

Social Researchers' Approaches to Research Ethics During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

An Exploratory Study

Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine/distancing measures have forced researchers to cope with a new situation. This paper aimed to analyse how the pandemic and its associated constraints have affected social researchers' approach to research ethics. Drawing on an online qualitative survey with 193 Polish social researchers conducted in April and May 2020, we distinguished three approaches: *nothing has changed*, *opportunity-oriented*, and *precautionary*. According to the first, the pandemic was not regarded as a situation that required additional reflection on ethical issues or changes in research approaches. By contrast, the other two were based on the assumption that the pandemic affected research project ethics. The difference was in the assessment of changes in the area of ethics. The pandemic presented an opportunity and a threat to the ethicality of research, respectively. We discuss the implications of all three approaches for research and education.

Keywords: COVID-19, Polish researchers, research ethics, research with researchers, social researchers

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine/distancing measures have forced researchers to cope with a new situation – that is, conducting research in risky environments (Swenson & Roll, 2020). Analyses of possible ethical changes have appeared quite quickly, mainly in the medical research literature (e.g., Chatfield & Schroeder, 2020). In the context of social research, consideration has been given to informed consent (Roberts, Pavlakis, & Richards, 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020); confidentiality and privacy (Hall, Gaved, & Sargent, 2021; Lawrence,

2020; Lobe, Morgan, & Hoffman, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021); the comfort of participants (Howlett, 2021; Tremblay et al., 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020) and researchers (Meskell, Houghton, & Biesty, 2021); the risk of exploitation/harm and the issue of reciprocity (Crivello & Favara, 2021; Hall, Gaved & Sargent, 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020), especially in the case of vulnerable populations, for example, people in the crisis of homelessness or with hearing problems (Hall et al., 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). For the most part, however, texts on social research ethics during the pandemic drew on researchers' reflections (see also Lupton, 2020; Ravitch, 2020; Teti, Schatz, & Liebenberg, 2020; World Council of Anthropological Associations, 2020) rather than systematic studies with researchers. Social studies with scholars have focused mainly on the impact of the pandemic on the work and well-being of academic teachers and have paid far less attention to the ethics of social research (see the research bases of the World Pandemic Research Network and the American Sociological Association).

The pandemic has led us to take an interest in how social researchers operated during a global crisis for which they had no chance to prepare. The pandemic provides a new context for social research that can influence the way researchers think about and act on, *inter alia*, research ethics. Drawing on a qualitative online survey (QOS; Braun et al., 2020) of Polish researchers, this paper aimed to analyse how the pandemic and its associated constraints have affected researchers' approach to research ethics. We discuss how researchers have responded to the emerging difficulties and how they have perceived research ethics during COVID-19. We focused on descriptive research ethics, which, unlike normative ethics, does not involve evaluating or indicating the morally right and wrong course of action. The descriptive approach allowed us to concentrate on social science researchers' experiences and opinions concerning research ethics (Colnerud, 2014). Such knowledge can advance our understanding of the impact of pandemics on social research ethics from the perspective of social researchers. Moreover, it can help social scientists better address the emerging ethical challenges in research during the current and future pandemics. Due to the exploratory nature of the research project, no specific theory was tested. The project was, however, based on a tradition of qualitative research in social sciences (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2017; Silverman, 2017), where allowing the participants to describe their experiences in their own words use are considered crucial in understanding and explaining their practices (Braun et al., 2020).

Poland's Reaction to COVID-19

In March 2020, Polish scientific institutions were closed, students and scientists began working remotely, and foreign travel was suspended. Because restrictions were introduced nationally to reduce social contact between people, research possibilities were limited, although no top-down measures were introduced. A ban on research involving contact between people, for example, was introduced locally by some universities. At the end of May 2020, some of the restrictions were lifted, and rectors were free to organise university life, but most institutions remained closed until the end of the academic year (i.e., the end of September 2020).

Method

The primary aim of the present study was to describe how social researchers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. We sought to address two main research questions:

- Research Question 1: How have social researchers responded to the emerging methodological and research ethics problems in their research projects (actions/practices)?
- Research Question 2: How have social researchers perceived methodology and research ethics during COVID-19 (perception/evaluation)?

The present study focuses on the research ethics component.

Ethical Approval

The project was not financed by an external granting institution, that is, it was self-financed. Therefore, the approval of the relevant research ethics committee was not required, so we did not seek it.¹

¹ There are still few research ethics committees in Poland (Author, 2019). Their role is primarily formal/controlling (accepting a proposal when someone applies for a grant), not advisory. Further, our research participants did not belong to COVID-19-vulnerable populations (e.g., medical staff). The questionnaire was not burdensome (Tremblay et al., 2021) and may have had a therapeutic effect (writing about participants' experiences, cf. Hall et al., 2021). There are no national

Qualitative Online Survey

The QOS is neither a standard qualitative nor quantitative technique (Braun et al., 2020). However, given the specific context—at the beginning of the pandemic and the lockdown—we decided to use it for three reasons: time constraints, distance keeping/safety concerns, and qualitative research advantages. First, the QOS allowed us to react promptly to the situation. By using this technique, we aimed to capture social researchers' responses to methodological and ethical constraints during the pandemic as they were happening. Second, the QOS—as an Internet tool—enabled us to avoid direct contact with the participants. Third, despite the time pressure and lack of direct contact with participants, we wanted to conduct a qualitative study that allowed for obtaining relatively rich data.

The QOS is compatible with the tradition of qualitative research that allows participants considerable control over the research situation. The researchers were able to write as much as they wanted and when they wanted; this was in line with qualitative research values such as the participant-centred approach (Braun et al., 2020).

The QOS allowed us to obtain diverse (and not just typical) responses, “a range of ‘within-group’ voices” (Braun et al., 2020, p. 3). It enabled us to avoid gathering responses from a relatively small sample of people who may not have been representative (i.e., insufficiently diverse) of the wider population. In QOSs, answers are usually brief but they can be very long. It is important—and herein lies their usefulness—that their richness and depth result from the analysis of the *entire* dataset rather than individual responses (Braun et al., 2020).

The QOS was created using the LimeSurvey system. The open and multiple-choice questions allowed the participants to share experiences and thoughts freely. During the pilot study, each author emailed the QOS to two or three social researchers and discussed it with them. It was amended in light of their comments and published on the websites of selected research institutions and on social media (i.e., Facebook and LinkedIn) and sent by email to selected individuals and institutions between

or local guidelines that apply to non-funded research, except codes of ethics of specific disciplines. Therefore, the research project was conducted following the *Code of sociologists' ethics* of the Polish Sociological Association (2012).

21 April and 30 May, 2020. We asked what problems the researchers had encountered as a consequence of the introduction of pandemic control measures, what solutions they had decided to implement, and what ethical or methodological reflections these engendered. We collected 193 completed responses.

Information About the Researchers

The study was designed and conducted by three female scholars holding PhDs in sociology or ethnology. They were researchers in public institutions (two universities and a research institute), each having more than 10 years' experience in social and market research and in working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They co-authored the present study and conducted the data analysis (i.e., coding and interpretation).

Sampling

To gather the responses in a short amount of time, we used non-probability sampling, that is, purposive sampling, based on availability and the snowball method (Babbie, 2014). We wanted to reach out to researchers from the social sciences and humanities who were diverse in terms of their workplace, career stage, and gender. When sending out the surveys, we used our social networks² and the participants' help to contact those who were less active on social media and those who tend not to respond to email invitations.³ We focused on the statements of those participants who carried out non-medical research with people. We collected data until response patterns began to repeat. We reached the data saturation after collecting 193 QOS.

Informed Consent

² As a result, some of the participants knew us before the study was conducted. Some did not but were able to check information about us online. We signed the introduction of the questionnaire with our names and affiliations.

³ Most of the respondents who were asked individually to fill out the survey did it immediately (and, e.g., posted about it on social media or emailed us about it) or promised to do so. Institutions and associations either promised to send the link to researchers or did not answer. We did not meet a direct negative response, although we found a few negative comments in the data. We have presented them in the discussion. We did not gather any further data about people who decided to click the link but not to answer questions (335 people). The participants did not provide feedback on the findings.

General information about the project's purpose, participant anonymity, and the way the data would be stored and used was provided to potential participants, who gave their consent by clicking a Next button. We assumed that a detailed explanation about informed consent was not needed since our participants were social researchers themselves: they knew the procedures and standards. Reading a long explanation may have discouraged them from taking part in the research. They could withdraw from the survey at any time. The questionnaire was short so as not to burden the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. the concept of Ravitch's [2020] trauma-informed methodology).

Participants

Demographic questions were either open (gender, discipline, and career stage) or multiple-choice (workplace and funding source); therefore, the numbers did not sum up to 193 nor percentages to 100%. Not all respondents provided the same data; for example, when asked about their career stage, some wrote about an academic title (MA, PhD, habilitation), others about their position at a university (eg. Lecturer, Researcher, Assistant Professor, Professor). All those interviewed identified themselves with the social sciences and/or the humanities. They worked mainly in public and private institutions and in some cases in NGOs. Most were PhDs or post-doctoral degrees (habilitation) and most worked as assistant professors, university professors, or PhD students. Sixty-seven (35%) described their work experience, which ranged from 2 to 52 years.

TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents (N=193).

Characteristic											
Gender											
Male		Female								Data missing	
109	56%	81	42%							3	2%
Discipline											
Social sciences		Humanities		Other ⁴						Data missing	
147	76%	83	43%	9	5%					6	3%
Workplace											
Public institution		Private institution		CSO		Other ⁵				Data missing	
157	81%	132	68%	14	7%	6	3%			5	3%
Career stage											
Title											
Professor		Habilitation		Phd		MA				Data missing ⁶	
7	4%	42	22%	76	39%	17	9%			5	3%
Position											
University professor		Associate professor (adjunct)		Assistant professor (assistant)		PhD student		Senior lecturer			
23	12%	62	32%	4	2%	20	10%	1	1%		

4 Including market research.

5 Including unemployed, freelancer, self-employed.

6 Data missing for the open question about career stage. These people provided no information about this topic – neither their title nor position nor other experiences. Another experience was not presented in the table because answers were very diverse, from ‘advanced’ to ‘a dean’.

Funding source											
Statutory research		Grant		Self-funded		Commercial research		Other ⁷		Data missing	
106	55%	72	37%	60	31%	23	12%	10	5%	7	4%

Source: authors' work.

Data Analysis

We used Microsoft Excel software to support the coding process. The data were first coded by grouping repeated issues and patterns (Merrill & West, 2009). We then conducted content analysis based on 'meaning coding' and 'meaning categorisation' (Kvale, 2007). We attached keywords—informed consent, confidentiality/privacy, the comfort of participants and researchers, and exploitation/harm/reciprocity—to text fragments. We then applied meaning condensation (i.e., compressing longer statements into briefer ones to allow comparisons between participants) and meaning interpretation (i.e., critical interpretation of statements beyond what was directly said, for instance, how fears about research quality in statements also suggested a critique of other researchers' approaches; Kvale, 2007). We combined this approach with elements of linguistic and theoretical analysis (Kvale, 2007). We did not conduct any specific or comprehensive form of linguistic analysis. In our theoretical analysis, we used concepts from the literature on research ethics: recurring sentences, democratisation/power (im)balance, ethicality, and relational/situational ethics. We worked independently when coding, then discussed our results. Since the research was exploratory, no pre-prepared coding tree or other coding system was used.

Results

Approaches to Research Ethics

Based on the statements of the researchers, three types of approaches to ethical issues during the pandemic were distinguished: *nothing has changed*, *opportunity-oriented*, and *precautionary*.

7 Including no money, own time.

We created a typology in which (in contrast to a classification) each participant could be assigned to one, two, or three types rather than placing them in one category (Nowak, 2007). Some mentioned the second and third types in their statements simultaneously, while the first one was represented separately.

The nothing has changed approach. According to the first perspective, ethical principles were unchangeable, and the pandemic did not affect the participants' applied research strategies. This point of view appeared most frequently in the form of recurring sentences (Kaufmann, 2007) formulated in similar laconic words: “[Impact on] ethics? Probably none” (W/MA/PS/82);⁸ “The pandemic did not influence the methodology of research projects I conducted, ethical issues did not change either” (M/Prof/H/321); “I do not change my [ethical] – standards” (W/PhD/data missing/88); and “[The pandemic] – did not influence ethical issues” (W/Prof/H/312).

These statements were general and did not explicitly refer to our ethical categories, for instance, informed consent and confidentiality/privacy. A few professors and one assistant professor who took this approach argued their positions through their clear disapproval of changes in ethics under external circumstances: “Ethical issues should be a constant feature of any research. Therefore, there is no place for (...) shortcuts” (M/Prof/S/139); “I do not understand why research methodology or ethics should change during a pandemic” (W/Prof/E/223); and “Ethical rules should always be followed, so the pandemic did not change anything” (W/Prof/P/497).

The other researchers representing this type of approach did not deepen their opinion; they did not explain their views on the immutability of ethical principles in the pandemic. We can only assume that they were reflecting the argument put forward in the literature, that most of the key ethical issues and ethical procedures such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and

⁸ Citation codes provide information on: (a) gender of respondents (W – women, M – men); (b) academic degree (Prof, Hab, PhD, MA); (c) discipline (A – anthropology, cultural studies, E – economics, H – humanities and the arts, M – management, P – pedagogy, PS – psychology, and S – sociology); and (d) participant number. Some participant numbers are higher than 193 because the LimeSurvey system assigned them to people who filled the survey and to people who only clicked on the first page.

privacy would be the same in both pre- and post-pandemic offline and online research (Dodds & Hess, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020). These statements would be worth verifying (or otherwise) in future research.

Two-third of the respondents who took this approach had post-doctoral degrees, which prompted us to provide several possible explanations. We would suggest that they perceived research ethics as a universal and objective system of rules rather than a social construct that depends on different contexts and that is subject to renegotiation, especially those at an advanced stage of their careers. It may also have indicated that their reflexivity on ethical issues was related to their experience. Those who have already formed habits and opinions about conducting research may be less likely to consider ethical dilemmas because, with professional experience, they are more certain about their ethical choices. The prevalence of senior researchers among those expressing the nothing has changed approach may have also been explained by the fact that some of them conducted empirical research less frequently (i.e., the work was done by younger PhD students or doctors; cf. Kwiek, 2015). This may suggest that a lack of direct engagement reduces ethical relativism in social research, or that these researchers felt responsible for safeguarding ethical standards.

The opportunity-orientated approach. The second approach was based on the perception of the pandemic as an opportunity to increase researchers' innovativeness and flexibility, build relations with and give voice to the participants, and democratise research processes. Therefore, this approach adopted elements of relational ethics based on responsibility and interdependence, an equal, dialogical relationship with research participants, and openness to their needs (Ellis, 2007).

Innovation and flexibility. The limitations and burden of the pandemic inspired some researchers to seek new, more flexible solutions to compensate for the inconvenience of organising research during this extraordinary time. Several PhD students and MAs working in private institutions declared that circumstances prompted them to design easier, friendlier tools and less exhausting research procedures. One researcher, for example, changed their research methodology from qualitative to quantitative out of concern for her respondents' comfort, because she

considered this less burdensome for them. Other researchers were also more attentive to the issue of providing information about informed consent, confidentiality, and the conditions under which online conversations with their research participants were taking place, as can be seen from the following declaration: “I pay more attention to informing about the confidentiality of the research process” (W/PhD/S/88). The crisis seemed to encourage some parts of the community to move away from proven practices and look for new solutions. One of the researchers wrote that “A researcher should be flexible, alert, sensitive and open to new contexts emerging in the course of the research and ready to reconceptualise them” (W/PhD/P/104).

Giving voice to the participants. Some researchers were encouraged by the pandemic situation to reflect on “how and whom research can help” (W/Prof/S/71). They said that conducting research in such circumstances addressed their participants’ needs, enabling them to break away from the reality of the pandemic and to (in the words of a researcher who was conducting biographical research) “listen to others, help through attention and co-existence. It was particularly valuable during times of increased anxiety, loneliness, and isolation” (W/MA/S&A/95). A researcher in the field of cultural and art studies stated that

Those who, until now, did not have time to meet, find time to talk remotely; those who did not want to talk about their experience, come to me themselves with this need. Perhaps the situation of isolation encourages a journey into oneself, and the lack of contact with people – to look for opportunities to meet and talk about experiences, even online.

(W/PhD/A&H/380)

These extracts show that participation in a study during the pandemic was also treated quasi-therapeutically (Hall et al., 2021). Moreover, in the case of professional groups that were particularly burdened during the pandemic, participation in a study was regarded as empowering: “The very fact of giving them [teachers]) a voice and listening was very valuable for them” (W/PhD/S&A/101).

Democratisation of the research process. Analysis of the data led us to conclude that a pandemic can be a factor in the democratisation of the research process. In the opinion of the

researchers who adapted empirical research so they could conduct it online, the risk of a lack of comfort during, for example, interviews applied equally to participants and researchers who felt similar “stress due to technical problems, time, or space constraints” (W/PhD/P/92) and who were overwhelmed by remote contacts because “they are currently overloaded with online tasks” (W/PhD/P/92; cf. Meskell et al., 2021). The researchers who decided to carry out research online indicated that both sides had limited control over it. This was because of “the problem with unstable internet connections” (W/PhD/S/45) and “the lack of suitable conditions at home to carry out online [interviews]” (W/Hab/S/53); each interlocutor was responsible for organising the interviews themselves, making them equal research partners.

At the same time, the qualitative researchers claimed that transferring research to the Internet during the pandemic made conversation more comfortable, was less stressful than offline research, saved time, and fostered greater openness among the interlocutors (cf. Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). The interviewees emphasised the positive impact of online research both on their comfort and on the comfort of their research participants; a researcher who was the principal investigator (PI) in an ethnological grant pointed out that “I have the impression that for my male and female interlocutors it is sometimes more comfortable to talk in their own homes, so geographical distance and online mediation are convenient for them” (W/PhD/A/31). Another PI, who was running a sociological research project explained that “more tasks are done online so I think the interview has become less stressful” (W/PhD/S/45). These benefits can be interpreted in terms of aligning risk with research democratisation. Interviews in the home space made it possible for both interviewer and interviewee to feel equally comfortable, strengthening the balance of power between them (cf. Tremblay et al., 2021).

The researchers also observed that their participants were more likely to influence the research process actively during the pandemic. For example, they asked for more detailed information about the nature of the research before agreeing to participate, either because they had less trust in research conducted on the Internet or because the pandemic was causing higher levels of stress:

When arranging one of the first interviews, I was contacted by a person who stipulated that she was asking for a detailed interview script because she did not like to be surprised. When informed that there was no such script because of the narrative nature of the interview, she replied to me saying that she had resigned from the study. She said her decision was based on her previous experience of depression and her reluctance to return to that experience in the circumstances of the pandemic, which was giving her a heightened sense of anxiety and uncertainty. This situation made me realise that, especially at this time, that I have the responsibility, and moreover the duty, to inform potential participants about the form of the interview. (W/MA/S&A/95)

It may be assumed that obtaining additional information about the research meant that participants' sense of security and agency increased.

Democratisation of research and greater equality in research interactions also included the demand that respondents be given a voice. Researchers could achieve these aims by being more innovative and flexible. Innovativeness, giving participants a voice, and democratisation were part of the opportunity-orientated approach and linked to the tendency to look on the bright side the changes generated by the pandemic.

The opportunity-orientated approach was followed by those who decided to adapt their research methods to the new circumstances and who had in-person experience in their field. It suggests that facing difficulties directly—by continuing research—fostered a commitment to finding positive solutions in the area of research ethics. It is also worth noting that around three-quarters of this group were early-career stage researchers.

Precautionary approach. Researchers who represented the third approach have perceived the pandemic as a threat to the ethics of social research, namely regarding two issues: an increased risk of harm and a lowering in ethical standards. This approach to research ethics was mainly adopted by researchers who - before the pandemic outbreak - intended or implemented face-to-face qualitative (mainly) or quantitative research. In addition, three-quarters of respondents with this

approach were women, who identified themselves with sociology/social science and/or socio-cultural anthropology.

Increased risk of harm. The researchers believed that the pandemic situation increases the risk of harming their research participants in two main areas: their health (mostly mental health, i.e., discomfort, stress, and anxiety), and further marginalisation. While the first area prompted some of them to suspend their research, the second was an argument to continue it.

In the case of contact research, it is evident that it exposes both the investigators and the participants to a loss of health and life. It can also aggravate mental discomfort:

I fear that it will be difficult to carry out any field research in the coming months. First, because of the fear of potential participants being infected. Second, they may be in difficult life circumstances and not interested in participating in any research (W/PhD/S/12).

As argued by our participants, the reason for mental discomfort is an increased level of stress and anxiety associated with the threat to health and life and the consequences of lockdown. Such a conviction concerned individual participants of their studies and specific professional groups that were severely affected by the pandemic (i.e., medical staff, entrepreneurs, and teachers; cf. Meskell et al., 2021). For example, a researcher who studies the innovation in enterprise based on qualitative interviewees wrote: ‘As for the realisation of the research – entrepreneurs are so depressed that they do not even want to talk about this [innovation] and phone calls are cut off’ (W/PhD/M/236).

Due to the increased sensitivity to harming their potential participants, some researchers wondered whether it was justified to undertake or continue qualitative research during the aggravation of COVID-19. They feared placing an even more significant burden on their study participants by absorbing their time, attention, and energy. One of the researchers interested in gender studies noted: “In a pandemic situation it is more difficult for me to ask for interviews because I realise that many people are busier with work, family, and obligations than usual” (W/Prof/A/160). Qualitative research itself often requires effort on both the research participant and the researcher, which may be of particular ethical importance during a pandemic.

Some of our participants concluded that they should refrain from conducting their research for the duration of the pandemic (cf. the “avoiding risk” response in Swenson & Roll, 2020, pp. 287–288). As they have argued, the research issue they chose has lost its relevance in the context of severe public and economic health crises and the individualised problems that many people are currently facing. The following statement is an example:

Many of my potential interlocutors are currently struggling with problems caused by the pandemic. For many, these are common economic problems, while for others (such as people the crisis of homelessness or workers who are from over across the eastern border working semi-legally) are simply fighting for survival. In this situation, it is inappropriate to arrange an interview about space (W/PhD/A/137).

Several researchers believed it was unethical to move qualitative studies regarding sensitive topics from an offline to an online space. Compared with direct communication, online interviews were less comfortable and proffered fewer opportunities to build an atmosphere of mutual trust (cf. Tremblay et al., 2021 on rapport). The following statement was an example:

Experience shows that conducting interviews with parents of children with disabilities requires a great deal of sensitivity, attention, and the ability to react to unexpected behaviours and reactions. I would not risk such a conversation via Skype or the like (M/MA/S/289).

As two participants pointed out, however, abandoning research because of the risk of harm may have exposed people to other types of harm, especially those considered socially marginalised or vulnerable. For example, halting certain research studies can leave people in disadvantaged situations socially isolated or, in the case of seniors, lonely and without support. As one of the participants who conducted narrative interviews put it: “research was suspended and people were abandoned” (W/PhD/P/453; cf. Hall et al., 2021). Another consequence of the suspension of research in this environment was the absence of marginalised people’s perspectives, as the following observation illustrated:

Certain groups can be particularly difficult to access for research. I am referring to those who have generally been described so far as marginalised or socially excluded. Their absence in the online sphere, or their limited remote accessibility offline (including by telephone), will make many of them even less visible and more difficult to reach.

(W/Prof/A/169)

Because marginalised communities often have limited access to the Internet and other modern means of communication, and because it is difficult to conduct research with them under pandemic conditions, their needs will not be recognised and consequently ignored. This can be interpreted as a form of harm.

Lowering ethical standards. Many researchers thought that the pandemic had had a negative impact on ethical standards, for example regarding confidentiality, privacy, and assurance of comfort. The following statement was an example: “I do not have the proper conditions at home to carry out [online qualitative research] and I do not know what conditions my interviewees are living under. I prefer meetings face to face. So I suspended the research” (W/Hab/S/53). Those who expressed such an opinion were afraid that people in their respondents’ homes would be able to hear their conversations (cf. Roberts et al., 2021).

Furthermore, according to some researchers, conducting online research during the pandemic had high emotional costs. For example, one of our participants who conducted qualitative research with seniors wrote that “There is definitely less comfort in conducting interviews when that [comfort] is measured by a subjective sense of the invisible (virus) threat” (M/PhD/S/268). The researchers argued that the pandemic affected not only their research participants but also themselves. One said, “I am experiencing stress because of technical problems and time and space constraints” (W/PhD/P/93). Another noted that

Sitting alone at home and being isolated from other researchers with whom I normally meet has a terribly demotivating effect on me. I think it is because I cannot see what others are doing or working on, and I have a sense of loneliness. (W/PhD/S/28)

It is worth mentioning that sometimes the researchers' sense of discomfort was caused primarily by conducting research remotely rather than by the threat to their health of or quarantine/distancing measures: "I was not able to carry out my research – instead of direct contact with the participants (interviews) only telephone contact remained. This is neither sufficient nor comfortable for the researcher or participants" (W/PhD/P/493). It would be interesting to examine how stress experienced by researchers due to the pandemic affects their adherence to ethical standards in research in future studies. We would suggest that it may lower them.

The examples cited in this section led us to conclude that the precautionary approach involves the assumption that conducting research during the pandemic was at the expense of both researchers' and their participants' well-being.

Discussion

The present study belongs to the field of descriptive, not normative, research ethics. We have presented the researchers' approaches to research ethics without making normative judgements. Our analysis complements the literature by showing how researchers responded to the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. We distinguished three main types of approaches to research ethics: nothing has changed, opportunity-oriented, and precautionary. This points to the different ways researchers can respond in their practice to a crisis. The pandemic compelled researchers to adopt various strategies to cope with the new situation (Hall et al., 2021). Another explanation of this diversification of approaches is that researchers were unsure about what constituted ethically acceptable behaviour because, as Crivello and Favara (2021) have noted, "the threat of COVID-19 has disrupted social research across the world and required researchers to evaluate whether and how to continue their active studies" (p. 1). It may also be that researchers' approach to research ethics during the pandemic closely paralleled their approach to research ethics in what may be termed normal times. If we were to assume that this was so, we may have hypothesised that the researchers taking the nothing has changed approach would see research ethics as a closed set of rules. In contrast, researchers using the opportunity-oriented and precautionary approaches may have been more inclined to situational or relational ethics (cf. Hall et

al., 2021).

All three approaches are represented in the Anglophone literature, which may be an indication of their universality. The majority of researchers who described their experiences of implementing remote research during COVID-19 took the opportunity-orientated approach (Howlett, 2021; Lawrence, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021) or the precautionary approach (Mwambari, Purdeková, & Nyenyezi Bisoka, 2021). Some authors combined these (Crivello & Favara, 2021; Tremblay et al., 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020), as did the present study's participants. They perceive similar opportunities and threats as our study participants. Many of the challenges mentioned by our respondents who represented the precautionary approach could be additionally described as *COVID-19 specific challenges* (e.g., the risk of harm) or *general challenges associated with distance research* (e.g., confidentiality and privacy), as Hall et al. (2021) noted in their literature review (although they considered participatory research only). However, in the present study, both challenges were present simultaneously. For example, the participants' and their respondents' discomfort was sometimes the result both of the pandemic and remote communication issues. Another difference between the present study's findings and the literature was the prevalence of the nothing has changed approach in our study. It has been underrepresented in the literature perhaps because it does not seem to require further investigation (cf. Dodds & Hess, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020). However, it would be interesting to examine this approach—and in particular what it entails and what it implies—more closely in future studies.

Self-Reflection

We also compared our experience of carrying out the research described above with the pandemic experience of our research participants. Like them, we faced the same ethical dilemmas associated with conducting online research. We had to obtain the participants' informed consent and create a tool that would guarantee their comfort, safety, and anonymity as well as the security of the data. Relating our research findings to our own research choices and attitudes, we would describe our approach as opportunity orientated. We decided to start a new project at the beginning of the pandemic and saw the situation as an opportunity to collect interesting data and maintain contact

with the research community, which was something we and our colleagues lacked during the initial months of lockdown. During and after the research, we received a great deal of feedback on how important it was for the participants to be able to write about how they felt during COVID-19 and how their work had changed. An important positive outcome of the present study seemed to be the creation of a community of experience. We believe that the participants felt comfortable with their involvement in the study. We received only three negative comments indicating a reluctance to participate:

1. “Everyone is studying people in the pandemic” (data missing/data missing/data missing/120).
2. “In my opinion, giving people only open questions does not meet the criteria [for good qualitative research] . But I don’t know; maybe there is a questionnaire in the next part, not just empty spaces for an online qualitative interview” (M/PhD/market research/65).
3. “It is not good to make up artificial problems” (M/data missing/P/484).

The research process was, therefore, a generally positive experience for both the researchers and the participants.

Limitations

One limitation of the present study was that it involved researchers in Poland only. Similar studies in other countries may have generated different responses. Moreover, the method and the tool we chose allowed us to gather broad (many different perspectives) but not deep (individual level) data, which tends to be the case when QOSs are used (cf. Braun et al., 2020). Using a QOS did not allow us to present quantitative findings and draw conclusions about the prevalence of specific opinions. The sample was not representative, so the results could not be generalised. The chosen population was restricted to a particular group of researchers. We gathered the data at the beginning of the pandemic when the situation was unfamiliar to most of the participants. It could not be directly applied to present circumstances; the approaches may or may not have prevailed, so the data cannot be applied longitudinally.

Best Practices

Our recommendations are limited to contexts similar to that of the Polish one. First, social researchers are relatively autonomous and make most of the decisions about research ethics unilaterally (Author, 2018). Researchers could consider ways of dealing with ethical problems during the pandemic and analyse which response best suits their specific research project. Second, most social research projects do not have to be approved by ethics committees in Poland, but these are becoming more important. The present study could provide some solutions to the problems that researchers present to such committees. We view the role of ethics committees mainly as advisory. Third, the findings could be useful for institutions that provide grants. We have implied the complexity of the decision-making process in risk-bearing research; the institutions could investigate these circumstances and decide whether to extend or suspend grants accordingly.

Research Agenda

Further research on the present topic could focus on discovering which researchers used which approach and how this related to their socio-demographic characteristics. An analysis of the intersection between the sources of funding and the chosen approach would be especially interesting. It seems likely that grant funding compelled researchers to continue their projects for fear of not being able to account for how it was spent.⁹ It would also be worth studying which approach and under which circumstances proved to be the most effective in terms of maintaining ethical standards and finishing projects on time. Although we focused on researchers, the perspective of participants in other research projects, grant institutions, and research committees would complement our analysis.

Educational Implications

The present study may be helpful as part of the process of teaching ethics and research integrity, where it is not only crucial to inform those involved about ethical principles and how to intervene in case of violation (the reactive approach) but also to shape responsible attitudes by

⁹ In the present study, the source of funding was ascribed to a researcher and not to a specific research project. Therefore, we were not able to test this hypothesis.

providing good examples and stimulating ethical reflection in a dialogical way (the proactive approach; Hyytinen & Löfström, 2017). The present study's findings could be used to help social researchers and students to reflect on ethical challenges and look for ways to offset possible problems. Rethinking decisions made by researchers in the pandemic might help anyone who is preparing to carry out research in emergency situations.

References

- Babbie, E. (2014). *The practice of social research*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., & McEvoy, C. (2020). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *16*(1–2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550>
- Chatfield, K., & Schroeder, D. (2020). Ethical research in the COVID-19 era demands care, solidarity and trustworthiness. *Research Ethics*, *16*(3–4) 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016120945046>
- Crivello, G., & Favara, M. (2021). COVID-19 and the 'ethics of disruption': Current dilemmas facing longitudinal research in low- and middle-income countries. *Methodological Innovations*, *14*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799121994223>
- Colnerud, G. (2014). Ethical dilemmas in research in relation to ethical review: An empirical study. *Research Ethics*, *10*(4), 238–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016114552339>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (eds) (2017) *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: SAGE Publications.
- Dodds, S., & Hess, A. C. (2020) Adapting research methodology during COVID-19: Lessons for transformative service research. *Journal of Service Management*, *32*(2), 203–217.
- Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *13*(1), 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406294947>

- Hall, J., Gaved, M., & Sargent, J. (2021). Participatory research approaches in times of Covid-19: A narrative literature review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211010087>
- Howlett, M. (2021). Looking at the ‘field’ through a Zoom lens: Methodological reflections on conducting online research during a global pandemic. *Qualitative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120985691>
- Hyytinen, H., & Löfström, E. (2017). Reactively, proactively, implicitly, explicitly? Academics’ pedagogical conceptions of how to promote research ethics and integrity. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 15(1), 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-016-9271-9>
- Kaufmann, J. C. (2007). *L’Entretien compréhensif* [The comprehensive interview]. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Kvale, S. (2007). *Doing interviews*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Kwiek, M. (2015) *Uniwersytet w dobie przemian* [The university in a time of change]. Warsaw: PWN.
- Lawrence, L. (2020). Conducting cross-cultural qualitative interviews with mainland Chinese participants during COVID: Lessons from the field. *Qualitative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120974157>
- Lobe, B., Morgan, D., & Hoffman, K.A. (2020). Qualitative data collection in an era of social distancing. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920937875>
- Lupton, D. (2020). Special section on “Sociology and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.” *Health Sociology Review*, 29(2), 111–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14461242.2020.1790919>
- Merrill, B., & West, L. (2009). *Using biographical methods in social research*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Meskill, P., Houghton, C., & Biesty, L. (2021). Opening windows behind closed doors: Reflections on working qualitatively during a pandemic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211008313>

- Mwambari, D., Purdeková, A., & Nyenyezi Bisoka, A. (2021). Covid-19 and research in conflict-affected contexts: Distanced methods and the digitalisation of suffering. *Qualitative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794121999014>
- Nowak, S. (2007). *Metodologia badań społecznych* (Methodology of Social Sciences). Warsaw: PWN.
- Polish Sociological Association. (2012). Code of sociologist's ethics. Retrieved from: <http://pts.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/kodeks.pdf>
- Ravitch, S. (2020). The best laid plans... Qualitative research design during COVID-19. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yx9r27kf>
- Roberts, J. K., Pavlakis, A. E., & Richards, M. P. (2021). It's more complicated than it seems: Virtual qualitative research in the COVID-19 Era. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211002959>.
- Silverman, D. (2017) *Doing qualitative research*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage Publications.
- Swenson, G., & Roll, K. (2020). Theorizing risk and research: Methodological constraints and their consequences. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 53(2), 286–291. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651900177X>
- Teti, M., Schatz, E., & Liebenberg, L. (2020). Methods in the time of COVID-19: The vital role of qualitative inquiries. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19(51), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920920962>
- Tremblay, S., Castiglione, S., Audet, L-A., Desmarais, M., Horace, M., & Peláez, S. (2021). Conducting qualitative research to respond to COVID-19 challenges: Reflections for the present and beyond. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211009679>
- Valdez, E. S., & Gubrium, A. (2020). Shifting to virtual CBPR protocols in the time of corona virus/COVID-19. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920982145>

World Council of Anthropological Associations. (2020). Fieldwork in an era of pandemia: Digital
(and other) alternatives. Retrieved from: <https://www.waunet.org/wcaa/videos/>