

Developing a Remote Interviewing Practice: Doing Oral History During Times of Crisis

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We have all been living through a time of significant dynamism. Globally, we have experienced several overlapping and connected crises since 2019 including the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple climate-fuelled disasters. In this article, we pose the question: what have these years of upheaval done to oral history practice? We reflect on how our experiences of practising oral history during the last three years, including adopting remote interviewing methodologies, have prompted us to reconsider and re-evaluate much of what has long been considered best practice in the field. We firstly reflect on how oral historians around the world have responded to these crises, then explore a collaborative case study, before proposing some lessons to guide future practice. While we believe that there will always be a place for in-person interviewing, we contend that oral historians also need to embrace remote interviewing as part of our toolkit. Our proposal in this article is that we embrace flexibility as oral historians, widening our methodological strategies and remaining reflexive about what we lose and what we gain when we adopt different approaches.

INTRODUCTION

It's like the pandemic and things related to climate change have fundamentally changed my sense of the world being a safe place... [It] feels like an increasingly unsafe volatile environment, the pandemic mostly, and you know, associated with climate change, like there's going to be a lot, it feels like that we're entering this new era of humankind, that instability is going to be the norm.¹

We have all been living through a time of significant dynamism. In this quote above, narrator Tamara, one of the interviewees in a recent Australian oral history project, eloquently summarises her sense of living through unstable times. Globally, we have experienced several overlapping and connected crises since 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every corner of the globe through illness, death and a raft of government measures including lockdowns, mask mandates and vaccination mandates. Simultaneously, climate-fuelled disasters including fires, floods and heat waves have struck with unprecedented ferocity and devastation. Both the coronavirus pandemic and climate-linked disasters can be understood as symptoms of the Anthropocene – a geological epoch in which human beings exercise greater influence than any other natural force.² Human actions are degrading the environment which is, in turn, rebounding on us with terrifying force. These global phenomena and their local manifestations have given many people, like Tamara, a sense of living through a volatile age.

Moments of crisis can transform the ways people think, feel and act. This disruptive potential is true of oral history as much as anything else. In this article, we pose the question: what have these years of upheaval done to oral history practice? The major shift has been a rapid increase in the use of remote interviewing practices. We suggest it is now timely, three years after the beginning of the pandemic, to consider how these crises have reshaped oral history in the short term. As the dust settles on the chaos of the last few years, what do we, as oral historians, want to keep and what do

1 Tamara, interviewed by Carla Pascoe Leahy on Zoom, 10 June 2022, recording and transcript held by author. All interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms.

2 Libby Robin, 'Histories for Changing Times: Entering the Anthropocene?', *Australian Historical Studies*, 44, no. 3 (2013): 329–340, DOI: 10.1080/1031461X.2013.817455.

we want to jettison of our experimentations? In this paper, we reflect on how our experiences of practising oral history during the last three years, including adopting remote interviewing methodologies, have prompted us to reconsider and re-evaluate much of what has long been considered best practice in the field. We firstly reflect on how oral historians around the world have responded to these crises, then explore a collaborative case study, before proposing some lessons to guide future practice.

EXPERIENCING AND RESPONDING TO CRISIS

Both COVID-19 and climate change are global phenomena, but they have been experienced differently in different parts of the world. Responses from oral historians therefore need to be understood within their local and temporal contexts. We know, for example, that people in the Global South are particularly vulnerable to climate change.³ We also know that Australia is a country susceptible to extreme weather and environmental disasters, as we have painfully experienced through the Black Summer fires of 2019–20, brutal floods in New South Wales and Queensland in 2021 and 2022, and further severe flooding in Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia in late 2022. Experiences of the pandemic have also shifted at different points in time and in different corners of the globe. It is easy to forget, with the benefit of hindsight, that in the early stages of the pandemic, some predicted, or at least hoped, it would all be over in months. We did not yet realise that COVID-19 would disrupt everything we considered normal in our personal and working lives. Rather, many hoped that this would be a temporary interruption before life returned to the way it was.

The Australian experience of the pandemic was in some respects different to other parts of the world, with low case numbers but stringent restrictions in some states across 2020 and 2021. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Australia was on

3 H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, M. Tignor, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löscke, V. Möller, A. Okem (eds), 'IPCC, 2022: Summary for Policymakers', in H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löscke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, 2022), 3–33, DOI:10.1017/9781009325844.001.

25 January 2020. On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and eight days later, the federal government shut Australian borders to all except citizens, permanent residents and their immediate families.⁴ Very quickly, the Australian experience of coronavirus fragmented depending upon location. The state of Victoria, where the two authors reside, experienced the most severe pandemic disruptions: the first lockdown was announced on 22 March 2020, with the state enduring six lockdowns across 2020 and 2021, totalling 263 days.

Oral historians in the Global North responded in a range of ways. The United Kingdom's Oral History Society issued a statement in April 2020 recommending that oral historians cease interviewing. The organisation took the view that remote interviewing is inferior to face-to-face interviewing for several reasons, including reduced audio quality (making it harder to reuse or archive the interview afterwards) and reduced rapport and ability to read non-verbal signals. While this advice has been updated several times since, until mid-2022 the OHS recommended that remote interviews only be conducted if an interviewee is unwell, if the interview is about the pandemic itself or the project deadlines cannot be extended.⁵

The Oral History Association in the United States took a slightly different tone. Like the Oral History Society, it was sceptical about whether remote interviews could be as effective as face-to-face interviews. However, rather than recommending that interviews should cease unless absolutely necessary, the Oral History Association adopted a more pragmatic approach and suggested a range of considerations that oral historians should take into account. These include the narrator's preference; the intended end use of the interview; the minimum quality needed for that use; project deadlines; the feasibility of postponement; the location of the narrator; and

4 Kelsey Campbell and Emma Vines, 'COVID-19: a chronology of Australian Government announcements (up until 30 June 2020)', Australian Parliamentary Library, Research Paper Series 2020–21, 23 June 2021, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Chronologies/COVID-19AustralianGovernmentAnnouncements#_Toc74317383.

5 Charlie Morgan with Rob Perks, Mary Stewart, Camille Johnson, 'Advice on remote oral history interviewing during the Covid-19 pandemic', Version 7 (8 February 2021). Available at <https://www.ohs.org.uk/covid-19-remote-recording/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.

the health and mobility of narrator and interviewer. Crucially, the Oral History Association suggested that there will always be a place for remote interviewing.⁶

Oral History Australia initially followed the lead of the Oral History Society and recommended that oral history projects cease. As the pandemic dragged on, Oral History Australia began to adopt a middle ground, acknowledging that some members were using remote interviewing and providing links to resources to improve such practices.⁷ *Studies in Oral History*, the journal of Oral History Australia, invited a series of reports in 2020 from oral history historians around the country, explaining whether they had continued interviewing during the pandemic and why.⁸ In acknowledgment that oral history practice is changing, Oral History Victoria based its 2022 symposium around the question of ‘Oral History: Making it Work through the Pandemic’.⁹

If there have been some divergences between national oral history bodies, there have also been a range of responses from individual oral historians. Some oral historians decided to cease interviewing due to concerns about lesser audio quality in remote interviews. Consultant historian Fiona Poulton was working on a number of commissioned oral history projects for clients when the pandemic struck. She and her colleagues paused these projects because a critical factor in project design was the recording of high-quality interviews so the recordings could be used for several purposes in the future, including audio documentaries, podcasts and digital stories.¹⁰ The National Library of Australia, which maintains very high audio recording standards for archiving interviews, also paused oral history projects when in-person interviewing became illegal and/or risky. In an attempt to nevertheless capture some

6 Oral History Association, ‘Remote Interviewing Resources’ (27 August 2020). Available at <https://oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.

7 Oral History Australia, ‘Remote interviewing’. Available at <https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/remote-interviewing/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.

8 ‘Covid Reports’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020), https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020_journal_covid_reports.pdf.

9 ‘Oral History: Making it Work through the Pandemic’, Oral History Victoria Annual Symposium, Melbourne, 19 June 2022.

10 Fiona Poulton, ‘The impact of COVID-19 on consulting historians’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 166–167.

of the historical significance of the pandemic, the NLA commissioned oral historian Nikki Henningham to go out with an audio recorder to record the sounds of a locked-down city. She travelled around Melbourne recording the sounds of an Australian Rules football match without a crowd, the sounds of an anti-lockdown protest in the otherwise silent Melbourne CBD, and the sounds of a schoolyard when only a handful of students were still attending school.¹¹

Other oral historians ceased interviews due to concerns about the vulnerability or capacity of their participants. Alistair Thomson explained that as he was working on a project involving elderly narrators, he ceased interviewing even before official restrictions were introduced, due to concerns about the potential health risk of social contact for these participants.¹² Similarly, Skye Krichauff was in the midst of research interviewing elderly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. Many geographically contained Indigenous communities closed early in the pandemic because of the health vulnerabilities of First Nations peoples, caused by the enduring social inequities sparked by colonisation. This rendered in-person interviews impossible. Skye rejected the idea of remote interviewing because internet reception is poor in these communities, technological expertise is not strong among the cohort, and she had previously found face-to-face interactions critical to building rapport with Aboriginal participants.¹³ Other oral historians in Australia stopped interviewing when pandemic restrictions were introduced because they felt that oral history interviews are not as satisfying or successful without the non-verbal cues that come with face-to-face contact.¹⁴ There was a widespread sentiment that something precious is lost when interviews are no longer two people meeting in one space.

11 Nikki Henningham, “‘Why would you want to do that?’ Recording Soundscapes of a Global Pandemic’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 180–182.

12 Alistair Thomson, ‘Introduction: Oral history during the pandemic’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 163–165.

13 Skye Krichauff, ‘Abandoning oral history interviews during COVID-19 restrictions’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 177–179.

14 Margaret Leask, ‘Optimism vs pessimism – An oral historian and the COVID-19 pandemic’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 183–185; Ruth Melville, ‘A different kind of listening’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 190.

Many important considerations influenced some oral historians to cease interviewing during the pandemic, including a concern that remote interviewing would reduce audio quality; a concern to protect vulnerable participants; and a conviction that much of what interviewers and interviewees value in an interview is lost when it is not in person. But there were others who chose to continue interviewing and adapt their approach. Those on projects with time pressures – such as students or those with funding deadlines – often had no choice. University student Janice Barr was studying family history online when the pandemic struck. She re-imagined her student project and interviewed her husband about his family background, making surprising new revelations about his life.¹⁵ Secondary school history teacher Phillip O'Brien was teaching oral history to students in Victoria when the state transitioned to remote learning. He gave students the challenge: what can you find out about history from your immediate family members? Students conducted their interviews in person, recorded on mobile phones. Their interviewing training and subsequent analysis was conducted in their virtual classroom.¹⁶ These examples show that even with lockdown restrictions, some oral historians found ways to keep doing in-person interviewing, looking afresh at the resources in their homes and communities. PhD candidate Sarah Faulkner was planning to conduct face-to-face interviews to understand how migrants construct a sense of place, home and belonging. As a postgraduate student, she faced time restrictions on her candidature so could not wait for the pandemic to end to conduct interviews. Sarah was instead forced to adapt her research techniques to embrace remote methodologies. She consciously built pre-interview rapport with participants through phone, text and Skype conversations. She also asked participants to share photos with her beforehand that both participants could then discuss during the interview. Through these adaptations, Sarah was able to shift her methodology in order to answer her research questions despite pandemic restrictions.¹⁷

15 Janice Barr, 'Lockdown revelations', *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 168–170.

16 Phillip O'Brien, 'Hands on history: An active approach to creating oral historians in the secondary classroom', *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 186–189.

17 Sarah Faulkner, 'Conducting overseas fieldwork during a global pandemic: Challenges, changes and lessons from the field', *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 171–176.

Other oral historians kept interviewing because they felt there was something important to capture of the present moment. As Stephen Sloan argues, there is arguably a greater need for oral history in moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic because it helps humans to make sense of our experiences, and to record changing interpretations while they are still fluid. Nevertheless, Sloan and others recognise that careful consideration must be given to the timing of interviews concerning crisis, to ensure that interviewees are not asked to relive difficult experiences at a time when this will be prejudicial to their personal recovery from crisis.¹⁸ While some oral historians have worried about the potential for emotional harm to participants when conducting research during crises, Emily Peirson-Webber wondered whether intimacy may have actually been enhanced by the online format of her interviews during the pandemic, as remote interviews gave her narrators a sense of agency and connection during a difficult time.¹⁹

Perhaps most fundamentally, some oral historians have suggested that the increased use of remote interviewing during the COVID-19 pandemic has helped expose the inadequacy of some common assumptions about oral history. As a scholar experiencing barriers to travel, Jessica Stroja has always had to conduct interviews remotely – the pandemic simply gave her a sense that other interviewees were experiencing her normal mode.²⁰ Sarah Dziedzic similarly suggests that the value of this global health crisis is that it highlights the experiences of those for whom in-person interviewing is always problematic; to query whether ableism underpins some of the field's assumptions.²¹ In this sense, the pandemic has offered oral history an opportunity – to think about whether providing a greater range of methods for speaking and listening can improve the inclusivity, equity and accessibility of our

18 Stephen M. Sloan, 'Behind the "Curve": COVID-19, Infodemic, and Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 193–202, DOI: 10.1080/00940798.2020.1798256.

19 Emily Peirson-Webber, 'Mining Men: Reflections on Masculinity and Oral History during the Coronavirus Pandemic', *History Workshop Journal* 92, no. 1 (2022): 242–50.

20 Jessica Stroja, 'Oral history and COVID-19: Drastic changes or business as usual', *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 193–195.

21 Sarah Dziedzic, 'Immunodeficiency and Oral History', *Medium*, 7 April 2020, <https://medium.com/@sarahdziedzic/immunodeficiency-and-oral-history-85695925dd43>.

field.²² Applying a disability justice lens to oral history means considering individuals' preferred modes of participation.²³

Despite such arguments, many oral historians remain unconvinced or unsure about whether remote interviewing is a reasonable substitute for in-person interviewing. Many of the concerns raised about remote interviewing have focused upon sound quality – which is presumed to be inferior – and the interview relationship – which is also presumed to be adversely impacted.²⁴ We would like to query these taken-for-granted assumptions and add some additional nuance to these discussions. Through experimenting with different options, oral historians around the world have demonstrated that audio recordings of a high enough quality for archiving can be recorded online.²⁵ Our discussion will focus more upon what happens to the interview relationship at a distance. Drawing upon our experiences of doing oral history across the last three years, we will seek to draw out some of the lessons we have learnt from interviewing through crisis.

REFLECTIONS FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Like other oral historians, our experiences and reflections have been shaped by our personal contexts. We carefully considered whether it was appropriate and ethical to conduct interviews during this crisis, especially during the initial months of the pandemic. We were aware that in a time of considerable distress when many people were experiencing a lack of safety and stability there were important questions to be

22 Anna F. Kaplan, 'Cultivating Supports while Venturing into Interviewing during COVID-19', *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 214–226, DOI: 10.1080/00940798.2020.1791724.

23 Dziejic, 'Immunodeficiency and Oral History'.

24 There are also heightened data security risks with an online (and to a lesser extent, phone) interview, although these can be managed through careful attention to how an interview is recorded, stored and transferred. Both the Oral History Society and the Oral History Association offer advice on data security for remote interviewing: Charlie Morgan et al., 'Advice on remote oral history'; Oral History Association, 'Remote Interviewing Resources'.

25 British Library Oral History team, 'Remote oral history interviewing at the British Library during the Covid-19 pandemic', *Sound and Vision* (blog), 18 February 2021, <https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2021/02/remote-oral-history-during-covid-19.html>; Judy Hughes, 'Remote interviewing during the pandemic' (paper presented at the Oral History Victoria Annual Symposium, Melbourne, 19 June 2022).

raised about the ability of interview participants to fully consent and to adequately protect themselves during and after an interview.

Before 2020, neither of us had conducted oral history interviews using video conferencing. When the pandemic struck, Carla Pascoe Leahy was in the last two years of an Australian Research Council–funded project examining the history of Australian motherhood and she was not permitted to extend the end date of the research beyond 2021. This meant she was faced with the choice of not completing all of her interviews or embracing a remote format. She chose to complete the final few interviews online, particularly because these remaining interviews were aimed at increasing the diversity of the cohort, which was important to the representativeness of the history she wanted to write.

Carla made this decision in consultation with Museums Victoria (MV) because, in the project, narrators could elect to have their interview preserved in the cultural institution's collection. Discussions with MV curators acknowledged the reduced audio quality of Zoom interviews compared to in-person interviews with high-quality audio recording equipment. But Carla and the curators ultimately decided that caring for children under lockdown conditions was an important part of the Australian history of mothering to capture, and that a remote interviewing methodology was a further reflection of that specific experience.

Carla noticed an immediate difference with these, her first online interviews. The intimacy of the encounter had shifted in an unfamiliar way, by not being in the same room. Although she could see the narrators on screen, not being able to see their whole bodies made it harder to read subtle visual cues. Despite these challenges, the interviews were historically significant, capturing a unique moment in time when the interviewees' mothering had come under extraordinary pressure from the pandemic. In addition, two interviewees disclosed very personal and sensitive information about domestic abuse which had not been shared by any previous participants in the research, despite the statistical probability that it had affected others. This experience left Carla wondering if it might sometimes be easier or more comfortable

for participants to share difficult material when they are physically distant from the interviewer.

Carla also experimented with another form of qualitative research during these lockdown periods. Alarmed at the unequal effects of COVID-19 upon academic mothers, she decided to track and analyse some of these impacts in collaboration with feminist researcher Emilee Gilbert. The challenge for both Carla and Emilee was that they were burdened by the self-same conditions they were seeking to capture – academic mothers struggling to manage their continuing work commitments while home-schooling and caring for children. Instead of attempting the near-impossible task of scheduling live, online interviews with other mothers while they were all extremely time-poor and lacking domestic privacy, Carla devised a ‘maternal epistemology’ that could be flexibly scheduled around other commitments. She invited written responses to a series of questions that could be jotted down in spare moments or late at night and returned via email.²⁶ This methodology was a form of ‘collaborative witnessing’ where the boundaries between researchers and researched were permeable. While some oral historians have worried about the emotional impacts of conducting interviews during times of crisis, these participants spoke of the benefits of involvement in the research at a time when their difficult experiences felt insufficiently recognised. In bearing witness to and documenting the historical significance of the pandemic experiences of academic mothers, there was an ethical, epistemological and political imperative underpinning the research.²⁷

Anisa’s oral history practice was not as dramatically affected as Carla’s when the pandemic commenced, as her main research project during 2020 and 2021 was completing her doctoral thesis which focused on interpreting archived digital oral history interviews. Anisa did conduct one session of an in-person interview for the

26 Kaplan similarly suggest that experimenting with a range of ways to elicit personal reflections may improve the inclusivity of a project’s methodologies, to ensure a diverse participant sample can be included: Kaplan, ‘Cultivating supports’.

27 Emilee Gilbert and Carla Pascoe Leahy, ‘Visibilising care in the academy: (re)performing academic mothering in the transformative moment of COVID-19’, *Gender & History* 35, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12659>; Emilee Gilbert, Sarah Knott, and Carla Pascoe Leahy, ‘Care, Mothering and the Academy: Making the Invisible Visible’, *Gender & History* 33, no. 3 (2021): 608–617.

National Library of Australia's Oral History and Folklore Collection in 2021, but the ongoing challenges and disruption associated with the pandemic, including further lockdowns, substantially delayed the second session. Anisa ultimately decided to pause in-person interviewing for safety reasons until late 2022. For a brief stretch in late 2022, Anisa was conducting both remote and in-person interviews on different projects, which deepened her sense of the value of being able to have both formats as part of her oral history toolbox.

Attempts to come together as oral historians have also been interrupted by crises. In June 2022 Oral History Victoria held its annual symposium in Melbourne, Victoria. But despite it being finally permissible to hold in-person events in Victoria after two years of what felt like interminable lockdowns, the spectre of COVID-19 still hung over the gathering. A new wave of infections was gathering force which meant that many participants wore masks indoors and stepped outside during breaks. There was a tension present, in that gathering in a room with other oral historians felt like a much-appreciated privilege, and yet simultaneously dangerous and fraught. In October 2022 Oral History Australia held its biennial conference in Launceston, Tasmania, after cancelling the conference in 2021 due to COVID-19 risks and restrictions. Again, many oral historians present commented upon how satisfying it was to gather in person with colleagues. But that event was haunted by climate change. As Carla and Anisa prepared to travel to Launceston, they deliberated over whether it was safe to fly due to warnings of extreme storms. After arriving in Launceston, heavy rain lashed Victoria and Tasmania. Serious floods affected widespread areas in both states, with some sections of northern Tasmania close to Launceston evacuated. The city is somewhat protected from extreme weather events by civil engineering – the recurrent floods historically produced by sitting at the confluence of major rivers have been reduced by the recent construction of flood walls and levees. As the conference progressed, Anisa and Carla nervously checked the flood updates and evacuation orders each day, while on the wall of their accommodation hung a photo of the same street in flood a century earlier. It was becoming clear that while oral historians often value opportunities to gather in a room, anthropogenic crises such as disasters and pandemics are beginning to render such events problematic and risky. At the same time, some historians were beginning to question whether

the carbon cost of academic conference travel was defensible, in an era in which public awareness was growing of the contributions of high-carbon modes of travel to the climate crisis.²⁸

CASE STUDY: MOTHERING IN CRISIS

Some of the issues and opportunities raised by interviewing through unstable times have been experienced during our collaborative research across 2022. The authors have been working together on a project titled ‘Mothering in Crisis: Family, Disaster and Climate Change’.²⁹ The project explores how mothers are being affected by climate change and worsening environmental disasters such as floods and fires. There are three major strands to the project. The first is analysing archived interviews on how Australian families have experienced disasters in the past, to consider whether there is something distinctive about the present moment. The second is creating interviews with contemporary mothers in Australia about their experiences of more recent, climate-fuelled disasters. The third is comparing these Australian interviews to interviews with UK mothers about their experiences of climate change.

The contemporary interviews focus on how climate change and environmental disasters are impacting maternal experiences, emotions and decisions. For the Australian interviews, the region of Gippsland, in Victoria, was selected as a case study because of its long association with coal mining and burning and its recent experiences of climate-linked disasters including fires and floods.³⁰ The original plan was to conduct in-person interviews during two field trips to Gippsland in 2022. Several factors compelled us to change that plan and adopt remote interviewing. Recruitment of

28 Carla Pascoe Leahy, Andrea Gaynor, Simon Sleight, Ruth Morgan and Yves Rees, ‘Sustainable academia: The responsibilities of academic historians in a climate-impacted world’, *Environment and History* 28, no. 4 (2022): 545-570, DOI: 10.3197/096734022X16552219786645; Toby Green and Simon Sleight, ‘Historians and sustainability’, *Historical Transactions* (blog), 31 October 2019, <https://blog.royalhistosoc.org/2019/10/31/historians-and-sustainability/> (longer version available as PDF).

29 For a seminar recording summarising research in the first year of the project, see: C. Pascoe Leahy, C. Gay and A. Puri, ‘Mothering in crisis: Family, disaster and climate change’, (Melbourne Climate Futures CRX Seminar, University of Melbourne, 2 December 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqIWcuRtbeE>.

30 Alexandra Delliou, *Heritage Making and Migrant Subjects in the Deindustrialising Region of the Latrobe Valley* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

participants proved unexpectedly slow and difficult. We advertised through diverse community networks and organisations, including an offer of a participant payment of AUD\$50, but still found recruitment challenging. Both we and our interviewees experienced ongoing, unpredictable disruptions during 2022 caused by repeated waves of infection and new environmental challenges. Anecdotally, other qualitative and quantitative researchers attempting to recruit participants from the southeastern parts of Australia, hard hit by pandemic lockdowns and disasters, experienced similar challenges. There was an irony for us in that the very phenomena we were trying to study – maternal experiences of raising children during multiple crises – made it hard for mothers to find the time and energy to become involved.

By the end of the year, we managed to conduct 10 interviews with mothers living in Australia who had children under 18 years of age. The focus of the interviews was how mothers are experiencing climate change and climate-fuelled disasters, within the context of their wider life history. Towards the end of the project, the recruitment challenges we faced prompted us to expand the geographic scope beyond the initial case study region of Gippsland. In the end, eight interviewees lived in Gippsland, and the other two lived elsewhere (one in a different part of Victoria, and the other in Queensland). Despite this expansion of the area from which participants were drawn, common themes emerged across all interviews.

We commenced the project at the beginning of 2022, optimistic that lockdowns would not impede in-person interviews as they had during the first two years of the pandemic. But we soon discovered that there were other challenges to navigate. The first of these related to timing. Funding rules mandated that research funds had to be spent in 2022. Two fieldwork trips to Gippsland had been carefully planned around Carla's teaching schedule and to avoid school holidays, which we knew would be a more difficult time for maternal participants to schedule interviews. When ethics approval and participant recruitment took much longer than predicted, the first window of opportunity for in-person interviews was lost, so we decided to schedule the first interviews online.

We soon encountered additional disruptions including high rates of illness among the population. When one of Carla's children was diagnosed with COVID-19 in March 2022 the whole family was plunged into one week's isolation, an experience which was repeated in August 2022. In addition to coronavirus, unusually high levels of the cold virus, flu virus and other illnesses have circulated within the Australian community in 2022, particularly among school children and their families. Several interviewees had to reschedule interviews at the last minute due to illness, with the online format facilitating easy rescheduling which may have been impossible if interviews were conducted in person during fieldwork trips.

In these respects, technology eased the interviewing process. All recorded interviews rely upon different forms of technology and can be impeded or enhanced by technical factors. Remote interviews rely upon the interviewee being able to individually manage their technology because the interviewer is not in the room with them. The cohort of women interviewed for this project were all comfortable using Zoom video conferencing technology. But there were occasional challenges when participants' internet connections were not working well. In one interview Anisa conducted, the interviewee's video display stopped working and neither of them were able to diagnose why. Anisa found it more difficult to read the interviewee's emotional state and subtle cues without that visual input. In cases where technology worked seamlessly, we wondered if we as interviewers were perhaps more attentive to the interviewee than we might have been in person because we did not need to carefully monitor a physical recording device throughout the interview. We were, however, conscious of 'Zoom fatigue' and carefully planned the interview schedule to ensure that interview duration was one to two hours long, in an attempt to avoid tiring interviewees. Nevertheless, we were aware that an interview might add yet another Zoom meeting to the daily schedule of an interviewee, creating fatigue not only in the length of the interview but in the proportion of the interviewee's time potentially spent on Zoom that day.

We also noted that in many respects, reducing travel to conduct an interview was experienced as a reduced burden for the interviewer, especially when the distance to travel is considerable. Interviews in regional locations, like Gippsland, make

travelling by public transport difficult. Almost all travel has a financial cost – and driving a conventional motor vehicle has become more expensive in the last two years due to rising fuel prices. Many forms of travel also carry a carbon footprint, which is attracting increasing attention in our climate-impacted world. While there is also a small carbon cost incurred by video conferencing, it is often considerably less than travelling to interview in person.³¹ This is particularly the case if conducting research interstate or overseas.

Removing the need to travel to conduct interviews reduces the burden for interviewers and interviewees in other ways too. For people with mobility challenges, disabilities or health conditions, needing to move around to conduct interviews can be difficult or impossible. For some oral historians or participants with disabilities or chronic illnesses, the opportunity to conduct interviews remotely can make the difference as to whether it is possible to conduct them at all.³² For people with caring responsibilities, scheduling in-person interviews is particularly difficult as it often requires organising an alternative carer for one's children. Several interviewees in the *Mothering in Crisis* project remarked that they were able to conduct their interview with a sick child watching television in another room because of the flexibility afforded by Zoom. While in this project remote interviewing seemed to increase equity of access, we note that it also has the potential to reduce access for people without internet access, without devices able to download video-conferencing software, or without the expertise or familiarity to use such technologies.

HOW DOES THE INTERVIEW RELATIONSHIP CHANGE WHEN INTERVIEWS ARE HELD REMOTELY?

While there were many perceived advantages, both authors felt the relationship between interviewer and narrator was changed by interviewing online. It was much harder to capture a tangible sense of place. This is arguably more important when interviewing people in a particular case study area, as we were. Some Gippsland

31 As a rough guide, one hour of video conferencing or streaming emits 150–1,000 grams of carbon dioxide: Pascoe Leahy et al., 'Sustainable academia'.

32 Stroja, 'Oral history and COVID-19'.

mothers described things like the variable air quality, and scents associated with air pollution, in different towns in their region, which we could have perhaps smelt ourselves had we been there. Others described the proximity of bushland to their home and how that influenced their sense of safety from bushfires, which again is more easily seen and appreciated in person. In addition to that wider sense of a locality, it was harder to gain a holistic understanding of an interviewee's home during a remote interview. We generally take careful note of surroundings when we interview someone in their home, sometimes starting conversations about the domestic environment such as asking about family members in photographs on a wall or talking about a person's garden glimpsed through the window. Such observations might form part of the interview reflections we write after an interview, as we take note of what things like furnishings or decor might tell us about the narrator. It is often harder to 'read' a narrator's domestic environment through a webcam.

It is also more difficult for us as interviewers to judge the influence of external factors when we are not sharing space with someone. For example, the presence of another person in the house – such as a partner, child or other – will subtly influence the level of disclosure a person feels they can make due to a fear of being overheard. But during an online interview we may not be aware or informed that another person is present nearby and hence unable to analyse the influence of another on the narrator's reticence. Nevertheless, there were moments during the *Mothering in Crisis* interviews where sometimes this became clear, such as when one participant stated that one of her children was in the house when Anisa asked about her experience of becoming a mother.

Perhaps most profoundly, there is a subtle intimacy gained by being in the same space with someone. It brings a sense of closeness of which we are not fully aware until it is absent. From the last few years of pandemic lockdowns and border closures, we have gained an intuitive sense of the difference between being in person and online, though it is hard to fully articulate why or what that is. Carla wondered whether, in losing the intimacy of sharing space with someone for a period of time, oral historians might also feel less emotionally close to them and that this may subtly diminish our sense of ethical responsibility. Of course legally, our ethical duties remain

undiminished by an online mode, but beyond formal, explicit duties there is a more subtle sense of ethical obligation that oral historians feel to their interviewees that is not reliant upon legalities for its observance.³³ We also noted the lesser frequency of ‘off-the-record’ breaks, which are common during in-person interviews, and often involve conversations that deepen the relationship – including trust and rapport – between the interviewer and interviewee.

Despite this, we suggest that there are some ways in which remote interviews may actually lead to less remote subject matter. We noted above that in some of Carla’s remote interviews during pandemic lockdowns, participants disclosed private and painful material, and said that they felt an emotional benefit to sharing this information. It felt as though in those instances, physical distance facilitated a paradoxical disclosure. In other words, being apart made it easier to reveal difficult things.³⁴ It might also depend on the topic being covered in an interview as to whether this is true for all research. Anisa wondered whether the challenging subject matter covered in the *Mothering in Crisis* interviews may have sometimes reduced the sense of distance. She found that some of the interview relationships that developed felt as meaningful as those developed in in-person contexts. Perhaps the topics covered in these interviews require (or at least invite) a vulnerability that facilitates an emotional closeness between the interviewee and interviewer.

Through these interviews, Anisa and Carla came to realise that distance and intimacy are not mutually exclusive. Even in cases where there were not notable disclosures, many of these interviews were deeply emotional and moving spaces where vulnerable conversations took place. We also noted a new symmetry and reciprocity, facilitated by the two-way gaze of the webcam, not present in our previous in-person interviews. Interviewees were afforded a glimpse of our home spaces during each interview, allowing them to peer into our private realm. If they chose, interviewees

33 Carla Pascoe Leahy, ‘The afterlife of interviews: explicit ethics and subtle ethics in sensitive or distressing qualitative research’, *Qualitative Research* 22, no. 5 (2022): 777–794, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211012924>.

34 Peirson-Webber also suggested that interviewing remotely may have enhanced candour in her research: Peirson-Webber, ‘Mining men’.

could protect the privacy of their own home spaces with a blurred or virtual background. The reciprocity of the Zoom gaze has a subtle effect on the balance of power in an interview in ways we are still coming to understand.³⁵

EMOTIONAL CARE DURING REMOTE INTERVIEWS

Although we have identified that there are advantages as well as disadvantages to conducting oral history interviews remotely, Anisa and Carla have still worried about the ramifications of shifting online for our research. This was particularly the case in the context of this subject matter. We were interviewing mothers – people who are deeply invested in the futures of their children – about how it feels to be parenting during a time in which the future is drastically uncertain and sometimes feels bleak. We asked questions about potentially sensitive material such as what it feels like to be trying to care for your children when their safety is threatened by disasters. This is not easy or superficial subject matter by any stretch.

Due to our concerns about interviewee wellbeing, we debriefed regularly with each other and spoke about the strategies we were using and developing. There were three key issues we focused on. Firstly, we discussed how to read emotion effectively during an interview. This is an issue that every oral historian in every interview needs to consider, but we worried that in a remote interview we might be less competent at reading subtle emotional cues, particularly those communicated through non-verbal signals. We discovered that pace was particularly important in these online interviews. As interviewers, we needed to make sure we maintained a slow, unhurried pace where we left spaces and pauses to ensure the interviewee had time to communicate fully. We had to be more deliberate about allowing time and space for silences in an online setting. We were also reminded that we needed to listen and watch carefully and attentively. Someone distressed in a remote interview might reveal their feelings through a change in the tone or speed of their voice, or through physically fidgeting or shifting in their seat. Alternatively, an interviewee might explicitly state, 'I felt upset'. Even if a narrator appeared otherwise composed, we took seriously and

35 Peirson-Webber makes a similar point, musing that 'our interpersonal relationship seemed to benefit from my loss of anonymity': Peirson-Webber, 'Mining men'.

literally those verbal declarations of feeling-states, treading carefully when strong emotions were invoked.

Anisa and Carla also worried about whether we could adequately console someone who became distressed if we were not in the same room, and we discussed together how to deal with that situation. Again, our experiences seemed to highlight the importance of taking time. If someone appeared upset we would ask questions that allowed the narrator to practise self-care and to take control of the interview, such as ‘Are you okay? Do you want to take a break? Do you want to keep talking about this or change the subject?’ In this way, we hoped to give agency to interviewees who may have wished to stop talking about difficult subject matter or may have preferred to express how they were feeling. Our basic strategy after checking in with the interviewees’ wishes was to affirm their experience through a comment such as ‘That must have been really difficult for you’. We let them know that other interviewees had voiced similar sentiments and that they did not need to apologise for crying, to normalise and contextualise their distress, without minimising it. We also explicitly thanked them for trusting us enough to share distressing material.

Finally, we thought and talked about how we could ensure that our interviewees were okay at the end of the interview. From the outset, we consciously designed the interview schedule so that we ended the interviews on a positive note, asking ‘what inspires you or motivates you? What makes you feel hopeful?’ In closing we would often remark, ‘we covered some challenging topics today – how are you feeling?’ In a follow-up email after the interview, we would ask how they felt in the aftermath when it felt appropriate to check whether they needed to speak further with us. While we recognise that these are not perfect strategies, after careful consideration we concluded that they were as good as we would be able to manage in an in-person context. We remain convinced that the topic of how mothers are coping with the climate crisis remains significant and hence important to capture. There are no easy answers as to how interviewers can continue to take emotional care of narrators when inviting them to speak about profound and potentially distressing subject matter.

SAFETY AND INTIMACY

Pre-pandemic, oral historians used to often think about in-person interviews as creating a safe and special space. We assumed that intimacy was enhanced through being in the same place with an interviewee. Our oral history interviews were an opportunity to share space and time, consciously fostering rapport and actively working to create a space where both interviewer and interviewee feel secure and comfortable. (Although there have always been exceptions to this such as interviewing in violent, tense or adversarial settings.³⁶) But the pandemic has shifted how Carla and Anisa think about safety and intimacy in interviews. We have all become so much more conscious of how germs spread through touch and through sharing air. Being in the same space as another person no longer feels as safe as it once did. In fact, sharing another person's air feels strangely intimate – to breathe the same air without a mask is to expose oneself to potential danger. It always was, of course, but it was not front of mind for most of us.

In the past, best practice to create a high-quality audio recording was to interview inside, with doors and windows closed, to minimise background noise. But is this safe practice now? And does it uphold a duty of care to interviewee and interviewer? There is always an option to wear masks for in-person interviews, particularly with more vulnerable participants. But wearing a mask introduces a literal barrier between people and reduces our ability to read facial expressions. In these pandemic times, it may feel more intimate and safer to interview online, where both parties can be safely mask-free. As oral historians who have been practising our craft for a number of years, we are aware that some of our most fundamental assumptions about how to create trust and rapport with narrators, and how to behave ethically and carefully, have been unsettled by this coronavirus.

36 See, for example, Erin Jessee, 'The limits of oral history: ethics and methodology amid highly politicized research settings', *The Oral History Review* 38 (2011): 287–307; Kathleen Blee, 'Evidence, empathy and ethics: Lessons from oral histories of the Klan', *Journal of American History* 80, no. 2 (1993): 596–606.

CONCLUSION

Since 2019 all of our lives have been upended by a series of multiple and overlapping crises, including floods, fires and pandemic. Although the worst of lockdown disruptions in Australia were experienced in 2020 and 2021, residents have experienced far worse illness and death in 2022, demonstrating that this pandemic is not finished with us yet. All of these environmental and health disasters are broadly symptoms of what some call the Anthropocene, an epoch in history in which anthropogenic crises are disrupting our lives with stunning frequency and ferocity.

At the start of the pandemic, many of us optimistically hoped that the crisis might last only a few months. This was the basis on which many oral historians paused our interviews or postponed our gatherings. But it is now clear that the risks posed by the pandemic are not ending any time soon. Environmental disasters, in turn, are multiplying and intensifying. The uncomfortable truth is that disruption and crisis are the new normal, and we know that experiences of crisis are variable and unevenly distributed. Oral history has always strived to be an inclusive field and it has made important social justice contributions. There is an opportunity for us now to collectively reconsider how to increase equity of access in designing interview projects, as we evaluate how to be inclusive of people with different comfort levels, vulnerabilities and capacities around meeting in person.

What does all this mean for oral history practice? The last few years have radically unsettled dominant ideas about doing oral history, as they have disrupted everything else. We believe that there will always be a place for in-person interviewing. It often feels more intimate and it generally gives us a better understanding of a person in their environment. But we contend that we also need to embrace remote interviewing as part of our toolkit as oral historians. There will be more and more times when it is not safe or practical for us to interview in person because of illness, disaster or other factors. If we want to nevertheless continue capturing important historical changes, we need to adapt our oral history methodologies as we are having to adapt to the disrupted world that we live in. It is better to do so thoughtfully, consciously and deliberately – and to think carefully about what best practice remote interviewing looks like in these troubling new times.

There are always a multitude of factors to take into account when deciding how to conduct an oral history project. Whether we decide to conduct interviews in person or online, there will be multiple considerations to weigh relating to the researcher, the participant and the individual project ambitions, constraints and priorities. We are fortunate in that we inhabit a period of human history in which technology has afforded (some of) us alternatives to interviewing in person. Our proposal in this article is that we embrace flexibility as oral historians, widening our methodological strategies and remaining reflexive about what we lose and what we gain when we adopt different approaches. The pandemic has given us a moment of critical disruption to step back and evaluate where we want oral history practice to go from here. Each of us has the opportunity to consider: what does it mean to do oral history in a time of crisis? The answer will likely be different for each of us, at different moments in time.

NOTE

As an editor of this journal, Carla Pascoe Leahy has removed herself from the peer-review process for this article and followed best practice recommendations of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), <https://publicationethics.org/>.

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