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*Qualitative Social Work* 2006 5: 389

DOI: 10.1177/1473325006067367

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## Conducting Intensive Interviews Using Email

### A Serendipitous Comparative Opportunity

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#### ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of computer-mediated recruitment and email intensive interviewing in contrast to more traditional methods of data collection. Email interviewing is compared to telephone and face-to-face interviewing with the same study population utilizing the same interview guide. This allows analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each interview format to emerge. This serendipitous comparison opportunity arose from a study of the decision-making and bereavement process of women who terminated desired pregnancies after diagnosis of a fetal anomaly. History and analysis of ethical and methodological issues related to computerized communication for research purposes is included. Although more methodological analysis (Illingworth, 2001) must occur, results suggest that computer-mediated methods allow the research to include isolated, geographically dispersed and/or stigmatized groups who are often overlooked or ignored. This is important for social work researchers who need additional research methods to collect rich data about these difficult-to-access groups.

#### KEY WORDS:

computer-mediated communication and research

email intensive interviewing

qualitative research methodology

women's health

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines the use of computer-mediated recruitment and email intensive interviewing in contrast to more traditional methods of data collection. Accessing stigmatized and isolated populations is difficult, yet imperative, in social work research in order to understand the experiences and needs of populations whose voices are stifled. Email can allow such access but must be compared to the gold standard of face-to-face interviewing. A brief history of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in research precedes an analysis of the ethical and methodological concerns that emerged when the first author utilized computer-mediated recruitment and data collection strategies. CMC includes Listservs, chatrooms, email and interactive websites. CMC allowed rich data to be collected from a geographically dispersed and socially-silenced study group of women experiencing grief after terminating a desired pregnancy due to the diagnosis of a fetal anomaly (termination for anomaly[TFA]).

The underlying study on which this analysis is based explored the medical decision-making and bereavement experiences of women who experienced TFA (McCoyd, 2003). Analytic induction and grounded theory methods were utilized to analyze the data. Discussion of emergent themes and policy and practice implications are beyond the scope of this article, though the tremendous grief that these women experience in the face of societal silencing is critical to why they were interested in email interviews. Initially, due to poor response rates from physician offices and the predominant genetics laboratory for the region, recruitment strategies expanded and a recruitment letter was posted on a listserv connected with a website (hereafter called TOPS [Termination of Pregnancy Support])<sup>1</sup> devoted to provision of support for this population (another rapidly expanding use of CMC).

This qualitative exploratory research design originally included only face-to-face interviews or telephone interviews (for those beyond geographical reach). Respondents recruited through the Listserv letter spontaneously requested email interviews (likely because they received support from one another via emails and a listserv at TOPS). After IRB approvals and modifications to address ethical imperatives discussed below, email interviews were used for those who requested them – the majority of the study group.

This study is unique in that the respondents were interviewed using one of three interview formats, but all utilizing the same interview guide. This provides an opportunity to compare the three formats. Further, it allows a more accurate analysis of each interview format relative to the others than a comparison across varied research questions, designs and/or populations. The analysis of the data in this study reveals that the email interviews tend to be more complete, to include more self-reflection by respondents, and to be seemingly more candid. This supports Turkle's (1995) assertion that people have a

tendency to confide in machines that are viewed as non-judgmental, rather than directly to another person. The findings reported here extend the comparison of telephone and face-to-face interviewing identified by Tausig and Freeman (1988). This serendipitous opportunity to compare email intensive interviewing to face-to-face and telephone interviewing reveals that email may have promise for social work researchers attempting to locate and interview populations who have characteristics that tend to isolate, silence or stigmatize them.

## **METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH REVIEW: INTERNET RESEARCH**

As computers have been adopted rapidly across the USA (Lexis-Nexis™ Statistical, 2002), CMC is beginning to be considered as a research tool (Bowker and Tuffin, 2002, 2004; Flicker, et al., 2004; Hine, 2000; Illingworth, 2001). Indeed, web-based organizations like the Association of Internet Researchers (<http://www.aoir.org>) have recently arisen to develop ethics and other guidelines. Most literature on the use of email in research has not analyzed its effectiveness as a research tool or contrasted it with other methods of data collection. Illingworth (2001) suggests that CMC research can 'potentially overcome some of the barriers imposed by more conventional research approaches', but she cautions against indiscriminant use for the purpose of ease without assessment of drawbacks. In one of the few other methodological analyses, O'Neil and Penrod (2001) report that requests for identifying information increase levels of attrition, even when the purpose of the information is to mail an incentive gift, suggesting that an impression of privacy is positively correlated with the level of disclosure a respondent is willing to provide, a finding well supported by anecdotal and theoretical evidence (Hine, 2000; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Turkle, 1995). Despite the dearth of methodological analysis (Illingworth, 2001), use of Internet research is burgeoning (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

Few articles report web-based research prior to 2000, but there are more by 2000–2; by 2004, multiple disciplines are incorporating CMC research. Early journal articles using CMC research tend to cluster into groups. The first cluster discusses the use of web-based and email surveys, information sharing, and/or therapeutic communications. These generally support the notion that web-based health information sharing and counseling is legitimate, cost-effective and allows easier access to difficult-to-reach populations (Alves and Szucs, 2001; Douglas and McGarty, 2001; Fyfe et al., 2001; Manhal-Baugus, 2001; Nahm and Resnick, 2001; Navarro, 2001; Sills and Song, 2002). A second cluster compares email or web-based surveys to standard mailed surveys or telephone communication, generally finding lower participation among those using email, but also finding lower costs associated with this form of survey (Harewood et al., 2001; Kurioka et al., 2001; Raziano et al., 2001). A third

small cluster explores various demographic groups' comfort levels with electronic communication of various forms, finding that gender differences existed to some degree as women prefer email and men prefer web-based communications such as chat rooms (Boneva et al., 2001; Jackson et al., 2001). A fourth cluster reports research done utilizing email correspondence, usually with little analysis of the benefits and challenges of CMC-based data collection. (Baker, 2000; Chen et al., 2001; Mander, 2001; Perry, 2001). The latter articles indicate acceptance of email interviewing as a legitimate research technology despite the scarcity of methodological analysis in the literature. Each of these articles focuses on stigmatized or difficult-to-access populations.

By 2003–4, more research utilizing CMC began to be reported, tending to include more methodological rationales (Bowker, 2001; McAuliffe, 2003). Bowker and Tuffin (2002, 2004) not only utilized CMC (specifically chat rooms) for research, but also demonstrated how identity issues interplay with CMC. The construction of identity on the computer, particularly 'normal' identity for those who customarily must cope with stigma and stereotypes based on their physical disabilities, is highlighted as a healing force. The TeenNet group also generated articles reporting the use of CMC research that analyzed methodological issues. By 2004, ethical issues regarding CMC research were broached (Flicker et al., 2004).<sup>2</sup>

### Sampling Issues

Although the focus of this article is the use of CMC for recruitment and data collection, some discussion of sampling strategies must be included for context. Due to the exploratory qualitative design, recruitment was never intended to produce a random sample. Nevertheless, the original recruitment procedures were intended to produce a purposive study group of 30 women from the local area who were within 2 years of TFA and reflected a customary range of experience and meaning-making. Recruitment strategies were expanded when only four respondents were found in four months and the genetics laboratory acquired a new medical director who did not support the research. This led to the decision to post the recruitment letter at the TOPS website. It is of note that Illingworth (2001) suggests that this difficulty of access (one she experienced in locating women with fertility problems) may be due in part to women's reproductive health providers maintaining positions of control over women. Their interest may be in creating the illusion of protecting the women from research while ultimately silencing them. This may indicate another reason why women respond openly and honestly via CMC methods when given the opportunity to be heard.

The expansion of the recruitment via posting the letter at TOPS yielded seven respondents within the first week. Some respondents referred others who had experienced this type of loss (yielding three more respondents), and the site re-posted the recruitment letter three times over the course of the data

collection (10 more months). Respondents came from the Eastern USA as well as Canada, California, and Florida.<sup>3</sup> The study had 30 respondents, 20 of whom participated in email interviews, 3 had phone interviews, and 7 were interviewed in person.

Qualitative purposive sampling in social work is designed to allow voices to be heard that are otherwise stigmatized or oppressed. The goal is to reflect a range of experience and meaning-making, capturing the *emic* view (Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Padgett, 1998). It can be argued that computer access creates a study group who do not reflect this population and its range. Yet, these populations coincide because people who are middle-class and 'above' have much greater access to prenatal diagnostic testing and pregnancy termination just as they currently have more access to computers.

Further, and more important to the idea that CMC can be used in social work research, computer access is rapidly expanding to lower economic classes to the point where 20.5% of households where the income level is under US\$5,000 have a computer with Internet access. Although the income categories \$5,000 through \$14,999 are lower, the \$15–19,999 income category has 23.6% with computers and Internet access (LexisNexis™ Statistical). Additionally, Horrigan (cited in Flicker et al., 2004) reports that approximately 84% of American Internet users have utilized online groups. This indicates that recruiting through CMC does not preclude a credible sample.

An additional benefit emerges from the fact that women's voices are often not heard in the medical context of pregnancy and motherhood (Corea et al. 1987; Davis-Floyd and Sargent, 1997; Glenn et al., 1994; Illingworth, 2001; Rich, 1976/1995; Rothman, 1982/1991). The Internet provides women privacy, protection and lack of subjection to the potential for negative repercussions of health providers' knowledge of participation in research (Illingworth, 2001). The interest and enthusiasm of women in participating in research of this nature is indicated by the differences in response to recruitment (i.e. little response from physician office recruitment, rapid, enthusiastic response from CMC recruitment). Once the recruitment letter was posted on the TOPS website, the first respondent suggested an email interview rather than an interview by telephone (she was geographically distant). From that point, respondents were offered this option and nearly all preferred individualized email interviews. Only one elected a telephone interview. This strongly suggests that women are open to discussing these intimate, stigmatizing experiences when given opportunities that meet their desire for privacy. This also requires new ways of meeting ethical imperatives.

### **Ethical Issues**

The issues outlined above are important in terms of the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Equally important are ethical issues as one tries to protect respondents' rights and privacy.

*Confidentiality*

Confidentiality was of greatest concern (although the researcher was more concerned in nearly all cases than were the respondents). The first author checked email daily and when new messages came in, they were immediately cleaned of identifying information after printing one 'hard copy' for back up and then the message was put into a computerized folder system (by code numbers) that was under password protection. The hard copies were kept in binders in a locked cabinet. The message was copied without identifying information and pasted into a Word document with no identifying information other than the assigned code number. The original email was then deleted (and re-deleted from the delete file) as soon as a response was sent. Respondents understood this protocol and the informed consent form noted that attempts would be made to assure protection of the data. The researcher's PC was not networked and was kept off-line when not in use to discourage 'hacking' and to enhance protection of information. Further, the space left after deleting emails was regularly recycled and de-fragmented to 'cover' electronic tracks of identifying information as well as possible. New methods and ethical guidelines have been developed (<http://www.aoir.org>) since conducting this research and are rapidly evolving within varied professional disciplines.

*Informed Consent*

The consent form was revised to reflect the use of email and to identify the strategies utilized to protect information. As a respondent decided whether to participate, the informed consent was sent as an attachment to the email, unless the respondent used television web-mail (as two respondents did), which did not allow attachments. In those cases, the forms were pasted into the body of the email. Because signature affixing is difficult via email, each respondent was asked to read the form and to ask the researcher any questions she might have. Once questions were answered and the respondent indicated that she understood the informed consent, she was asked to write a statement at the beginning of the first response stating: 'I have read the informed consent and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time with no negative effects. My responses confirm my ongoing consent'. Respondents did this universally and without expressed concern.

In the consent form, respondents were advised that care would be taken to protect their confidentiality (as discussed) and that records would be cleaned of all identifying information and original documents or tapes would be destroyed following production of unidentified data sources (copies with no identifiers) for analysis. They were further aware that the researcher would know their identity from the postal mail contact at the end of the interview process,

during which incentives (books) were sent to thank the respondent for her participation and during which she sent back hard copies of the informed consent and demographic data collection sheet. Only one respondent felt inhibited about this. She elected to send the hard copies to the researcher (from attachments to an email, which she could send without identifying her postal address). She waived the incentive, although she assured the researcher that she wanted her information used. She further asked that her book (the incentive) be donated to a woman going through the experience currently, a request that was honored.

After data analysis, a further aspect of informed consent emerged. Respondents were accustomed to writing in very open, self-disclosing ways as part of their use of the support group website and listserv. The responses seemed to mirror this same free self-disclosure. Although this provided detailed rich data, enhancing credibility and, one assumes, trustworthiness, this may raise the possibility of exploitation. Respondents' perception of anonymity due to relating by electronic means and their custom of utilizing web-based services for support may incline respondents to be less censored than they might with other research methods. It may be that respondents should be warned of this possibility. Nevertheless, all research is subject to factors that make respondents more or less likely to be disclosing (e.g. having had friends that look like the researcher; having a background that inclines them to lower personal boundaries) and these are not viewed as something for which ethical researchers must provide protections. It is therefore something about which to be reflective.

### *Emotional Assessment and Referral*

A final ethical issue is the researcher's more limited ability to refer respondents for counseling if it is deemed appropriate. Customarily, mental health research includes provisions for referral to mental health follow up if the respondent becomes disturbed as a result of participating in the research. It is incumbent upon researchers working with CMC to provide comparable protections. This means that researchers must attend to clues that a respondent is experiencing emotional distress and must explore the level of distress while also ensuring adequate referral sources for mental health coverage if required. Respondents used symbols to denote emotion – colons for tears, smile and frown faces – and were very forthcoming about the nature and intensity of their emotion. One respondent who indicated some distress (see Sarah in the section on advantages of email) was explicitly asked about her level of emotion and coping and given information about support resources in her area. The ethical researcher is prepared with national lists of mental health providers (Register of Clinical Social Workers; American Psychiatric Association Register) for referral should a respondent become depressed or otherwise ill-affected by the research process.

## USE OF ELECTRONIC MAIL INTERVIEWING

As described, the use of email interviewing evolved due to honoring requests by respondents for this interview format. Most of the respondents participated on TOPS and were accustomed to communication through CMC. Women making this request were at great geographical distance and supported their request by citing the fact that they could do the interview in small ‘chunks’ in their own time, instead of needing to set aside a longer period of time during ‘normal hours’. Indeed, many referred to the fact that they could get on the computer at all times of night and find other women there to ‘chat’ with about their loss. Many of the responses to the interview questions showed that women were responding at 3:00 and 4:00 am, a time many reported being awake as they worked to manage their grief.

The researchers’ initial concerns that emotional content may not be forthcoming or adequately reflect respondents’ experience were unfounded. To a social worker, the value of non-verbal cues, face-to-face interaction and relationship have always been critical and there were fears about how much could be translated via the computer. Findings showed that responses were genuine, thoughtful and insightful, while still conveying emotion. They were congruent with the researcher’s clinical experiences. Nanci (a pseudonym)<sup>4</sup> wrote:

This is the hard part for me. I can never write this without feeling all that pain and loss just rush through my body::

She used :: as a symbol for tears; other respondents indicated tearfulness with written words. Respondents were able to establish a relationship with the researcher and convey genuine emotion. Questions were sent in groups of two to three, customized for that respondent, after the initial request for the respondent to ‘tell your story’. Indicators of gratitude towards, and familiarity with, the respondent were included in most interactions. For instance, one respondent referred to her responses as ‘installments’. After writing that she was ‘feeling down’ after reliving some of her experiences, the first author wrote (in the closing paragraph):

. . . So, thanks again for your willingness to re-live this tragic time again. By the way – you somehow knew about nuchal folds – but you are a business person; how is that? I’ll be waiting for the next installment. Thanks!

### *Advantages of Electronic Mail Interviews*

- Extensive, longitudinal communication
- Allows respondents to complete the interview at their convenience
- Written text responses

- Less social pressure; few visual cues to create judgment
- Geographical differences in experience are revealed

There are a number of advantages to email interviewing. The seeming anonymity of email appeared to allow more extensive communications (generally, email interviews were 3–8 pages longer than in-person interviews and 6–12 pages longer than telephone interviews). Due in large part to the extended period of time over which email interviews could be conducted, email yielded detailed, rich data. One positive aspect of email interviewing is that respondents' comments are already in written text. This has two immediate positive correlates: first, it obviates the need for tedious transcription; second, respondents can 'clean up' their own messages so that the researcher does not modify the respondent comments by deciding which verbal tics and stuttering to remove, but obtains responses needing only a cleaning of spelling errors. Even so, many respondents wrote in a stream-of-consciousness manner, which seemed to enhance credibility and also included their immediate emotional responses while also describing their prior emotions and thoughts. This empowers the respondent to present herself in the ways she chooses while also reducing interpretation error. The possibility that respondents could be embarrassed by the 'roughness' of transcribed verbal transactions is avoided: in prior research, the second author had a respondent who recanted consent to use her comments due to the direct and complete transcription of verbal interviews. Upon review, the respondent thought the transcripts made her sound less sophisticated than she viewed herself and she recanted consent.

Another advantage of email communication is that it occurs without the pressures of face-to-face interaction; there seems to be a sense of privacy or safety that allows greater disclosure of intimate and stigmatizing information. Some argue (McAuliffe, 2003) that CMC allows more opportunity for reflection and greater depth of response. Additionally, respondents are 'on their own turf' and (particularly in this sample) often accustomed to typing revealing communications at their computers (as evidenced by participation on the listserv). This means that they usually are at home and more comfortable than most interview settings allow. Below, some women who participated state their views about email interviewing:

I'm looking forward to doing the interview . . . it is a much more relaxed and productive way to do it [through email]. This way, I can do it when things are quiet and I'm in the right frame of mind. I love to write and by sharing my story, it really helps me. Each time I do it, I learn something new about myself. I notice things I've resolved, things I'm still working on and things that still bring out strong emotions even years later. (Nanci)

A woman whose first language is not English seemed to be having some difficulty with expansive answers and was offered a telephone interview to complete the interview. She responded:

Actually, I prefer to continue the interview via email since it gives me time to think and write. (Connie)

Still another respondent wrote about the safety of email in another context:

One mom who I was going to have [as the mother of a student in the elementary class she taught] this year said that if there was anything she could do, let me know and she gave me her email. Email was the safest thing for me at that time. (Deirdre)

She went on to explain that email allows her to communicate without fear that she might become suddenly emotional in a way she finds embarrassing.

Another advantage that many of the respondents identified is the lack of visual cues, which may inhibit communication. Many noted that they befriended people over the support group listserv that it would be unlikely they would have 'even given a second glance' (Yasmine). She expanded on this:

You know, it's so incredible in some ways – you spend your whole life building relationships on what somebody looks like or what they dress like or what they act like, and those are your friends, right? But we don't know anything about anybody. You know, I don't know what they look like, I don't know what kind of home they live in, I don't know how they dress – like in rags or the finest – and it doesn't matter because we're so connected now – and it's beautiful.

They found out about their differences (weight, social class, clothing, jewelry, ethnicity) after a bond had already been established. It is likely that this same dynamic allows for less contaminated interactions between the researcher and respondents as well. Indeed, Padgett (1998) discusses the fit between researcher and respondent demographics and the stance one most optimally takes to limit contamination and encourage open dialogue. This appearance-focused response is not troublesome via email communications.

Time frames are also advantageous in email interviews as indicated. First, respondents enjoy answering at times convenient to them and over stretches of time. Additionally, the drawn out nature of email interviewing (interviews typically required 8–14 interactions) allows follow up on questions and fully complete interviews in ways that the more immediate, one shot nature of most face-to-face and telephone interviews do not. It also allows a longitudinal aspect to emerge from the data. For example, Sarah had been emailing regularly and then had not responded for several weeks. When asked (by email) whether

everything was OK or whether she had decided to withdraw from the study, her response not only helped clarify her interest in continuing, but also allowed a different glimpse into the experience of this type of grief:

Again, I am sorry I started out strong and then had nothing to say for months. I can't explain it really, other than I guess I (for one reason or another) couldn't seem to get the rest of my story out. Maybe it's like I said; there is no end. Maybe it took me back too far. I'm not sure. All I know is that I pray everyday that my son is safe and warm and that he knows that his dad and I love him very much. (She emailed to complete the interview after this communication.)

Another advantage of email interviewing and recruitment via a website is that geographical differences in medical practices of pregnancy termination throughout the country emerged because the sample included women from all parts of the contiguous USA and even one respondent from Canada. This geographical diversity occurred without the expense of travel. This revealed that the women from the Northeast were much more likely to be steered toward surgical terminations, while women in the South and West were more likely to be induced (McCoyd, 2003). The broad range of women nationwide allowed this intriguing finding to emerge, something that could not have occurred had the original design been maintained.

#### *Advantages of Telephone Interviews in Comparison to Email*

- Telephone allows auditory vigilance and verbal rapport
- Allows less social pressure than face-to-face interviews
- Allows respondents to control setting and time for the interview

Like email interviews, telephone interviews allow respondents to remain 'on their own turf' and also allow the respondent to have the anonymity of non-face-to-face interaction. Tausig and Freeman (1988: 425) comment on this 'visual anonymity [which] appeared to reduce self-consciousness or the "interviewer effect" that is so characteristic of the face-to-face encounter'. They acknowledge the need for 'auditory vigilance' (1988: 425) to maintain rapport and to gather data responsively and sensitively. A similar need for vigilance became apparent during email interviewing. To avoid attrition and to maintain the bond required for good data collection during email interviews, multiple expressions of thanks and other connecting messages were used. Extra effort was expended to assure that communications were clear but somewhat informal, with friendly salutations and indications that the researcher had read prior responses and tailored questions to clarify information reported previously. For instance:

Hi,

The grief scale came through with answers – thanks! Your answers are really helpful. You mentioned the pain of induction and delivery – were you offered the chance for surgery? Would this have been something you might have wanted? Many do not get a choice, but I've been trying to learn more about the pros and cons of each method once the decision is made to interrupt . . .

After the procedure was complete, you mentioned in your first email how sad you were, but how it was almost easier than making the decision. Can you write more about that? I'll look forward to hearing from you, and thanks again for your willingness to be so open and thoughtful about your answers.

Although Lavrakis (cited in Bickman and Rog, 1998: 430) cautions about telephone surveys/interviews becoming tedious and difficult after 20–30 minutes, only one telephone respondent seemed negatively affected by the length of the interviews, typically 1½–2 hours. The one exception seemed distracted, rustling papers in the background; the others were open and engaged. By contrast, email allows the interview to occur in 'chunks', avoiding any tedium, and further, allows little alternate distraction. Using the telephone allowed respondents to control the time and setting for their interview, much like the email interviews.

#### *Advantages of Face-to-Face Interviews in Comparison to Email*

- Richer non-verbal data about dress, mannerisms, social cues, tonal quality
- Researcher can interpret above in their own manner
- Easier completion of informed consents and other paperwork
- Ability for respondent to show mementos, reminisce

The face-to-face interview has been the gold standard of qualitative and other research (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). Most research texts (Kazdin, 1998; Padgett, 1998; Rubin and Babbie, 2001) focus on the rich data to be gathered in interviews. Information about the respondent's setting, clothing, appearance and mannerisms, as well as other descriptive information, is accessible. The researcher does not have to rely solely on the respondent's description of events, responses and self reports, but can add their interpretation of observations. Nevertheless, most qualitative researchers caution against assuming one is the all-knowing, interpretive source of the 'truth' of the emotional response, urging that researchers trust respondents/informants to define and interpret their own emotions (Haraway, 1988; Padgett, 1998; Van Maanen, 1988).

Another advantage of face-to-face interviewing over email is that completion of paperwork, from consent forms to scales, is managed more easily. Further, the respondent is generally on her home ground (one interview was

done in an office; the rest were in homes), though this is also the case for most of the email interviews. A strong advantage of face-to-face interviews is the ability of respondents to offer to show the researcher mementos that promote further exploration of the experience. This unplanned, spontaneous behavior occurred in all but one of the face-to-face interviews.

### *Disadvantages of Electronic Mail Interviewing*

- No direct observation of emotion, only reports
- Technical problems – disappearing text and email address changes

Email meant that the research relied on the women to report their emotions in writing rather than allowing the researcher to directly observe and interpret the emotions. Although some may view this as a disadvantage, feminist researchers (Haraway, 1988; Padgett, 1998) and ethnomethodologists (Charmaz, 1997; Liebow, 1967/1993; Van Maanen, 1988) have long held that researchers should do less interpretation and trust their respondents to inform the researcher of their experience as interpreted through the perspective of the respondent herself. This is precisely what occurred with this research. It is true that cues from tone of voice and non-verbal cues from body language were unavailable when using email interviewing, but women were fairly consistent about including parentheticals such as ‘(crying now)’ or symbols (: indicated tears and ☺ and ☹) to indicate strong emotion. So although this has the potential to detrimentally effect data collection, it did not seem to adversely affect this study.

There were some difficulties specific to the use of email. Carole wrote in distress:

I just spent an hour writing a ton about my experience, and suddenly it all disappeared! I don't know if I hit delete or what. I'll write more, or again, later. I am sick! What happened to it? (Carole)

Computer mishaps and changes of email addresses due to changes in servers were all potential barriers, though these were navigated relatively easily in most circumstances. One respondent also found the email interview painstaking in its length. She felt she spent more actual time than she would have in a face-to-face interview, something she viewed as a disadvantage. The extended time is accurate as the email interviews allow follow up questions in ways that face-to-face interviews do not. Even so, most email respondents appreciated the fact that the time was segmented. There were at least 16 versions of the following message:

I'm so glad that I can participate in this study. This topic is somewhat 'taboo' and if I can do even a small thing to help with educating others, I want to. Thanks for letting me participate!

*Disadvantages of Telephone Interviews in Comparison to Email Interviews*

- Telephones remove visual cues so respondents can multitask
- Shorter; less rich data
- Fewer reported emotions; had to interpret via voice tone

As previously mentioned, during one telephone interview the respondent seemed distracted, seemingly ‘multitasking’ in a way that would not occur in other interview formats. The lack of visual cues not only seem to create open and free discussions (Tausig and Freeman, 1988), but also to free some from the expectations of full focus and attention on the task of the research.

Additionally, telephone interviews tended to be somewhat shorter than email or face-to-face interviews and seemed to have somewhat less depth generally. The responses were much more concise, even when elaboration was encouraged. This may be a function of tending to be more efficient in telephone communications. Telephone interviews had fewer reports of emotional cues because they were not visually accessible (as in face-to-face) or self reported (as in email) and relied on differences in voice quality to assess emotional impact.

*Disadvantages of Face-to-Face Interview in Comparison to Email Interviews*

- Presence of spouses and children in the home where interviews occurred
- Follow up questions that arose after transcription were harder to convey
- Social cues led to more respondent reactivity

The face-to-face format has its difficulties too. One of the most detrimental in this study was the presence of children and spouses in the home who interrupted the interviews. Although respondents were cautioned ahead of time to find a private space within the home for interviews, children and spouses seldom observed the privacy, feeling that their desires took precedence. This not only interrupted the flow of the interview, but also may have limited candor.

Follow up questions were less easily conveyed once the researcher was out of the home. Most interviews were 1–2 hours drive from the researcher’s home (3 were over 3½ hours) and so return for follow up was difficult. Although telephone follow-up was theoretically possible, it seemed intrusive on the one occasion it was utilized. The ongoing nature of email interviews allowed the researcher to follow up easily.

Some respondents who were interviewed face-to-face seemed surprised by the researcher’s appearance (one commented on her beliefs about the researcher’s age; another wondered if the researcher had children due to her physical size) and/or car. It is unknown whether this may have contaminated the data in any way. In any case, these were non-issues in the email interviews since visual cues were nonexistent.

## SUMMARY

Intensive interviews are a mainstay of data collection for qualitative study. This article reports the successful use of email as a format for conducting intensive interviews and reports the serendipitous comparison of the email interviewing to more traditional formats. Web-based posting of recruitment letters and email administration of intensive interviewing were both found to be successful with women who had terminated desired pregnancies due to fetal anomalies. Additionally, the richness of the data compared favorably with face-to-face interviewing (and clinical experience), suggesting that data gathered in this way is credible and trustworthy.

The advantages of using email interviews with this geographically disseminated group seem to outweigh the disadvantages. Women responded openly in all interview types, but email seemed to generate particularly detailed and thoughtful responses. The use of email interviewing allows isolated and stigmatized populations to respond on their own terms and in their own time. This seems a respectful format for gathering information from people who are eager to share their stories, but frightened or hesitant to do so in a face-to-face interview. Additionally, the women who participated by email seemed more open than their counterparts in face-to-face or telephone interviews. Further, the research benefits by the more complete, complex and reflective nature of the data derived from ongoing email interviewing.

Despite these advantages, it is true that non-verbal cues such as observed emotional reaction, dress and setting information, and voice quality are lost. Further, this study group may be out of the ordinary in their willingness to openly express emotion through written emails because they are so accustomed to doing so within the context of the support they gain from TOPS. It is possible that other populations will be less forthcoming and enthusiastic in their responses with email interviewing.

Computer-mediated research appears to be a technological advance that shows promise with few negative aspects. Ethical concerns raised by this less self-censored form of communication were discussed. Because the women in this study were recruited through web-based support, they may have been more open in intensive interviews than they would customarily elect to be. This requires that we evaluate the impact of the research on our respondents and that we assure the well-being and dignity of the respondents. Further exploration of the ethics of recruiting from support websites is advisable.

All social workers must adhere to our Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1996), which includes the imperative to challenge social injustice. Email interviewing seems to empower women to speak out on women's health issues on which they have not been easily heard due to difficulties of access. The women in this study were grateful for the opportunity

to participate in this manner. This may be extrapolated to suggest that other underserved, oppressed and stigmatized groups may welcome research designed in this manner. In short, email intensive interviewing adds an additional tool for accessing difficult-to-reach populations and collecting rich data that has comparable credibility to traditional qualitative interviewing formats.

### Acknowledgements

Dr McCoyd wishes to thank the American Association of University Women for an American Dissertation Fellowship in 2002–3 to support her work on the research discussed herein. We are also grateful for the comments of two anonymous reviewers who improved this manuscript tremendously.

### Notes

- 1 All recruitment and data collection changes were approved by the Bryn Mawr College Institutional Review Board (IRB). The monitored website was asked for, and they granted, permission to post the recruitment letter on the listserv. The website is given a pseudonym to protect its members – and it is also extended gratitude for their willingness to cooperate with this research.
- 2 The data collection for this research occurred from June 2001–August 2002.
- 3 This extended geographical sample allowed the fact that women had differing experiences based upon geographical biases towards different termination procedures to emerge, a finding that would not have occurred had the sample been only from the Northeastern seaboard states.
- 4 All names are pseudonyms, with attempts made to match the ‘flavor’ or ethnic implications of the respondents’ true name.

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