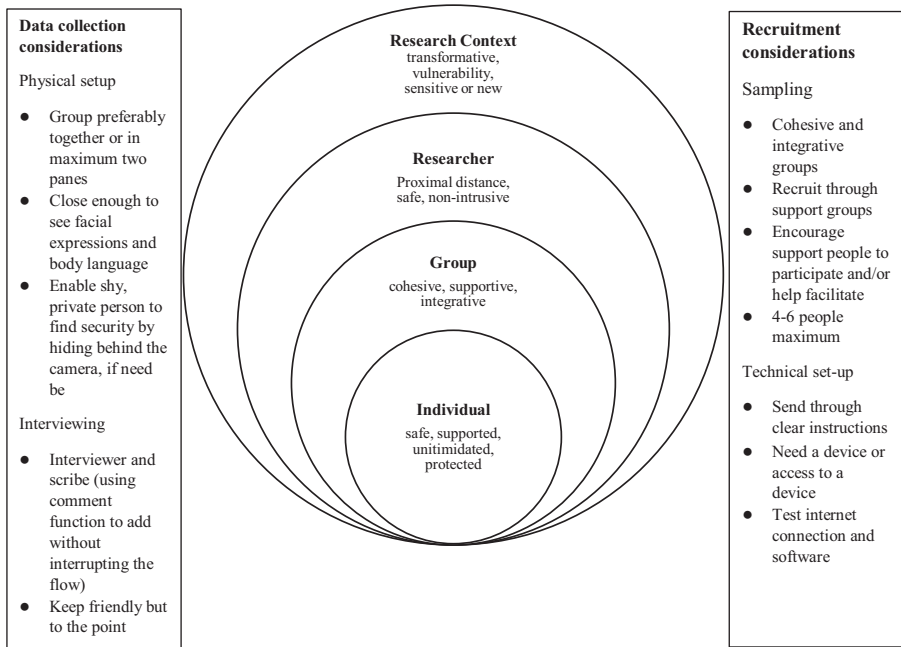
Framework for researching vulnerable participants in a TSR context

Adapting research during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided unprecedented insights into qualitative research approaches and methodology, particularly with vulnerable participants. Notably, COVID-19 and "social distancing" restrictions have enhanced people's comfort and knowledge with video conferencing platforms. This change, in itself, has instigated a permanent change in the way people view online communication, thus making online group interviews even more relevant going forward. Prior to COVD-19, online research with vulnerable groups was considered problematic, due to access issues and knowledge of technology for some groups (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015). However, COVID-19 has highlighted the issues around access to technology for low income and older people, with many governments providing extra resources to ensure less privileged groups have technology and Internet access (Collins, 2020; Morrow-Howell, 2020). Importantly, the group interviewing technique we developed, where a support person helps coordinate the research, including the technical set-up, provides an effective and innovative way of researching vulnerable groups online.

Based on the findings of this research we develop a framework (Figure 2) for researchers conducting online group interviews with vulnerable participants. Vulnerable groups are often hard to access and difficult to engage in research (Flanagan and Hancock, 2010; Hepi *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, vulnerable participants often find the research process intimidating (Newman *et al.*, 2017; Kirkevold and Bergland, 2007) and researchers interviewing vulnerable groups and participants can be affected emotionally (Jafari *et al.*, 2013). The proposed framework provides recommendations and insights to help mitigate some of these issues enabling researchers interested in a *research context* that focusses on vulnerable people and transforming people's lives, a safe and effective way of researching. The framework also outlines important recruitment and data collection considerations.

Essential to the framework is the *researcher*. In online group interviews proximal distance between researcher/s and participants is paramount. The researcher who is situated outside of

Data collection considerations

Physical setup

- Group preferably together or in maximum two panes
- Close enough to see facial expressions and body language
- Enable shy, private person to find security by hiding behind the camera, if need be

Interviewing

- Interviewer and scribe (using comment function to add without interrupting the flow)
- Keep friendly but to the point

Research Context
transformative, vulnerability, sensitive or new

Researcher
Proximal distance, safe, non-intrusive

Group
cohesive, supportive, integrative

Individual
safe, supported, unintimidated, protected

Recruitment considerations

Sampling

- Cohesive and integrative groups
- Recruit through support groups
- Encourage support people to participate and/or help facilitate
- 4-6 people maximum

Technical set-up

- Send through clear instructions
- Need a device or access to a device
- Test internet connection and software

the participants' environment, needs to be close enough to participants through an optimal physical set-up. An optimal set-up is when the group are together on one device (in the same space and on one screen), and close enough to the camera in order for both researcher and the participants to pick up facial expressions and body language. However, also allowing the possibility for shy participants to hide if need be. Interviewing needs to be kept friendly and warm, but relevant and to the point to keep participant's engaged. The use of a research scribe who can post private comments to the interviewer is highly recommended as this helps to keep the interview on track. These methodological and data collection considerations provide an engaging, safe and non-intrusive experience for the *group* and subsequently the *individual*.

The *group* acts as a support mechanism for the *individual*. Ideally, the group would be cohesive, in that, the participants involved would be well-integrated and unified, either through a family unit (as in this research), a community or organisational support group (e.g. AA, mental health support groups, disability groups, youth groups) or healthcare/ government/not-for-profit services (e.g. mental healthcare services, women's refuge, poverty action groups). When recruiting, an ideal group would be of 4–6 people, and made up of both vulnerable people (e.g. adolescents with mental health issues) and their support people (e.g. family member/s and/or mental health worker). In this research, the group was a family unit made up of 1–3 young people (vulnerable participants) and 1–2 parents (support participants). A *group* could be made up, for instance, with 2–3 vulnerable participants from a community/organisational group, either each with a support person or with one support person for the group. The critical aspect is that the *group* has "support participants", who can help the *individual* feel safe, unintimidated, supported and in some cases protected. The "support participants" can also help co-facilitate, by encouraging vulnerable participants to have a voice.

Service providers dedicated to promoting and uplifting greater wellbeing for vulnerable people need to understand the issues facing these groups and the implications for service

practices (Anderson *et al.*, 2013; Fisk *et al.*, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2017). Despite the limitations discussed, the online group interviewing methodology provides an effective way to gather valuable information that understands vulnerable people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Newman *et al.*, 2017). Never before has TSR been so critical to understand individual, family, community and societal well-being in a COVID-19 and post COVID-19 world (Barnes *et al.*, 2020; Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2020; Odekerken-Schröder *et al.*, 2020) where vulnerability and vulnerable people are faced with an uncertain future (Henkel *et al.*, 2020). Further, our research method would be useful for service researchers interested in studying groups, for example, the study of engagement behaviour in a network of stakeholders (Verleye *et al.*, 2014), examining group service failures (Albrecht *et al.*, 2018) and investigating the co-creation of well-being in healthcare (Chen *et al.*, 2020; Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020).

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Appendix

Family	Family member details	Physical set up
Smith Family	*Paul, 55yrs, lecturer* Kathy, 54yrs, self-employed Emily, 19yrs, gap year Kate, 21yrs, graduate looking for work	Paul, Kathy and Emily together on a laptop in living area, all three easily seen. Kate on her own, using a phone sitting on a couch
Thomas Family	George, 50s, school teacher *Joanne, 40s, school teacher* Leah 15yrs, school student David 18yrs, uni student	George and Joanne together on laptop in open plan living kitchen area. Leah and David visible on scree only when asked a question
Bennett Family	*Jane, 54yrs, nurse* Daniel, 21yrs, uni student Tom, 19yrs, looking for work Isabel, 21yrs, uni student	Together in the lounge Jane uses her ipad, with a background. She passes the ipad around when each person talks
Sharp Family	*Susan, 46yrs, retail manager* Oliver, 20yrs, plumbing apprentice Kayla, 18yrs, part-time supermarket George, 15yrs, school student	Together in living room on one laptop. Susan, Oliver and Kayla easily seen, George half out of view on the side
Jones Family	*Barbara, 58yrs, researcher* Jim, 60 yrs, IT consultant Nicola, 20yrs, uni student Tim, 18yrs, uni student Henry, 18yrs, gap year	Together in the lounge on one laptop with Barbara, Jim, Nicola and Tim sitting on couch, and Henry sitting on the floor
Arthur Family	*Claire, 54yrs, professional* John, 52yrs, finance manager Jack, 20yrs, uni student Logan, 18yrs, gap year	Together in a home office on one laptop, all easily seen. Claire and John in front with chairs and Jack and Logan behind on stools
Fern Family	*Chris, 50s, professional* *Amanda, 50s, professional* Erin, 22yrs, uni student Ashleigh, 20yrs, uni student	Together in the lounge on one laptop. Chris and Amanda on a couch, Erin on a chair and Ashleigh on the floor. All easily seen
Phillips Family	*Vanessa, 40s, Manager* Nicole, 16 yrs, school student Gabby, 14 yrs, school student Olivia, 12 yrs, school student	Together in living room on one laptop. Vanessa and Gabby closer to the laptop. Nicole slightly behind and Olivia further to the back
Kates Family	*George, 51yrs, educator* Katie, 14yrs	Together in living room on one laptop and both easily seen

Note(s): Participants in bold were the key contact person/s and acted as the main co-facilitator