FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 26, No. 3, Art. 6
September 2025

# Invisibility by Choice: Telephone Interviews as an Opportunity for More Inclusive and Participant-Centred Qualitative Research

*Miriam Raab*

**Key words**: telephone interviews; face-to-face interviews; participant-centred research; narrative interviews; inclusivity

**Abstract**: The COVID-19 pandemic forced many qualitative researchers to consider alternative interview modes to face-to-face interviewing. While video communication platforms have gained immense popularity, video interviewing has been the focus of much of the post-pandemic methodological literature, with less attention paid to telephone interviewing. Both modes can produce data that are as rich as those generated in face-to-face interviews while offering greater cost efficiency, flexibility, and safety. Telephone interviews have been criticised for their lack of visual cues, whereas video interviews are said to exclude individuals without access to the necessary technology. In this article, I discuss the continued relevance of telephone interviews in qualitative research, based on a comparison of 62 narrative interviews with 33 former welfare recipients—some conducted face to face and some by telephone—as all research participants declined the use of video platforms. The findings indicate that similarly rich data could be generated with both modes, provided that research participants were allowed to choose the interview mode with which they felt most comfortable. Furthermore, offering telephone interviews created opportunities to include individuals who wished to be heard but not seen. I therefore propose adapting to potential research participants' needs by allowing them to choose their preferred interview mode to enable more inclusive and participant-centred research.

**Table of Contents**

## 1. Introduction

Interviewing is one of the most commonly used methods in qualitative research. It allows for in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of research participants (KVALE & BRINKMANN, 2009). While the superiority of face-to-face interviewing over other interview modes had already been challenged in recent decades (HARVEY, VAN TEIJLINGEN & PARRISH 2024; HOLT, 2010; VOGL, 2013), the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the process of conducting qualitative research led to a lasting shift in this perception. Many qualitative researchers were compelled to adopt "remote modes" (SELF, 2021, §4) such as video interviews using Zoom or similar online video communication platforms, to adhere to safety measures and abide by legal restrictions while trying to prevent delays in their research projects (KEEN, LOMELI-RODRIGUEZ & JOFFE, 2022). [1]

In March 2020, just as I was about to begin fieldwork for a study on welfare recipients entering subsidised employment in Germany—at a time when the pandemic had curtailed most in-person interactions worldwide—I faced a similar dilemma. The original plan had been to conduct biographical-narrative interviews with formerly long-term unemployed participants in a subsidised employment programme, aged between 30 and 65 years, in their homes. However, this approach was no longer feasible under the contact restrictions in place at the start of the pandemic. In an effort to remain flexible in response to pandemic developments and still meet project deadlines, I adapted the research design in terms of locations and interview modes and added follow-up interviews, with the intention of eventually conducting at least one face-to-face interview with each research participant. [2]

When pandemic regulations prohibited in-person meetings, I offered potential research participants the options of telephone and video interviews. While they accepted telephone interviews, none of the 33 research participants—who had depended on welfare benefits for several years—could be interviewed via video call. Most claimed that they lacked the necessary equipment for video communication. In addition, some research participants refused both video and face-to-face interviews, even when personal interactions were allowed, and made the use of the telephone the condition for participating at all. [3]

To my surprise, despite the vast technological advances and widespread adoption of video communication during the pandemic, video interviews were neither accessible to nor trusted by my study population. The telephone emerged as the only acceptable alternative to in-person meetings—and, in some cases, the *only* acceptable interview mode. Based on this experience, I argue for the continued relevance of telephone interviewing in qualitative research, particularly

for expanding access to potential research participants by offering them a choice of interview modes. This paper contributes to the methodological literature on telephone interviews by demonstrating that they can produce data that are as rich as those obtained through face-to-face interviews while emphasising that this is true only if research participants are given the opportunity to choose the interview mode with which they feel most comfortable. [4]

In Section 2, I present the current state of research, comparing face-to-face, telephone and video interviews. I then introduce the research background (Section 3) and my own empirical comparison of telephone and face-to-face interviews (Section 4), followed by an in-depth analysis of four cases in which research participants declined both face-to-face and video interviews and could be interviewed by telephone only (Section 5). This is succeeded by a brief discussion of strategies for including hard-to-reach study populations (Section 6). Finally, I summarise the results, draw conclusions about research participants' interview mode preferences in relation to data quality, and discuss the practical implications for researchers (Section 6). [5]

## 2. Mode Comparisons in the Literature: Face-to-Face, Telephone and Video Interviews

Conducting interviews face-to-face has traditionally been viewed as the "gold standard" (NOVICK, 2008, p.397) in qualitative research, with telephone interviews considered "second best" (HOLT, 2010, p.113) or "a methodological compromise" (IRVINE, 2011, p.203). While widely used in quantitative surveys, telephone interviews were only reluctantly introduced into qualitative research amid general concerns about maintaining motivation, establishing rapport and ensuring both data quantity and quality (GILLHAM, 2005; RUBIN & RUBIN, 1995; SHUY, 2002). However, their popularity has grown since the 1990s (OLTMANN, 2016). Currently, telephone interviews are used across research disciplines such as public health, nursing studies, psychology, sociology, social work, education research and political science (BLOCK & ERSKINE, 2012). [6]

### 2.1 Face-to-face vs. telephone interviewing

In much of the earlier literature, telephone interviews were not researchers' first choice. They were often used as a "default mode" (HOLT, 2010, p.120) when researchers were unable to conduct a portion or all of the planned interviews face to face for practical reasons such as time constraints or low funding (IRVINE, 2011; TRIER-BIENIEK, 2012), safety concerns (STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004), ethical considerations (GLOGOWSKA, YOUNG & LOCKYER, 2011), or research participants' requests (NIEDERBERGER & RUDDAT, 2012; STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004). However, some researchers intentionally chose qualitative telephone interviews to follow up on quantitative telephone surveys (DRABBLE, TROCKI, SALCEDO, WALKER & KORCHA, 2016; TAYLOR, 2002) or qualitative face-to-face interviews (VOGL, 2013) or to gain access to academic elites with limited availability (STEPHENS, 2007). [7]

The benefits of telephone interviewing for researchers are evident: it saves both travel time and costs (MILLER, 1995; TAYLOR, 2002; TRIER-BIENIEK, 2012), is environmentally friendly (HANNA, 2012), and ensures physical safety for both researchers and research participants (STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004). Telephone interviewing also minimises audible disruptions compared with face-to-face interviews in public settings, facilitating better listening and recording (ibid.). In addition, recording devices and note-taking during interviews, which may irritate research participants (HÖPFNER & PROMBERGER, 2023; MILLER, 1995), remain out of view during telephone interviews (STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004). [8]

Telephone interviewing is also relatively inclusive since most people have access to and are familiar with communicating via landlines or mobile phones (CARR & WORTH, 2001; NOVICK, 2008). However, it is not feasible for individuals without phones or those who have difficulty using them owing to hearing or language limitations (CARR & WORTH, 2001; IRVINE, 2011). This is especially relevant for conducting interviews in countries where landline and mobile phone access is still unevenly distributed among the population (KHALIL et al., 2021; UMAR et al., 2023). [9]

STURGES and HANRAHAN (2004) were able to include a broader range of visitors in county jails in their research by offering the choice between telephone and face-to-face interviews. Other researchers also note that telephone interviews have the potential to extend "to groups under-represented in research" (MILLER, 1995, p.29) or those who would "otherwise go unheard" (GLOGOWSKA et al., 2011, p.26). This also applies to rural and geographically remote areas (KHALIL et al., 2021; UMAR et al., 2023). [10]

If researchers have not met research participants before conducting telephone interviews, information about their physical appearance or environment is lacking unless researchers enquire about these aspects (NOVICK, 2008; OLTMANN, 2016). Non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions and gestures, is also missing (NOVICK, 2008). However, NOVICK noted, that non-verbal communication could be easily misinterpreted, and HOLT (2010) argued, that this lack allowed the researcher to "'stay at the level of text'" (p.115). STURGES and HANRAHAN (2004) suggested that verbal cues such as hesitating might suffice. They deemed telephone interviews useful for research that does not require full immersion into the worlds of research participants (ibid.). [11]

Telephone interviews are less intrusive than face-to-face interviews conducted in settings such as research participants' homes, as research participants do not have to host researchers (HOLT, 2010; OLTMANN, 2016). HOLT (2010) assumed that face-to-face interviews at research participants' homes might remind some participants of being questioned by and subjected to the "professional gaze" (p.115) of social workers and similar authorities. Consequently, interviewing such research participants by telephone might make them feel less judged and observed (ibid.). TAYLOR (2002), on the other hand, highlighted the "capacity for control of the 'interviewer effect'" (p.22) when

conducting interviews by telephone. Since research participants can make "judgements regarding similarity and difference" (STEPHENS, 2007, p.212) between researchers and themselves only on an audible level, not being able to see them might reduce hierarchies and power imbalances (HOLT, 2010). [12]

STURGES and HANRAHAN (2004) discovered that research participants, who opted for telephone interviews over face-to-face interviews in jail waiting rooms, cited privacy concerns and convenience as the main reasons. Being interviewed by telephone allows research participants to "control the privacy of the conversation" (HOLT, 2010, p.117) and provides flexibility. Telephone interviews are not witnessed by onlookers and do not require research participants to travel to the interview location. The women interviewed by TRIER-BIENIEK (2012) valued being able to arrange interviews according to work or care obligations; for example, they could be interviewed while their children were sleeping. However, since telephone interviews are associated with less social pressure than personal interactions are, they make it easier for research participants to not only reschedule but also cancel or simply not answer the telephone (OLTMANN, 2016; STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004). Therefore, there is a higher rate of non-participation in scheduled telephone interviews than in face-to-face interviews (OLTMANN, 2016). [13]

In the literature, most authors have conducted semi-structured or narrative telephone interviews. These include a wide range of target groups and research questions. Researchers who explored sensitive topics such as trauma or anxiety were particularly concerned with the lack of visual interaction with respect to building trust with research participants (GÖTZENBRUCKER, GRIESBECK & PREIBISCH, 2022; TRIER-BIENIEK, 2012). STURGES and HANRAHAN (2004) overcame this issue by recruiting in person, whereas VOGL (2013) followed up on face-to-face interviews. IRVINE (2011) recommended that researchers continuously articulate to research participants that they are listening during telephone interviews with "'acknowledgement tokens' (such as mm hm, yeah, okay)" (p.208) to compensate for the loss of visual encouragement. [14]

Contrary to researchers' expectations, research participants were not restricted in their personal narration of sensitive topics, even when researchers and research participants had not met in person previously but were recruited in online forums (TRIER-BIENIEK, 2012). Some research participants interviewed by telephone shared more information about intimate issues than did others interviewed in person (NIEDERBERGER & RUDDAT, 2012). One plausible explanation for this finding is that the "physical distance" (BLOCK & ERSKINE, 2012, p.435; NIEDERBERGER & RUDDAT, 2012) during telephone interviews suggests anonymity and may thus encourage research participants to open up about potentially embarrassing topics, as the anonymity enables them to save or "maintain face" (GOFFMAN, 1967, p.6) in front of a "faceless researcher" (DINHAM, 1994, p.25; TAYLOR, 2002). DRABBLE et al. (2016) and TRIER-BIENIEK (2012) suggested favouring telephone interviews over face-to-face interviews when researching trauma and other potentially painful experiences, as

research participants are interviewed in a "safe space" (DRABBLE et al., p.121) and have more control over the interview process. [15]

Most empirical comparisons between telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews in the same study (IRVINE, 2011; NIEDERBERGER & RUDDAT, 2012; STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004) or with the same research participants (VOGL, 2013) revealed that although telephone interviews were often shorter than face-to-face interviews were, this did not result in a loss of data quality or depth. LECHUGA (2012) noted that "the many qualities that define successful qualitative interviews do not require the interviewer and respondent to be in view of each other" (p.266). HOLT (2010) argued that, instead, success depends on the "telephone skills" (p.118) of researchers and research participants. [16]

### 2.2 Face-to-face interviewing vs. video interviewing vs. telephone interviewing

The use of interviews via platforms or applications such as Skype or Zoom, which allow audio-visual interactions, has increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has been the subject of methodological research since the early 2000s (HANNA, 2012). Video interviews appear to combine the benefits of telephone interviews—such as time efficiency, access to a wider geographical field, interviewer and research participant safety, convenience and flexibility (DEAKIN & WAKEFIELD, 2014; LOBE, MORGAN & HOFFMAN, 2022)—with one key advantage of face-to-face interviews: the ability to connect in an auditory and visual manner (GRAY, WONG-WYLIE, REMPEL & COOK, 2020). [17]

Researchers found the data produced in video interviews to be comparable in reliability, depth, and richness to those generated during face-to-face interviews (DEAKIN & WAKEFIELD, 2014; KEEN et al., 2022). Although video interviews allow for mutual visibility, the quality of video can vary significantly. However, improvements in technology and internet connectivity have enhanced image quality—from lagging low-resolution frames (OLIFFE, KELLY, GONZALEZ MONTANER & YU KO, 2021) to high-definition visuals that even enabled researchers to read research participants' lips (WAKELIN, McARA-COUPER & FLEMING, 2024). Yet, HARVEY et al. (2024) still regarded observable visual cues as limited, as certain body language and emotional responses remained outside the camera frame. PRIOR and LACHOVER (2023) also noted that research participants could "manipulate their performance" (p.4) because they controlled the visible frame. Additionally, the presence of others listening in may not be disclosed in remote interviews (ibid.). [18]

ARCHIBALD, AMBAGTSHEER, MAVOURNEEN and LAWLESS (2019) found that both researchers and research participants valued the ability to see each other and respond to non-verbal cues during video interviews, which helped build trust. This effect was most pronounced when research participants were experienced with the technology. Interestingly, technical difficulties did not alienate research participants; rather, they were often perceived as a bonding experience through the "joint problem-solving process" (p.5). GÖTZENBRUCKER et al. (2022) also

observed that visual signs of discomfort, such as tearing up, enabled researchers to provide support even when no audible cues were present. [19]

Nonetheless, many researchers have described occasions when technical issues forced them to switch off cameras to maintain audio quality or avoid further disruption (DEAKIN & WAKEFIELD, 2014). In some studies, at least one research participant refused to turn on the camera (PRIOR & LACHOVER, 2023; WAKELIN et al., 2024). DEAKIN and WAKEFIELD (2014) noted that "[s]eeing oneself on screen can often be a source of unease and anxiety" (p.611). This can be problematic for research studies that require information about research participants' physicality (HARVEY et al., 2024). If visual cues are absent and only the audio is recorded, video interviews resemble telephone interviews. However, researchers can still make themselves visible to research participants and use additional tools such as chat or visual sharing functions (WAKELIN et al., 2024). [20]

Video interviews present both new and familiar challenges; for example, ethical concerns related to the storage of video files by providers and the protection of research participants' data during and after interviews must be addressed (ARCHIBALD et al., 2019; WAKELIN et al., 2024). As with telephone interviews, video interviews may appeal more to individuals who are challenged by personal interactions due to disabilities, phobias or other physical and mental health issues (GÖTZENBRUCKER et al., 2022; KEEN et al., 2022). However, the increased freedom, flexibility and control for research participants offered by video interviews, also lead to higher rates of non-attendance compared to face-to-face interviews. DEAKIN and WAKEFIELD (2014) attributed these rates to a "feeling of disconnect when one arranges a meeting over the Internet" (p.612). [21]

Video interviews require access to technological equipment, stable internet connections, digital proficiency and comfort with video communication tools (ENGWARD, GOLDSPINK, IANCU, KERSEY & WOOD, 2022). While KEEN et al. (2022) argued that the use of online video platforms became commonplace during the pandemic, this primarily applies to certain professionals and individuals with sufficient "digital literacy" (ENGWARD et al., 2022, p.4). GÖTZENBRUCKER et al. (2022) cautioned that unfamiliarity with the technology can cause stress among research participants. For this reason, ENGWARD et al. (2022) recommended "[a]n added layer of participant preparation" (p.4) to ensure that research participants feel comfortable with the interview setting. Nonetheless, the prospect of video interviews may deter individuals from participating in research studies and exclude populations with limited financial resources or digital competence (DEAKIN & WAKEFIELD, 2014; GÖTZENBRUCKER et al., 2022; GRAY et al., 2020; LOBE et al., 2022). [22]

### 2.3 Providing choices

When comparing these three modes, researchers have almost unanimously concluded that the research context is decisive (OLTMANN, 2016; OPDENAKKER, 2006), which implies the necessity of prior knowledge about or research on the target group. However, HARVEY et al. (2024) suggested that mode preferences depended more on research participants' personalities than on ascribed characteristics, and that research participants' choices should be prioritised over standardisation and researcher convenience. For instance, HANNA (2012) emphasised the importance of offering remote and thus environmentally friendly options to climate-conscious participants, which also contributed to creating a "more equal relationship" (p.239). GÖTZENBRUCKER et al. (2022) allowed research participants with anxieties or phobias to select their preferred interview mode beforehand. Notably, they were among the few authors in the current literature who still included telephone interviews as an option (for a summary of the mode comparisons in the literature, see Table 1).

| **Mode** | **Advantages** | **Disadvantages** |
|---|---|---|
| Face-to-Face Interviewing | Provides full access to visual information and non-verbal communication<br>May facilitate trust and rapport through physical presence<br>Typically achieves a higher participation rate than remote modes do | May feel intrusive, particularly in home settings<br>Lacks privacy in public spaces<br>Physical presence may reinforce power imbalances<br>Less flexible: requires travel coordination<br>Can be costly (e.g. travel)<br>Risk of physical harm |
| Telephone Interviewing | Flexible, economical, and convenient<br>Accessible to remote, immobile, or time-constrained research participants<br>Reduces visual distractions (e.g. note-taking, recording)<br>Environmentally friendly<br>Ensures physical safety<br>Less intrusive, reduces social pressure<br>Enables research participant privacy and control<br>May encourage openness on sensitive topics due to perceived anonymity | Lacks visual information and non-verbal communication<br>Trust-building relies heavily on vocal cues<br>Higher non-participation rates; calls are easier to ignore<br>Requires access to and capacity for telephone use |

| Mode | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---|---|---|
| Video Interviewing | Combines the advantages of the face-to-face and telephone modes (e.g. flexibility, visual connection)<br>Offers safety, privacy, convenience, and broad geographical reach<br>Allows access to non-verbal cues | Technical issues may affect quality (e.g. poor connectivity, delays)<br>Some visual cues and emotions may remain out of frame<br>Seeing oneself on screen can cause discomfort or anxiety<br>Presence of others off-camera may be undisclosed<br>Requires digital access, equipment, and proficiency<br>Higher non-participation rates |

Table 1: Mode comparisons in the literature [23]

## 3. Research Background, Sampling and Field Access

My empirical comparison is based on a study comprising 33 biographical case studies. The study explored formerly long-term unemployed welfare benefit recipients' personal experiences before, during and, in some cases, after their participation in a subsidised employment programme in Germany. Since I also believed in the superiority of face-to-face interviews over telephone interviews, I extended the research design to include two interviews per research participant. This approach was intended to allow me to meet research participants—whom I initially interviewed by telephone due to COVID-19-related contact restrictions—later in person. I considered face-to-face interviews essential for fully understanding and developing the biographical case studies. [24]

Potential research participants were randomly selected from a quantitative cluster analysis of programme participants. I received the contact information, including names, postal addresses, and phone numbers, of a considerably larger preliminary sample of 320 individuals. I then sent letters to all individuals with a permanent postal address, informing them about the study. The letter stated that they were randomly selected and might be contacted by telephone to participate. It also emphasised that participation was voluntary, that there would be no disadvantages if they chose not to participate, and that their personal data would be protected from third parties and used only in anonymised form if they chose to participate. The letter also presented the options of face-to-face interviews (in compliance with distancing and hygiene regulations), telephone interviews, and video interviews. [25]

A few individuals declined participation via post or e-mail and were not contacted again; one person called me and agreed to participate. Since I had no means of contacting individuals without telephone numbers—presumably because they did not own a landline or mobile phone or because they could not use them owing to hearing impairments—they were consequently excluded from the study. I

gradually contacted 172 of the 305 remaining potential research participants with what often felt like "coldcalling" (GLOGOWSKA et al., 2011, p.19)—calling potential participants unsolicited without prior introduction or opportunity to opt out beforehand—since very few remembered receiving or reading the information letter, and several letters were returned because the recipient had moved. Additionally, some potential research participants had low levels of literacy, while others seldom checked their mailboxes. [26]

Several telephone numbers were no longer in use or had been reassigned. The majority of the other potential research participants did not answer when they were called up to three times. Many of those who answered the telephone immediately hung up or quickly declined to participate after I introduced myself and explained my request. From some of the more dismissive responses, it became apparent that these individuals had been targeted by telemarketing or market research calls in the past. This probably also explains why many did not pick up calls from an unknown number. A smaller group was initially talkative and might have been open to an on-the-spot interview. However, they declined to participate in an actual or longer interview of any mode that required written consent. Additionally, the telephone posed a barrier when a bad connection or limited language proficiency on the part of a potential research participant made it impossible for me to communicate my request effectively. I was able to recruit 25 of the 33 research participants by post and telephone. [27]

Aiming to obtain a sociodemographically diverse sample, I found that individuals with certain characteristics—such as older Eastern German men or individuals without vocational training—were more difficult to access by telephone. Therefore, I contacted offices of the German welfare administration, which then acted as gatekeepers. This alternative field access enabled me to recruit eight additional research participants. This combination of field accesses might have helped reduce the bias inherent in each. The first approach required research participants to answer the telephone and be generally open to research studies, which excluded a large portion of the preliminary sample. Through the second approach, I was able to reach individuals who were suspicious of unknown callers and studies. However, these research participants were selected by welfare administration staff and were likely on good terms with them—introducing a potential bias of positive selection (for the research participants' characteristics, see Table 2).

| **Characteristic** | | **Number of Research Participants** |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 20 |
| | Female | 13 |
| Age | 30-39 | 11 |
| | 40-49 | 7 |
| | 50-59 | 13 |
| | 60 or older | 2 |
| Region in Germany | East | 9 |
| | West | 24 |
| Migration Background | Yes | 7 |
| | No | 26 |
| Vocational Training | Completed vocational training | 24 |
| | No vocational training | 9 |
| State of Health | Severely disabled | 2 |
| | Health impaired | 11 |
| | Not health impaired | 20 |
| Household Composition | Single | 18 |
| | Single parent | 10 |
| | Partnered | 2 |
| | Partnered with children | 3 |
| Field Access | Post/Telephone | 25 |
| | Gatekeeper | 8 |
| Interview Modes | Face to face only | 2 |
| | Telephone only | 8 |
| | Face to face, then telephone | 20 |
| | Telephone, then face to face | 3 |

Table 2: Characteristics of the research participants (n=33) [28]

## 4. Empirical Mode Comparisons: Face-to-Face vs. Telephone Interviews

In this section, I present my own empirical comparison of face-to-face and telephone interviews, as none of the research participants chose to be interviewed by video communication. I compared the two modes in terms of the research participants' mode preferences, participation rates, and comfort as well as interview durations and, ultimately, depth and quality. [29]

### 4.1 Mode options, preferences and participation rates

Whenever personal interactions and business trips were prohibited, I offered only telephone and video interviews. Otherwise, I tried to convince the research participants to do face-to-face interviews. Considering the health of the research participants and myself, I decided to conduct face-to-face interviews outside in public places such as cafés or restaurant terraces, once on a playground, and once in a participant's garden. I informed the research participants that I would travel to their hometown or near their workplace and that they could choose a suitable location for the interview. I made it clear upfront that I would pay for any drinks or food that they consumed at gastronomic locations during the interviews, knowing that some research participants with limited financial resources might otherwise be deterred. Additionally, I offered that parents could bring their children to the interview if they could not arrange childcare. [30]

While some research participants may have welcomed not having to host me in their homes, others may have been discouraged by the public nature of the face-to-face interviews, which likely explains their preference for telephone interviews. To avoid losing potential research participants and with the hope of eventually interviewing them in person after building trust through initial interviews, I accepted any mode that they preferred. Only one potential research participant opted for the second remote mode, video interviewing, despite my strong encouragement due to the benefit of audio-visual interaction. Most claimed that they did not have the technological equipment for video interviews. Some did not own computers, smartphones or even mobile phones and had never used video platforms before. Moreover, owing to data protection concerns at my research institute, I had to use a specific platform that included complicated instructions and was less user friendly than providers such as Zoom. Ultimately, the only person who had agreed to do a video interview did not attend the scheduled call. [31]

In total, five individuals who had initially confirmed participation were ultimately absent. Three had scheduled telephone interviews and one a video call, but they did not answer at the scheduled time or when I tried to contact them later. Another participant did not show up for the scheduled face-to-face interview. This confirms the higher rates of non-attendance or non-participation associated with remote interview modes, which appear less binding and easier to avoid. These absences were also more tolerable for me, as I was sitting in my office and could easily work on other tasks instead. However, because face-to-face interviews require more time and financial resources, I tried to increase the research

participants' commitment beforehand. I reminded them that I had booked a train and confirmed the interview time and location by text closer to the date–something I did not do for telephone interviews. [32]

Between August 2020 and January 2023, I conducted a total of 62 narrative interviews, comprising 33 initial and 29 follow-up interviews. I was able to follow up with 27 research participants once, six to twelve months after the initial interview and with one of them two additional times—the third time 12 months after the second interview and the last time shortly after the third interview—due to her insecure residence status. The interview corpus consists of 25 face-to-face interviews and 37 telephone interviews. Twenty-three research participants were interviewed via both modes: 20 were interviewed first face-to-face and then by telephone, while the order was reversed for three. Four research participants were interviewed both times by telephone—three due to their own preferences and one involuntarily, the first time due to a public transportation strike and the second time due to illness shortly before the interview, which forced us to switch to a telephone call at the last minute. Two research participants were interviewed only once face to face, and four others were interviewed only once by telephone. These six research participants declined or could not be reached for a second interview. [33]

Comparing the face-to-face and telephone interviews, I noticed that the research participants showed agency in both modes. Apart from selecting the interview location, time, and, in some cases, mode, some rescheduled their interviews or showed up or responded late. Telephone interviews even allowed the research participants to reschedule on the spot when they had forgotten about the appointment, whereas the research participants felt more committed and likely to remember to attend in-person meetings. [34]

### 4.2 Interview settings

Face-to-face interviews required greater flexibility on my part, as several research participants were accompanied by family members: two female research participants brought their children due to care obligations, one male participant brought his wife—presumably for socio-cultural reasons—and another male participant brought both, as he relied on his wife to read the consent document before signing it, and they could not leave their young child unattended. In contrast, during telephone interviews, I did not know whether a third person was present. In one case, I realised halfway through the interview that the research participant's job coach was listening in. This compromised the quality of the interview to some extent, as the research participant was often distracted. While parents were also temporarily occupied with their children during face-to-face interviews, this did not affect the interview quality. However, I sometimes refrained from inquiring about topics that I considered inappropriate for children. [35]

### 4.3 Trust building

I was able to build a trustful environment with the research participants in both modes, beginning and ending all interviews with "informal chatter" (ENGWARD et al., 2022, p.8) about the weather, the state of the pandemic or their current employment situation. The interviews comprised a biographical-narrative part (ROSENTHAL, 1995; SCHÜTZE, 1983) and a guide-assisted problem-centred part (WITZEL & REITER, 2012), focusing on the research participants' experiences with the subsidised employment programme. I intuitively chose which part to begin with and opted for the biographical part only when I felt that the research participants had already *warmed up* to me. In other cases, especially when the research participants brought up their subsidised job before the interview, I followed up on the job specifics first, and then moved on to their biographies. This approach was effective across both modes. [36]

At the end the initial interviews, I asked the research participants if they consented to being contacted for a follow-up interview after six months. All but one gave consent. The remaining 32 told me whether they preferred to be contacted by e-mail or telephone. When contacting them for the follow-up interviews, I reminded them of their study participation, which all those who responded seemed to remember. We then arranged the time and, where applicable, the place for the second interview. I started the follow-up interviews with a short recap of the research participants' employment and overall situation at the time of the initial interview and invited them to share what had happened since then. [37]

### 4.4 Interview duration

The initial face-to-face interviews ranged from 29 to 135 minutes (average of 60 minutes), whereas the initial telephone interviews ranged from 21 to 114 minutes (average of 56 minutes). Owing to the biographical-narrative part, durations varied based on the research participants' age, complexity of biography, personality, eloquence, and fluency. Some research participants needed encouragement and prompting to share their narratives, whereas others, particularly those eager to express themselves, spoke in extended monologues. [38]

Face-to-face interviews did not necessarily produce more textual data but proceeded at a slower pace. Sharing the same space allowed the research participants and me to communicate non-verbally—for instance, by exchanging glances in reaction to passers-by or waiters. While longer pauses required clarification during telephone interviews, they were usually self-explanatory in face-to-face interviews. In contrast, telephone interviews appeared more focused. This may also explain why the two follow-up interviews that I conducted in person —lasting 34 and 41 minutes—were longer than the average follow-up telephone interview which lasted 15 minutes (ranging from four to 40 minutes). However, the duration of the follow-up interviews again depended on the extent of change in the research participants' lives since the initial interviews and on the number of follow-up questions that I posed. [39]

### 4.5 Audible and visual information

Despite taking place in public, face-to-face interviews were rarely disrupted by surrounding noise, although such noise complicated transcription. Telephone interviews presented different acoustic challenges. In a few cases, I struggled to understand participants due to poor reception, strong regional accents, or speech impediments—issues that were more manageable face to face, where I could also observe their speech. Because telephone interviews lacked visual interaction, silences could easily be misinterpreted, and more overlapping speech and accidental interruptions occurred. However, I noticed that I learned to avoid these with more experience in telephone interviewing. [40]

The recorded interviews began and ended with me audibly announcing that I was turning the recording device on and off. While the device remained invisible during telephone interviews, it did not pose a problem during face-to-face interviews either. Even when I had to move it closer to the research participants due to surrounding noise—thus inadvertently drawing attention to it—the participants did not appear to be affected by its presence. My note-taking during interviews, which I had announced beforehand in both modes and which became necessary when narratives became chaotic or non-chronological, received slightly more attention. One research participant, whom I interviewed face to face, joked that I would get blisters on my hands from writing so much. While the research participants could see that I was still writing during face-to-face interviews and sometimes paused or slowed down their narration, I had to articulate my subsequent silence during telephone interviews. [41]

During face-to-face interviews, I was able to show interest through facial expressions or gestures alone, which felt less intrusive. Some research participants picked up on my raised eyebrows indicating a question and provided clarification or elaboration. Others were encouraged to continue their narration when I smiled and nodded. In contrast, during telephone interviews, I had to verbalise my reactions—either by interrupting the research participant's narration or by taking notes and returning to the point later. [42]

I also gained substantial visual information about the research participants whom I interviewed face to face, including their appearance and how they interacted with me and others in public spaces. As a result, I remember these interviews more vividly. Furthermore, being present in their hometowns allowed me to experience first-hand some of the local characteristics, such as poor public transportation or social dynamics. For example, I observed that one research participant, Victor[1], was greeted by every person we passed on the way to the interview location, emphasising his strong bond with his hometown and reluctance to move for work. I also saw that he limped and later discovered that he had a disability—something he never mentioned during either interview, not even when asked about his health. Victor's decision not to disclose this disability might indicate that he did not perceive it as relevant or did not want to be seen as

1 All names used are pseudonyms.

weak. Since my research interest was focused on the research participants' own narratives and subjective perspectives, this kind of outside view may have been of secondary importance. Thus, the absence of visual information in telephone interviews did not necessarily constitute a major loss. [43]

### 4.6 Research participant retention

In general, the research participants seemed content with the initial interviews of both modes, with many expressing relief at having been able to talk about their experiences. All except one—who claimed that he had too little time due to his work schedule—gave their consent to be contacted for a follow-up interview. However, although I had exchanged multiple contact details with the research participants, I was unable to reach five of them for follow-up interviews. Since four of them had initially been interviewed by telephone, I first assumed that the remote nature of the initial interview created more distance and made the interview itself less memorable. However, given that I had no difficulty reaching the remaining research participants—including those who were also first interviewed via telephone—a more plausible explanation is that these particular research participants had been recruited by third parties. Accessing them via a gatekeeper from the welfare administration may have contributed to a more distanced researcher–research participant relationship, which in turn reduced participant retention. In all other cases, however, the initial contact had been made directly—by telephone. Thus, the cornerstone for a lasting researcher–research participant relationship may lie in the initial contact being made directly by the researcher rather than through intermediaries. [44]

### 4.7 Comfort and engagement

When comparing face-to-face and telephone interviews with the same research participants, I noticed one significant difference: while the majority of the participants conveyed similar levels of comfort across both modes, six research participants—four men and all older than fifty—were noticeably less talkative during follow-up telephone interviews. This finding surprised me, as I had assumed that having already met and established a trustful relationship in person would facilitate smoother subsequent conversations, including by telephone. Since I did not explicitly ask the research participants about their mode preferences or reflections on the interviews during or after the sessions, I can only infer the reasons. One likely explanation is that these research participants were simply less accustomed to and less comfortable with longer telephone conversations and preferred *real* interactions. Victor, for example, was audibly disappointed when I told him that the follow-up interview would not take place in person, and he was much less elaborate in his answers and somewhat distracted during the telephone interview. The pandemic may have also played a role: while some participants had become more reclusive and withdrawn, others were eager to overcome their loneliness and actively sought out opportunities for human connection. Rita, another research participant who seemed less comfortable and less motivated to be interviewed by telephone, explained that she agreed to

participate mainly because she saw the initial face-to-face interview as a rare opportunity to leave the house and socialise. [45]

### 4.8 Interview depth and data quality

Overall, the depth and quality of the interview data from telephone interviews were comparable to those from face-to-face interviews. While some research participants appeared less comfortable with telephone interviews and were thus less articulate during follow-up interviews, this carried little weight in terms of data quality. As the initial interviews were often the main source of information, the follow-up interviews—especially those conducted by telephone—were generally shorter, and in many cases, secondary in nature. Therefore, even though these research participants were less talkative than they had been before, their follow-up interviews did not differ greatly in terms of informational content and depth from those of other participants. Nevertheless, research participants' comfort levels with interview modes should be considered a factor in determining interview depth and overall quality. [46]

Comparing the modes, I did not notice any difference in the research participants' willingness to share personal or even painful experiences, whether they spoke on the telephone in the privacy of their own home or were interviewed in cafés or other public places. However, if a research participant indicated discomfort about a topic, I would move on to a different subject. This was harder to *sense* in the telephone interviews than in the face-to-face interviews because of the lack of visual cues. Relying solely on audible cues and having to reassure myself verbally, I enquired less about sensitive topics in telephone interviews than in face-to-face interviews, fearing that I might unintentionally overstep the research participants' boundaries without seeing their reactions to questions about failed marriages or teenage pregnancies. Nonetheless, I found that by omitting or cutting short certain aspects of their biography in their narration, the research participants revealed more about themselves than by disclosing every detail. Consequently, I do not consider this a loss in the telephone interviews. [47]

### 4.9 Ethical considerations

While the telephone interviews deprived me, as the interviewer, of visual cues and prevented me from asking more intrusive questions, this aspect of them also had the positive effect of making me more respectful and cautious of the research participants' boundaries. The telephone mode also provided more privacy for the research participants, as they could move to a different room and out of the earshot of family members if they wished—unlike during face-to-face interviews with children or other guests present or close by. [48]

Another potential ethical dilemma involves paying for the research participants' food or drink orders during face-to-face interviews in cafés or restaurants, as it might have swayed some research participants with limited financial resources to take part in the study. The same is true for the prospect of social interaction for

lonely individuals. These issues were avoided in telephone interviews, which did not involve any expenses or incentives for the research participants. [49]

Additionally, safety was less of a concern in the telephone interviews. Despite hygiene and safety measures such as testing before interviews, maintaining physical distance, and disinfecting pens, both the research participants and I were still subjected to a remaining risk of contracting COVID-19—or other diseases. Telephone interviews, however, did not pose any health risks. Moreover, they offered physical safety for the research participants and me. To reduce the potential danger that comes with meeting strangers, I usually arranged to interview the research participants face to face in public places. However, in one case, I conducted the interview in a research participant's garden, as he lived too far away from any potential public interview site. To ensure my own safety, I arranged for a colleague to both drop me off before the interview and pick me up afterwards. None of these safety measures were necessary for telephone interviews (for a summary of the empirical mode comparisons, see Table 3).

| **Category** | **Face-to-Face Interviews** | **Telephone Interviews** |
|---|---|---|
| Mode Options and Preferences (Third option video interviews chosen only once [non-participation]) | Face-to-face interviews seen as a social opportunity by some; preferred by participants who were less familiar with long telephone conversations | Favoured for convenience, privacy, and safety; allowed socially withdrawn or anxious participants to partake; suited those used to non-visual communication (e.g. gamers); in rare cases, a stepping stone to in-person interaction |
| Participation Rates | Higher participant commitment, perceived as more binding | More prone to non-participation |
| Interview Settings | Mostly public settings; some participants accompanied by family; adjustments made | Private settings; third-party presence not apparent, rarely affecting interview quality |
| Trust Building | Trust developed through informal talk and shared physical presence | Trust also built via informal talk, reliant on verbal cues alone |
| Duration | Initial interviews: 29–135 min (avg. 60); follow-ups: 34 and 41 min; slower pace due to co-presence and non-verbal cues | Initial: 21–114 min (avg. 56); follow-ups shorter (avg. 15); more focused; faster pace; but data comparable in length |

| Category | Face-to-Face Interviews | Telephone Interviews |
|---|---|---|
| Audible and Visual Information | Access to visual information; allowed for non-verbal communication; note-taking was commented on in rare cases | Lacked visual cues and information; higher likelihood of misinterpreting silences; overlapping; audio issues (reception, accent); verbal reactions required |
| Research Participant Retention (Retention higher when initial contact made directly by me; dropouts linked more to third-party recruitment than mode) | Slightly better retention | Four out of five drop-outs (all recruited by third party) |
| Comfort and Engagement (Most research participants similarly engaged with both modes) | Some participants more engaged during the initial in-person interviews | Some participants (esp. older males) less comfortable and less talkative during telephone follow-ups |
| Interview Depth and Data Quality | Rich data; visual feedback supported sensitive topic probing; better sensing of discomfort; vivid recollection | Comparable data quality overall; some avoidance of sensitive topics by the researcher due to a lack of visual cues |
| Ethical Considerations | Potential influence of covering costs or offering social contact; health and safety risks (e.g. COVID) mostly avoided | Reduced ethical dilemmas related to incentives; no health or safety concerns |

Table 3: Empirical mode comparisons [50]

## 5. Wanting to Be Heard but Not Seen: Case Analyses

To explore why some research participants rejected interview modes that would expose them visually, I analyse the four research participants who insisted on being interviewed by telephone only. While the research participants did not explicitly state the reasons for choosing this mode, they provided indications during the interviews. [51]

Alina was a middle-aged single mother who had migrated to Germany years earlier. When I contacted her by telephone, she was very talkative from the start but simultaneously seemed suspicious about my motives, as I was calling her in the evening. She informed her job counsellor at the welfare administration about my request, and the counsellor then called me to confirm my identity and the

study details. After this confirmation, Alina agreed to participate. When I suggested meeting in person, she refused due to the risk of COVID-19 contagion. Alina was eager to talk about negative experiences and often told me: "You have to write that down". During the second telephone interview, which she again preferred over a face-to-face meeting, I learned about her insecure residence status. To follow up on her prospects of staying in the country, I conducted a third telephone interview, at the end of which she invited me to meet her in person at her workplace. After slowly building trust over the course of three telephone interviews and almost two years, I was finally able to conduct our fourth and final interview face to face. [52]

Martin was a single man in his early thirties. When I called him, he agreed to be interviewed but asked whether we could do the interview by telephone. Although I emphasised the voluntary nature of the study, it still seemed that he felt obliged to participate. Martin had struggled with burnout and depression in the past and was still medicated and receiving therapy. He had many interests and opinions but had to be prompted during the interviews and generally seemed passive and lacking the drive to follow through with them, as he explained: "Thinking about doing sports has actually become a hobby of mine". The telephone interview seemed to have a sufficiently low threshold, as he rarely left his apartment apart from going to work. Martin's social life revolved solely around online video games, where he played with fellow gamers who sometimes eventually became friends whom he met in person. The gaming interactions took place only at the audio level, as Martin did not own a video camera. When I contacted him for a follow-up interview, he strongly implied that he preferred another telephone interview. [53]

Simone was a single mother in her late thirties. When she agreed to participate in the study, it felt like she was doing me a favour, but I later learned that she had a strong urge to communicate her negative experiences with the welfare administration. She preferred to be interviewed by telephone because she juggled work and childcare and lived remotely in the countryside, making it difficult to find a nearby interview location. Since I was travelling via public transportation, I agreed that a telephone interview would be more convenient for both of us. Simone was very comfortable talking on the telephone, which she also did daily in her job. Moreover, she highlighted the comfort that she felt when being at home. She recounted painful memories of moving to a new region as a teenager, where she was viewed as different. Simone also shared that she faced superficial judgements during job interviews, as she suffered from a skin condition and was "not built like a supermodel". When I suggested a face-to-face follow-up interview, she maintained her practical reasoning. [54]

Paul was a single man in his early thirties. He was excited when I called and eager to share his experiences, as he wanted to speak up for others in similar situations. However, he made it very clear that the telephone was his only option. Like Martin, Paul was a gamer who maintained most of his relationships through online video games and did not use a camera. He told me that he felt comfortable speaking on the telephone from his apartment because he considered himself "not at a loss for words" and stated: "My home is my castle". Paul listed several

physical and mental illnesses, including social phobia, as reasons for rarely leaving the house. Having experienced bullying and generally feeling misunderstood and misjudged, Paul had become afraid of strangers and unfamiliar situations—a condition that worsened during the pandemic. He constructed a strong narrative of being a victim and a genuine person, often telling me, "I'm a person who …" Paul was the only research participant who elaborated on his rejection of visual interview modes, explaining that he felt safer not sitting in front of me because he feared that (mis)interpreting my facial expressions might trigger him. As this also touched upon my safety as a researcher, I offered him a follow-up interview by telephone only, which he gladly accepted. [55]

These four cases confirm several research participant preferences found in the literature, such as convenience, comfort and safety. Moreover, being interviewed by telephone at home accommodated passive individuals such as Martin. The research participants' sense of safety appears to be layered. While the COVID-19 pandemic introduced the risk of contagion, withdrawn and socially challenged research participants such as Martin and Paul also needed protection from unpredictable interactions with strangers like me. Additionally, being shielded from the researcher's gaze allowed research participants like Simone and Paul to avoid superficial judgement. For Paul, this meant being more in control of his narrative by depriving me of visual information. However, by depriving himself of visual cues as well, he protected both himself and me from misreading visual signals and reacting negatively to them. [56]

Especially with Paul and Martin, I was able to establish more authentic interactions by interviewing them in their natural habitat—at home, over the telephone—as opposed to face to face in a public place, where they might have felt like fish out of water. The example of Alina shows that some research participants need time and several telephone interactions before becoming open to an in-person meeting. I cannot rule out the possibility that this might also have occurred with one of the other research participants if I had continued to follow up. As both Martin and Paul developed relationships through gaming, where they started communicating with strangers via audio-only interactions and slowly built trust to meet them in person, they were accustomed to and felt more comfortable with non-visual communication. These examples also demonstrate that individuals with technological expertise and those who are highly active in digital spaces are not automatically inclined to participate in video interviews. [57]

## 6. Including the Hard to Reach

While I was able to include individuals in the study who would not have participated without the option of alternative interview modes, contacting potential research participants by letter and telephone also excluded many who could not be reached in this manner. My second means of field access, facilitated by gatekeepers at the welfare administration, enabled me to also reach individuals who might have ignored my letters and calls, as they required encouragement and assurance from someone whom they trusted. The case of Alina illustrates a combination of these field access strategies: I was able to contact her by telephone because she answered the call and was curious about the study, and she then involved a gatekeeper to confirm my intentions. [58]

Another, less intrusive approach to reaching out to potential research participants could have involved placing flyers at welfare administration offices—the only suitable locations owing to the specificity of programme participation. Contacting members of the preliminary sample by e-mail—which may have been preferable for individuals with phone anxiety or busy schedules—was not an option, as I did not have access to mail addresses. GÖTZENBRUCKER et al. (2022) contacted research participants by e-mail after advertising through non-profit organisations and social media. To further accommodate potential research participants, they not only provided a choice of interview modes but also allowed research participants to choose between a male and a female interviewer to make the interview situation "as predictable as possible" (§14). [59]

Given that accessing a diverse research population is challenging and that—as previously discussed—accessibility and the willingness to participate depend greatly on individuals' comfort needs, preferences, and personalities, employing a variety of field access strategies seems to be the most promising approach. SCOTT (2004) in her study on self-identified shy individuals offered an insightful example of how research participants deemed hard to reach can be approached and how research methods and interview modes can be tailored to meet their comfort needs. After advertising in public places and at universities and contacting potential research participants through self-help online forums, SCOTT conducted some interviews as asynchronous written online discussions. She found that this form of communication offered a "safe retreat from the social gaze" (p.99) for the research participants and eliminated the pressure to perform correctly and the risk of failure. [60]

The aim of these approaches is to gain access to research participants and ensure that they feel at ease during the research process by accommodating their needs and granting them greater control. This focus on the research participant and the effort to balance power dynamics can be supported in part by feminist approaches (SCOTT, 2004; TRIER-BIENIEK, 2012). As OAKLEY (1981) stated, "in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical" (p.41). [61]

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to discuss the continued relevance of telephone interviews and the importance of offering research participants alternative interview modes in qualitative research, based on a comparison of 62 narrative interviews with 33 former welfare recipients, some conducted face to face and some by telephone. The results revealed that both modes generated similarly rich data. While the lack of visual cues and information during telephone interviews could be sufficiently compensated for by the researcher, trust building was not an issue with either interview mode. However, the willingness to be interviewed and the depth and richness of the interview data depended on the research participants' comfort with the respective interview mode. Consequently, the most significant outcomes were achieved when the research participants were allowed to choose the interview mode with which they felt most at ease. [62]

While some research participants felt comfortable with both modes, others were less familiar with extended telephone conversations, which resulted in less elaborate answers and shorter narratives. Conversely, other research participants felt safe only when speaking unobserved over the telephone. Offering different interview modes enabled access to a broader research sample, including individuals who typically abstain from participating in research studies. Since all the research participants declined video interviews—lacking proper access, practice and comfort with that interview mode—telephone interviews proved to be particularly relevant. Accordingly, video interviewing is not the most promising interview mode for study populations lacking financial resources, technological access, or comfort with visual formats. Thus, telephone interviews cannot be replaced by video interviews and should always remain an available option. While the interview mode did not influence research participant retention, retention was higher when initial contact had been made directly by the researcher rather than through intermediaries. [63]

This article contributes to methodological research on interview modes—specifically face-to-face and telephone interviews—and adds to the empirical literature on qualitative telephone interviews by presenting case studies of research participants who could be interviewed exclusively in this way. It also advocates for more inclusive and participant-centred research by highlighting the importance of giving research participants a choice of interview modes. At the same time, the field access strategies and interview modes offered excluded individuals without access to telephones or those with hearing impairments. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how to approach hard-to-reach populations and include their perspectives in qualitative research. [64]

As mode preferences appear to stem from research participants' subjective needs—which are often unknown to researchers beforehand—researchers should not be the ones to determine the interview mode. I recommend offering several interview modes and allowing research participants to select their preferred option, as they are the experts on their own needs, boundaries and comfort zones. When research participants feel at ease, they are most likely to

open up to researchers, resulting in a safer research experience and richer data. It is also advisable to ask research participants to reflect on their choice of interview mode and their interview experience. This feedback can help researchers better understand the needs of research participants and offer context for their narration (STURGES & HANRAHAN, 2004). Although this participant-centred approach requires researchers to remain flexible and adaptable, it holds promise for accessing broader and more diverse research populations—particularly those often excluded from research—and for supporting less hierarchical, more inclusive qualitative research. [65]

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Markus PROMBERGER and Natalie BELLA for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I am also grateful to the research participants for sharing their stories and perspectives. The research project that this article is based on was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

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## Author

*Miriam RAAB* is a researcher in the Research Department Joblessness and Social Inclusion at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) in Nuremberg, Germany. She is writing her dissertation in sociology at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg in Erlangen, Germany.

Contact:

Miriam Raab

Institute for Employment Research (IAB)
Department of Joblessness and Social Inclusion
Regensburger Straße 104
90479 Nuremberg, Germany

E-mail: miriam.raab@iab.de, miriam.raab@fau.de

## Citation

Raab, Miriam (2025). Invisibility by choice: Telephone interviews as an opportunity for more inclusive and participant-centred qualitative research [65 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *26*(3), Art. 6, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-26.3.4358.