Challenges Faced During a Pandemic:
Remote Ethnography and a Renegotiation of Ethics[1]

Kirsty Stuart Jepsen
(Cardiff University, Wales)
stuartkf@cardiff.ac.uk

This article addresses the ethical issues related to the necessary change in research strategy when investigating substance use services during the COVID-19 pandemic in Wales. The introduction of a lockdown following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic deferred the majority of face-to-face services, including substance use services, with some reduced to essential onsite personnel or re-located online. This created a barrier to traditional access for members of the service and challenged researchers to rethink research strategy. Substance use services began to occupy remote meeting spaces, such as Zoom, allowing the service to provide real-time support. This stimulated the development of a new research technique using remote participant observation. However, this restructuring was not a simple transition from physical place to remote space. Drawing on established digital and 'netnography' procedures, in this article I discuss the ethical implications of ongoing consent and visibility along with risks of inadvertent lurking. This novel provision of remote support both created barriers and provided opportunities. Remote meeting spaces require client knowledge and access to technology. This may exclude many individuals and may challenge the assumptions of a 'safe space'. Conversely, the use of online groups enabled improved access for those living faraway, and by using a microphone and camera, allowed the potential for less stressful exposure. Finally, the 'field' is considered in the context of the online domain. Participants live in both online and offline spaces, with overspill or contradictions occurring in the presentation of the self. Researchers often do not draw distinctions between the two domains, yet this is an important consideration when conducting remote ethnography.
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Introduction

My research focuses on how identity is navigated when someone is in recovery from an addiction. Discovering how identity relates to addiction recovery is still in its early stages. Much of the sociological literature discusses how those with experience of addiction assert identities that are in alignment with their self and try to reduce the stigma felt by an addiction identity. Therefore, 'recovery' is treated as a positive identity change, moving from a stigmatised condition to a recovery identity (Fomiatti et al. 2017). Understanding recovery from an addiction in terms of repairing a stigmatised identity encourages a blanket interpretation and prioritises the role of individual agency in the recovery process (Neale et al. 2011). It also ignores the turbulent nature of recovery, which includes relapse and near-relapse experiences. The idea of distancing oneself from a former 'spoiled identity' as a binary reparation from addiction assumes identity as a singular and unified entity (Dahl 2015, Fomiatti et al. 2017, Neale et al. 2011). For my study, I employed an ethnographic approach, involving 12 months of participant observation at a substance use support organisation. I carried out participant observation both remotely and face-to-face within the context of the organisation, including

support groups, casual meet ups and external activities that the service had organised. Given that the research focus was on recovery, I decided it was more appropriate to stay within the remit of the organisation rather than looking at the members' everyday social lives. The substance use support service provides support for all self-identified problems with alcohol and/or other substances. However, the majority of people who participated in this study reported polydrug use or a primary problematic substance of alcohol.

This ethnographic approach was complimented by photo elicitation conversations. The use of photographs as a research tool is established in social and anthropological sciences (Harper 2002, Rose 2016). The term 'photo elicitation' describes 'inserting a photograph into a research interview' and is used to elicit additional information and add new topics to the conversation (Harper 2002, p 13). Interviewing with images is primarily carried out in two ways. Either the researcher may produce photographs for the participant to comment on, or the participant may be asked to produce or bring photographs that represent experiences relating to the research question (Harper 2002; Pink 2021). In this study, participants were asked to bring along photographs which they felt were relevant to their identity and recovery journeys, to allow for an understanding of an experience in which I was unable to participate (Pink 2021). Those who experience addiction can have difficulty expressing less-tangible thoughts and emotions, and visual methods can be used to circumvent these difficulties and aid reflection (Pain 2012).

Ethnography originated from social and cultural anthropology in the 1800s. Malinowski (1922) was the first to use extensive participant observation to facilitate a deeper understanding of the community structures and cultural norms in New Guinea (Rees and Gatenby 2014). Around this time, Park and Burgess (1921), the qualitative sociologists of The Chicago School used ethnographic methods to carry out research in the city and established ethnography as a credible research methodology within the social sciences. Thus, anthropology influenced the social sciences and, in turn, the social sciences influenced anthropology (Prato and Pardo 2013). Although the definition of ethnography has varied over time and across disciplines, ethnographic data collection typically involves the researcher becoming embedded in others' lives over an extended period, allowing researchers to study the actions and accounts of people in everyday social context (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

The internet has provided a new community platform, and social restrictions put in place following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further increased the requirement for online communication. Application of ethnographic methodology to new fields is not a novelty. In particular, due to geopolitical changes in the 1970s and1980s, ethnography expanded beyond the study of the anthropological 'traditional' settings in order to study the urban or 'at home' (Prato and Pardo 2013). In recent years, it has been suggested that ethnography is an appropriate methodology for capturing the social and cultural structures and norms that occur online (Pink et al. 2016). Yet, as with many adaptations of methodologies, this can be met with scepticism. We must be considerate of the criticisms arising from 'armchair anthropology', which question if the researcher is situated within the action. Therefore, we must consider the aim of the study and where the 'action' is. As social restrictions brought much of society online, this study's design rationally followed the 'action', aiming to explore and understand social practices within

this novel context. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) did not define what constitutes a space, but state that the method should be appropriate for the phenomena studied. Thus, in this instance, online ethnography can be considered as the application of traditional ethnographic methods within a different conception of 'space'.

Most real-time participant observation has been conducted in person and few researchers have considered the implications of 'going online'. Recent literature reviewing the adoption of online qualitative methods in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has suggested that ethical considerations are equal to those of face-to-face research (Dodds and Hess 2021, Lobe et al 2020). However, the move to an online space can bring up new ethical concerns which need to be reflected upon and addressed, and a critical view on the use of information technology and how it may affect our social experiences is needed (Prato 2020). The majority of the emerging literature on remote research using videoconferencing software centres around the use of these platforms for interviews and/or focus groups. At the time of writing, the implications of using videoconferencing programmes for remote participant observation in real-time support groups have not been explored. This article hopes to fill this gap by drawing on existing literature and reflecting on examples from my own work, to address the ethical and methodological implications of moving participant observation online. Considerations include the renegotiation of ethics, insights into how moving online may re-conceptualise our idea of space, and how this may affect the research participants and data collected.

The Research Context

In March 2020, the UK government declared a lockdown in response to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, implementing restrictions on people in order to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Non-urgent NHS appointments were suspended, 'non-essential' businesses were closed, and people were ordered to stay at home as the country was declared to be in a state of emergency. These restrictions continued for months, requiring businesses and organisations to adapt their service provision, which often meant moving online. Remote meetings allowed many people to work from home, enabled learning and academic sharing to continue via remote webinars and conferences, and facilitated contact between friends and family (Prato 2020). Measures under this 'new normal' may have been expected to cease when the government declared the lockdown period over. However, even as formal restrictions were lifted, personal responsibility and risk intensified by media and political outputs meant that people and spaces often did not return to their pre-pandemic state. Prato (2020) critiqued the narrative surrounding the implementation of the 'new normal' and questioned why restrictions continued following the aftermath of an emergency and what implications this might have on social relations. This emphasises the importance of evaluating the implications that restrictions and online communication have on city and social life.

Teti et al. (2020: 1) stated that the pandemic is a 'social event that is disrupting our social order', with a need for qualitative researchers to examine the resulting social responses and implications. However, lockdown restrictions limited access to spaces and changed how participants could be reached and interacted with. Consequently, this posed a challenge to

rethink research strategy and find alternative methodologies to prevent studies from ceasing completely. For many researchers and practitioners, this meant looking at digital and remote methods.

Originally, my research sought to carry out face-to-face participant observation at a substance use support service in South Wales. However, as restrictions continued and substance use support organisations remained remote or accessible solely to key personnel, I was forced to re-think and adapt my methodology. This adaptation was considered whilst in communication with the gatekeeper of a substance use organisation, Diwrnod Newydd (DN), who had moved their essential support service to remote meetings over Zoom and one-to-one phone calls. Although they did not know when the centres would re-open, they were happy for me to begin my research while they provided remote support. Initially, I was reluctant to do this. I was concerned whether remote interactions would influence my ability to immerse myself in the environment and engage openly with those who use the service. However, the necessary change of these service provisions felt important to observe and explore, and I anticipated that social restrictions would relax as time went on. At first, the remote meetings felt impersonal. Nonetheless, I was experiencing and occupying the same unfamiliar online environment as those in attendance. As time went on, I built a rapport with regular attendees, and talk became more familiar within small periods of downtime. As I became more familiar within the groups, I was invited to additional online groups which were facilitated by members, and I started to be treated as a 'regular'. With Marhefka et al. (2020), I found that as Zoom occurred in real-time the interaction and sharing of stories helped facilitate group cohesion and allowed others to share. Over time, I was surprised at how interpersonal certain groups became, as members bonded and built relationships with each other without ever having physically met. Moreover, I continued to ensure that my fieldnotes contextualised these interactions within the online space, as this influenced what could or could not be seen, and therefore, what could be deduced from the data.

'Space' is often defined as an abstract concept whereas 'place' is referred to as a cultural location. However, this theoretical debate is fragmented within ethnographic literature, with divisions over concept and their analytical and political implications (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). The concept of 'space' and 'place', and what constitutes a 'field' creates further questions when social interactions move online (Murthy 2008), therefore it is important to define the research space within the context of this study. Pink et al. (2016) discuss the implications for ethnographers conducting observation remotely, and what 'being there' really means. This idea of 'being there' is unpacked and broken down in four fundamental ways. First, we can be there physically (face-to-face); second, we can be there remotely (Skype, Zoom, etc.); thirdly, we can be there virtually (third place; e.g., forum or real-time game); and fourthly, we can be there imaginatively (blogs, digital stories, social media) (Pink et al. 2016). Drawing on Pink et al. (2016), I describe the meetings attended at the substance use organisation as remote; nonetheless, this cannot be assumed to be a universal definition. It is probable that other notions of 'being there' may be helpful to draw on when addressing the construction of space.

Ethical Renegotiations

The development of ethics in social science research stems from a combination of research which either caused harm or highlighted potential harm to participants, as it emerged, for example, from the ethnographic study entitled 'The Tearoom Trade' (Humphreys 1975). Therefore, social scientists and the institutions that support such research began to focus on the application of ethical guidance in order to reduce harm caused to participants. According to the British Sociological Association (BSA), 'Sociologists have a responsibility both to safeguard the proper interests of those involved in or affected by their work, and to share their analyses/report their findings accurately and truthfully' (BSA 2017: 4)

The BSA (2017) break down their report into 4 sections, Professional integrity, Relationships with Research Participants, Data storage and Archiving and Distribution and Publication of Research. However, this statement is not a prescriptive account of how to conduct research but should be used alongside reflection and engagement in the academic community. As well as the BSA guidance on ethical practice, other institutions and funders have requirements which may align or differ slightly. Although some ethical guidance is generalised, there is always a need for careful adaptation to a specific method. The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA), specifically address ethical dilemmas that present within ethnographic research. They highlight the difficulties in obtaining consent (as typically defined by ethics committees), the need for transparency as a researcher and the avoidance of covert research (ASA 2021). Ethical guidance shapes the design of research, influencing how participants are recruited and engaged during studies and require the researcher to reflect on their research practice. Some of the difficulties that arise from social science ethical guidance are due to following the biomedical model of research, which however fails to incorporate the different needs of sociological or ethnographic disciplines (Atkinson and Delamont 2018).

In applying ethical procedures to my study design, and subsequently moving the initial research online, the notion of consent became an important factor that needed to be addressed. The traditional definition of 'informed consent', and how this can be achieved in ethnographic studies, is often debated due to the iterative and inductive nature of fieldwork (Atkinson and Delamont 2018). This requires careful consideration, with a clear explanation given to participants regarding this potentially unfamiliar method, without surmising what the outcome may be. Checklists provided by ethical review boards need to be accompanied by carefully thought-out processes that demonstrate how the principles have been interpreted (Iphofen 2011). Therefore, I present that negotiated ethics is useful in tailoring ethical procedures to contextual research practices, negating the 'one size fits all' approach.

Ongoing Consent

Platforms such as Zoom have created, encouraged and nurtured remote connections, which may not have occurred otherwise during the pandemic. However, spontaneous casual connections and conversations that may have arisen in a physical meeting space have reduced. This poses a challenge for ongoing consent, as the spatial move from 'physical place' to 'remote space'

changes the dynamics of casual conversation and visibility in which conversations of ongoing consent may occur. Convery and Cox (2012) proposed 'negotiated ethics' as a way to address ethical challenges that were specific to their study's context and design. 'Negotiated ethics' was defined as 'a situated approach grounded in the specifics of the online community, the methodology and the research question(s)' (Convery and Cox 2012: 50). The aim was to produce a more open and responsive ethical practice. This move to remote participant observation online posed a relatively new ethical challenge for conducting ethnographic research. Rahman et al. (2021) argued that remote participant observation should be distinguished from digital ethnography, as an observation of virtual events is different from immersion into the daily lives of people existing in the virtual world. However, digital ethnographies and 'netnographies' have been conducted on social media and virtual spaces for many years, and it is important to draw upon their expertise and experience.

When carrying out 'netnographic' research it is essential not to deceive participants, while recognising that the revealing of one's presence should not disrupt the normal activity which is being observed (Kozinets 2010). The normal structure of groups at DN required each member to 'check in' at the start to tell everyone how they were doing. This provided an opportunity to disclose who I was to those I had not met and explain the purpose of my presence. If anyone was uncomfortable with my presence, then I offered to leave the group, without any explanation being needed; however, this did not occur. Kozinets (2010) recommended that an ethnographer should offer an additional research explanation if requested and suggested using a separate webpage or email address to facilitate this. In this research, I felt providing an email address verbally during my check-in would not be accessible to all. Instead, I explained my study for as long as it seemed appropriate, then provided my email address verbally or via chat message, in case participants had further questions. Further discussion arose following breaks, when waiting for other members to join the group or during natural pauses in the conversation.

Visibility
I believe that the notion of ongoing consent was achieved by explicitly stating my intentions during the group meetings and providing an opportunity for the members of the group to access more information. Yet, consent would only be valid if my presence within the group remained visible. In offline spaces, a researcher remains visible within the situation that they are observing unless they make a conscious effort to hide. However, it could be argued that being online provides the opposite effect — a researcher is hidden unless a conscious effort is made to remain visible. Thompson et al. (2021) address the ethical considerations for digital ethnography when researching vulnerable populations. The authors pose the term 'virtually' to describe researcher's presence within a thread of conversation, such as a forum. Thompson et al. (2021) postulate that the researcher's presence can disappear within large volumes of postings, and, unless their presence is managed, data may be inadvertently collected covertly. This position of passively watching without interaction is often termed 'lurking'. Goffman (1971) addresses lurking, or 'lurk lines', primarily in reference to danger beyond our perception

in public spaces; however, he also discusses lurking in reference to the social rule of greeting, which, if avoided, allows an individual to be observed without their knowledge.

In offline spaces, taking field notes in a public space is predominantly viewed as unproblematic (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019); however, much of the literature discussing the ethics of digital ethnography debate the lines between the public and the private domain (Goralska 2020). This categorisation was straightforward for Zoom meetings at DN, which I believed would be understood clearly to be a private space, as Zoom requires login details to be sent to each attendee. Within these private meetings, verbal consent was sought for my presence as a researcher, with the aim to reduce potential harm by collecting data overtly. It might be assumed that remote Zoom meetings do not provide the opportunity for 'lurking'. However, Zoom does not always allow for all those in attendance to be on the main screen, and, if using a mobile device, it may be difficult to see the windows of the other participants (Lobe et al. 2020). Thus, if someone does not speak, their window is often put on a secondary page and their presence could be forgotten. If the researcher interacts, they contribute to the construction of the space and may interrupt flow; however, if they do not, they run the risk of unintentional exploitation (Thompson et al. 2021). Murthy (2008) proposes that in order to avoid lurking, the researcher must disclose their presence, inform participants about the research, and consistently and overtly interact with participants. I believe that the opportunity to 'check in' and purposefully engaging in the conversation has addressed the ethical concerns of consent and visibility when conducting remote participant observation.

Implications of Observation Over Remote Spaces

Access: Limitations

In-person field research can sometimes require the permission of a gatekeeper to access a participant group. However, when moving to remote observation, access to participants is also limited by the participant's access to the remote spaces. When using online methods, access to digital resources is well recognised. Participation requires the ownership of a computer or mobile device and internet access, which automatically excludes a proportion of the population (Lijadi and Schalkwyk 2015, Sy et al 2020, Watson and Lupton 2022). Even when participants have access to these resources, conversations can be interrupted by frozen screens or a dip in audio (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). Remote observation at DN involved a group that existed outside the research environment, therefore in this case I could do little to limit these concerns. Most important, the data collected must be considered in relation to who can access this online space. Participants were less likely to be street homeless but residing in stable accommodations with some type of monetary support. Consequently, the findings of this study cannot be applied to the experiences of all those who use substances. Furthermore, when writing field notes, dips in audio or a frozen screen were noted alongside responses to this. On one occasion during my fieldwork, a member of the group at DN unexpectedly disappeared from the screen and did not log back into the meeting. The members' responses and subsequent actions to the sudden disappearance were as important to note as (what we found out later to be) a drained battery which caused a premature departure.

As well as access to digital resources, participation in online research requires basic computer literacy and confidence in using the equipment and programmes. In their review of conducting virtual qualitative research on student homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic, Roberts et al. (2021) found that digital literacy and access varied greatly among participants. Thus, care was taken to prevent this barrier to participation. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted many people's communication online, with participants and researchers gaining confidence in using videoconferencing software (Dodds and Hess 2020, Watson and Lupton 2022). Watson and Lupton (2022) found that those who agreed to participate in their study of a video-call ethnography required little technical support. However, they noted that this does not mean that others were not put off from participating due to unfamiliarity or lack of confidence. At DN, technical support was offered to those who wished to join the online groups, including how to install and use Zoom. However, some members of the service still did not wish to engage online. Initially, willingness to engage online was difficult to assess due to Zoom being the only mode of delivery. However, as the service opened up and I met members face-to-face, not only was I able to observe and interact with those who did not engage via Zoom, but I was able to explore some of the barriers that prevented remote engagement.

Critical barriers to online access that arose during my study were the difficulty in predicting who would be in attendance before logging onto the meeting, and suspicions regarding the confidentiality and security of the data. When DN began to offer outdoor face-to-face meet-ups, I met for the first-time people who had been members of DN prior to the pandemic. When I asked why they did not attend the online groups, they mentioned lack of confidence and (in)ability in using computer software; however, other additional reasons were also given. One woman revealed that she had attended one group, but was put off, as the rest of those in attendance were men. In this group, she felt that her voice was overshadowed by others and found it difficult to engage in the 'banter'. Not knowing who else would be present became a barrier to further engagement in the online groups, and she felt more comfortable attending face-to-face meet-ups where she could see who was arriving before committing to attend. Another reason was that not everyone wished to communicate online, due to concerns about software security and who may be able to hear what was said. Therefore, face-to-face meet-ups were the only comfortable option for them. My role as a researcher was not to provide technical support and advice, but to acknowledge the implications that the move to online groups had for other potential members of DN, and the consequences for the data collected.

Access: Opportunities

In spite of the limitations outlined above, online groups have provided opportunities for attendance and inclusion. Digital methods have been proven to be more accessible to those with reduced mobility (Jenner and Myers 2019, Sy et al. 2020), living faraway and 'vulnerable' populations (Jenner and Myers 2019), and are shown to save time, money and a reduced carbon footprint due to an absence of travel (Jenner and Myers 2019, Rahman et al. 2021). Although Rahman et al. (2021) identified time and cost savings for themselves as researchers, this too

can be considered in relation to participants or attendees of remote groups as opposed to face-to-face meetings.

The geographical location of services within the city is important, as resources spent on travel may pose a barrier. When meeting face-to-face with a group at DM, one of the members required a two-hours train and bus journey. This person was not in a formal occupation and had a free bus pass, therefore could afford the time and money spent. However, this is not a viable option for everybody and the accessibility of travelling to treatment facilities presents a large barrier to both those living in the city and rural areas (Pullen and Oser 2014, Thomas et al. 2020). Thus, online meetings allow for greater access to support as time and costs are saved on travel (Eaves et al. 2022). This flexibility in accessing groups at DN allowed for movement and enabled members to access support when on holiday or during hospital stays (as long as the confidentiality agreements of the group were upheld, such as wearing headphones). In this instance, it could be argued that there was a lower barrier of entry as one's physical place became unimportant and, in theory, gaining access to the support group only required turning on a phone. Moreover, an effect of remote meetings, and the ability to access services and work from home, may have benefited the city environment by reducing travel and consequently a pollution reduction — also, lockdown brought reports of increasing nature into the cities. However, without physical workspaces being accessed, local businesses that rely on the 9am-5pm workforce footfall are vulnerable. Furthermore, humans are social beings who require physical social interaction, therefore although there may be short-term benefits to an online contact, we must be cautious of how sustainable this may be. Although the efficiency of remote support and decentralising access to substance use support services is beyond the scope of this study, the decentralisation of health equity has been debated (Abimbola et al. 2019).

Flexible access may mean that Zoom, and most videoconferencing software, can be used to create a less stressful environment. Dodd and Hess's (2020) study exploring youth alcohol consumption and family communication revealed that participants felt more relaxed in online group interviews, as they expressed feeling safe in their environment and supported by those around them. The researchers noted that some shy participants created a safety barrier by hiding out of view of the camera. Similarly, those who attended the group meetings at DN were able to come to a meeting and not 'reveal' themselves as they could keep their camera off. The ability to keep the camera off, or choose a virtual background, afforded those in attendance more privacy (Roberts et al. 2021). This ability to expose yourself slowly to the environment was meaningful and a sign of progression at DN. One member proudly told me that when they first accessed the support group, they attended with their camera off and their microphone muted. This was in stark contrast to subsequent meetings where they occasionally helped co-facilitate groups with a staff member. This gentle exposure allowed members to attend without revealing themselves, which allowed time for confidence and familiarity to grow. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced Howlett's (2022) study to continue online, there was a lesser degree of formality, and the conversations were more relaxed. Howlett (2022) speculates that with no one to overhear their conversations and donning less formal clothing, the participants became more relaxed and comfortable, and shared in more detail about their lives.

Space: Limitations

How the field site is constructed and defined is important in understanding the phenomenon that is being studied. Research participants live both on and offline, therefore, the idea of space needs to be considered and analysed with consideration to what kind of data is gathered online (Thompson et al. 2021). We cannot assume to understand someone's offline life by what we observe remotely. Therefore, Thompson et al. (2021) posit that one of the main ethical considerations within digital research is critical reflexivity on the data collected.

Although the research space is brought online, participants still access this remotely from their own worlds and it cannot be considered a neutral environment. Ethical considerations concerning the privacy and confidentiality of the space are particularly important to consider in group meetings. Marhefka et al. (2020: 1985) identified early on in their implementation of videoconferencing software that their recommendation of a 'private space' needed to be defined. They set out clear protocols: participants must attend from a room where they are alone and could not be heard; if this was not achievable, then others in the room must be introduced and headphones worn so that others could not overhear sensitive information. Similarly, DN set out an agreement with those who attended the group to ensure that no one else could oversee or overhear the meeting. However, these protocols and agreements were made based on trust. In any online study, participants must be made aware of the limits to confidentiality, which cannot always be guaranteed as it is dependent on the compliance of group members.

As well as ensuring a private space, it needs to be considered whether remote research is an intrusion on a participant's personal space (Roberts et al. 2021). Participants will likely be in their own homes, with the potential that other members of the group could see a participant's surroundings. Lobe et al. (2020) pose that although for some group members this may not be an issue, for others, the option of a filtered background or attending without an active camera should be given. Whilst Roberts et al. (2021) and Lobe et al. (2020) propose that remote meetings may provide more privacy and physical safety for vulnerable groups, this did not always seem to be the case in my fieldwork. Although remote groups allowed increased protection against the spread of COVID-19, we must recognise that a person's home is not always a safe place (Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020, Gurney 2020).

The social restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated vulnerability and risk of harm for those affected by domestic abuse, and reduced access to support (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020, Usher et al. 2020). Refuge, one of the UK's leading domestic abuse organisations, reported a 61% increase in calls and contacts between April 2020 and February 2021 (Refuge 2021). On one occasion during a DN meeting, shouting could be heard coming from someone's screen causing that person to log off. This left the rest of those in attendance concerned about that person's safety. The facilitators reassured the group that they would check in on them, but due to confidentiality no more information was shared. This not only posed a concern for the person who logged off, but also presented a possible risk to the well-being of those who witnessed the situation. Furthermore, this overspill from the private domain to this remote space had to be managed by the individual later when they returned to

meetings. As the group was facilitated by DN, it was important that the staff members followed up on the situation and offered support to anyone witnessing this, if needed. However, this emphasises how vulnerability and safety in the home must be assessed in the ethical considerations when facilitating a remote group, and we must consider whether the construction of a 'safe space' is achievable when one cannot account for the physical place that someone is in.

When engaging in remote ethnography, researchers must acknowledge the reality of 'being here' whilst being aware of the dramatically different experience of 'being there' (Horton 2021: 99). Horton reflected on her remote ethnography and examined the difference between her experience and her participants, who were Latin American women living in the USA, who were doing essential work during the outbreak of COVID-19. These women experienced the loss of their job without state support and renegotiated their living circumstances in order to survive their increasing debt. All the while, Horton sat in the comfort of her own home remotely working in a secure job. Horton (2021: 105) argues that reflection allowed her to resist the illusion that she was immersed in the participant's worlds and brought to light the 'discomfort of disjunctive lived realities'. The remote or virtual field is not a new concept. In the past, researchers' field sites have been inaccessible due to war or natural disasters, and new ways were sought through media in order to continue their study. Postill (2017) argues that it is imperative to expand upon ways of 'being there' through triangulation, by way of gathering a rich variety of primary and secondary resources. Thus, remote observation helps researchers to observe things from a different perspective and understanding 'being there' from 'being here' is becoming more fundamental to everyday situations (Postill 2017).

Space: Opportunities

While there are limitations, like those addressed above, the use of reflection and ethical re-negotiation allow for opportunities within remote observation. The COVID-19 pandemic created a social event whose impact was experienced by everyone. Watson and Lupton (2022) found that this shared experience of suddenly being at home helped to develop a sense of rapport, informality and shared empathy, which may not have occurred if meeting face-to-face. Furthermore, it is argued that remote research reduces the power asymmetry between the researcher and participant, as participants become in control of the researcher's access to the online field site by deciding whether to answer a call and whether their camera is on (Howlett 2022). Participants are likewise invited into the researcher's life, with the ability to view their environment in return (Howlett 2022). Although Tremblay et al. (2021) drew concerns over the limited context that virtual modes provide, as researchers are restricted by what they see on the screen, I found that observing a participant in their own environment helped provide a bigger picture of who they were. During my fieldwork I was introduced to pets, shown meaningful personal items, and exposed to a greater degree of the environment in which the participants lived than if located at DN's premises. Although superficially insignificant, these glimpses into the participant's lives often facilitated in-depth discussion; and at a time when the government

lockdown severed many other social connections, these personal items (and pets) became a large part of their social world and therefore important to acknowledge and understand. Furthermore, Beaulieu (2010) argued the importance of 'co-presence' within ethnographic fieldwork, which decentralises the importance of space, as a shared physical location does not always provide a shared understanding within interactions. Therefore, mediated interactions, be that over a telephone or videoconferencing, should not be viewed as a barrier to interaction but viewed as a feature of our social world which can be assessed for co-presence through analysis of interactional routines and practices (Beaulieu 2010).

Currently, there are few research studies that explore remote participant observation. Rahman et al. (2021) critically reflected on their use of remote observation by way of attending remote conferences and networking events that occurred over webcast software. The researchers critiqued that it was hard to observe all attendees at an event due to large numbers, and also that there was limited inter-individual interaction. This suggests that interview recruitment may present a challenge at remote events due to fewer opportunities to interact (Maxwell 2009). In agreement with Maxwell (2009), I found that recruitment for further creative methods conversations was more successful with those I met face-to-face, rather than at remote observation, potentially due to fewer opportunities for personal interactions. However, Rahman et al. (2021) pointed out how interactions became easier as time went on and as those in attendance got used to the 'space', showing the need for persistence at remote events.

A further study that employed participant observation via remote groups was conducted by Eaves et al. (2022), who looked at how the rapid assessment of policy change during COVID-19 affected people with an opioid use disorder in the USA. Their essay describes the challenges faced when conducting rapid online ethnography. Some elements of their ethnography were effective; however, others did not accumulate the necessary depth of data. The researchers gathered an in-depth evaluation of policy change from the provider's perspective via online conferences and webinars, which saved time and did not require the use of travel. Conversely, the study was unable to provide a complete picture of client perspectives, as those in recovery were protected by privacy regulations. Therefore, the researchers were restricted in their contact to those who continued to attend in-person clinics and were not affected by the policy changes. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of who you are able to reach and engage with when conducting remote ethnography, and the implications this has on the scope of the research.

The ability to observe participants is not only dependent on the number of people in attendance but also on where participants are sitting in relation to the camera (Dodds et al. 2021) as facial expressions become hard to see and subtle, non-verbal cues may be lost (Deakin and Wakefield 2013, Dodds et al. 2021, Eaves et al. 2022, Lobe 2020). Despite this, Rahman et al. (2021) noted that interactions and reflections were easier to record over videoconferencing software. From their research, Rahman et al. (2021) concluded that the quality of the online observations was comparable to that of face-to-face; however, the types of data are different: body language was more difficult to observe remotely, but people engaged more in the seminars

online. As with Rahman et al. (2021), I found that documenting field notes was easier when observing the online groups, as being less visible to the participants allowed me to make some notes in 'real time'. Furthermore, although subtle non-verbal cues were inevitably missed in my observations, I noted that some participants (as well as my own) facial expressions and gestures appeared slightly exaggerated. Examples of this were common during difficult topics of conversation; obvious nodding of the head would be combined with a furrowed brow to show concern, and many of the women emulated a hug by putting their arms out in front of them in a circle. These exaggerated expressions and gestures appeared to arise to ensure that these acts of support were felt. As Zoom does not allow for multiple people to speak at a time there was a conscious effort not to interrupt other people's audio.

Conclusion

The move from in-person to online ethnography is not a simple transition from a physical place to remote, online space. Early on in this research, it became apparent that the way in which videoconferencing software worked meant that there needed to be a new approach to the notion of ongoing consent and visibility in order to avoid collecting data covertly. It was not the aim of this article to offer a prescriptive account of the ethical principles necessary for conducting remote ethnography, but by drawing on Convery and Cox's (2012) 'negotiated ethics', this discussion has demonstrated how reflecting on current ethical practices is essential when moving online, and researchers should not assume that face-to-face ethical principles are sufficient.

The move online was essential in understanding the experiences of accessing remote substance use services during the COVID-19 lockdown; however, a critical view was necessary to assess the unique challenges that remote ethnography brings. Remote meetings created access when social restrictions were in place, enhanced access to support from varying geographical locations and allowed for gradual exposure to the service. Barriers to access to technology should be mitigated when possible. However, at times this was out of the control of the study, meaning that the depth of the data gathered needed to be considered alongside limitations of access, and triangulation with other resources and data sets was essential.

The assumption that an online space may be 'neutral' erases the physical space that the participants may be situated in. However, I found that people's private lives often spilt over into the remote space. This may be positive as personal items and homes could be shared to create a sense of familiarity and bonding. Conversely, being in one's own space meant that people needed to manage situations that occurred beyond their control, and set protocols needed to be agreed to in order to maintain confidentiality. By weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of remote ethnography, this article aimed to highlight the opportunities that remote ethnography can bring whilst mitigating potential ethical concerns through the use of reflection.

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