Conducting Biographical-Narrative Interviews During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Methodological Reflections on Situated Affective Encounters and Emotional Reflexivity

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Abstract: In pre-pandemic times, biographical-narrative interviews were conducted regularly on-site in intimate face-to-face situations. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by several lockdowns and the politics of social distancing, forced many scholars to use digital tools for interviewing. In this article, I take a self-reflexive, autoethnographic look at my own research process during the COVID-19 pandemic. I explore the problems I faced in conducting interviews both on-site and in online settings. I focus on the affective and emotional dimension, as this was strongly influenced by "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022), created by the pandemic. I propose the concept of "emotional reflexivity" (HOLMES, 2015) as a tool for dealing with the challenges encountered in the research field. Furthermore, I advocate an epistemic exploration of the objections and opportunities of conducting biographical-narrative interviews in digital online space. In so doing, I aim to contribute to the empirically grounded, methodological discussion of the affective and emotional underpinnings and diverse ways of conducting such interviews.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic not only threatened people's health and led to a public health and societal crisis but also posed challenges for scholars conducting qualitative field research (REICHERTZ, 2021). The political, legal, and epidemiological measures introduced to prevent the spread of the virus focused mainly on the regulation of social contacts and the promotion of social distancing. This hindered qualitative fieldwork, making it almost impossible to conduct it in a routine manner. As a result, social scientists were alarmed and gathered in various forums and online conferences to discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic affected different qualitative research practices, which methodological challenges it posed, and what practical solutions could be developed.[1] The opportunity to reflect on the anxiety and frustration caused by the pandemic and to search collaboratively for answers on how to conduct empirical fieldwork, despite the pandemic restrictions, helped me to find my way out of the "professional crises" that the pandemic had caused me as a sociologist and biographical researcher. In this sense, I also realized the epistemological importance of addressing my own feelings of anxiety and exploring how they not only influenced but co-constructed the entire research process. [1]

In the following sections, I will discuss the methodological challenges I faced as a biography researcher conducting fieldwork in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany from 2020 until today. Following the autoethnographic approach (ELLIS, 2004; ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2011), I take my own experiences as a starting point for my reflexive exploration and focus on the affective and emotional dimensions of the research process. After introductory remarks (Section 1), I will first discuss how the emergence of affective "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022) provided a societal framework for my research during the pandemic (Section 2). In my discussion, I draw on my field notes to show how the general atmosphere of anxiety gradually became part of my scholarly habitus, thus influencing the development of the research process. Having been strongly affected by the atmosphere of anxiety, I then ask what role affects and emotions play in general in the context of biographical-narrative inquiry (Section 3). I then discuss the challenges I faced in conducting biographical-narrative interviews both on-site and in the digital online space (Section 4). Finally, I consider the epistemological and methodological implications that I draw from my experiences in conducting biographical-narrative interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how my reflection can be useful for further development of biographical methods used in the digital online space (Section 5). Consequently, I advocate the investigation of affective and emotional dimensions of the data production processes in the field of biographical-narrative research. This does not only increase the amount of data, challenging the understanding of fieldwork, but also opens a new perspective on the often

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1 For example, I organized together with my colleague Tazuko KOBAYASHI an international online panel discussion on the topic "Doing Biographical Research Under Conditions of Pandemic: Methodological Challenges and Methodic Innovations" (RC 38) at the IV ISA FORUM of Sociology in Porto Alegre in 2021 (KÖTTIG & RUOKONEN-ENGLER, 2021).

invisible and unspoken underpinnings of both successful and less successful scholarly inquiry (Section 6). [2]

2. The Emergence of an Affective Atmosphere in the COVID-19 Pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic clearly demonstrated how social forces and context structure the practice of qualitative empirical social research. Despite the extensive literature on various societal crises, the challenges that such crises pose for empirical social scientific exploration have rarely been addressed (RAHMAN, TUCKERMAN, VORLEY & GHERHES, 2021). During the pandemic, however, this changed, as scholars started to reflect on their changed fieldwork practices (see, e.g., FALTER et al., 2022; GRAY, WONG-WYLIE, REMPEL & COOK, 2020; HOWLETT, 2022; MURANAKA, 2024; TEKATH, 2024). [3]

Particularly interesting is the interdisciplinary, empirical work done on affective atmospheres (e.g. KOLEHMAINEN, 2019; VON BOSE, 2023). They opened a new perspective on the invisible but tangible atmospheric dimension of the fieldwork that has not yet been systematically studied in the social sciences. This may be due to the illusion of objectivity and a general disinterest in addressing the affective and emotional aspects of the scholarly inquiry, or due to the methodological and epistemological difficulties of capturing atmospheres within fieldwork (BILLE, BJERREGAARD & FLOHR SØRENSEN, 2015). Scholars exploring atmospheres showed that with their novel approach, they not only enrich the corpus of empirical material but also open new perspectives beyond structural, discursive, and material notions, also allowing the exploration of the embodied and affective involvement of the researcher in the respective fieldwork (KOLEHMAINEN, 2019; VON BOSE, 2023). Moreover, TRIGG (2022) introduced the concept of atmosphere to analyze anxiety, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. From a phenomenological perspective, he argued that the pandemic created generalized "atmospheres of anxiety" beyond the individual existence (p.94). Similarly, ANDERSON (2009) and SEYFERT (2012) emphasized that atmospheres, while individually felt, transcend individual autonomous subjects. They are more like "affective tones of a social situation that are bodily felt and mediated through bodily action and interaction" (GUGUTZER & BARRICK, 2022, p.7)[2]. [4]

My field notes, written during different stages of the pandemic, strongly support TRIGG's thesis, as they show how "atmospheres of anxiety" (2022) gradually emerged until they became a part of everyday life as a "new normal" and inscribed themselves in my affective state of mind as "social-relational dynamics unfolding in situated practices and social interaction" (SLABY & RÖTTGER-RÖSSLER, 2017, p.2).

> "It is the end of February 2020, and I am traveling by train from Frankfurt a. M. in Germany to Bern in Switzerland, for a private birthday party. We celebrate in a large

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2   All translations from non-English texts by Maria SCHMITZ.

group and in a good mood. We are not concerned about the new infectious disease and the diagnosis of the first infections in Europe. [...] On the way back home, I read an article about the symptoms of COVID-19 in an online newspaper. A fellow passenger who has just boarded my coach begins coughing a few seats away. He is obviously sick. This frightens me. I cannot help but think that he may have been infected with SARS-CoV-2. Every time he coughs, I am worried. I feel the anxiety spreading throughout my body. My throat itches and I pull my winter scarf over my face to filter the air" (Field note, February 29 & March 1, 2020). [5]

A few weeks later, the WHO declared the new infectious disease, COVID-19, a global pandemic. This was followed by national and international travel restrictions. As the number of infections rapidly increased, several nation-states began to implement lockdowns. Germany introduced its first lockdown in mid-March 2020.

"We, my family members and I, avoid social contacts because one of us belongs to a high-risk group. My husband and I have the 'privilege' of staying at home, we work remotely, and the children stay at home and go to school virtually. [...] Professional and personal contacts are moving into a virtual space. Our days pass at our desks at home" (Field notes, March 16 & March 18, 2020).

"I follow the media reports of virologists. I want to understand what this virus is doing around the world. On television, there have been reports from Italy, where hospitals are full of COVID-19 patients. I saw many coffins with dead bodies. I am deeply influenced by these images. I feel frightened and helpless" (Field notes, March 19, 2020).

"Life in the public space has come to a standstill. There are no cars and no people on the streets. For the first time, I experience Frankfurt in real silence. [...] We are instructed to avoid direct social contact outside the home and to wear masks in public. I begin to sew masks out of leftover fabric for the entire family" (Field notes, March 28 & April 26, 2020).

"Our first family member has been infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus. I am worried, desperate, and wondering if there is any way to protect oneself from infection. Will we all be infected?" (Field note, May 1, 2020) [6]

These autoethnographic field notes from my field research journal show how everyday life had gradually become precarious. The introduction of epidemiological, legal, and political measures to control the pandemic, as well as the emergence of general affective "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022), challenged the habitual (BOURDIEU, 2000 [1997]) everyday interactions of the pre-pandemic period at both individual and collective levels. Scholars engaged in qualitative fieldwork tackled the question of how to do field work under these changed circumstances. [7]

I was one of the researchers grappling with this question as I had just received a research grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) [German Research Foundation]. This enabled me to start a new, multigenerational research project on the intergenerational experiences of upward social mobility in

the context of migrant families in Germany.[3] The problem was that I had written the proposal long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was now forced to adapt the research design because the mandatory social distancing measures, as well as the classification of certain age groups at high risk of infection, made the field access almost impossible. Moreover, I was also subjectively involved, as I and my family shared the vulnerability and fear of exposure to SARS-CoV-2 with my potential interviewees. [8]

This situation led me to postpone the start of my project by six months. At the time, I imagined that the pandemic might have passed until then. However, this did not happen, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic forced me to rethink my research design and methods. My anxiety about becoming infected was accompanied by the existential fear of not being able to carry out the project according to my proposal and thus getting into trouble with the funding organization. [9]

The anxiety and doubt generated by the pandemic delayed my research activities. My embodied and affective engagement with pandemic-related protective measures clearly showed how my position as a researcher was entangled with the constitution of the empirical field. I was affected by "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022), which not only affected my personal life but also forced me as a biography researcher to reflect on my methodological approach as well as to address the affective and emotional dimensions of conducting biographical-narrative interviews. At the same time, however, it opened the door to methodological further development. It showed that not only knowledge production (FOUCAULT, 2003 [1974]) but also its means, like social scientific methods, cannot escape their situatedness (HARAWAY, 1995 [1988]) and need to be critically reflected in the respective research process. [10]

3. Biographical Interviews in the Context of Interactive, Situated Affective Encounters and Emotional Narratives

It can be argued that "human experience has a crucial narrative dimension. It is organized along a temporal, sequential order of 'first this, then that,' 'before and after'" (SCHÜTZE, 1987, p.15)—which means that "people have specific "narrative" knowledge about "how things came to be" and that this knowledge is only accessible in a narrative form" (KLERES, 2010, p.183; see also ANDREWS, SQUIRE & TAMBOKOU, 2008). Accordingly, researchers have developed a range of narrative theories and biographical methods to interrogate such narrations (APITZSCH & SIOUTI, 2007; BECKER, POHN-LAUGGAS & SANTOS, 2023; CHAMBERLAYNE, BORNAT & WENGRAF, 2000; DOUGLAS & BARNWELL, 2019; SIOUTI, 2017; SMITH & WATSON, 2010 [2001]; STANLEY, 1992). [11]

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3 "Durch Bildung zu sozialem Aufstieg: Zur intergenerationalen Bearbeitung von Aufstiegserfahrungen in Migrationsfamilien" [Social Advancement Through Education: On Intergenerational Negotiations of Upward Social Mobility Experiences in Migrant Families], financed by DFG, 445115586.

I follow an interpretative, social constructive research approach and work with the method of biographical-narrative interviewing (ROSENTHAL, 2008 [2005]; SCHÜTZE,1983) to collect the empirical data. Biographical-narrative interview initiates a retrospective life story narration that captures not only selected past life experiences, but also interpretations attributed to them (ibid.). This method is based on the idea that the interviewees can first tell their life story freely and in their own words, in relation to topics that they consider relevant. At this point, the interviewer should only actively listen to the interviewee and support the narrative with nonverbal gestures but should not interrupt, comment, or ask any questions. After the interviewee has finished the narration, the interviewer has the possibility to ask for detailed descriptions of topics already related to or to ask questions that might be of research interest (ibid.). [12]

This interview situation is often very personal and intimate compared to other types of interviews. In addition, the act of telling one's own life story to an interviewer relies heavily on relationality, interaction, and intersubjective communication, and is framed by the idea of making oneself understood in the interview situation (ibid.). Consequently, some scholars have emphasized the importance of systematically working out the interactive, ethnographic foundations of the biographical-narrative interview method (BECKER & ROSENTHAL, 2022; DAUSIEN & KELLE, 2005; DAUSIEN & THOMA, 2023; KÖTTIG, 2005; PAPE, 2018). I consider these approaches epistemologically promising, as they allow to analyze the taken-for-granted conditions of an interview interaction in a more profound way. Moreover, as HARDING (1993, 2004), KUEHNER, PLODER and LANGER emphasized, the importance of exploring the interactive role of the researcher in the respective field of inquiry offers "a legitimate source of knowledge and has a central epistemic function" (2016, pp.700) in a process of scientific exploration. For concrete research practice, this means that "researchers actively acknowledge, and reflect on how their social locations, biographical histories, and worldviews interact with, influence, and are influenced by the research process" (BROOKS, 2007, p.79). Furthermore, several scholars have advocated the role of the researcher as a co-constructor of the qualitative inquiry and have developed different methodological approaches such as interactive interviewing (ELLIS, KIESINGER & TILLMAN-HEALY, 1997), dialogic/performance analysis (RIESSMAN, 2008), intersectional analysis (LUTZ & DAVIS, 2005), auto/biography (STANLEY, 1992), doing biographical reflexivity (RUOKONEN-ENGLER & SIOUTI, 2013, 2016), and autoethnography (ELLIS, 2004). It can be argued that, despite the differences, these approaches at least to some extent share the central idea of the "strong reflexivity"-approach that allows to consider "[s]ympathies, prejudices, fears, emotional, mental, and physical reactions of the researcher [...] not [...] as inescapable problems, but as a highly valuable epistemic resource" (KUEHNER et al., 2016, p.700) in a research process. [13]

In general, scholars doing interview-based biographical research must invest a great deal of work in intersubjective, relational, self-reflexive work to establish rapport and trusting *Arbeitsbündnisse* [working alliances] (RESCH, 1998) between interviewer and interviewee. This is complicated by the hierarchical and

asymmetrical social positions of the participants as well as by differences and social inequalities in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, racialization, class, ableism, and their intersections. Therefore, biographical researchers should also critically reflect on their own biographical entanglements and "do biographical reflexivity," as RUOKONEN-ENGLER and SIOUTI (2016, p.2) suggested for researchers working in the field of transnational studies. This is a methodological tool that can facilitate "to understand the central role of the researcher as a participant in the construction of the research field and in the (re)construction of the phenomena under investigation" (p.749). Scholars can do this by reflecting on their own biographical entanglements with the topic of inquiry: How they came to study it, what their relationship to the topic under investigation was, how they gained access to the field and how their own social position influenced the interaction in the field and the data collection as well as what interpretation perspective they had (ibid.), so that they can explore their own "attitude to hegemonic discourses, national and ethnocentric perspectives, hierarchies and power relations, and also to conventional analytical categories" (p.749). Although the focus of "doing biographical reflexivity" (RUOKONEN-ENGLER & SIOUTI, 2013) lies in reflecting on the relationship between the researcher and the topic, it also allows the reflection of one's own position on interactions in the field. However, it does not, or at least not explicitly, address the interactive, affective, and emotional underpinnings of the research situation. [14]

Several scholars have investigated the role of emotions in the qualitative fieldwork (DAVIES, J. & SPENCER, 2010: DAVIS, K. & IRVINE, 2022; FLAM & KLERES, 2015; GILBERT, 2000; GOTTSCHALK, KRÄMER & TEPELI, 2024) and also the emotional texture of (biographical) narratives has been discussed by some (KLERES 2010; KLERES & ALBRECHT 2015). The interactive, affective dimension of conducting biographical-narrative interviews, however, has remained understudied. Rather, researchers have focused on classical questions like how to establish trusting "working alliances" (RESCH, 1998) and balance of proximity and distance during fieldwork. The lack of an explicit and systematic theorization is surprising, since not only narratives are "inextricably emotionally structured" (KLERES, 2010, p.183), but also the interaction in the research field is strongly affective (AHMED, 2004) and relies on "emotion work" (BERGMAN BLIX & WETTERGREN, 2015; FLAM & KLERES, 2015, HOCHSCHILD, 1979), as some authors argued. For example, LEE-TREWEEK (2000) underlined the importance of analyzing the emotional dimension of the research process because this strongly influences the data collection: "Ignoring or suppressing feelings about research is more likely to lead to distortion of data than to clarity" (p.128). Moreover, DEVEREUX (1984 [1967]) considered anxiety as a structural part of any scientific inquiry and underscored the importance of analyzing the researcher's own emotional involvement (p.28). The interrogation of affective and emotional dimensions of the research process moves the scholar out of academic "comfort zones" which are often considered disembodied and disaffected. [15]

In general, researchers working in the fields of sociology of emotions and affective studies have emphasized the significant role of affects and emotions in the constitution of the social (ARCHER, 2000; BROWNLIE, 2011; BURKITT,

2012; FLAM, 2002; HOCHSCHILD, 1979; SLABY & VON SCHEVE, 2019; VON SCHEVE, 2018). Following AHMED (2004), RECKWITZ (2012) and SLABY and MÜHLHOFF (2019), I understand affects as products and producers of the social that emerge from undefined bodily resonances between enacting bodies. Such "affective resonances" indicate that "the interactional dynamic itself produces an affective experience, rather than transmitting internal states of feeling between pre-existing individuals" as MÜHLHOFF (2015, p.1001) argued. Despite the "constructive interplay" (VON SCHEVE & SLABY, 2019, p. 44) of affects and emotions, there exists a significant difference between these two. Emotions are, as VON SCHEVE and SLABY (2019) argued, "situation- and culture-specific conceptualizations and classifications" (p.49) of affects. These are learned in a socialization process and are "closely related to reflective self-relations, providing sources of self-understanding, anchoring individual narratives of value and import, and providing default ways of making sense of actions, decisions, and commitments" (p.46). Keeping these definitions in mind, I turn now to the discussion of my experiences with the on-site and online interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic and explore their affective and emotional texture. [16]

4. Conducting Biographical-Narrative Interviews During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Social scientists were forced to reflect on the appropriateness and responsiveness of their fieldwork methods during the pandemic which often led to an adaptation of research designs and contributed to the further development of qualitative methods (MORAN & CAETANO, 2022; RAHMAN et al., 2021, p.2). The general "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022), as well as the methodological and epistemological challenges I encountered during the fieldwork functioned as an "eye-opener," forcing me to examine how affects and emotions underpinned my own relationship to the field of research and were thus a constitutive part of it. My subjectivity functioned here as "a legitimate source of knowledge" and had a "central epistemic function" (KUEHNER et al., 2016, p.700). [17]

At the beginning of my research, it seemed almost impossible to start conducting biographical-narrative interviews since the social distancing measures made access to the field difficult and in some cases even prevented me from contacting some possible interviewees. Therefore, I decided to start to interview first the younger generation, namely the descendants of the migrant workers, and to postpone the interviews with their parents into the near future. In addition, I struggled with the problem that I could not imagine how it was possible to create an atmosphere of trust when following the rules of social distancing. In the following description, I take a closer look at the field access and the interview situation, and discuss them as examples for "situated affective encounters" (AYATA, BILGIN, HARDERS, ÖZKAYA & WAHBA, 2019, p.65) that were strongly co-constructed by the general "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022). I take these encounters as a starting point for the reflection of my own participation in and contribution to the emotional dynamics in the research field and how this required me to act in an "emotionally reflexive" (HOLMES, 2015) way. [18]

4.1 Situated affective encounters in biographical-narrative on-site interviews

It can be argued that conducting biographical-narrative interviews has always been a fragile and unpredictable endeavor, with the potential for both positive and negative surprises. However, the pandemic made it even more tenuous. I found the idea of conducting interviews during the pandemic emotionally distressing as I was afraid of becoming infected myself and/or infecting my interviewees with SARS-CoV-2. This feeling did not only underscore the vulnerability and physical exposure when living under pandemic conditions, but also raised several questions concerning qualitative fieldwork. It made me curious to explore the question to what extent researchers are emotionally involved in their fieldwork and how they move between professional advice, methods, and their affective and emotional understanding of the field situation. [19]

My experience of conducting biographical-narrative interviews during the pandemic was strongly influenced by the general "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022). This manifested itself in the need to follow the rules of social distancing that governed social interactions during the pandemic. In Germany, the instructions on how and when to wear a mask changed several times. At the beginning of the pandemic, wearing a mask was voluntary; therefore, my first three face-to-face interviews on-site took place without a mask. In the interview situation, we mutually agreed to take off our masks while following the rules of social distancing—we had both performed rapid tests in advance, had sufficient physical distance of 1,5 meters between us, and ventilated the room every 20 minutes. Our bodies affected in different ways: I did not sense any signs of insecurity on the part of the interviewee, whereas the mask-free situation continued to unsettle me. On the way home, I questioned our decision not to wear masks from an ethical standpoint. Over the next few days, I continued to perform rapid tests and was afraid of a positive result. Fortunately, none of us were infected with SARS-CoV-2 and remained healthy. [20]

The uncertainty and anxiety that plagued me during the possible ten-day incubation period taught me to avoid such risky behavior in subsequent interviews. Consequently, I decided to wear a mask when conducting the following face-to-face interviews on-site. However, some interviewees preferred to remove their masks. This seemed quite understandable to me—who wants to talk about one's life behind a mask? Was it not a contradiction in terms? During the interviews, however, I struggled with the mask. I was having trouble breathing, I was sweating, and my glasses kept fogging up with the air I was breathing. I jumped up every 20 minutes and ventilated the room, following the official hygienic. My physical discomfort increased tremendously during the interviews, and I felt like I was running out of breath. However, I did not want to take my mask off because I felt responsible for not putting my interviewees in any potential danger. [21]

For the first time in my professional career, the physical proximity to my interviewees in the interview situation seemed to pose a tremendous problem.

Before the pandemic, I had considered embodied presence to be one of the most important prerequisites for conducting a successful biographical-narrative interview. The pandemic situation, the introduction of hygiene measures and rules of social distancing as well as the atmosphere of anxiety made the face-to-face interview situation a stressful one with which I could hardly cope. As the pandemic worsened, the number of infections increased and the requirement to wear masks was introduced. Further lockdowns were imposed and it was not possible any longer to conduct face-to-face interviews on-site so that I had no choice but to seriously consider conducting biographical-narrative interviews digitally. [22]

4.2 Situated affective encounters in biographical-narrative online interviews

Inspired by the examples of colleagues who had started to conduct online interviews, I also decided to move the biographical-narrative interviewing into the virtual online space. Nevertheless, this decision was associated with doubts and epistemic questions on my part: Whom could I reach this way? Who would be willing to tell me about their own life on screen? Who would have the technical means to conduct the interview with me online? Would internet connections be sufficiently stable? How could data security be guaranteed? Above all, I asked myself whether I would be able to create a trustful atmosphere and functioning "working alliances" (RESCH, 1998) via digital devices. If someone had suggested, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, that I should consider conducting biographical-narrative interviews in virtual online space, I would have vehemently objected. At that time, I could not imagine that it was possible to create any atmosphere of closeness and trust necessary for conducting biographical-narrative interviews in digital space. I thought like ABIDIN and DE SETA who argued that technologically mediated interactions often cause "anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions, and troubles" (2020, p.9). [23]

The move of the biographical-narrative interviews from physical presence to virtual online space not only raised new methodological questions but also forced me to think about the influence of the digitally mediated research situation on both the interaction and on the possibility to generate biographical-narrative interviews. Nevertheless, due to the pandemic I revised my opinion, as the digital online space seemed to be the only place where an encounter for a biographical-narrative interview was possible without the risk of infection and pandemic-related psychosomatic stress. [24]

The physical, embodied presence and atmosphere of trust that I considered to be prerequisites for biographical-narrative interviews in on-site settings were replaced in the online encounter by digitally mediated representations of body and voice. In this way, it was possible to connect two distant places through digital technology and create a virtual, translocal space that made our interview encounters possible. I had an impression that building rapport and working trust required from me much more work before going online than had been the case with face-to-face interviews. I had several contacts via e-mail, phone calls, and

messenger services to establish a "working alliance" (RESCH, 1998) that would enable us to take the challenge of meeting in a virtual space for a biographical-narrative interview. In comparison, the number of contacts for a face-to-face interview on-site was limited to one or two. In general, these contacts gave us the possibility to get to know one another. They helped to create an atmosphere of trust and established my credibility as a researcher and thus paved the way for a virtual meeting. In phone calls, it was possible to exchange information about the project, answer questions, seek commonalities as well as to interpret the emotional texture of a person's voice. Not just the information given and words spoken, but also the sensual, affective underpinnings of the voice can influence a person's willingness to give an interview. I remember one of my interviewees once telling me that my voice resembled that of her old dear friend. This contributed positively to her willingness to give me a biographical-narrative interview. [25]

In general, I was worried that potential interviewees would not agree to be interviewed in a technologically mediated virtual environment. As the interviews revealed, this was not the case. Most of my interviewees were "digital natives"—they had grown up with the internet and social media and were accustomed to using technological devices for online communication and virtual self-presentation. In addition, many of them had to work from home offices, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As most of them worked remotely, they experienced digital communication and online meetings as a part of everyday life or as a new "normality." I realized that I had projected my own uncertainty about using virtual conferencing tools for interviewing on my potential interviewees. I was afraid that I might not be able to properly communicate with my interviewees as well as not really observe them in digital space. [26]

Despite my reservations and doubts about using digital conferencing tools, things turned out to be quite different. The people I interviewed with different conferencing tools were comfortable with them. They were already familiar with them or quickly learned how to use them. In the interview situation, we mostly sat in front of the screen, either at home or in a home office. While life outside home seemed threatening, the digital space offered a kind of digitally mediated "security" or "safe environment" that could, at least in theory, be left at any time by pressing the exit button. It might have been much more difficult to leave an on-site interview setting as there are always explicit and implicit rules that guide on-site interactions. [27]

In general, internet connections remained stable, although there were brief technical glitches during which voice reproduction was fragile. This is marked in interview transcripts with the comment "unintelligible." While such technical interruptions disturbed me and I worried about what I might have lost during such interruptions, my interviewees remained very calm and sometimes even solved technical problems we had. [28]

The first encounter with the interviewee on-site is always exciting and it might demand "emotion work" (HOCHSCHILD, 1979, p.561) to cope with the

unpredictability of the situation. Yet, for me the first digitally mediated encounter in a virtual space was even more exciting: The first glance after switching on the camera, followed by the constant search for eye contact with the interviewee, while at the same time being confronted with one's own image appearing on the screen and demanding self-observation. In such a technologically mediated encounter in virtual space, there is no physical, embodied encounter—no shaking of hands, no shared bodily sensations about room temperature, smells, etc. Thus, the technical connection creates a virtual space in which the researcher and interviewee appear as technologically mediated bodily representations. Nevertheless, the virtual connection also creates a highly affective atmosphere in which different bodily representations can be seen as affecting and being highly affected (AHMED, 2004) during the online session. The affective atmosphere that emerges in digital online space is characterized by a search for digital togetherness and connectivity, which, however, has its limitations. For example, during a long and vivid narration of one interviewee in which she got very emotional, I felt more like a spectator than an active interviewer and co-constructor of her narration, because of the physical distance that the virtual space had created between us. [29]

In that interview situation, my interviewee, Maria[4], sat on a sofa in her living room and became very emotional in her biographical narrative. She started to cry, and at that moment I felt extremely helpless as an individual person and unprofessional as a researcher.

> Minna: "I am sorry for that. We can stop and take a break for a while if you want.
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> Maria: [Maria cries deeply and continues to narrate even though she is still crying]. My mother had cancer, and we only found it out a year before she died; she had been smoking for ages. [Maria cries deeply]
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> Minna: I am sorry to hear that—I am sorry to be so far away from you now. I would like to at least give you a handkerchief to hug you, and I am so sorry for that. But please take your time" (Interview transcript, A06). [30]

It can be argued that I try to make sense of the situation by emotionally reflecting (HOLMES, 2010, 2015) on the affective space created between us. I feel sad not only about the death of my interviewee's mother but also about the physical distance that separates us in the virtual online interview situation. Maria's emotional outburst made me feel uncomfortable because I could only observe her from a distance on the screen. I saw her crying on a sofa and looking sad, helpless, and lonely. I was strongly affected by Maria's emotional outburst and sadness and felt like a voyeur—just watching and listening without being able to react adequately to the situation of the interviewee. [31]

When I analyzed the transcribed text passage and compared it with the autoethnographic notes from my research journal, I realized that it was not only the physical distance at the moment of the emotional outburst, but also its visual, mediated transmission through virtual space which complicated our affective

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4   All interviews have been anonymized, so Maria and Eleni are pseudonyms.

interaction and forced me to put it into words like "I am sorry to be so far away from you now." I respond to the affective interaction between us by being *emotionally reflexive* (ibid.), as I do not seem to have any other means than to use language to repeat that I regret the physical distance between us. Although physical distance seems to complicate responsiveness in an interview situation, as Maria's case shows, there can be situations in which the distance, created by digital space, can also be experienced positively. For this, I turn now to Eleni's case. [32]

At the end of the virtual biographical-narrative interviews, I usually ask my interviewees how they feel after the interview as they have told me so much about their personal lives. During my field work, I was amazed to hear how similar the responses were between those interviewed online and those interviewed in person on-site. The location of the interview, whether virtual or face-to-face, did not seem to matter much to most of my interviewees. However, the virtual online interview with Eleni is an exception.

> "Minna: How was it to you to talk about your life in this situation?
>
> Eleni: I don't know. [...] My friend had just written to me: 'Lots of strength!' and I was like: 'Huh, why lots of strength?' and so on. 'What do you mean by that?' 'Yes, you're going to live your life [...]' so I think he had more of an idea of what was going to happen. And I just did not think about it. I did not think it would be so upsetting to think about certain things. [...] Apart from this, it was a very pleasant conversation with you.
>
> Minna: (laughs) Thank you, on my part.
>
> Eleni: (laughing) I think it was a bit of a psychological reappraisal.
>
> Minna: (laughs) I would like to sit with you at the table or something. It is still hard for me—this online communication. But I do not think it bothered you at all.
>
> Eleni: No, it did not bother me.
>
> Minna: I had the impression that you felt (…) quite free [...] it is not an obstacle for you to talk here?
>
> Eleni: No, not at all. Maybe even better. Maybe even better for me personally.
>
> Minna: [...] this distance is also a protection [...]" (Interview transcript, A18). [33]

It remains unclear why Eleni found it "better" that the biographical-narrative interview took place in a digital space as this passage is open to various interpretations. It is possible that Eleni wanted to confirm my decision to conduct an online interview for security reasons. She could also be countering my obvious, emotionally charged regret about physical distance and its possible negative influence on the interview. She toyed with the idea that, far from being an obstacle in the interview situation, physical distance facilitated her biographical narration. Thus, Eleni's case underlines that conducting virtual interviews can be even helpful when the interview consists of personal and intimate issues. Distance can create a protective interview atmosphere that makes interviewees feel more comfortable to share with the interviewer their own intimate experiences (GRAY et al., 2020; JENNER & MYERS, 2019; MORAN & CAETANO, 2022;

RICK, 2023). Moreover, O'CONNOR and MADGE (2017) argued that it might be possible to develop more symmetrical relationships in online than in on-site interviews. [34]

Overall, most of the interviews I conducted in person on-site were much longer and included more affective, spontaneous interactions between me and my interviewee, both during and after the interview. This may be due to the physical, embodied presence that created a relational space that was much more complex in physical presence than in virtual space and allowed for much more differentiated interaction with small talk and was thus giving more space and time for "affective resonance" (MÜHLHOFF, 2015) than the interview encounter in online space. [35]

As the camera set visual, sensory, and interactive limits for the interaction, I realized the importance of asking the interviewees to describe the space they inhabited during the interview. I first came to this idea after an hour-long interview as we were about to finish it. Suddenly, another person walked past the screen and out of the room. At that moment, I realized that this person had been in the room during the interview, but out of my sight. This surprised me because I thought that we, the interviewee and I, were the only people in the interview situation. My interviewee realized my surprise and explained that the person who passed the screen was her husband. Later, when I analyzed the transcript of the interview, I recognized that the person I was interviewing was telling her life story in a very formal way, so that the interview reminded me of a job interview. It is difficult to determine if the presence of her husband influenced her biographical narrative. However, narrative research has shown that self-presentation is always addressed to someone. [36]

Despite the limitations of digital devices, they can also provide new insights into the spaces inhabited by interviewees, especially when mobile devices are used. This can, however, also create ethical problems as the interviewer can no longer control the interaction situation. One of my interviewees wanted to smoke a cigarette during the informal small talk that followed the interview. He took his mobile phone that he had used for the interview and went to the balcony. He proudly showed me the balcony sofa he had created. He focused on the camera, and I saw someone sleeping on the sofa. I felt uncomfortable and found myself once again in an interaction situation in which I felt like a voyeur because of the intimate insights that the use of a technological device made possible. [37]

Despite the affective distress and ethical concerns I experienced during the online interviews, there were situations in which online interviews were the best feasible option. For example, I decided to conduct one online interview for health reasons because my interviewee was pregnant and was in the late stages of her pregnancy. Although my interviewee was willing to conduct the interview on-site, I decided to conduct the interview online to reduce the risk of possible harm to her health. Digital online interviewing also made it possible to conduct interviews late at night, after office hours. For example, a mother of two children could give me an interview after she had put her children to bed. In another case, we agreed to

conduct the interview online because the interviewee's parents were visiting at the time, and there was no room for all of us in the small apartment. I also could conduct interviews, even though I had a sore throat and was afraid of being infected by SARS-CoV-2. I am convinced that none of these online interviews would have been possible if they had been conducted in person, on-site. [38]

My initial decision to locate the biographical-narrative interviews in a virtual space was prompted by the "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022) and the collective experience of vulnerability in a situation of societal crisis. The virtual space and online conferencing equipment made it possible to continue the fieldwork despite the pandemic. While the decision to move biographical-narrative interviews into digital space helped me solve some of the challenges I faced in on-site encounters, it also created new ones. Although both interview settings, on-site and online, were strongly co-constructed by the general atmosphere of anxiety, it seemed that the interaction in virtual space created an affective atmosphere and initiated situated affective encounters that were much more difficult to control than face-to-face interviews where physical presence and embodied interaction were embedded with normative, interaction codes. Such unpredictability was also caused by technical problems, as digitally mediated verbal and nonverbal communication was susceptible to technical disruptions (ARCHIBALD, AMBAGTSHEER, MYVOURNEEN & LAWLESS, 2019; DRÖGE 2020), and the possibility of leaving the interview situation at any moment by simply turning off the computer or leaving the screen. This unpredictability created a technologically mediated, though tangible and affective tension between the interviewer and interviewee. [39]

In conclusion, the discussion of my fieldwork showed that the general affective "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2023) which the pandemic had created, actively co-constructed both field access and the interview situation. Despite the lack of physical presence in online interview situations and the challenges mentioned above, it was possible to create an affective space where rapport, trust and empathy was possible. This experience did not only challenge but broadened my understanding of field interactions in regards to the constitutive power of affects and emotions, and urged me to think about the epistemological consequences and methodological implication of conducting biographical-narrative interviews in different spaces. [40]

5. Methodological Implications for Conducting Biographical-Narrative Interviews

In the following considerations, I focus my discussion on three methodological implications that I derive from describing my field research experience. I consider these as central to advancing the method of conducting biographical narrative interviews, generating new data, and opening new epistemological perspectives on the interactive production of biographical narratives in the digital space. First, I propose to conceptualize biographical-narrative interviews as "situated affective encounters" (AYATA et al., 2019). Second, I emphasize the importance of "emotional reflexivity" (HOLMES, 2015) as an interpretive tool that helps the interviewer and interviewee to navigate emotionally in the context of "affective atmospheres" and "situated affective encounters" in the field. Third, I advocate the use of these theoretical concepts as a methodological starting point for analyzing interview interactions when conducting biographical-narrative interviews in a digital space. [41]

5.1 Biographical-narrative interviews as interactive "situated affective encounters"

In discussing my fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic, I explained how I adapted the data collection process to the requirements of the research field (see also BECKER & ROSENTHAL, 2022; DAUSIEN & THOMA, 2023). This not only required practical modifications, such as the introduction of online interviews as a space for interview data collection, but also underlined the importance of reflecting on my own subjective position in relation to the affective and emotional dynamics of the field. As my research process was significantly influenced by general "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022, p.79), I began to reflect on my own behavior and interaction in the field, focusing on the affective dimension of conducting biographical-narrative interviews. [42]

I explored the interactional and affective dynamics in both on-site and online interviews based on my research journal notes as well as on transcriptions of the interviews. In my discussion, I drew on the concept of "situated affective encounters," coined by AYATA et al. (2019)[5]. With this concept I could describe the relational, often non-linguistic, but strongly embodied affective dynamics that took place between me as an interviewer and my interviewees in an interview situation. Thus, I could not only generate valuable material but also get a deeper understanding of the relational and interactive dynamics that underpinned the conduct of biographical-narrative interviews under pandemic conditions. At the same time, I noticed the need for further and more systematic research into the role of affective and interactional dynamics in eliciting biographical narratives. [43]

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5   AYATA et al. (2019) proposed to approach interviews as "situated affective encounters that enable researchers to collect [...] embodied data. This data can be traced through careful observation, self-reflexivity and documentation in an interview" (p.68). They referred to AHMED (2004) who described how an attachment is made in an interview situation as follows: "Through the work of listening to others, of hearing the force of their pain and the energy of their anger, of learning to be surprised by all that one feels oneself to be against; through all of this, a 'we' is formed, an attachment is made" (p.188)

5.2 Exploring "emotional reflexivity" in conducting biographical-narrative interviews

Having discussed how the affective "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022) as a general and transindividual process co-constructed my fieldwork and how the interview situation could be understood as a "situated affective encounter" (AYATA 2019 et al., p.68), I explored the role of emotions in field research. I followed KLEINMAN and COPP (1993) who underscored the importance of reflecting on emotions that emerge during fieldwork. They argued that even though researchers may not be aware of their own emotions and the "emotional labor" (HOCHSCHILD, 2012 [1983], pp.137ff.) they are performing, these strongly influence their behavior and actions in the field. Similarly, HOLMES (2010) defined emotions as "core to reflexive processes" (p.147). To act and navigate in the research field requires *emotional reflexivity* (HOLMES, 2015; see also BURKITT, 2012). This concept can be used to reflect and act upon one's own and others' emotions and thus navigate and take action in the field. HOLMES (2015) argued that the concept of *emotional reflexivity* is broader than the concept of "emotion work" (HOCHSCHILD, 2012 [1983], pp.35ff.)[6]—which adheres to the normative notion of "feeling rules" (pp.56ff.)[7]—because it is not only cognitively induced but also embodied and relational (HOLMES, 2010, p.61). As the discussion of my field experiences showed, not only the conduct of biographical-narrative interview but also the interaction in the field required *emotional reflexivity* (HOLMES, 2015). Consequently, I propose the use of emotional reflexivity as a methodological tool to explore how a researcher is actively co-constructing the respective field inquiry. It helps to interact and navigate in situated affective encounters framed by affective atmospheres. [44]

5.3 Conducting biographical-narrative online interviews in a digital space

Although digital online interviewing is not a new phenomenon in the field of qualitative interviewing (DEAKIN & WAKEFIELD, 2013; SALMONS, 2012), there exist hardly any profound methodological reflections on it (SCHIEK, 2022). Similarly, scholars conducting biographical-narrative interviews online have to systematically work out the methodological limitations and opportunities that the use of digital space opens up, as the method was developed for in person, on-site interview settings, long before researchers could rely on high-tech audio recording devices and internet-based online interviews. [45]

Drawing on my field research experiences, I advocate not only for the use of digital online interviewing in the field of biographical inquiry but also stress the importance of exploring the interactive, affective, and emotional dynamics in virtual space. This highlights the value of not only focusing on the analysis of the content of biographical-narrative interviews but also exploring the interactive,

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6   Concepts of "emotional labor" and "emotional work" are often used interchangeably. HOCHSCHILD (2012 [1983]), however, defined "emotional labor" as "labor" and its unpaid form "emotion work" (p.ix).

7   HOLMES (2015) underscored that in current complex and diverse societies it is not clear any more what "feeling rules" (HOCHSCHILD, 2012 [1983], p.61) are.

embodied, affective and emotional dynamics that co-construct the respective interviews. During my fieldwork, I wrote autoethnographic notes about my own subjective involvement. Together with detailed transcriptions of the interviews, it was possible for me to reconstruct and analyze the affective and emotional underpinnings of these field encounters. This not only enriched my data but also provided epistemologically interesting insights into the affective constitution of the field as well as to the emergence of emotional responses. [46]

6. Conclusion

In this article, I discussed the affective and emotional underpinnings of my research process during the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on the use of biographical-narrative interviews as a means of empirical data collection. I highlighted both the challenges I encountered and the new perspectives that opened up. I described how the "crisis" which the pandemic situation caused in qualitative fieldwork was not only shocking but functioned like a wake-up call. This forced me and other field researchers, to critically reflect on the taken-for-granted conditions and to think about the use of alternative forms of data collection, thus paving the way for the use and development of new and creative approaches. I discussed how this situation led me to use digital devices, such as online conferencing tools, to conduct biographical-narrative interviews. [47]

My research experience showed the importance of not being intimidated by the problems encountered in the field. Instead, it is worth to reflexively question the methodological assumptions and methodic tools that scholars take for granted. Exploring new ways of conducting fieldwork might be worrisome at first but can lead to new epistemological insights, even under difficult conditions and in moments of perceived failure. I discussed how I was affected by the general "atmospheres of anxiety" (TRIGG, 2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this led me to focus on exploring the affective and emotional dimensions of my own research and to realize that these strongly co-constructed them. In so doing, I discovered the potential of using online digital tools to conduct biographical-narrative interviews. [48]

I argue in favor of the significance of discussing the methodological and theoretical implications of transferring the conduct of biographical-narrative interviews from on-site to online interview settings. This is not only challenging but also opens up new possibilities for re-examining the limits and (new) possibilities of the use of biographical-narrative interview methods in a digital online space. In my discussion, I also highlighted how my field experiences provided general insights into the constitutive role of affects and emotions in biographical-narrative interviewing. Besides theoretical discussions, more empirical work is now needed to systematically explore the invisible role of atmospheres, affective and emotional underpinnings in this field. [49]

Acknowledgments

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