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Brief Report

Online Free Association Narrative Interviewing: Intimacy, embodied experience and technological entanglements

Trudi Macagnino

Introduction

This paper is a reflection on my experience of conducting thirty online Free Association Narrative Interviews (FANI) for my PhD research during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. I consider the idea of intimacy together with the barriers and facilitating factors for intimate research encounters in an online environment.

My current PhD project explores our relationship with the natural world in the context of the climate and ecological crisis, specifically how it presents in psychotherapy and eco-activism. I conducted online interviews with therapists, clients and eco-activists. I was particularly interested in the latent meanings in participant narratives suggestive of unconscious material, therefore, I chose FANI as my method. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in-person interviews were not possible. Guidance on how to adapt the method to an online environment was lacking, although some research on online psychoanalytic therapy did exist and this was useful to a degree. However, I needed to develop my own adaptations as I went along in order to create sufficient intimacy in the interviews to ensure a richness of data. I will first give an outline of FANI before considering the relevance of intimacy for the method. I will then share my experience and reflections of adapting the method to an online context.

FANI method

Much of the development of FANI has been done by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000, 2013) and it has become a well-recognised and used method within psycho-social research. It draws heavily on psychoanalytic concepts. The most notable of these are:

- The presence of an unconscious such that not all knowledge is available for conscious thought. Narrative data will contain both manifest (conscious) material and latent (unconscious) material.
- Unconscious defences against anxiety and vulnerability are used such that the meanings of feelings and actions are disguised in the narrative. Interviewer and interviewee are both defended and this will be present in the inter-personal dynamic.
- Transference processes occur where past relational experiences are re-experienced in the present with other people. The interviewer and interviewee may see each other in a particular light based on past relationships and experiences. Questions may, therefore, be understood through different meaning frames by interviewer and interviewee.

FANI also draws on narrative approaches where the subject is seen as a storyteller rather than a respondent to the interviewer's questions. The meaning of the story is created between the storyteller (subject) and the listener (interviewer) and is co-constructed within the specific context in which it is being told. Hollway and Jefferson highlight the "transparent self problem" challenging the assumption that subjects know who they are and are willing to tell it to a stranger (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.3). They contest that people have a confusing and contradictory relationship with knowing about themselves.

Free association is of central importance in FANI. Allowing the subject to tell the story in their own way, with all the contradictions, avoidances and elisions, gives access to their anxieties and concerns, their unconscious conflicts and the defences they use to avoid them. This approach, therefore, researches "beneath the surface" and "beyond the purely discursive" (Clarke & Hogget, 2009, p.2). Free association is achieved using specific interviewing principles. Firstly, the use of very open questions designed to elicit real and specific experiences. For example, my first question to therapist participants was 'Can you tell me about times when clients have talked about the natural nonhuman world?' and 'Why' questions, which tend to elicit an intellectual response, are avoided. In addition, the participant's ordering and phrasing in the narrative is followed rather than imposing a structure. In this way the interviewer is transformed from a "highly visible asker of ... questions to the almost invisible, facilitating catalyst to their stories" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.34) and the subject's meaning-frames are preserved.

The research encounter itself is not a neutral, data gathering event. Unconscious processes within the research will construct the ways in which reality is perceived, the way in which the research context is constructed, and the ways in which the research data is generated and analysed (Clarke & Hogget, 2009). As Hunt (1989) says, “the unconscious communications which are negotiated in the research encounter affect empathy and rapport. They therefore play a role in the materials that subjects reveal and researchers grasp” (Hunt, 1989, p.27).

The FANI method consists of two interviews. The first is designed to elicit free association narrative themes associated with the particular research questions, gain a reading of the emotional tone and pick up any contradictions and inconsistencies. The second interview is designed to seek further evidence of any hypotheses being developed, to explore themes which may have been absent from the first interview and to give the subjects an opportunity to reflect (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

The reflexivity of the researcher is a necessary step in meaning making and introduces subjectivity as a key part of the data. However, as already highlighted, psycho-social research assumes both subject and researcher to be anxious and defended (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Even with reflexivity, therefore, it is not always possible for the researcher to access their own unconscious processes. Analysis of the data requires the involvement of others, such as colleagues, supervisors and peers in the form of research panels, to surface any unconscious material of the researcher which may be relevant. This detailed reading of the data allows us to know “how a researcher comes to produce such an account and opens it to the possibility of different readings of the same material” (Walkerdine, 1997, as cited in Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.42), a process known as ‘triple hermeneutics’ (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018) – interpretation of interpretations plus the interpretation of unconscious material.

A key consideration was whether such depth and complexity of meaning-making could be achieved in an online environment without the subtle non-verbal communication that occurs between two bodies in close proximity.

Intimacy in the research encounter

Intimacy has been defined as ‘connections that impact on people’ (Kolehmainen, 2022). It involves a sensitivity to others’ lived experience such that they are left feeling deeply understood (Piras & Miele, 2019). Hiitola (2021) discusses how research encounters “contain affective, embodied and sensory knowledge” (p.179) creating intimacy through a “shared,

intense affective assemblage where the borders of the researcher and participant become blurred” (p.187). Additionally, neuroscience shows that “the body is the main stage for emotions, either directly or via representation in the somatosensory structures of the brain” (Damasio, 2000, p.287), called embodied cognition. Much of this embodied cognition is unconscious and implicit and relates to what Russell calls “intuition, empathy and emotional communication between individuals” (Russell, 2018 p.82). The physical body forms part of assemblages that emerge within research interviews; we recognise others by reading their bodies and intimate encounters are those which metaphorically pierce our skin (Hiitola, 2021). Such intimacy is compatible with psycho-social research that seeks to research “beneath the surface” (Clarke & Hogget, 2009, p.2) and is particularly important when seeking unconscious latent meanings in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participant.

So how does the lack of physical proximity impact on the levels of intimacy achievable in a research interview? In what way does the more-than-human technological tools required for an online interview, and which become part of the assemblage of the encounter, facilitate or hinder intimacy? In the remainder of the paper, I share my reflections on these questions.

Using FANI online

In her book entitled ‘Screen Relations: The Limits of Computer-Mediated Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy’ Gillian Russell discusses the way in which using online platforms for therapy is different from co-present therapy (Russell, 2018). The overarching point she makes is that technologically mediated therapy is not equivalent to co-present therapy; you cannot just simply substitute one for the other and there are some significant losses. I would argue, that by the same token, online interviewing is not equivalent to co-present interviewing. However, that does not mean that rich data cannot be produced. I will consider four aspects of my experience and how they relate to intimacy: the physical environment, the technology, lack of embodied presence and style of interviewing.

The physical environment

I was not able to control the participant’s environment in the same way as if we had arranged to meet in person in my consulting room. I could not make the environment safe in terms of confidentiality, interruptions and distractions or create the ‘holding’ environment that enables the participant to feel secure and able to be spontaneous. Instead, I was reliant on the

participant to take responsibility for these things. Russell (2018) draws attention to the way in which the client's choice of where to have their therapy session can illuminate unspoken relational processes and this made me more aware of this aspect. What elements of themselves did the participants allow me to see/not see? One therapist, for instance, made a point of moving the camera to show me all the plants she had in her room and I wondered whether she wanted to position herself as a nature lover. Kolehmainen (2022) also draws attention to the absence of the therapist's consulting room during online sessions and the sense of the therapist as a guest rather than a host. This made me consider the equalising effect of using online interviewing, both myself and the participant showing up in our own space. In most cases, the lack of control over the physical environment was unproblematic, although there were occasions where we were interrupted by a phone ringing, a dog barking or the sound of someone else in the house talking. Sometimes this intrusion into the privacy of the interview distracted from the intimacy, but at other times it acted as a window into the participant's domestic life and paradoxically served to increase the intimacy. The tender way in which a participant cradled their dog for instance gave a valuable insight into their relationship with it.

The technology

The unreliability of the technology was sometimes a problem. Poor internet connection, delayed transmission, pixilated images and distorted audio created distractions. On more than one occasion, an interview unexpectedly halted due to a dropped connection, with frozen images and one of us speaking into empty space. Frustratingly this might happen at a moment of significant emotion, or when some key material was being shared. We would then have to re-establish where we were in the narrative, points or questions repeated and oftentimes I would feel that both potency and intimacy was lost. Similarly, delayed audio transmission often occurred, leading to talking over each other or interrupting. This gave the interview a less spacious feel and potentially detracted from the intimacy. When the technology failed, I would feel a sense of shame, especially early on in the research, as though it were my fault; I had not been a good enough researcher, akin to Winnicott's notion of being a good enough mother (Winnicott, 1971). However, there were also times when the shared frustration or humour created a moment of connection and intimacy between us, a recognition of the shared struggle with our 'intimate entanglement' with technology (Latimer & Gomez, 2019) and a sense of surviving the rupture together.

Additionally, maintaining a technological focus created some self-consciousness around the use of the tools, although this lessened the more interviews I conducted. In the early days of getting used to the technology, the focus on the mechanics rendered the intimacy of the encounter less visible. In their edited monograph 'Intimate Entanglements' Latimer and Gomez (2019) make the point that technology can make human intimacy invisible in science and technology research. Although my research project is within the social sciences, my reliance on technology seemed to sometimes create the same effect. The participant and I were independently interacting with our respective computers, screens, cameras, microphones and keyboards and this became figural, whilst the intimacy of the interview encounter was occurring in the background. We were both ironically concerned with the quality of the technological 'connection' and less with the human connection.

Related to this, the need to keep a very focussed attention on the screen and to the words being spoken was not conducive to a free-floating, free associative environment that is the basis of FANI. It was harder for me to enter a place of reverie, to allow my own thoughts, images and associations to flow, to hold an evenly-suspended attention, and for my mind to move internally and externally. Perhaps the creation of a third, transitional space - a process of "letting go into being with [the other]" (Benjamin, 2004, p.7) – and the potential for a co-created meaning-frame was restricted because of this.

I also found that the quality of my gaze was different online, it somehow felt more concentrated, more penetrative and even at times objectifying of the other. The touch of the gaze can be profound in intimate encounters. It can communicate understanding, compassion and empathy, and an experience of emotional depth. There is a significant difference between a soft gaze as an empathic or supportive touch, and a direct focussed looking that could have a more challenging quality.

Embodied presence

I will now consider the lack of physical proximity and the impact of this on embodied presence, the ability to tune in to sensory information from the body, bringing awareness of experiences beyond cognition that signal intra-psychic and inter-relational affect (Ogden, 2006; Totton, 2015). I found myself relying much more on explicit verbal communication. The subtler perceptions of implicit body language, energy shifts and changes in skin tone for example were not so easily noticed online, especially if the quality of the screen image was poor. One participant made a point of telling me she was crying as she realised that I could

not see her tears on screen. She wanted me to know, and had to do extra work to create the intimate experience of being seen.

My own body felt inert at times and entries in my reflexive research journal indicated that I was seeking a more embodied connection. For instance, following an interview with one participant who lived in a caravan, I wrote the following entry:

“I find myself studying his appearance on the screen. He’s wearing a casual checked shirt with a tweed waistcoat. He sits in front of a window and I can see a field behind him with trees and an occasional bird flies past. I have no idea where the caravan is but I know it is local; I try to guess its location. I try to imagine what else was in the room with him. How warm or cold is it? He lives and works in close contact with the land and I wonder what his hands look like. I imagine they are large and rough with dirt under the fingernails. What does he smell of? Earthy? Does he smell of trees and grass and wood smoke?”

I realised that what I was trying to do was put my sensory body in the room in my imagination, trying to fill the gaps created by the virtual interview process.

The lack of embodied presence sometimes created a sense of emotional distance from the participant, giving the encounter a more superficial feeling. This echoes Russell’s finding that online therapy sessions can be experienced as ‘thin’ (Russell, 2018). It also created a sense of distance from the content of the interview. Given the distressing nature of the climate crisis, this distance may have been defensive, facilitating a form of functional denial (Moser, 2019). Functional denial allows us to know the reality of the climate crisis whilst at the same time behaving as if nothing has really changed. We can continue to get up in the morning, do our jobs and fulfil our obligations. In this context, I could know about the climate crisis and listen to participants talk about it, but at the same time I could get the job of interviewing done. Instead, I often felt emotions later, whilst listening to the recording, or at a later date triggered by something I subsequently read or heard regarding climate change or environmental destruction and would find myself in tears or feeling anxious and fearful.

This process of functional denial became even clearer to me after attending an online conference organised by The Freud Museum entitled ‘The Climate Emergency: Psychoanalytic Perspectives’. During the conference I was engaged with the speakers, busy taking notes and thinking how useful this would be for my own research. My bodily feeling was buoyant and excited. There was a section in the conference programme where young

activists read their poems about the climate emergency. I became aware of my impatience; poetry is very nice but I wanted to get on with the real work of the conference, the academic material which I could use for my PhD. After the readings, the speakers moved on to the next topic but there was a sudden halt as one of the speakers broke down and spoke about the impact that the young people and the poems had had on her. At that point, I too was able to connect to my own grief, guilt and fear. The combination of seeing the grief clearly in another's face, albeit on the screen, and the power of poetry to get beneath the surface, to subvert the psychological and technological defences, broke through my functional denial.

This experience made me realise how, as an interviewer, it is tempting to rush on to the next question without pausing, breathing and connecting with what may be happening in the body. How easily we focus on getting the job done rather than allowing affect and emotion to inform us of what might be happening beneath the surface. We need to be even more alert to this kind of functional denial when interviewing in an online setting.

Style of interviewing

Lastly, I want to say something about the framing and style of interviewing I found myself using which I think was another attempt to increase intimacy. I used a much more dialogic and responsive style of interviewing than perhaps Hollway and Jefferson might be advocating for when they refer to the “disciplined reticence” of the interviewer (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.39). When listening to the recordings I was struck by the frequency of my utterings throughout the participants' narrative – uh huh, mmm, yeah etc. I think what I was doing was trying to let the participant know, I'm here, I'm listening, I'm with you. I would regularly reflect back what the participant had told me, often offering my own response to what they had said. I would use phrases like, 'It sounds as though ...' Or 'I'm wondering if ...'. Often this encouraged the participant to go a little further into their experience, leading to further associations, stimulating new shared insights and deepening the intimacy. I agree with Hogget et al. (2010) that this more dialogic style is a way of assessing the value of an interpretation.

The important moments of saying 'hello' and 'goodbye' were also different online. When a stranger's face suddenly appears eighteen inches in front of you, you are thrown into a moment of intimacy without a gradual approaching. There is no initial viewing each other from a distance, a sensing of the other, an assessment of the surroundings, a gradual coming together and perhaps a handshake to signify friendliness. At the other end of the interview,

after having shared perhaps personal and intimate material, the goodbye process is abrupt, in essence a click-click-gone experience. What is left is a silence and a blank screen. It can feel like an abandonment. And who clicks first? The corollary to this is of course that the participant has the power to click off at any point should they wish to end the interview.

Additionally, the lack of a journey to and from the interview for either myself or the participant, reduces the time available for anticipation, reflection and digestion; all processes which involve a bodily experience. This may have been particularly relevant for the participants in the time between first and second interviews. My attempts to build the intimacy gradually prior to the first interview included making emails as friendly and warm in tone as possible, using emojis appropriately, especially the smiley face one. I also felt I wanted to honour the time we had spent together online and so always followed up on the interview a few days later with a thank you email, expressing my gratitude and letting them know that I had been moved by their stories. In this way I was saying – you have had an impact on me, an admission of intimate relating.

Conclusion

Drawing on the recent literature regarding online therapy was relevant for using FANI online. The technology with which we are entangled becomes part of the assemblage that contribute to the experience. When considering using FANI online, it is important to recognise the way in which the technology fundamentally shapes the encounter rather than being a passive platform for human-to-human interaction (Kolehmainen, 2022).

Using FANI online has also enabled me to also consider the role of intimacy in co-present interviews. The importance of rapport-building and establishing a caring space emphasised during online interviewing are equally important in co-present interviews. The role of the room in which the interview takes place is also something to consider. Issues of control of the space and who is the host and who is the guest are pertinent and something which again, became more figural for me as a result of conducting interviews online.

Online interviewing is different to co-present interviewing; not better or worse but different, open-ended and varied. It can both facilitate intimacy and create alienation, even within the same interview. With practice and some adaptations, I was able to create sufficient intimacy within the interview to produce deep and rich data. The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged my previously held limits of my understanding of intimacy. I have learnt that it does not need to be framed as purely corporeal. Individual differences in how we each relate

to one another need to be considered, however. For some, physical proximity may be essential for intimacy whereas for others this may not be the case. The role of neurophysiology, generational and gender differences may all play a part in this, and may benefit from further research.

Although I was reticent about online interviewing initially, I now feel indebted to the technology that allowed me to continue my research. As online working in our consulting rooms, in our research and with colleagues has become more commonplace, it is important to adapt and develop our practice in order to retain a level of intimacy conducive to our aims.

Correspondence

Trudi Macagnino

Open University

Trudi.macagnino@open.ac.uk

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