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The Sociality and Liminality of Bangkok's Cannabis Cafés

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Abstract: In June 2022, Thailand became the first country in Asia to decriminalize cannabis, only to face opposition from conservative political forces that are now attempting to pass policies that will recriminalize its recreational use. My qualitative study conducted between summer 2022 and the conclusion of 2024 examines the sociality of 45 cannabis cafés in the capital Bangkok despite these developments, enhanced by my status as having grown up in the city and speaking the Thai language and local Chinese dialects. Employing urban sociological concepts such as Ray Oldenburg's third places and Lyn Lofland's notion of the urban experience as characterized by interactions with strangers, I describe Bangkok's cannabis cafés as third places that reduce the status of the stranger, and thus destress the actor in its lifeworld. These dynamics are argued to counter Bangkok's over-stimuli and stressor-filled experiences, now challenged by policy developments that place the continuing operations of cannabis cafés in a liminal state.

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In June 2022, Thailand became the first country in Asia to decriminalize the recreational use and sale of cannabis[1], making it the only country in ASEAN to challenge the bloc's mission to establish "drug-free" communities (Chalermpalanupap 2023). On the same day, and in dramatic fashion, approximately 4,200 prisoners incarcerated for cannabis-related offenses were released. At the time, such a status implied the country was a sort of bellwether for eventual social acceptance of recreational cannabis use. Indeed, in 2018, Thailand had already become the first country in Asia to legalize the medicinal use of cannabis. One year later, the country amended the law to allow for cannabis research and development purposes (Deng, Slutskiy, and Boonchutima 2023:3). For a country that has seen 13 successful and nine unsuccessful military coups led by conservative forces, the continuing progressiveness of Thai culture is surprising.

How can these larger political dynamics be seen as relevant to the development of Bangkok, and to a larger extent, Thailand's cannabis industry? For one, as noted by Askew's excellent work *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation* (2002), the city has become a site where power representations are articulated and contested by many loci of identities. Its citizens have historically—especially in the post-World War II period—staked their claim in its metropolitan landscape in ways that manifest their tolerance for differences in its experiences with modernity. Yet, this observation by Askew overlooks a more explicit detail about Thailand's capital city: Bangkok, capital of a country never colonized by any European power during the *fin-de-siècle* and 20th century, has thus effectively balanced its old with its modernity in ways that do not exhibit the angst seen by other Southeast Asian countries that experienced French, English, or Dutch colonial enterprises as they imposed their Judeo-Christian worldviews and inequalities upon indigenous cultures and their conceptions of stress. As such, Thailand—especially through Bangkok's status as a primate city, one that serves as the "front office" of the country, and also as a machine that exhibits the stressor-filled, over-stimuli of urban bureaucratic functions, division of labor, and inequalities (Jefferson 1939; Goldstein 1971; London 1977; Ayal 1992; Henderson 2002; Fong 2013)—infuses the old with the new, the past with the present, in ways

[1] To prevent continuing stigmatization of cannabis as associated with deviant subcultures, respectable terms and phraseologies to reference cannabis were employed to replace informal language and slang. Thus, the term cannabis will replace marijuana, smoking cannabis will replace "smoking pot," inebriation (or the equivalent) from smoking cannabis will replace "being stoned," flower will replace "bud," and cannabis cigarettes will replace "joints." The term "budtender," however, is conventionally employed as an analog to the alcohol-serving establishment's bartender.

that allow it to absorb global forces while projecting them back to the local. As Askew (2002:58) notes:

> In the 1950s Thailand literally *came to* [emphasis added] Bangkok. Communications made Bangkok increasingly accessible to the rest of the country, while also rendering the countryside more open to flows of images and commodities signifying status and modernity. In this way, Bangkok—acting as a conduit of new urban aspirations—also *came to* [emphasis added] Thailand.

Even during the late 1990s, the city's governor, Pichit Rattakul, described the city's character and, perhaps, exhibited prescience in how Bangkok should evolve, arguably foreshadowing the decriminalization of cannabis. Describing the city, he notes:

> Bangkok is a city of villages, fifty different districts in all, and most of them are very different from one another. We are not just about temples and reclining Buddhas and street markets…Some areas are renowned for crafts, some for special traditions, some from a very distinct heritage going back many generations, some for certain kinds of foods. So, we are trying to bring out the best of each area. So, we are trying to present Bangkok as a multi-dimensional city, not a city with problems. [Askew 2002:300]

What must be acknowledged, however, is that the aforementioned processes also synchronize mainstream cultural forces—and to the consternation of many—with what are perceived as countercultural forces. The decriminalization of cannabis, then, needs to be contextualized as yet another attempt by the city and community to experiment with new economic sensibilities, one where readers must also consider that holdouts for a more purist evolution of Thai culture (*watthanatham*), heritage (*moradok*), community (*chumchon*), and development (*kanphatthana*) are not sitting idly by (Askew 2002). The aforementioned coups, which historically express the voices of Thailand's conservative forces aghast at a threatening countercultural modernity, do have their politicized coterie of supporters in civil society as well as in the country's power structure expressing their discontents and indignations by promoting the need for policy changes that are designed to curtail, if not end cannabis decriminalization.

The process that resulted in decriminalization and its recreational use was therefore not sanguine. By late 2022, a few months after decriminalization, and likely unbeknownst to international patrons of cannabis culture, Thai conservative forces were busy trying to re-list cannabis as a dangerous and harmful narcotic, inciting over 200 protesters, investors, and staff to rally outside Bangkok's Government House. Joined by cannabis farmers and cannabis dispensary owners, Chokwan Chopaka of the People's Network for Cannabis Legislation in Thailand lamented how there is a probability that "cannabis may end up being illegal again" (Strangio 2022), although a draft bill forwarded to the Thai parliament at the time failed (Chen and Olarn 2024). Indeed, an ominous news report titled "Bangkok Becoming a Weed Wild West: Amid a Legal Vacuum, Vendors Enjoy High Times, But No One Knows How Long They Will Last" was published by the *Bangkok Post* on December 15, 2022, foreshadowing the cultural and political contestations still to come.

During March 2024, the Thai government, constituted by a new conservative coalition, acted to "urgent-

ly move a bill to ban recreational use of cannabis," although feedback from the public was encouraged and welcomed (Chen and Olarn 2024; *France 24* 2024). Such a ban, if realized, will halt advertisements of cannabis and cannabis-related products, such as their edibles, as well as ensure that any cannabis product containing more than 0.2% THC would be deemed illegal. Initial enforcement of such a ban would include fines of 60,000 baht ($1,700 USD) (*ASEAN Now* 2024). In spite of the conservative backlash, within two years of its decriminalization, thousands of cannabis dispensaries and cafés were established across the country. Despite the scrutiny, cannabis entrepreneurs and their establishments, along with local and global patrons, have undoubtedly been riding a wave of euphoria. The growth of the industry was impressive given the short amount of time since decriminalization, with mobile dispensaries, deliveries, street stalls, and cafés augmenting the sales of a plant so perennially misunderstood and persecuted by many states throughout the 20th century.

My research was undertaken during a contentious period when cannabis cafés in Bangkok emerged in the multitude, watched by the country's progressive, conservative, and public health forces, as well as neighboring countries, with different narratives offered on the merits of decriminalization. However, my article does not exclusively center on analyzing narratives and policies emerging from the public spheres of the political arena and public health—these are mentioned insofar as they can provide a brief chronology and a set of contexts for understanding what is being assessed—so that the article can focus on describing the sociality, and in the conclusion of the manuscript, the functionality of cannabis cafés as destressing environments to counter the over stimuli of Bangkok.

Theoretical Foundations

To realize the goals of this study, I harness the concept of the *third place*, a term coined by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999), to refer to needed places in urban environments that help city residents decompress from the toxic stimuli of the lifeworld. In the classic work, *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg defines third places as informal public sites—pubs/bars, hair salons, or coffeehouses—that allow citizens to engage in recreative communication in ways that release stress and build some semblance of community in the process. In such environments, community is built through communication and leveling of social statuses. Indeed, Oldenburg (1999:10) argues that urban sociologists fail to appreciate how "relieving stress can just as easily be built into an urban environment as those features which produce stress." This observation thus channeled my focus on how cannabis cafés can function as an extension of Oldenburg's premise in that these community environs can be seen to destress urban residents by enabling different forms of sociality to surface. In the process, there is an *undoing of stigma* associated with recreational cannabis use, a vindication of certain arguments made by Thaddeus Müller (2024) about how communities can reshape negative narratives about themselves into a more positive framing.[2] Here, the realms of the home (identified as the

[2] It should be noted that in his study, Müller (2024) tied notions of doing/undoing stigma to a spatial territory—a residential environment—of a Dutch neighborhood, primarily its aesthetics and quality of life as seen by insiders and outsiders, thus behooving residents to undo the stigma, or to undo the neighborhood's reputation when it is negatively viewed. However, my article shifts the center of gravity somewhat, choosing to argue that doing and undoing stigma is not a spatial problem. Instead, this research highlights how a burgeoning cannabis culture is politically viewed by conservatives as a cultural issue, not primarily an issue of location; that is, there is no "territory" to stigmatize per se since thousands of cannabis venues are already dispersed all over Bangkok—in upscale and middle class environs—thus rendering a territorial stigmatization a non-is-

first place) and work (identified as the second place) differ from third places in that the former are *informal* but *private* spaces while the latter are *formal* but *public spaces*—both of which for Oldenburg detract from community-building in the city. Indeed, in the first place, we are aware that the home environment is a sort of quasi-fortress, an almost opaque world where unresolved issues are attended to, unfettered emotive expressions are conveyed, cultural values are reproduced, and informal routines of everyday living are practiced. Second places, on the contrary, require conformity to procedural details and organizational culture and scripts, as well as deference to protocol and vertical relationships based on titles and seniority. Free expression here is narrow and targeted toward institutional survival, not enhancement of community. In contrast to first and second places, third places are environments that are *informal* and *public*. Additionally, employment of Lyn Lofland's urban sociological concepts from her important works *A World of Strangers* (1973) and *The Public Realm* (1998), to be elaborated shortly, will be synchronized with Oldenburg's theory throughout my manuscript.

Lofland's *A World of Strangers* (1973) asserts that most daily encounters in urban settings involve interacting with strangers. Lofland, however, does not harbor a disdainful view toward the stranger, acknowledging them as a facticity of urban life simply because most individuals do not have time during a frenetic day to get to know one another (thus enabling her views to be symbiotic with Oldenburg's assertion that urban environments require third place sociality to foster community). More interestingly, Lofland argued that being strangers to one another did not negate the fact that "communication" can continue unabated, although in a blunt manner. She notes how city dwellers, even in quietude, are always "not only picking up information about the other," but they are also "simultaneously and interrelatedly giving off information about themselves which the other codes and acts upon" (Lofland 1973:97) be it through what one wears, that is, *appearational ordering*, or knowing approximately from where one hails, as in observing a subway passenger disembarking at a station in an impoverished or wealthy part of town, that is, *spatial ordering*. To ensure that the minimization of strangeness does not generate unpleasant interactions, behavior that generates some boundaries between urbanized strangers such as *civil inattention*, *audience role prominence*, and *civility toward diversity* are also employed by urbanites, as noted in Lofland's *Public Realm* (1998:33). Relevant for our study is her notion that even in *public solitude* there can be community, one based on people watching or listening, or one based on acknowledging everyone else's desire to experience alone time without feeling lonely due to the presence of "surrounding bodies" (Lofland 1998:88).

For Lofland, all these psychic and interactional dynamics daily work together in the mental mapping of urbanites: through civil inattention, the actor will not become engrossed toward those they do not know to the point of making others uncomfortable; by fulfilling an audience role prominence, the actor knows when to only people watch, thus granting those they do not know a respectable space; by enacting civility toward diversity, the actor remains unfazed by those who are culturally different from them, again, granting those strang-

sue. By not focusing on territorial stigma, I believe I can still make operative the practices of doing/undoing stigma by examining the sociality of cannabis café patrons as well as their welcoming staff—both of which offer acceptance and embrace of the cannabis culture, creating community in the process.

ers their space for the full expression of self and perhaps, their community, all of which minimize strangeness in some fashion because actors appreciate other people's careful negotiating of their boundaries and therefore relax. Finally, by experiencing urban dynamics through one's enjoyment of public solitude, persons may "reside in the comfort of being surrounded by the hum of conversation" (Lofland 1998:89).

With their concepts harnessed, I hope to demonstrate that Bangkok's cannabis cafés are contexts where ideas of Oldenburg and Lofland are visibly lived. My exploratory research thus attempts to highlight sociality patterns seen at Bangkok's many cannabis cafés as third places that allow appearational and spatial ordering to create some semblance of community in ways that minimize strangeness, be they through civil inattention, audience role prominence, civility toward diversity, and/or public solitude dynamics, all of which are posited to destress patrons and create community while simultaneously—along the lines of Müller's persuasion—undoing the stigma associated with cannabis culture as one that promotes countercultural and/or deviant behavior. Focusing on such qualitative attributes will be undertaken with an urban sociological lens that relies on non-interactive observations—that is, as a researcher, I too employed my audience role prominence of cannabis café patrons to examine their sociality at randomly sampled venues located in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region. To undertake this task, following the literature review, an ethnography and site analyses of Bangkok's cannabis cafés will thus: a) employ concepts by Oldenburg and Lofland to b) make visible the sociality of cannabis café patrons, and c) discuss how the configurational and spatial environments of cannabis cafés enable sociality to emerge in ways that can be framed with the concepts of Oldenburg and Lofland. Formal one-on-one interviews of patrons and staff were not undertaken due to the ethical concern that they may, through this publication, be incriminated in the future should a repeal of decriminalization policies ensue to some degree, a scenario that appears likely at the time my research drew to a close in late 2024. It should be noted that the incrimination of observed actors that may entail legal consequences and/or incarceration *is highly improbable* given that cannabis café proprietors and staff have been diligent in complying with regulatory measures established by the Thai government since decriminalization in June 2022 (e.g., cannabis cannot be sold to those under 20-years-old, women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, and/or while smoking and vaping are prohibited in public areas) (Stuart and Bush 2024).[3] Fully aware of Thailand's unique status as the first country in Asia to decriminalize the use of cannabis, advocates and entrepreneurs of such operations, along with their patrons, appear to tread this new cultural freedom carefully. Because of such compliance, should conservative forces revoke the decriminalized status of cannabis use, the anticipated outcome is that cannabis cafés will simply be shut down by decree while their operators will not be penalized due to their compliance since decriminalization.

[3] Since none of the establishments in Bangkok, or Thailand overall, operated illegally due to the decriminalization of cannabis use, the actual names of the establishments are listed non-pseudonymously in this manuscript. However, to ensure protection for café staff from potentially being incriminated should the Thai government reverse its stance on decriminalization, faces of patrons and proprietors, when clearly seen, are thus barred to ensure anonymity. No persons were specifically named at my café visits. That said, photographs seen herein were provided by café proprietors as public material used for their promotional efforts (e.g., on social media, through flyers, on Google reviews, etc.). With the exception of one photograph, Image 6, none were taken by your author.

Review of Literature

Given that Thailand has only recently decriminalized and allowed recreational use of cannabis, research literature on the sociality dynamics specific to *Bangkok's cannabis establishments following decriminalization* did not exist during the administration of my exploratory study. The following review of literature thus begins with a focus on global examples that pertain to cannabis decriminalization and/or recreation. It will then funnel and cascade their pertinence toward examination of Thailand's path toward decriminalization in ways that can then frame the sociality of Bangkok's cannabis cafés, a process undertaken to generate cautious extrapolations about third place social interactions that will be made visible toward the conclusion of this exploratory study. With such a trajectory, we will thus move from the global toward the local by employing concentric contexts of cannabis decriminalization developments to frame the sociality of cannabis cafés in this study.

Following from the aforementioned trajectory, Korf (2019) addresses cannabis-based tourism in the Netherlands by highlighting a surprising reality for those who remain unaware: cannabis remains an illicit drug, that is, technically illegal in the country, yet its use is decriminalized for personal enjoyment, resulting in the embeddedness of cannabis cafés in the country, an ambiguity that continues to influence and shape Netherlands' discourse on cannabis. Keul and Eisenhauer (2019) focus on cannabis tourism in the state of Colorado in the United States, noting how its cannabis tourism industry grew by concomitantly challenging laws and political developments to change the discourse toward recreational cannabis use. Kang and McGrady (2020) offer a comparative assessment of Oregon and Colorado's tourism dynamics, revealing that Colorado residents' sentiments toward cannabis tourism tended to be more favorable, likely owing to the more sophisticated practices engaged by Colorado guides, like their use of driven tours to different recreational cannabis venues, an outcome supported by Keul and Eisenhauer (2019). Not all findings on cannabis decriminalization are sanguine, however, with Carliner, Brown, Sarvet, and Hasin (2017) warning that the increase in adult recreational use of cannabis has resulted in use disorders in the US. Cox (2018) traces Canadian public policies leading to the *Cannabis Act* that ultimately decriminalized its use in July 2018, making Canada the first G7 country to legalize cannabis, a status welcomed by Dupej and Nepal (2021) who saw its decriminalization as promoting cannabis tourism to the country, one that served to normalize and destigmatize its use, thus changing the discourse on what it means to enjoy cannabis.

Funneling our gaze toward the local in the case of Bangkok at the time of this writing, research before and following decriminalization amounts to only seven publications that specifically focus on the country's cultural and socio-political developments regarding use and sales; six are peer-reviewed (Katasila 2022; Deng et al. 2023; Ehambaranathan, Murugasu, and Hall 2023; Meeprom et al. 2023; Phucharoen et al. 2023; Terdudomtham 2023), while one is a dissertation from Thailand's prestigious Chulalongkorn University (Matsushita 2020). These Thai-centric scholars will be addressed in ways that can help us frame the proliferation and alacrity of patrons recreating at Bangkok's cannabis establishments.

Bangkok's cannabis café owners were optimistic when their venues opened to international patrons in 2022, a not-unrealistic expectation given the city's

global reputation as a welcoming and party-friendly city. Although medicinally legalized in 2018, the decriminalization of cannabis took place, perhaps not coincidentally, during the post-COVID-19 pandemic when tourists were expected to return to Thailand. Thai proponents of decriminalization along with its academic advocates seized the historical moment. Bangkok's Rangsit University offered, at the time of this writing, the first Bachelor of Marijuana Science Curriculum—perhaps inspired by data from scholars such as Terdudomtham (2023:9) who is critical of the country's incarceration practices for cannabis offenders and views decriminalization as a "sensible alternative for Thailand." Rangsit's offerings enroll students in courses related to agricultural cultivation, production, and distribution of the plant as notes Associate Professor Dr. Banyat Setthiti, Acting Dean of the Faculty of Agricultural Innovation, College of Agricultural Innovation, Biotechnology, and Food.[4] The major also explores the plant's ability to function as an herbal remedy as well as its potential for alleviating cancer symptoms (Katasila 2022). Its Facebook[5] page displays a video of students in lab coats from the Faculty of Agricultural Innovation diligently attending to the growing, cultivation, and pruning of the plants at university facilities and in the field. The webpage optimistically cites the merits of a "growing medical marijuana career that is in high demand in the labor market both domestically and abroad" (2023).

In the northeast region of Thailand, Khon Kaen University embarked on an in-depth study examining the motivations for consuming cannabis-infused foods as a means toward well-being (Meeprom et al. 2023) while in the south of the country, the famous island of Phuket and its associated university, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket campus, has seen its scholars examine the "green rush" on the island, employing sophisticated ArcGIS mapping techniques for engaging in hotspot analyses that illuminate how cannabis-selling establishments are strategically located near key hotels catering to an international clientele (Phucharoen et al. 2023). Their cautious conclusions advocate for public policies that regulate yet accommodate the proliferation of such establishments to ensure the staying power of the island's wellness industry in ways that imperatively "establish legal boundaries [for] ensuring the sanctity of educational, religious, or other sensitive establishments in hotel-rich areas to mitigate adverse consequences" (Phucharoen et al. 2023:547). For Phucharoen and colleagues (2023:547), the goal of such accommodations is to focus "on the strong relationship between hotels and cannabis stores" so that "policymakers can develop more effective strategies to manage…adverse externalities from the green rush phenomenon toward the community and ensure a well-balanced approach that benefits stakeholders." During the same period in Bangkok, further validation came from Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister, Anutin Charnvirakul, a well-known advocate and media presence encouraging the mass production of cannabis for medical and health benefits, as well as promoting cannabis as a new cash crop for Thailand's agriculture sector (Katasila 2022).

Detractors of decriminalization would not sit idly by, however. By September 2023, the country's newly appointed prime minister, Srettha Thavisin, threatened to curtail the entire industry by advocating for the reinstatement of stricter measures against operations enabling recreational use as well as contesting its decriminalized status. Thavisin's maneu-

[4] See: https://www2.rsu.ac.th/sarnrangsit-online-detail/◉News-Cannabis. Retrieved July 04, 2025.

[5] See: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=Nif5oz&v=137224675252482. Retrieved July 04, 2025.

ver was undertaken not long after his political rival Anutin announced a year earlier that cannabis and hemp would be removed from the drug control list. Indeed, since Anutin's 2022 announcement, the Thai government "has successively added many regulations" (Deng et al. 2023:2). For example, the country's Ministry of Health attempted to issue decrees to ensure that cannabis-selling establishments were not located near "schools, shopping malls, streets, and crowded places" (Katasila 2022:2192), while the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) launched information campaigns that warned about cannabis dependency and disorders stemming from recreational use. Such state expressions of discontents were reinforced by some segments of the country's international visitors, with Chinese tourists, especially their netizens, citing concerns that there was inadequate regulation and information about cannabis use in Thailand that could endanger its visitors, thus contributing to a "negative perception of Thailand as a travel destination…[for] cannabis" (Deng et al. 2023:5-6), further adding that "*caution should be* exercised when discussing cannabis tourism and its potential economic benefits" (Deng et al. 2023:7).

During this period, many other Southeast Asian countries, especially those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations trade bloc (ASEAN), began offering their views toward cannabis decriminalization. Malaysia's Home Minister Datuk Seri Hamzah Zainuddin warned that:

> Malaysians traveling to Thailand would be easily exposed to cannabis-based products in the form of food, drinks, and supplements sold there. Furthermore, cannabis-based products in the form of food, drinks, and supplements may be smuggled into [Malaysia]. [Malaysia is] concerned that some [Malaysians] may become addicted to cannabis because they had unwittingly consumed such products. [Basyir 2022]

Singapore, infamously known worldwide for its harsh drug laws, exhibited an uncharacteristically measured response through its Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam: "Freer availability of cannabis in Thailand, to which a lot of Singaporeans go to and from, where a lot of tourists come to Singapore, is going to present more challenges" (Min 2022). The Thai Embassy in Indonesia, fully mindful that the country maintains one of the strictest anti-drug laws in the world (where more than 1 kg of cannabis may result in life imprisonment or even the death penalty), proclaimed: "The Royal Thai Embassy in Jakarta warn [sic] Thai people not to carry cannabis, hemp, or products with cannabis or hemp ingredients into Indonesia. Violators of the law could face a fine of at least 5 years to life imprisonment, capital punishment, or a fine of roughly 2.4 million baht (approximately USD 67,800)" (Ehambaranathan et al. 2023:116).[6] The only ASEAN country where views toward Thailand's decriminalization of cannabis were stated in a more accommodating fashion was Cambodia, with Khan Samban of the country's Ministry of Agriculture noting "while cannabis cultivation will be still illegal here, the government could consider lifting the ban. It is an easy crop for planting and can grow in many areas, the government would consider amending the law for special cases" (Olszewski 2022).

Detractors of decriminalization at the time of this writing, such as the country's incumbent Health Minister, Cholnan Srikaew, were aggressively agitat-

[6] At the time of this writing, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the Republic of the Philippines offered no official statements.

ing for a return to some semblance of regulatory control. An anti-decriminalization narrative emerged: those against decriminalized cannabis were arguing that medicinal cannabis use had always been a political camouflage to ultimately segue the country toward accepting cannabis use recreationally, an act that would result in moral degeneracy. Thus, pushback emerged not only from the conservative political forces of Thai society but from a coterie of physicians constituting the Medical Council of Thailand. Yet, current control measures are piecemeal, and the industry continues to generate revenue since cannabis plants were reclassified as "controlled herbs," a benign category reserved for plants that deserve "protection and promotion" due to their role in enhancing "Thai folk wisdom in traditional medicine," upon which cannabis's veracity will be determined by the country's minister of public health (Chalermpalanupap 2023). Because cannabis plants are now categorized under the less malevolent category of "controlled herbs," they are "no longer under the purview of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB)" (Chalermpalanupap 2023).

Despite the continuing alacrity and discontents surrounding issues related to cannabis decriminalization, I do not intend to promote any pieties toward the relaxation of regulations *or* regurgitate alarmist views from detractors that frame its recreational usage as "marginal or deviant behavior, a lifestyle found in developed nations" (Deng et al. 2023:1). My article only attempts to illuminate how cannabis cafés are the newest third places in Asia, and how they have been able to build community locally and transnationally despite or because of the aforementioned geopolitical and localized political developments, a quintessential expression of *glocalization*—a term popularized by sociologists Roland Robertson and Zygmunt Bauman to mean the simultaneous coexistence of universalizing (global) and particularizing (local) tendencies in society (Roberston 1992; Robertson 1995; Bauman 1995). Thus, through primarily the ideas of Oldenburg and Lofland, I argue that third places in the guise of cannabis cafés can further be appreciated as destressing urban environments inflected by local and international sociality in ways that contest caricaturized and deviant images of cannabis smokers. Thus, dynamics from my aforementioned discussion of how conservative forces in Thai society are *doing stigma* against cannabis decriminalization will be shown to have generated an opposite dynamic where international and local patrons and supporters of cannabis decriminalization are *undoing stigma* by practicing law-abiding consumption and socialities at cannabis cafés.

Site Visits

During the summers of 2022 and 2023, and spring 2024, I visited 45 cannabis cafés in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR) to conduct my observations of sociality. The BMR region includes not only the capital city of Bangkok but small adjacent provinces of Nakhon Pathom, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, Samut Prakan, and Samut Sakhon. Because of the fast proliferation of cannabis-selling establishments, the decision was made to focus on a plurality of venues (n=45) for the sake of drawing cautious extrapolations about the dynamics of cannabis cafés based on reliability rather than focusing on the dynamics of one venue repeatedly for the sake of ensuring validity. A random number generator was employed to assign a numerical value to each establishment. From this list, 45 cannabis cafés were selected, filtered by identifying those environments that provided tables and available seating. The value of 45 was determined based on funding parameters and logistical feasibility of my site visits. A map that identified locations

of cannabis-selling venues, *weed.th*, was employed to list the n=1,873 establishments that at the time sold cannabis in the BMR. This map remains the most comprehensive map displaying establishments selling cannabis in Thailand. However, it should be noted that the list of establishments mapped by *weed.th* did not (and still does not) discern between walk-in shops, counters inside malls that sell cannabis, street stalls, or actual cannabis cafés with seating. The random sample of 45 cannabis cafés are located across some of Bangkok's districts and one province of Samut Prakan (part of the BMR) (see Table 1). Some cafés are franchises, while the majority of the venues in the sample operate as independent venues.[7]

Additionally, budtenders at some of the establishments I first explored noted that early afternoon hours and evening hours would draw different types of visitors, with the former seeing more mellow patrons. Indeed, such insight substantiates sociologist Murray Melbin's (1978:3) classic study where he demonstrates how humans occupy time like they occupy space, with trends showing how evening hours draw out the less inhibited and more garrulous toward settings that resemble "social life on former land frontiers.". Thus, for each establishment, I visited twice per day, between noon and 1:00 PM and the evening hours of 7:00 PM and 8:00 PM, in hopes of being able to discern different types of sociality between daytime and evening patrons that visit the cafés (see Image 1).

To display courtesy as a patron, I purchased one cannabis cigarette, coffee or soft drink, and snacks per visit to become a bona fide patron who can then *inconspicuously* observe the setting's social dynamics. There are three reasons why no interviews of patrons were conducted: a) to ensure that patrons do not feel violated when embarking on the ritual of enjoying cannabis; that is, I wanted to observe natural and unscripted sociality. Additionally, b) a researcher violating patrons' respective desires to alter their consciousness would do more to detract from cautious extrapolations about consistent sociality patterns—the primary goal of my study—rather than add to it. Finally, c) I did not want to risk driving away patrons from the cafés. Such approaches not only ensured continuing sales for the establishment, but more importantly, generated goodwill in the process which during my second visit in the evening would result in some staff recognizing me and ensuring I had a nice seating location for continued observation of our evening patrons.

Image 1. At left, budtenders at Green Day Dispensary sharing samples with patrons during evening hours

Source: Courtesy of Green Day Dispensary staff, summer 2022.

[7] Randomly selecting over 30 cannabis cafés ($n \geq 30$) enables the central limit theorem (CLT) to provide rudimentary insights into emerging patterns of sociality, at least for the scope of my study, that could—were such research to transition toward a quantitative orientation—make inferences about the larger population (Mascha and Vetter 2018). Moreover, I am sensitive to the condition, shared by Wisz and colleagues (2008:763), that with a small sample size of $n < 30$, one must be "highly conservative" in making predictions and "restrict their use to exploratory modelling."

Table 1. Cannabis Cafés Visited

Bangkok district/province (in alphabetical order)	Number of cafés visited per district or province	Establishments visited
Bang Na (district)	2	Coughing Apes
		Mabu High Weed Dispensary
Bang Rak (district)	5	Cannabis Kingdom
		Weed Shop Bangkok | HAF
		HSM Silom Cannabis Weed Café
		Pakalolo Surawong—Café Dispensary
		No Man's Land
Khlong Than Nuea (district)	1	Choo Choo Hemp Weed Shop
Khlong Toei (district)	7	Green Day Dispensary
		I Feel Good Café
		Slow Burn Cannabis Dispensary
		Thai Cannabis Club—Thonglor
		Weed 4 Less
		Boveda Official Thailand
		DANQ Cannabis Dispensary Sukhumvit
Phra Khanong (district)	1	Wellgreen 101
Phra Nakhon (district)	2	Gram by Gram Cannabis Club
		Highland Khaosan
Ratchathewi (district)	4	How High Cannabis Café
		Karma Canna Café Dispensary
		Mellow Weed
		Snoop Puff
Sampanthawong (district)	2	Cannabeast Ratchawong-Chinatown-Yaowarat
		Green Day Dispensary-Chinatown
Samut Prakan (province)	1	WeWeed Cannabis Café (near Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport)
Sathon (district)	3	High Society Cannabis Club Suan Plu
		Leaf Cannabis Café
		Oumi Organic Café
Suan Luang (district)	1	Café Munchies
Watthana (district)	15	420 Café x Booze 21
		Algrene—Cannabis Dispensary, Art, Café
		Hempmade—Cannabis Store & Chillin Hub
		Highfive Dispensary Cafe & Bar
		High Supply 99 Dispensary
		Dream Galaxy
		Goja
		Green Elephant 420 Dispensary
		High and Dry Dispensary
		Prime Botanica
		Marley's Bar & Café
		Heaven of Weed
		High Thai Weed
		THC Thonglor Hemp Club
		Tropicanna Cannabis Dispensary & Café
Yannawa (district)	1	Kushies Cannabis
Total Cafés Visited	**45**	

Source: Self-elaboration.

Like the pattern of service sector development Phucharoen and colleagues (2023) make visible at Thailand's tourist destination of Phuket, the vast majority of cannabis establishments in the BMR were located in districts near famous streets. In this study of cannabis cafés in the BMR, Sukhumvit Road is such a famed street. Sukhumvit Road, especially where it traverses the city's central business districts, along with its associated *sois* (roads that are directly linked to a major street), are densely clustered with many large malls, temples, and dining and retail establishments based out of shophouses. The surrounding areas also contain numerous hotels and hostels ranging from five-star, ultra high-end establishments to those located across the street from some of the city's infamous brothels and go-go bars. Sukhumvit Road's length allows ingress into the capital from the country's east and southeastern provinces, and egress toward the last province adjacent to Cambodia, over 303 miles, or 480 kilometers, away from Bangkok. In the BMR, accessing the high densification of cannabis cafés in the area means patrons are only walking distance or a short motorcycle taxi ride from the city's efficient public transportation rail lines such as the Bangkok Mass Transit System, locally referred to as the BTS, or its subway, the Bangkok's Metropolitan Rapid Transit (MRT).

Some cannabis cafés, but not all, sell food and alcohol. All cafés in our sample have seating areas for patrons to smoke. Such configured spaces can be seen at shops like HSM Silom Cannabis and How High Cannabis Café. Some of these environments have creative arrangements, such as Wellgreen 101 with its dance floor, Goja's inclusion of a DJ area where they play music for patrons during evening hours, the Thai Cannabis Club and its billiards area, and Algrene Cannabis and its art gallery viewing area. Some venues have comfortable sofas for patrons to play video games while viewing game imagery on a wall-mounted big screen television, while still others will have a stage with a microphone and a guitar on a stand for those who dare to perform.

Image 2. I Feel Good Cannabis Café and Bar in a shophouse format

Source: Google Street View, January 2024.[8]

Many cannabis cafés have their smoking areas above street level on the second floor or rooftop made possible by the shophouse configurations of the establishments, as in No Man's Land and its rooftop smoking area with vistas of the Bangkok skyline; indeed, the vast majority of cafés in my sample operate in facilities based on shophouse configurations. A shophouse is the vernacular architecture of the Far East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, often constituted by

[8] See: https://www.google.com/maps/contrib/106582868073073336481/photos/@13.718989,100.5761315,3a,75y,90t/data=!3m7!1e2!3m5!1sAF1QipPaaqJOcmjWc3bjtE6eFQk7QR1e0_Mwscuyuadp!2e10!6shttps:%2F%2Flh5.googleusercontent.com%2Fp%2FAF1QipPaaqJOcmjWc3bjtE6eFQk7QR1e0_Mwscuyuadp%3Dw365-h486-k-no!7i3024!8i4032!4m3!8m2!3m1!1e1?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MDkwOC4wIKXMDSoASAFQAw%3D%3D. Retrieved December 21, 2024.

narrow buildings with multiple floors—usually with two or three floors—that have the proprietor/s dwellings at the top floor, while the business operations are conducted on the ground floor. In essence, such structures serve as a home and place of business for the proprietor (see Image 2). Proprietors of businesses in such configurations do not commute to work in a car—they wake up in the morning on the upper floors and descend to the ground floor to open their shops and welcome staff and patrons for the day.

Cannabis Cafés During Evening Hours

During the evening hours of the establishments visited, patrons tended to gather around tables as strangers, although some arrived as friendship groups. In more spacious surroundings, tables often seat a half-dozen patrons, many in dyadic and triadic groups. One often hears English of many accents and proficiencies used as the first language to engage in conversation. Many of the international patrons, upon enjoying their first inhale, which is acknowledged with solidarity by other strangers at the table, may be asked where they are from. Over the two-year study period, I have heard tourists informing others that they are from Sweden, the Netherlands, China, India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, France, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany, to name but a few. These often mingle with Thai patrons at some point during their visits, given the somewhat densified seating environments of many cafés (see Image 3). Smiles and laughter are plentiful as the panoply of patrons pack their pipes and smoke their cannabis cigarettes, with some purists preferring to roll their cigarettes. Frequently, selfies were taken with different patrons' new associations as well as between patrons and the venues' budtenders and/or servers, evincing how civility toward diversity is practiced at cannabis cafés functioning as third places.

Following the minimizing of people's stranger status due to parties disclosing their domiciles, patrons often return to speaking their native languages, a transition that sometimes includes a polite gesture whereby an ashtray or lighter is transferred between one cultural group to another. Some groups remained cliquey if they were large, choosing instead to communicate among themselves if they were able to claim a sizeable seating area, although none of the members in the group were antisocial to those outside their coterie. This is not surprising because one must realize that for many patrons, from the Global North and Global South, Thailand being the first and only country in Asia to decriminalize cannabis use has provided for our patrons a significant cultural and legal allowance to emancipate their recreational relationship to cannabis in ways their home countries would never allow. The experience for such patrons may thus be a rite of passage of sorts, and the alacrity, joviality, and community expressed by our evening patrons, through their civility toward diversity, is not surprising.

Image 3. A gathering of local and international smokers at Choo Choo Hemp Weed Shop

Source: Image courtesy of Choo Choo staff, provided during summer 2023.

Image 4. Patrons at Heaven of Weed inspecting flower samples

Source: Image courtesy of Heaven of Weed staff, provided during summer 2023; faces are barred to ensure anonymity.

At one of the establishments visited in Watthana District, one patron at a table from Japan found out another patron was from the Netherlands and immediately asked in English whether Bangkok is the "new Amsterdam," to which our Dutch friend jovially affirmed, further noting that he was impressed with the quality of the flowers. At another café in Sathon District, a group of patrons, upon learning that some were from Germany and others from the United Kingdom, were engaged in a spirited discussion comparing the different playing styles of football exhibited by the Bundesliga and the English Premier League. Because I was raised in Thailand prior to my emigration to the United States, I am conversationally fluent in Thai and Mandarin, and was thus able to observe cross-cultural solidarity forged when a Mandarin speaker complimented on the quality and potency of her cannabis cigarette through Google Translate to a nearby Thai patron. Pressing a button on the app and recording her sentiments in Mandarin, she subsequently pressed the speaker icon that then voiced back the message in Thai to our Thai patron sitting a few chairs from her. Delighted with our Chinese speaker's message and responding with smiles and nods, our Thai patron then spoke the Thai language into her handheld translation device, Fluentalk, with the device vocalizing her message back in Mandarin to our Chinese visitor. Both broke out in affirmation and laughter in their altered states of consciousness. With such apps, I was also able to observe a Hindi-speaking patron querying a budtender about differences in pricing and potency of different flowers. Indeed, the surprising star of sociality in the age of glocalization is the power of translation apps and devices in building a semblance of community in ways that break down communication barriers when different languages are spoken in the same setting. In the context of this study, once a patron's geographical information set off by language becomes known, the strangeness of the stranger is minimized since awareness of the other's spatiality functions as a communicative lubricant that enables more amicable social interactions.

Although the bane of Oldenburg's conceptualization of a quality third place, many cannabis cafés during evening hours frequently employed music to saturate the environment's soundscape. In Oldenburg's analyses of American third places, such music overpowered quality conversation, drowning out patrons from being able to establish a healthy line of communication. Interestingly, at many cannabis cafés in Bangkok that played music, these venues did so with music projected at moderate volume. The key reason for this tact is that patrons, upon arrival, often expend time communicating with budtenders about the dif-

ferent types of flowers available for smoking—in the process, different jars with flower samples are opened and closed, and the act includes handing over such jars for the patron to smell different flowers' aromas, a gesture that often engenders in patrons verbal affirmations and/or commentary on the flower types (see Image 4). Loud music would detract from such communication. Some exceptions can be seen at Goja and Highfive Dispensary Cafe & Bar where techno dance music, or at Wellgreen 101 with its salsa music, is played at louder volumes.

At Wellgreen 101 with its dining tables, for example, the arrival of the evening would see international and local patrons enjoy a Thai dinner, with some consuming beers or wines in superficial amounts.[9] After dinner, some tables would be moved to increase the size of the dance floor. Jovial patrons, their friends, and locals then dance with one another—with both the salsa music *and* the aroma of cannabis diffusing into the *soi* due to the propping open of the establishment's corner entrance doorways. Some couples display amorous body language during dance, opportunistically relishing in how the loud music draws them closer so that they can whisper to each other. Those patrons who are arrhythmic or less literate with dance (or maybe because of their inebriation) watched with alacrity, perhaps vicariously enjoying the bonds being formed through their audience role prominence and civility toward diversity (see Image 5). Cannabis cafés during evening hours are frequently happy, boisterous, and garrulous places.

[9] However, in the cafés that sell alcoholic beverages, all patrons give pride of place to smoking of cannabis, and alcohol consumption seen at the establishments was a rarity. That is, I did not once witness a drunken patron during visits to my sample of cannabis cafés.

Image 5. After dinner, Wellgreen 101's patrons dance at the café's "Latin Night"

Source: Image courtesy of Wellgreen 101 staff, provided during summer 2023.

Cannabis Cafés During Daylight Hours

Daylight hours at cannabis cafés tend to be an environment where solidarity between cannabis aficionados is established by what I term as solitaires, each on their favorite table as they quietly enjoy their smokes, their own company. Daytime hours at cannabis cafés function as a different frontier from the evening, where the latter draw in younger, louder, and more garrulous patrons. Daylight hours draw in more adults, sometimes as partners. However, patrons tend to be primarily individuals, mostly men. In the premises I visited during daylight hours—my favorite being the Karma Canna Café—the more subdued environment allowed me to converse with Thai budtenders; their curiosities almost always prompted them to first query where I am from, frequently followed by weather-related queries, paraphrased along the lines of: "So what is Los

Angeles weather like this time of year? I bet it is not as humid as Thailand." On many occasions, after such introductory spatial ordering and the minimizing of the stranger status were completed, complimentary flower samples were generously offered.

Cannabis cafés during daylight hours build a different type of community, one borne through a solidarity between those who accept how those around them, taken by personal matters, are enjoying their alone time after the effects of THC take hold. Indeed, a relatively quiet third place can just as effectively prime the environment to be a community enhancement space defined by, counterintuitively, solitaires appreciating their own company if not the ability to partake in audience role prominence, that is, people watching other solitaires around them. Patrons during daylight hours do exhibit some etiquette, usually manifesting as a stoic nod between a seated smoker and an arriving patron seeking an ideal table, a simple gesture that is employed followed by the practice of respecting one another's public solitude, a behavior often seen at Karma Canna due to the beautiful layout of the environment replete with comfortable chairs and nice tables. Patrons are rather brief in their exchanges as seen in my daylight Karma Canna visit, with a recently arrived European patron sitting at his table asking with a rising lilt "Good?" to another European patron, as the former had yet to begin smoking but was busy packing his pipe, while our other patron, having been seated much longer, responds with a smiling nod and a "Yeah." Solitaires are cognizant of their social boundaries and ultimately return to their solitude, perhaps enjoying the quiet Loflandian "hum of conversation" emanating from the establishments' staff speaking with one another about their tasks for the day as they work behind their counters. Such a hum is heard because many of the visited venues during daylight hours do not play music. At another café, I witnessed younger phenotypical Far East Asian solitaires quietly working on their laptops. When they conversed, they often spoke in low volume in ways that dignified the quiet, but denied me the privilege of hearing from which geographical womb they hail. Digital nomads from Mongolia, China, South Korea, Taiwan, or Japan? Or Thais on their day off from work? Unemployed Thais preparing their resumes or maintaining their social media accounts? In the spirit of civil inattention, no one asked and no one cared (see images 6 and 7).

Image 6. Solitaires at Royal Queen Seeds (not in study sample, but visited on my own time)

Source: Photograph by author, summer 2022.

Image 7. Solitaires at Danq braving the heat and humidity

Source: Image courtesy of Danq staff, provided during summer, 2023.

During daylight hours, the effectiveness of enabling a nourishing quietude between solitaires can be contrasted to the evening hours' patrons, since the latter group, as Oldenburg observed, claim social presence through body language, volume of speech, and histrionics based on their desire to be the center of attention. The lack of such garrulous strangers during daylight hours is, in my view, just as important a means for enhancing the community. Indeed, as a scholar, my most reflective states were experienced during visits to cafés before the late afternoon or evening hours, allowing me to appreciate others around me who appear to peacefully inhabit a similar atmosphere.

Cannabis consumption during daylight hours tends to bring the actor into a contemplative state where they are frequently taken by personal matters without their social finesse being scrutinized. I am of the view that even when a multitude of solitaires are gathered in such fashion, the lack of garrulousness between patrons *in no way* cheapens the third place's ability to still promote community enhancement. This premise may appear to be counterintuitive. However, cannabis cafés during the day were observed to be a unique type of third place: one that welcomes solitaires enjoying their solitude and quietude, perhaps a needed function for actors to destress and distance themselves from Bangkok's noise pollution and over-stimuli contributed by *tuk tuks*, the arriving and departing BTS skytrains overhead, dilapidated diesel buses with flatulent-sounding exhausts, and 250cc motorcycles that add to street congestion (Fong 2016).

Voluntary solitude, then, exhibits its leveling like the garrulous third places of Oldenburg's persuasion—perhaps even more so—since patrons, fully aware of one another, nonetheless respect the "other" from a healthy distance, enabling the building of a community of solitaires. Although outdoor seating remains available for many of Bangkok's cannabis cafés during daylight hours, the high humidity and heat often keep visitors inside air-conditioned facilities, further providing a space for acknowledgment of fellow cannabis solitaires to surface. Thus, daytime cannabis cafés are bona fide third places despite their solitude-enhancing dynamics. It is a community enabled by welcoming a gathering of its solitude-loving patrons, all of whom appear to enjoy the presence of other solitaires in their midst without the expressed need to be garrulous. To deny that quiet third places with less or no sociality can still enhance community is analogous to denying that monks in deep meditation within a temple can experience community with one another.

During daylight visits to the cannabis cafés that played music, sounds within these venues were often exemplified by what the Millennial generation, Generation Z, and progressive music listeners would identify as "downtempo," "lofi," "lounge," and/or "ambient" music (although more creative terms abound). Downtempo, lofi, and ambient music tend to be long-duration compositions—mostly instrumentals—that are meant to, first and foremost, create an atmospheric state for the listener by employing repetitive musical structures that frequently sample melodies and/or vocalizations from other songs. Daylight soundscapes can be contrasted to dance-oriented music with upbeat tempos that are heard at venues during evening visits. Thus, daylight cannabis cafés frequently play electronically-composed music where virtuosos of instruments—as in charismatic guitarists who display their skills through emphatic solos or riffs often heard in different genres of rock and heavy metal—did not dominate the composition. Although some vocalists or bands with "pop" credentials are heard, the music is primarily mellow, relaxing, and exceptionally atmospheric, thus allowing cannabis smokers to smoothly segue into their altered states of consciousness—while appreciating that other solitaires are in the same mindset of drowning out the cacophony of urban sounds emanating from Bangkok's congested streets. Thus, whereas Oldenburg was highly critical of loud third place environments in the United States, observing that such venues are taken over by vulgar—especially if too much alcohol is consumed—cliquey college students gesticulating to pop/rock music being played, the musical backdrop of cannabis cafés during daytime hours projected music at lower volumes, allowing it to function as background music to frame our community constituted by a comparatively more contemplative coterie of patrons.

Conclusion

Bangkok's cannabis cafés, rendered in this manuscript as a new type of third place to emerge in the city's contemporary urban landscape, offer their patrons a unique means to experience the city's urban stimuli in ways that enable destressing and some semblance of community building. Although major cities around the world are experienced through their historical areas, landmarks, street configurations, gridlock, and cacophony through its densification and gradual dispersion into adjacent regions, such entities serving as cauldrons of stressors for their citizens and visitors now offer an antipodal environment as seen in the examples that are Bangkok's cannabis cafés functioning as third places. Patrons at such cafés appear to welcome a destressing disengagement with the well-known global city that is Bangkok, rendering the establishments an antipode of what urbanites frequently encounter in the urban experience: exposure to frenetic urban energies that colonize the day and night as sociality frontiers. Yet, at Bangkok's cannabis cafés, such a process of becoming a less stressed actor in a frenetic city through contemplative solitude with minimal sociality (daylight patrons) or garrulous sociality (evening patrons), enables community to be created by undoing the stigma associated with cannabis culture, whether it is accomplished by practicing civil inattention, audience role prominence, civility toward diversity, or public solitude. I believe Oldenburg and Lofland would be delighted with Bangkok's birthing of another iteration of the third place made visible in this study in a region of the world with which they have not engaged in urban analyses.

What can further be appreciated about our patrons is how they employ cannabis cafés to fulfill their roles in uniting communities of the global with the local. With different languages heard, different races and ethnicities of patrons seen, different cultures engaged, Bangkok's cannabis cafés also reinforce Lofland's view that awareness of one another's place through spatial ordering allows the modern urban resident to contextualize persons and thus minimize their strangeness, except that in the case of Bangkok, this minimization of strangeness crosses international boundaries. For Lofland (1973:82-83), in the modern city, "a man is where he stands," creating a culture where city dwellers can link "who" to "where." In the case of Bangkok's cannabis cafés, patrons can immediately have a cultural and/or political narrative about someone, albeit blunt and generalized, by simply knowing from where cannabis aficionados hail. To what extent the amicable encountering of actors with different worldviews improves one's mental health will be an interesting trajectory for future studies on the effects of cannabis cafés when compared to, say, bars or pubs.

Unlike bars or pubs that serve alcohol—a mainstay of many communities around the world—I posit that cannabis cafés, as destressing environments, are arguably healthier social spaces. Establishments that exclusively serve alcohol, so often celebrated by Oldenburg, unfortunately offer beverages that, when consumed in great quantities, frequently regress a person's sociability into crassness, and frequently, hostility and anti-social behavior. A key distinction that can be made is how cannabis café patrons remain noticeably more coherent in these environments than in alcohol-serving establishments. For many of us who have had experience attending bars, one is aware that in the case of those alcohol-inebriated, community-building and sociality can break down, resulting in stressors being *added* to the third place environment and the public at large—a scenario ignored by Oldenburg's overall sanguine analyses of bars or pubs functioning as third places. Yet, because Oldenberg clearly privileged the art of communication as a most important attribute of third place dynamics, that one can explicitly see this exhibited in different forms of sociality at Bangkok's cannabis cafés is thus a welcome sign.

The city can be a lonely and isolating environment for its people, with its concrete structures and urban configurations rendering inhabitants or visitors as cogs in the city's machine. Even documentaries that focus on the city, for example, begin with imagery of crowded crosswalks, exposés of pollution, and criminality—all of which need to be left behind lest we remain but ants in the proverbial concrete jungle.[10] To what extent a glocalized urban environment can be seen to humanize rather than caricaturize all types of people therein, that is, to render them as subjects with agency rather than objects to be subsumed under the calculability of urban development, should be an important trajectory for examining how actors can begin reading anew, and ultimately, appreciating anew, a city's alternative third places. Thai cannabis cafés in our sample are fulfilling this role as they relish in their burgeoning industry by allowing new subjects that can build community to emerge, despite their liminal status as the Thai state is now beginning to reel in their operations. As such, future studies—should cannabis cafés remain a mainstay of Thailand's service sector—should focus on one establishment to tease out more sociality granularity in the setting—but

[10] The 2017 documentary, *In Pursuit of Silence* (directed by Patrick Shen) is one example. Focusing on the hyper-stimulation of a city's acoustic environment, it shows the emancipation of its actors as those who leave the city or, at the very least, seek out pockets of quiet within the city.

given the fast growing industry one can witness across Bangkok and the rest of Thailand, my manuscript had opted to focus on the exponential growth and the plurality of venues as a context to draw my analyses of sociality, fully aware of the potential blind spots inhered in the current approach.

The degree to which cannabis cafés in Thailand can offer themselves as destressing third places of a garrulous, festive nature, or as non-garrulous and contemplative contexts of quietude, will depend on how they present themselves as bona fide destressing environments for the local and global population. In this regard, more emphases on how destressing spaces can be designed into urban environments in ways that minimize people's stranger status are not just intellectual pursuits worthy of sloganeering, but an ideal that can be pursued as public policy in ways that can continue to transform the city from being a stratifying, partitioning, and mechanical machine, into the city as culturally diverse villages and communities as noted by the former city's governor, Pichit Rattakul. In the case of Bangkok, such an ideal can be realized beyond the welcoming of the local and global at the city's many temples, ruins, floating market, night markets, food courts, and shopping malls, or through the riding of the *tuk tuks* to get to the aforementioned venues, but also through the act of visiting the city's cannabis cafés.

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Labor of Care and Contracts: A Study of Surrogacy after the Transnational Ban in India

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Commercial Surrogacy; Ethics of Care; Mothers; Contracts; Stigma; Secrecy

Abstract: Characterized by the interplay of care and contracts, surrogacy is an exclusive form of gendered work. The paper is based on a micro-level ethnographic study exploring the lived and embodied challenges of commercial gestational surrogates in Gujarat, India, who were undertaking surrogacy work after the ban on transnational surrogacy. The experiential accounts collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews bear the challenges, stigma, and shame involved in surrogacy work. Not only is surrogacy work devalued, deprived of dignity, and shrouded in secrecy, but it is also corrupted by contracts, complicated by alienation and relinquishment of the gestated child. Surrogates disguise their work and stay in surrogacy hostels. Poverty in India compels many women to engage in surrogacy to eke out a living and improve their living conditions. Surrogate mothers are poorly paid, deprived of health benefits and legal security, they receive only twenty percent of the total cost of the surrogacy arrangement, and are also treated as fungible and disposable. The paper adopts the ethics of care perspective to analyze surrogacy arrangements. Such a perspective is directed toward promoting a responsible and humane attitude toward commercial surrogates. It is motivated by the need to uphold the dignity of the surrogates, their legal rights, and the social recognition of their work. The application of care ethics can alleviate the neglect and oppression of surrogates.

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This paper explores the lived and embodied challenges of commercial gestational surrogates in India who have entered into surrogacy for the second time. It focuses on the unique nature of their labor and work, as they nurture life in their wombs for relinquishment. Sociological relevance of surrogacy lies in the fact that it is both a gendered and a highly stratified practice, often sustained by the disparity between the rich and the poor. The paper adopts an ethics of care approach to cognize the motivation for entering into surrogacy arrangements. Such a perspective emphasizes the interdependence and relationality among human beings for their sustenance and development. Surrogacy relations are premised upon interdependence and relationships of care. The study shows that the commitment of the surrogate mothers to bear a child for *others* is generated by their need to provide care and nurturance for their *own* children. The surrogacy industry in India is fueled by the symbiotic relationship between wealthy commissioning parents and the surrogates who belong to the underprivileged sections of society. While the former pine for a genetically related child, the latter are desirous of improving the life chances of their biological children. Focusing on the surrogates from the perspective of care ethics, the paper suggests means that can turn surrogacy arrangements into humane, responsible, and dignified relationships of care. Since the research was conducted after the ban on transnational surrogacy in India, the paper highlights its effects on the fertility clinic.

Indian Council of Medical Relations (ICMR), an apex body that regulates biomedical research in India, defines a "surrogate mother" as a woman who "agrees to have an embryo generated from the sperm of a man who is not her husband and the oocyte of another woman, implanted in her to carry the pregnancy to full viability and deliver the child to the couple/individual that had asked for surrogacy" (ICMR 2010:4). As per ICMR guidelines, an essential pre-requisite to qualify as a surrogate is that she should be married with at least one child of her own. Surrogacy was legalized in India in 2002 to promote medical tourism, and soon the country

became a hub of transnational commercial surrogacy and the world's fertility tourism hotspot. Within a decade, the Indian surrogacy industry generated US$2 billion annually, with more than 25000 children born to surrogates in India, of which nearly 50% were commissioned for parents from the West. This is because the surrogacy services in India have been considerably cheaper compared to other parts of the world. In the UK, surrogates received 15,000 (US$) and 18,000-25,000 (US$) in the US, while in India, the surrogates received 5000-7000 (US$) only (Shetty 2012).

Describing the medical tourism industry in India in her essay "The Surrogate's Womb," Hochschild (2015:43) writes:

> In 2012, medical tourism to India was worth about $2 billion and had become second only to Internet technology as a source of national revenue. Advertisements describe India as the global doctor offering First World skill at Third World prices with shorter waits, privacy, and—especially important when hiring surrogate mothers—an absence of legal red tape… In India, commercial surrogacy is legal and, as of early 2013, still unregulated; nowadays a Westerner of moderate means can go to an Indian clinic to legally hire a surrogate mother to carry a baby to term.

The surrogacy market also provided services for heterosexual infertile couples, same-sex couples, and single women (Reddy 2016). But poor regulation and ambiguity with respect to laws pertaining to transnational commercial surrogacy, dubious and unethical practices, and exploitation of surrogates resulted in bad press and public interest litigations. The Law Commission of India (2009) in its 228th Report recommended the prohibition of commercial surrogacy. The issue was raised in the Lok Sabha[1] and subsequently, transnational surrogacy was banned in 2015, permitting only heterosexual Indian couples who had been married for five years. To further regulate surrogacy practices and to streamline the role of fertility clinics and the relationship between commissioning parents and surrogates, the Government of India introduced the Surrogacy Regulation Bill (in 2016 and again in 2019). The Bill proposed to prohibit commercial surrogacy and permit altruistic surrogacy wherein the surrogate should be a close relative, belonging to the same generation as the commissioning parents. The Surrogacy Regulation Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha on 5th August 2019 and subsequently referred to a Select Committee of Rajya Sabha[2] (2019) for further examination. The Committee suggested that commercial surrogacy be replaced with altruistic surrogacy and be extended to PIO (people of Indian origin), NRI (non-resident Indians), OCI (overseas citizens of India), live-in couples, divorced women, and widows. Further, the Committee recommended that the clause of "close relative" be removed to widen the scope of getting surrogate mothers from outside the close confines of the family of the intending couple. The Surrogacy Regulation Act, 2021, came into force on 25th January 2022, whereby commercial surrogacy was banned. The amended act exclusively permits charitable surrogacy, preventing those with financial means from abusing and taking advantage of the surrogacy option. It prohibits commercial surrogacy, as well as the trade of human gametes and embryos in India.

The study discussed in this paper was conducted in 2019. At that time, the ban on transnational sur-

[1] The lower house of the Indian Parliament.

[2] Rajya Sabha is the upper house of Parliament in India.

rogacy, introduced in 2015, was operational. Still, the ban on commercial surrogacy and the Surrogacy Regulation Act, 2022, had not come into force. Commercial surrogacy for resident Indians and those with Indian passports was legally permitted, as it was banned two years later, in 2022. At the time of the study, the talk about banning commercial surrogacy was on the anvil. In the absence of stringent regulations, the scope for unethical malpractices and covert commercial surrogacy cannot be eliminated. It is in this context that this study, conducted before the ban on commercial surrogacy in 2019, is still relevant. The rationale and significance of the study lie in the fact that it has explored the measures secured by the fertility clinic to put on hold further investment in hiring new surrogates and making do with those who have proved their worth earlier.

Surrogacy in the Indian context has been widely researched from myriad perspectives of sociology, anthropology, economics, law, philosophy, and medical ethics, resulting in a highly contested and controversial terrain of study. Debates on commercial surrogacy in India feature mainly around commodification and objectification of the surrogate's body due to patriarchal capitalism (Gupta 2012), alienation, marginalization, and exploitation of the surrogates for commercial interests (Qadeer and John 2009; Tanderup et al. 2015). Another recurrent theme in surrogacy research highlights the fragmentation or disaggregation of a mother's role into biological, gestational, and social mother (Gupta and Richters 2008; Vora 2009). Studies by Pande (2009; 2010; 2011) and Rudrappa (2015) highlight the dimension of care involved in gestating the baby by the surrogates. The ethnographic scholarship based on the lived experiences of surrogates in India (Pande 2014; Rudrappa 2015; Tanderup et al. 2015) is contextualized in the pre-transnational ban milieu. This paper fills the gap in existing sociological literature on surrogacy in India by adopting the ethics of care perspective and substantiating that the second-time surrogate mothers epitomize care in more ways than one. It argues that care is not manifested in the emotional labor of gestation alone, but more importantly, the decision to enter into surrogacy is motivated by a sense of care and responsibility toward the biological children of the surrogates.

For Virginia Held (2006:25), "the ethics of care conceptualizes persons as deeply affected by, and involved in, relations with others…The ethics of care attends especially to relations between persons, evaluating such relations and valuing relations of care." The ethics of care has grown out of the response of feminism to the biases against women. Feminists like Firestone (1970) attributed women's subordination to their mothering roles. She considered childbearing and child rearing as the biggest impediments to the emancipation and empowerment of women. Sara Ruddick's (1989) *Maternal Thinking* is credited with laying down the seminal ideas of the ethics of care perspective. Held (2006:26) notes that her "essay showed how women's experience in an activity such as mothering could yield a distinctive moral outlook, and how the values that emerged from within it could be relevant beyond the practice itself, for instance, in promoting peace." The feminist validation of women's experiences has been of salience to ethics. The ethics of care "takes the experience of women in caring activities such as mothering as central, interprets and emphasizes the values inherent in caring practices, shows the inadequacies of other theories for dealing with the moral aspects of caring activity, and then considers generalizing the insights of caring to other questions of morality" (Held 2006:26).

Carol Gilligan's (1982) book, *In a Different Voice*, gave further impetus to the development of ethics of care. She highlighted that the self and others are interdependent (Gilligan 1982:8). Further, she emphasized that care is not a women's issue but a concern of human interest and is as important as justice. It has been ignored because it was developed solely in the private, domestic life of which women were the protagonists (Gilligan 2013). Developing further on Gilligan's approach, Susan Sherwin (1989) upholds that caring is associated with both gender and oppression, and furthermore that the medical profession contributes to this oppression by supporting patriarchal policies in the medical institutes. Reproductive technologies such as in-vitro fertilization, amniocentesis, and surrogate pregnancies function within the larger structure of perpetuating control over women's bodies. Feminist critics, therefore, warn against the abuse of medical power that can be disempowering for the patients. From the perspective of feminist medical ethics, there is a need to restructure "the power associated with healing by distributing medical knowledge in ways that allow persons maximum control over their own health. It is important to clarify ways in which dependence can be reduced, caring can be offered without paternalism, and health services can be obtained within a context worthy of trust" (Sherwin 1989:70).

Tronto (1993:102) asserts that ethics of "care implies a reaching out to something other than the self: it is neither self-referring nor self-absorbing. Second, care implicitly suggests that it will lead to some type of action." It focuses on interdependency and vulnerability of human existence and identifies relationality, care, vulnerability, and responsibility as privileged concepts and attitudes. As an ongoing practice, caring involves four phases: (i) caring about; (ii) taking care of; (iii) care-giving; (iv) care-receiving. "Caring about" refers to the acknowledgement that care is necessary; "taking care of" is about assuming some responsibility for the identified need and responding to it; "care-giving" is meeting care needs; and lastly, "care-receiving" invokes the experiences of having received care (Tronto 1993:127). Feminist care ethicists argue that human beings are socially embedded and our moral understanding of ourselves is contextually situated.

For Parks (2010), caring practice is the basis of human communities and has effectively applied the care perspective to the analysis of surrogacy. For her (Parks 2010:334), the Baby Manji case is symbolic of the "crisis of care." She argues that "if we imagine human beings as first and foremost caring subjects, we can imagine an entirely different global reproductive system that alters our relationships with the individuals we 'hire' to provide reproductive services" (Parks 2010:336). Similarly, Krause (2018) highlights the significance of caring relationships for an ethical evaluation of surrogacy and advocates that surrogacy arrangements must not be reduced to economic terms.

Discussed below is the methodology adopted for the exploratory study that delves into the motivations, rationale, and justifications for undertaking surrogacy for the second time. It focuses on the experiences of the surrogates in steering through the familial, medical, and legal disquiets surrounding their decision. It also examines the impact of the transnational ban on their earnings. Further, the bearing of the economic advantages of surrogacy on the power dynamics in the family is also investigated.

Methods

The study was conducted in 2019 in an internationally reputed center for the management of infertility situated in Gujarat, India. This center is located in a multi-storey building with state-of-the-art technology and infrastructural facilities. For decades before the ban, it had attracted international clientele for surrogacy services. The ban on transnational surrogacy introduced in 2015 has impacted the industry adversely. The manager at the fertility clinic reported that the demand for surrogacy was substantially lower after the ban. The hostel for the surrogates was running at less than half its capacity. She informed that many more women had resorted to ova donation as the increase in infertility in large cities had created a rising demand. Besides, after the ban on transnational surrogacy, the remuneration paid to the surrogates had not been raised despite inflation. This is also evident from the figures quoted by the surrogates who had gestated for the transnational clients earlier.

The micro-level qualitative phenomenological approach adopted for the study enabled the participants to narrate and impute meanings to their subjective experiences. A semi-structured and open-ended interview schedule was designed that allowed the participants to recount their motivations and justifications for undertaking surrogacy. Some of the issues that were explored during the interviews included: (i) the rationale for taking up surrogacy, (ii) the circumstances that influenced the decision, (iii) how were the requisites of surrogacy arrangements navigated, (iv) were the friends and neighbors informed of the decision or was it kept a secret, (v) lived experiences of surrogacy and were they different from pregnancy that birthed their own children, (vi) relinquishment of the baby, (vii) the bearing of the decision on their domestic life. Face-to-face interviews, which lasted up to 60-90 minutes each, were aimed at exploring the choices, constraints, and conditions that impinged upon the decision-making process of the surrogate mothers.

The interviews were conducted in an undisturbed room of the surrogacy hostel after obtaining verbal consent from the participants. All second-time surrogate mothers who were staying in the hostel of the clinic were interviewed as part of the study. Second-time surrogates were selected for several reasons. (i) Surrogacy arrangements made for a second time are often based on experience, leading to a more informed and thoughtful decision, (ii) second-time surrogates could assess the impact of the transnational ban, (iii) only the second-time surrogates could share their experiences of relinquishing the baby, (iv) with the monetary returns from the previous contract, they are better equipped to assess the advantages of surrogacy arrangement, (v) focus on second-time surrogate mothers offered a longitudinal perspective in understanding their perception of surrogacy and its ramifications on intra-family dynamics.

Phenomenological accounts of nine second-time surrogate mothers, including one attendant (who had been a surrogate twice) and a manager of the fertility center, were collected. They were assured of complete privacy and confidentiality. Therefore, pseudonyms have been used during the discussion. Further, their bios will not be discussed. All participants referred to as Hema, Usha, Jyoti, Maya, Kavita, Suman, Neena, Seema, and Gayatri are pseudonyms. Their stay in the hostel, maintained by the hospital, served to ensure constant monitoring of the surrogates' and the baby's health.

Barring Hema (50 years old), all other participants were between the ages of 24-33 years, married, and had children of their own. Except for Kavita and Sita, who had one child each, all others had two children. Except for Usha, who had completed her education till the tenth grade, others were either illiterate or primary school dropouts. Usha and Jyoti worked in a beauty parlor, Maya, Kavita, Neena, and Gayatri earned a living as part-time domestic help, Seema and Suman worked as unskilled helpers on farms, and Neena helped her husband with repairing and refitting garments before they joined the surrogacy program. Working as an attendant, assisting the surrogates in maintaining health and hygiene in the clinic, Hema had been a surrogate mother twice before. At the time of the interview, she was past the age when she could become a surrogate. The monthly earnings of the participants before joining the surrogacy program ranged from Rupees 1000 to 4000 (approximately US$11-44).

The interviews conducted in Hindi were recorded verbatim. Later, they were transcribed into English. Care was taken to capture the essence of the accounts. Some key statements and quotations used by the participants were retained to convey the crux of the meaning. Data were organized based on the main themes that emerged during the interviews.

Findings

Rationale & Justification: The Material and the Moral

Surrogate mothers in the study were neither educated nor skilled to find employment with an income that could contribute toward the improvement of their standard of living. Their spouses worked as painters and electricians, hawkers, and roadside tailors who repaired or altered clothes. Others worked as contractual daily wage workers on farms or construction sites. Their income was not enough to support the family, and hence, they had no funds to meet contingency expenditure. Three out of the nine surrogate mothers who were interviewed narrated that the prolonged illness and subsequent dip in earning capacity of their husbands pushed them toward surrogacy. In the absence of any other source of employment, surrogacy, they said, was the only route for them to earn a substantial amount in a lump sum. Almost all participants got interested in surrogacy after they witnessed a quantum jump in the living standards of their close relatives and friends who had divulged surrogacy as the source of their newly found wealth. Usha had seen an advertisement seeking a surrogate in the local newspaper, while Maya's tryst with the reproductive market began as an egg donor. She had visited the clinic earlier as an egg donor, and it was there that she was introduced to surrogacy work. All participants in the study expressed that it was their moral duty and responsibility to take care of the needs of their children. The care for the interests of their children weighed predominantly on the minds of all surrogates. Seema, in her thirties, strongly expressed that if children have been brought into this world, then it is morally binding on the parents to provide them with food and a roof over their heads. Furthermore, she added that it was the parents' responsibility to equip them with a good education to pull them out of poverty. The decision to work as surrogates was chiefly driven by the opportunity to earn money to educate children, improve their residential accommodation, especially in the case of those who had daughters, and to be able to save up for their daughters' marriages. As

mothers of two daughters each, Usha and Jyoti, felt, living in *kutcha* houses (mud houses) with adolescent daughters was predisposing them to the risk of being molested, and therefore felt impelled to provide safe accommodation for them and save for their wedding. In India, mothers are often castigated for not being able to marry their daughters (Pande 2010), and hence, saving for the weddings plays heavily on the minds of their parents.

The decision to earn through surrogacy was regarded as an ethical and morally upright one. The surrogates asserted that it was a "noble" way to earn without having to compromise on their values. "Mutual help" was the dominant rationale in nearly all narratives. Hema regarded surrogacy as a virtuous deed by arguing:

> We extend help to those who are not fortunate enough to have children on their own. The [commissioning] party returns the favor by providing the means to take care of the needs of our children. Both parties benefit by sharing what they have and, in return, receive what they need most. It's a fair deal of mutual help to help mothers and their children on both sides.

Maya expressed similar views:

> If I have the capacity to help someone, why should I not help? I have a womb and I have borne children out of it. It's now lying vacant and unused. What's the harm if it can be used to help childless women beget a child? It is a noble deed. People take rent for the most trivial things, we surrogates are nourishing life!

Usha elevated the discourse to a spiritual level by referring to surrogacy as *punya ka kaam* (good karma). Explaining further, she said that "children are a gift from God. If I can assist any woman to become a mother, then I am truly a blessed one." Neena argued that there are many immoral and illegal ways of making money, be it robbing or stealing. But surrogates have chosen an upright and lawful route to earn. She added that "while others shed sweat when they toil to earn, we earn by nurturing with our life and blood." The discourse on "mutual help" resonated with the views of Dr. Naina Patel, who is credited with making Anand, a small town in Gujarat, a global hub of transnational surrogacy. Rudrappa (2015:146) cites Dr. Patel's argument in defense of surrogacy:

> There is this one woman who desperately needs a baby and cannot have her own child without the help of a surrogate. And at the other end, there is this woman who badly wants to help her family…If this female wants to help the other one, why not allow that? It's not for any bad cause. They're helping one another to have a new life in this world.

Projecting surrogacy work as morally exalted, benign, and altruistic is consistent with the findings of Ragone (1996), Pande (2009), and Rudrappa (2015). The responses of the surrogates are influenced by the socialization and counseling imparted by the agencies and clinics that make surrogacy more acceptable and respectable. Rudrappa's respondents, surrogates based in Bangalore, also regarded surrogacy work as morally superior and "ethically impeachable," despite the community relegating them as "baby sellers" or "womb renters." They argued that the reproductive industry allowed them to be "moral workers" as the dormitory where they resided was a women-only space where they produced babies while abstaining from sex (Rudrappa 2015:96).

Negotiating Surrogacy: Mothers Straddling between Care and Contract

The Contract: Mothers' Relinquishing Children

The participants in the study had experienced pregnancy and childbirth when their own children were born. But experiences of surrogacy required re-orientation to the biology and sociality of reproduction. Since they were poor, when they had their own children, they could not afford medical care. They had delivered their biological children without having gone through antenatal check-ups, medically assisted deliveries, or C-sections. Childbirth was assisted by elderly women in the family or a *dai* (midwife). In sharp contrast, they narrated that surrogacy was steeped in medical check-ups, consumption of medicines, both oral and painful injections that preceded conception, and continued right through the pregnancy, culminating in "operation" (C-section delivery). Surrogates in Teman's (2010) study, based in Israel, contrasted their suffering during surrogacy to the relative ease and uncomplicated nature of their previous pregnancies. Some of them had chosen to become surrogates because of their earlier experiences of "easy pregnancy and uncomplicated delivery" (Teman 2010:43).

Narratives of the participants were replete with claims to being the *mother* of the child gestated by them. Each of them claimed that she is as much a "mother" to the child she was carrying as the commissioning woman. One surrogate mother, Gayatri, explained that a "mother is someone who gives birth and brings up the child. In the case of surrogacy, if there are two different women involved in birthing and bringing up, then obviously both are mothers!" Another surrogate mother, Seema, narrated:

> There is no doubt that both are mothers. Why take any stress on that front? But my duties and responsibilities toward this child that I am carrying are not the same as those that I have toward my own. Carrying this child is *my work*, and bringing up my own is my *dharma* [religious and moral obligation].

Seema further added that her surrogacy work was motivated by her desire to fulfil her duty toward her own children. While the surrogates claimed to be mothers of the child they were gestating, they were conscious of the contract and "agreement" that accompanied "mothering" in the avatar of a surrogate. They were well-versed with the code of conduct expected from them, including staying in the hostel, medical interventions, and, most importantly, the relinquishment of the child. Further, they added that the doctors and nurses at the fertility clinic socialized them into the code of professionalism, whereby they were counseled to take care of the fetus like a *mother* and to relinquish parental rights over the child in favor of the commissioning parents in a detached manner. Further, they were repeatedly counseled "to accept and acknowledge that the baby is not theirs, from the time it is conceived," informed Jyoti. Hema reasoned that "just as not returning your friend's valuables that she kept for you in safe custody is unethical, so also the baby that one is carrying is someone else's *amanat* [valuable kept in safe custody for someone else] and has to be returned to its rightful custodian."

Since all the participants were second-time surrogates, they were asked whether they missed the baby after relinquishment during their previous surrogacy. Neena did admit that during her first surrogacy, she was sad after giving the baby, but now "she is more experienced and wise." Suman expressed that she felt relieved at relinquishment be-

cause it marked the culmination of the agreement—that she had fulfilled her role as the nurturer and custodian of the fetus, successfully accomplished her target, and could get back home with the money she needed. The surrogate mothers rationalized that since they were mothers of their own children, they were not "troubled" at the relinquishment. As mothers, they were sympathetic toward the emotions of the childless. Neena said that if she did not have her own children, she would have had second thoughts about relinquishment. As a mother of two children, she admitted that she was struggling to bring up her own children and could not afford to bring up another child. Surrogate mothers were clear that their role was limited to gestating the child and that they were not interested in the child beyond that. Had they wanted to keep the child beyond gestation, they would have produced their own.

At the time of this study, the surrogates received Rupees four lakhs (approx. US$4600) for bearing one child and an additional one lakh, that is, a total of five lakhs Rupees (approx. US$5700) in the case of twins. It was the second time surrogacy for these women, and they had earned almost the same amount or more earlier, when transnational surrogacy was permitted. Hema had gestated a child in 2007 and 2010 for commissioning parents from the US and Japan, respectively, for which she received 4.5 lakhs each. After her first surrogacy, she bought a small plot for building a house, but ran into debt because the cost of construction surpassed her estimate. To pay off the debt and save money for her son's higher education, she undertook another attempt at surrogacy in 2010.

Women who had worked as surrogates before the ban on transnational surrogacy in 2015 were nostalgic about the "foreign party" who brought them expensive "imported gifts." Suman recalled with fondness receiving gifts and Rupees five lakhs from the *Londonwali Party* (commissioning parents were from London) in 2015. However, in 2019, as per her contract, she was to receive Rupees four lakhs only. She had used the money for educating her children and paying an advance for a rented accommodation, and now needed more money to pay for a house with an extra room so that her children could study undisturbed and also to save up for their higher education. Usha had borne twins in 2018 and received Rupees five lakhs, she fixed-deposited the entire amount in the name of her daughters. On average, surrogates receive Rupees four lakhs after a successful delivery. It would generally take about four years for their household to earn that amount, and many more years to accumulate it because most of the earnings are expended. Not all surrogates were lucky to receive the entire amount they were hoping for. Kavita recalled an earlier mishap when she had suffered a miscarriage after two months of conception. She received Rupees 25000 (US$287) only.

Navigating through Stigma toward Empowerment

It is evident that in any surrogacy arrangement, the child is the most coveted entity. Fetal health and development are contingent upon that of the surrogate mother. Therefore, as per the contract, the fertility center mandates that surrogates move into the hostel attached to the clinic to enable close monitoring of the maternal-fetal unit. Moreover, it proved beneficial for the surrogates who could escape from the disapproving eyes of the community and keep surrogacy under wraps. Besides these benefits, according to Pande (2010), hostels were spaces for the construction of perfect surrogates through counsel-

ing and socialization. In the construction of a perfect mother-worker, through counseling, Pande (2010:979) notes that the counselors paid particular attention to ensure surrogate mothers that surrogacy does not involve "immoral acts" like prostitution. Yet, the surrogates were disturbed about the negative public opinion regarding their work. Explaining the reason behind stigma, Suman said that people were still ignorant and associated pregnancy with sexual intercourse. For them, to be pregnant with another person's child is a slur on one's character. Jyoti said, "People who are ignorant of modern technology think that pregnancy is possible only by sleeping with a man, for such people, surrogacy is like prostitution. Others think we are 'baby-sellers,' so it is best not to reveal it to them."

Although the surrogates expressed that surrogacy was not immoral or unethical, they also confessed that they were doing it out of *majboori*, that is, a compulsion arising out of constraints of poverty, especially since they did not have any better options to earn. Those women who had daughters were asked whether they would encourage their daughters to become surrogates in the future. In response to this, all of them categorically stated that they would never want their daughters to become surrogates. Jyoti said the purpose of her surrogacy work is to ensure that after education, her daughter has "better options to earn." Usha stated she sincerely prayed to God that her daughters grow up to be better off and never have to take up this work because, "after all, it is not respectable."

The surrogate mothers circumvented stigma and negative public opinion by strategizing to maintain secrecy and concealing information regarding their engagement in surrogacy. Except for Neena, who had become a surrogate at the behest of her relatives, all the other surrogates kept their stint at surrogacy as a closely guarded secret from their children, larger family, and friends. To cover up the prolonged absence from home, they fabricated stories related to employment, training, or related assignments. Hema and Gayatri had informed their respective neighbors that they would be taking up a nanny's job in another city. Suman left home on the pretext of having found employment in a factory, and Seema had used the alibi of receiving training for work in a beauty parlor. Jyoti also concealed her surrogacy from her children and informed everyone that she was going to Mumbai to work as a live-in domestic help. Although their families could visit surrogates over the weekend, they did not permit their "grown-up" children, especially during the advanced stages of pregnancy. They said that they were embarrassed about their "work" and did not want their children to know about it. The fact that almost all women undergoing a surrogacy program had to keep it a secret from their extended family and friends is an indication that it is neither acceptable nor encouraged by the community and, therefore, derisive and stigmatizing. These findings are consistent with studies in other parts of the world. Berkhout's (2008) study in North America also confirms negative evaluation of commercial surrogacy and associated stigma. The surrogate mothers enjoyed their stay at the hostel as they got ample rest and good food without having to toil to cook. Gayatri referred to her stay in the hostel as *kamau chhuti* (paid holiday). However, she also added that she missed her family. Seema expressed a similar opinion, saying that "It is a win-win situation, we have no responsibility for domestic chores, there is plenty to eat, and we get to learn new things. Instead of paying for the luxuries, we are getting paid for our stay, but we miss our family, especially children."

On the positive side, since they were second-time surrogates, they reported experiencing enhanced self-worth and cessation of domestic violence within their respective families. Many said that they were treated better by their mothers-in-law and husbands. Neena stated that she was treated with dignity and respect by her husband, who no longer indulged in violence. Usha's mother-in-law stopped taunting her for not bringing enough dowry. Seema, Hema, and Gayatri reported having been involved in decision-making regarding important family matters after their first surrogacy. They reported better control over the money that they had earned, even though they said they decided to use it to further the interests of their children and family. Kavita said that after she was able to bring in the huge sum of money, she witnessed a role reversal. Earlier, she had to beg her husband for household expenditure, now it is the other way around—"Now, I control the purse strings, so he asks me for money." All the participants expressed that surrogacy had been a life-altering experience for them, as they felt confident and empowered due to their ability to earn. They narrated that staying in the hostel, living with other women, and interacting with doctors and nurses had been an incremental learning experience. Besides, the training imparted by the hostel, in skills such as running a parlor, stitching, spoken English, or computer literacy, added to their self-worth in the family and community. Hema narrated with pride about her ability to raise her natal and marital families out of poverty and educate their future generations by introducing womenfolk to surrogacy. For the Bangalore-based surrogates studied by Rudrappa (2015:96), the experience of surrogacy was both meaningful and empowering, which allowed them to assert their moral worth.

Discussion

Poverty often pushes women into surrogacy (Suryanarayan 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unemployment and resultant poverty, forcing more women to earn through surrogacy for the sustenance of their families and to pay off the debts. Since the pandemic, the fertility clinics in Hyderabad have reported an exponential rise in the number of women approaching for egg donation and surrogacy services. Enquiries at the fertility clinics have witnessed a tenfold rise. A survey among a hundred surrogates revealed that the majority had taken it up to tide them over the crisis generated by their husbands' loss of income (Chokhani 2021).

Surrogacy and Ethics of Care

Bailey (2011) regards surrogacy as an extension of care work that poor women have been providing to the rich. It is evident from the narratives of the participants that surrogacy is a medium through which surrogates extend care, devotion, and responsibility toward their family, with a desire to raise their children above poverty by educating them. In India, education is the most significant route to attain social mobility for the poor. Besides this, in the absence of a State-sponsored care mechanism for the aged, dependence on children during old age is their only security. Surrogates epitomize maternal care work doubly, first by birthing and nurturing their genetically related children and second, by gestating children for others.

Relationships of Care in Surrogacy Work and the Neglect of the Surrogate Mothers

From the vantage point of the surrogate, who is a mother before being a surrogate, there are three

main relationships that have a bearing on care. First, the relationship toward her own biological children, whose care and nurturance she feels impelled to provide for. Second, a complex relationship with the fetus whom she nurtures in her womb for the commissioning parents. Third, the relationship between the surrogate and the commissioning parents. In the first two roles, the mother's care-giving is one-sided and not contingent on reciprocity. The second and the third are imperative to the analysis of surrogacy. The relationship between the surrogate and the commissioning couple is the most extraordinary and an intimate one. The surrogate carries their gametes and nurtures them to life, fulfilling their dream of parenting. Such an invaluable relationship should ideally be premised on trust, gratitude, mutual care, and responsibility. Ironically, it is outsourced, contractualized, and mediated by commercially motivated interests, whereby the commissioning parents can completely shrug off all responsibilities by paying the agencies. In India, commercial surrogates are selected through a closed program, that is, the surrogate is selected based on her picture and bio-brief provided by the agencies. While the commissioning parents have all the information about the surrogate, including her picture and health status, the name and whereabouts of the commissioning parents are not shared with the surrogate, who refers to them as a "party." The surrogates referred to them as *Bengal ki party* (party from Bengal) or *Japan ki party*, depending on their country of residence. They meet only at the time of signing the contract and for the baby's handing over formalities (Ragone 1996:353). Rudrappa's (2015) study shows that many surrogates met their clients only after the fourth month, and in case they miscarried before that, they had no idea about whose fetus they were carrying. Commenting upon the surrogates "erasure" from the life of commissioning parents after the payment has been made, Rudrappa (2015:142) observes, "much as consumers often do not reflect on the labor that goes into making the products they consume in commodity production, the parents, too, did not ruminate on the surrogate mother's labor." The commoditization of this vital and delicate relationship that is managed and controlled by commercially driven agencies has left surrogacy bereft of interpersonal care.

Maximizing the care and promoting the development of the unborn child is the mission of all the stakeholders in surrogacy. Fertility clinics play a crucial role in ensuring and extending this care. As mediators between clients and surrogates, they engage with the surrogates to execute the contract between the two, whereby the surrogates are required to devote themselves to the care and protection of the fetus by moving into the hostels. Detachment and alienation are cultivated as a preparation for the relinquishment of the child. Surrogates are counselled to limit their interactions with the clients and remain detached from both the child and the commissioning parents (Hochschild 2015:43). This is advised for ensuring smooth relinquishment of the child, the ultimate objective of surrogacy arrangement.

Temporality, *transitionality*, and *transactionality* are critical aspects of the mother-child relationship in this arrangement, and hence relinquishment of the child to the commissioning parents marks the cessation of the relationship with the surrogate and commencement with the genetic and social parents. References to relinquishment are rendered in altruism in a bid to assuage the split of the dyadic unit. The discourse on "gift-giving" dissipates attention from the pecuniary nature of commercial surrogacy and contracts attaching a price to a child and

its gestation (Pande 2011). Though surrogates were socialized into believing that they were performing a "noble deed," the disdain and near horror expressed at the idea of their daughters engaging in it is revealing and insightful. More importantly, metaphors of altruism and "mutual help" are employed by the surrogates to present themselves in a position of reciprocity and equality rather than exploitation vis-à-vis the commissioning parents. Yet, having experienced surrogacy twice, they do not consider it "respectable." The homily on altruism is an attempt to dispel the stigma attached to surrogacy. It is the surrogate's attempt at assuming a moral position to combat her denigration. This "moral framing" (Rudrappa and Collins 2015:943) is cultivated by the surrogacy agencies to encourage their active participation as compassionate beings.

The surrogates fulfill the three dimensions of care postulated by Tronto (1993), that is, caring about, taking care of, and care-giving. They are mostly deprived of the fourth dimension that pertains to receiving care. Fertility centers and commissioning parents are interested in pursuing the interests of the child. Care in the form of food and medical care is extended to the surrogate because she embodies the baby, but not out of direct interest in her. Once the baby is relinquished, nutritious food and care cease to be provided.

Surrogate is the fountainhead of care for her own children and the care, safe custody, and relinquishment of the commissioned child. She not only assists the infertile couples in having a child, but also furthers the commercial interest of the surrogate agencies (Hochschild 2015:44). She is regarded as fungible and disposable, and the maternal-fetal dyad is marked by complications of alienation, relinquishment, and is corrupted by contracts.

From Contract to Care of the Surrogate Mothers

The maternal-fetal dyad of the surrogate demonstrates the primordial inter-corporeality. It is a relationship of dependence and survival, wherein the mother's body gestates the embryo to create a life and kinship relations. Dolezal (2017:325) emphasizes that pregnancy involves a prolonged embodied communication between the mother and the fetus, wherein the latter responds to the *in-utero* environment. This relationship is the foundation of post-partum intersubjectivities. In the case of gestational surrogacy, the surrogate plays a complex phenomenological and existential role in fetal development through "communicative inter-corporeal relations" that are vital to the future lived subjectivities. Therefore, any conceptualization that undermines the role of gestational surrogates as mere "carriers" or human incubators is unfounded and inaccurate (Dolezal 2017:315). Denying due acknowledgement to the care and nurturance provided by the surrogates during the foundational and formative period of the baby constitutes an injustice through instrumentalization of women as "baby machines" (Dolezal 2017:327).

Surrogacy arrangements in India are much cheaper compared to the US, Europe, and other parts of the world, owing to the prevalent poverty and illiteracy, both of which serve to reduce the employment opportunities and bargaining power of the surrogates. In the US, the provisions in surrogacy arrangements strengthen the surrogate's position by providing for health insurance to her and her family for maternity care. The surrogate is provided with a lawyer, who is paid for by the commissioning parents. More importantly, in the US, nearly 50% of the cost of surrogacy arrangements goes toward payment of the surrogate (Qadeer 2009).

Before the ban on commercial surrogacy was introduced, a report on surrogacy centers in Hyderabad, India, stated that the commercial surrogates received only 20% of the total cost of the surrogacy arrangement. That is, while the total amount paid by the clients is up to 25 lakhs, surrogates receive only five lakhs (Chokhani 2021). The fertility clinics and surrogacy agencies usurp a substantial amount. Parks (2010) applies care ethics to draw attention to the market competition involved in cutting the cost of surrogacy arrangements, which makes it risky and poorly paid for the surrogates. She warns the commissioning parents, especially in the case of transnational surrogacy, not to be party to such exploitative practices that offer competitive prices at the cost of depriving the surrogates of their dues (Parks 2010:336).

Surrogacy poses a health risk for the surrogates. The surrogate's work exposes her to painful medical interventions, injections, and C-sections. Besides this, feminists and reproductive health activists warn against the dangers of "artificial" pregnancy on the health of the surrogates, especially those resulting from multiple embryo transplants and the related abortions (Majumdar 2014:205). A study by Woo and colleagues (2017) has reported that surrogacy pregnancies are more prone to obstetric complications, such as a higher likelihood of caesarean section, gestational diabetes, hypertension, and placenta previa compared to "regular" pregnancies. Further, a comparison of surrogate and non-surrogate mothers during the prenatal and postnatal stages in India revealed higher levels of depression in the former. Hochschild (2015) observes in her study how women in India somehow managed their emotional turmoil due to their financial needs. Postpartum care over an extended period should also be part of the contract.

There is an urgent need for surrogacy agencies, fertility centers, commissioning parents, the community, law, and the State to extend care to the surrogate.

Parks (2010:338) suggests that viewing the commercial surrogacy arrangement from the standpoint of care ethics would imply that the "commissioning couple does not just enter into a *contract* with the surrogate, but rather embark on a *relationship* with her." In such a scenario, the responsibility will extend beyond payment for services, "to an expression of care and concern for the surrogate and her family."

Further, Parks argues that when one enters into a relationship, one assumes responsibility for the care of that person. The Surrogacy Bill 2020 proposes an insurance coverage for 16 months for the surrogate mother to take care of all her medical needs and emergency conditions/complications.

Paradoxically, though the surrogates command more respect and agency within the family after they add substantially to the family's earnings, their work is devalued, and surrogacy remains stigmatized. The secrecy that shrouds surrogacy is counter-productive and perpetuates exploitation as the surrogates are unable to come out in the open and bargain for their rights. Secrecy and stigma associated with surrogacy are a source of emotional and psychological distress among the surrogates. It is therefore crucial to disseminate factual knowledge about surrogacy to dispel false conceptions that are responsible for relegating surrogates' work as immoral, unethical, and stigmatizing. Qadeer and John (2009) suggest that the State should ensure an environment free of secrecy and anonymity associated with surrogacy. The surrogate mother should have all the rights of autonomy, privacy, and bodi-

ly integrity legally available to other women. Further, the surrogates' names should be included in the child's birth certificate and later transferred to the commissioning parents, who should be legally bound and responsible for the long-term care of the surrogate (Qadeer and John 2009:11). Dolezal (2017) recommends attributing kinship status to the gestational mothers. Ironically, in an effort to assert their self-worth, all surrogates in the study claimed to be "mothers" to children they had gestated and birthed, but such an acknowledgement is completely lacking on the part of the commissioning parents and fertility centers.

Commitment to the ethics of care by the State toward surrogates will make stakeholders more accountable and accepting of surrogacy work, eliminating the stigma attached to it. More importantly, the eradication of poverty and promotion of skill-based education to enhance employability among the poor sections of society will increase the bargaining power of those who wish to engage in surrogacy. The decision to engage in surrogacy should therefore not be compelled by financial constraints.

The limitations of the study include, firstly, a small sample size. On account of the stigma attached to surrogacy, it is hard to locate participants and encourage them to share their experiences. The study would have been enriched if the researcher could interview other stakeholders, especially the family members of the surrogates and the intended parents. This was not possible due to bureaucratic constraints and confidentiality issues.

Conclusion

The longitudinal perspective offered by second-time surrogacy was useful in cognizing the social and economic ramifications of the phenomenon. This is especially significant when the fertility industry was undergoing change on account of regulations introduced by the State. Interpreting the lived experiences of surrogates through the ethics of care not only helps in perceiving their motivations toward their engagement in surrogacy but also provides insights into ways to alleviate the denigration of their contribution. Caring is what mothers epitomize. Due to their sense of responsibility toward their own children, they feel obligated to provide for their needs. In the absence of other resources, their bodies and especially their wombs are their only resource to improve their plight. Although the surrogates provide an invaluable service to the commissioning parents and contribute immensely to raising the profit of surrogacy agencies, their work is devalued and considered lacking in dignity and respect. Though the money earned through surrogacy helped ameliorate their status within the family, the condemnation within the community resulted in sexualized stigma. The internalization of this devaluation is evidenced in the fact that they do not want their daughters to become surrogates. Though they tried to justify their engagement in surrogacy by claiming to be mothers to the commissioned child and using the metaphor of "mutual help," these remain failed attempts at elevating their position as equal to the commissioning parents. The application of the ethics of care perspective is directed toward promoting a responsible and humane attitude toward commercial surrogates. It is motivated by the need to uphold the dignity of the surrogates, their legal rights, and social recognition of their work. The application of care ethics can alleviate the neglect and oppression of surrogates.

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Ethical Processes and Dilemmas during Research with Youth on Cyber-Risk

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Abstract: In this article, we reflect on the ethical processes and dilemmas we encountered in almost a decade of qualitative research with teenagers about digital technologies and cyber-risk. Our research underscores both the opportunities and challenges of teenagers' engagements with digital technologies, including cyberbullying and image-based sexual harassment and abuse (i.e., non-consensual sexting), on popular social media platforms. Our current research explores teenagers' experiences with cyber-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic, including managing homeschooling (due to lockdowns), online addiction, mental health challenges, and encounters with disinformation and misinformation. We discuss our experiences with focus group facilitation and one-to-one semi-structured interviews, specifically our reflections on ethical processes encountered in the field, such as fostering rapport with young participants given the significant age gaps and our lack of knowledge at times, regarding digital technologies or topics like image-based sexual abuse. We also discuss our experiences conducting research with teenagers under the new capacity to consent ethical framework, which positions children and youth as often having agency to consent to research independently from their parents or legal guardians. Here, we detail reflections on navigating a new approach and highlight some of the considerations arising from ascertaining assent and consent. Centralizing issues of developing rapport, trust, and ethical processes related to interactional dynamics during interviews, the paper provides insights and possible strategies for those conducting research with children and youth.

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While qualitative researchers continue to meaningfully reflect on ethical processes and dilemmas for those conducting research with youth, knowledge remains stagnant. In this article, we reflect upon a decade of experiences conducting qualitative research on cyber-risks with diverse youth in their "tweens" and teens, through methods such as focus groups and semi-structured qualitative interviews. We use the term "cyber-risk" with the aim of not reifying notions of technology through naïvely optimistic or "rose-tinted" language, nor of demonizing technology by focusing solely on the potential for harm that can often accompany its use. This itself is an ethical decision, to foreground instead the *complex* and *nuanced* voices of youth regarding their experiences engaging online, especially with social media platforms (SMPs). Centering the voices of youth in qualitative research is an ethical decision (Billett 2012). Our goal here is not to simply critique how research ethics boards operate (van den Hoonaard 2001; Haggerty 2004), nor is it to explore issues of cyberbullying, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), or other forms of cyber-mediated conflict and harm (Ringrose et al. 2022). Instead, through our reflections on conducting research, we explore ethical processes and dilemmas encountered during research with youth; stories that we feel have not been told and which may help those planning research with children and youth anticipate the potential challenges and learn of recent developments, such as the relatively new capacity to consent framework.

As often noted by ethnographers, what happens in the field is often unanticipated, with an array of ethical considerations that continuously, quite sharply at times, confront the researcher. In the field, we

need to adapt, respond, pivot, and otherwise *react* in moments and situations that require different skill-sets than those that carefully produced an ethics application from the relative comfort of a desk. In this article, the challenges of navigating ethical processes in the field are examined, including those related to fostering rapport with young participants given the significant age gaps (which varies between the authors) and our lack of knowledge, at times, regarding digital technologies. As noted, we also discuss our experiences conducting research with teenagers under the new "capacity to consent" ethical framework, which positions children and youth as often having agency to consent to research independently from their parents or legal guardians. Here, we detail reflections on navigating a new approach and highlight barriers and challenges related to assessing assent and consent. We also consider issues of developing rapport, trust, and ethical processes related to interactional dynamics during interviews.

We proceed by providing a brief overview of our research projects, with a particular focus on our current research examining youth experiences with cyber-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. We then outline the relatively recent turn to a capacity to consent framework that applies to the latter project. To help ground and contextualize the reflections that follow, we offer a brief overview of published articles engaging with ethics in qualitative research with children and youth. Next, we highlight some of the ethical dilemmas and processes we have encountered in recent years. Our goal is ultimately not to offer a roadmap providing solutions for the issues we have encountered but to raise awareness and generate dialogue about them. However, this in itself—a tendency to outline the problems and not point to solutions—is an issue we have identified across the literature and upon which we reflect.

The Projects

While the second author has some experience with focus group research involving youth in Hong Kong, and has reflected on ethical issues related to conducting this research (see Adorjan 2016), we focus here on our Canadian research on youth and cyber-risk, including an initial focus group study of teenagers with the goal of capturing experiences with cyberbullying, IBSA, but also opportunities and benefits of using information communications technologies (boyd 2014; Haddon and Livingstone 2017). Our reflections include our current project on youth and cyber-risk during the COVID-19 pandemic, using semi-structured interviews. As we will explain, the pivot from focus groups to one-on-one interviews was an ethical decision in itself.

The second and third authors, with the help of several research assistants, conducted 35 focus groups in 2015-2016 with 115 youth, all aged between 13 and 19 years old, with the average age of the sample being 15 years old. We held open-ended (semi-structured) discussions about what technologies (including SMPs like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat) teenagers were using at the time, followed by several questions about their experiences using these technologies. These questions targeted a range of issues, including privacy and privacy management, parental mediation and surveillance by parents and schools alike, and experiences with cyberbullying and sexting (with a focus on IBSA and harassment). The focus group methodology behind our work is detailed in Adorjan and Ricciardelli (2019a) and related work (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019b; Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2019). Our reflections highlight complex ethical moments that formed during this work. We recall the challenges associated with asking teenagers about sensitive topics, such as the dis-

tribution and reception of nude images, within the context of a focus group. As part of our recruitment strategy, we had permission from various school boards to recruit for two rounds of focus groups; one in an urban, Western Canadian region we dubbed "Cyber City," and one in a rural, Atlantic Canadian region we dubbed "Cyberville."

Our current project, and the one we most focus on in this article, examines teen experiences and reflections from the pandemic through a series of one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, with an emphasis on the role of technology in producing opportunities and challenges.[1] While the project is currently in the stage of data coding and analysis, we reflect here upon our collective experiences conducting 30 interviews in Cyber City and 43 in Cyberville. Recruitment occurred in collaboration with a few third-party groups, including local school boards and non-profit organizations, one of which specifically serves the needs of gender non-binary and trans youth in the community. Based on our ability to connect with various community organizations, our sample is currently comprised of 37% trans and non-binary youth; 63% White, with others identifying as Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latino, and a portion of participants not responding to this question. Participants ranged from 12 to 19 years old.[2] Initially, interviews in Cyber City were being conducted by the second author, the principal investigator, with the first author serving as a lead research assistant on the project, joining the research team, engaging in recruitment, interviewing, and conducting data analysis and dissemination. In Cyberville, the third author and a lead research assistant oversaw participant recruitment and interviewing.

Following the relatively brief overview of literature, we examine various ethical aspects of our research, with reflections offered from the authors to help contextualize and situate experiences and dilemmas encountered in the field.

Qualitative Youth Research and Ethics

Qualitative researchers have discussed ethical encounters and dilemmas in the field, including (and perhaps especially) tensions with research ethics boards/institutional review boards (van den Hoonaard 2001; 2002), managing insider/outsider dynamics (Adorjan 2016; Eriksson 2023), research with powerful criminal justice authorities (Lillie and Ayling 2021; Ricciardelli 2022; Sandhu 2023), and with people who have experienced trauma (Spencer 2016; Todd-Kvam and Goyes 2023). Although not an exhaustive list, conversely, here, we engage more directly with research on ethical issues related to research with youth. Our research focuses on youth and cyber-risk, but this wider literature remains relevant insofar as the ethical issues resonate with our own but also reveal unconscious biases.

Within the literature on youth to date, there is a significant emphasis placed on the need to foreground the social construction of youth when considering how youth are perceived and responded to in society, or how researchers consider youth when planning their research. Examining ethics in youth social capital research, Billett (2012:43) stresses how framing youth solely as consumers and not producers of social capital undercuts a more complete

[1] We considered explicating in further detail ethical dilemmas related to the earlier focus group project, though our current project (youth and cyber-risk during the pandemic) is mostly centered in this article given limited space and, in our collective experiences, a richer array of ethical encounters in the field.

[2] As we note later, while our inclusion criteria were for teens 13-19, some organizations referred to us participants who were 12, who, based on our capacity to consent screening protocol (see below), were permitted to participate in the study.

understanding of the processes associated with youth social capital, and indicates a "failure to acknowledge the complexity of youth life."[3] Youth have agency. Yet, youth tend to be framed, by both researchers and in public discourses, as inherently vulnerable and, in sociological terms, lacking agency. Lesko (1996:140, 142) stresses how youth are "social categories" subject to "historical processes" and moreover, that these social constructions "masquerade as universal and neutral." Lesko also challenges how ideas of biology and age, and their application during adolescence—or the process of "coming of age," produce a range of oversimplified and essentializing characterizations of youth. Adults in general, including researchers, yield a "clear positional superiority…over adolescents based on age" (Lesko 1996:149). Age often acts to oversimplify notions of youth (im)maturity, identity, and, as we discuss, capacity to provide informed consent when considering participating in research. Brooks (2012:183) similarly notes that "as the literature in the field of youth studies attests, young people are often constructed by politicians, policymakers, and social commentators as 'not adults' or 'adults-in-the-making.'" Thorstensson Dávila (2014:27), quoting Raby (2007:48), similarly argues that "while youth is valorized in North American culture, teenagers are routinely subject to discourses that construct them as being at-risk, as social problems, and as incomplete." There are many assumptions and stereotypes, then, drawn from wider societal discourses, steering our understandings and associations of childhood and youth.

Dominant discourses of youth can affect how youth researchers, and research ethics boards, set their parameters of who is included and excluded, presumptions regarding maturation, et cetera. As Billett (2012:45) observes:

> The problem is that defining what a "vulnerable" population is can be difficult…They are often difficult to reach (due to unwillingness to participate in research) but can also be left out because of the problem researchers face in obtaining ethics approval to research these vulnerable groups…creating an inevitable "muteness" around their experiences.

However, as we make evident, these presumptions about youth as "inaccessible" and perhaps "unwilling" to participate are not always valid. In fact, research ethics boards have gravitated toward a capacity to consent framework (see below) for research with youth to, arguably, ensure they have their agency recognized, and are not made less vulnerable by any person removing their agency. On the other hand, some of the literature we reviewed referred to difficulties engaging with research ethics boards and how their policies can place youth as disadvantaged (Ensign 2003; Billett 2012; Brooks 2012). Brooks' (2012:180) critique of research ethics boards, for instance, echoes the literature: "formal submissions to ethics…cannot always anticipate the ethical dilemmas that may arise." Earlier scholarship has also discussed how ethics boards can often be comprised of members lacking expertise on qualitative research, limiting the appropriateness and rigor of reviews for proposals framed by qualitative approaches (see Ensign 2003). The critique seems to be less prominent, however, in literature penned over the last decade or so, which may be broadly representative of a more concerted effort being made by ethics boards to diversify their committees with members from an array of methodological and theoretical traditions.

[3] Billett (2012:43) cites Yang (2007:1), who defines social capital as "the ties that are formed in everyday interactions, which can help us get ahead or seek help in times of need."

Recent reflections emphasize the value of ethics as a process that unfolds during research, not a static set of protocols and guidelines sedimented after a research ethics board approves a project to commence. For example, Woodgate, Tennent, and Zurba (2017) argued that considerations of ethics in research with children and youth need to be made beyond ethics board requirements and protocols, with researchers adopting a sustained mindfulness presence. They explain the need for an "acknowledgement of the importance of 'everyday' ethics," through which we create the "potential for enhancing the moral and relational imperatives through shifting the dynamics around ethics toward being participatory" (Woodgate et al. 2017:6). The approach has developed in response to earlier scholars' calls to reflect on "the process aspects of what has taken place" during research (Woodgate et al. 2017:6 quoting Rooney 2015:82; see also Warin 2011). Some argued that participatory methods (including photovoice, brainstorming, mapping, drawing, etc.) are the most appropriate ways to empower and respect young people in the research process, especially when realized through ongoing ethnographic engagement (Tickle 2017). And yet, just because a method is labeled as or intended to be more participatory, *is it*? Does the method truly disrupt the power relationship by giving young people more agency over their voice in the research process?

Attention to the *hows* of qualitative research and the significance of adaptation to circumstances in the field have led Duncan and colleagues (2009) to promote the idea of ethical mindfulness, which "involves the recognition of ethically important moments, giving credence to the feeling of being 'uncomfortable' about an event, being able to articulate what makes something an ethical matter, being reflexive, and having courage" (Duncan et al. 2009:1692 quoting Guillemin and Gillam 2006:31). And yet, while we acknowledge Duncan and colleagues' efforts to move toward a more relational, reflexive approach to ethics in research with youth, stereotypes often undercut their efforts. For instance, they firmly assert that "young participants have less life experience" (Duncan et al. 2009:1694). The relatively short, passing sentiment seems innocuous, and may even be seen as generally true to many readers, including researchers. Such statements capture some of the most pervasive mischaracterizations of youth scholars' critiques. Young people appear to be collectively infantilized through such language, where their experiences or capacities are minimized on account of their age. Is it true to claim that youth have "less life experience?" Perhaps, if solely considering numerical age. However, some youths have had particularly difficult life experiences or experiences more associated with adults. This again speaks to the problem of relying on age in rendering presumptions regarding youth experience and youth voice (Schelbe et al. 2015). Some statements ironically contradict the very "ethical mindfulness" promoted about research with children and youth.

Several scholars who studied youth and ethics in qualitative research center on how trust and rapport are established and maintained. Here, too, the *hows* (i.e., specific processes and exigencies) are largely unspecified. For instance, Guillemin and colleagues (2016:370) argued:

> guidelines emphasize the integrity and trustworthiness of researchers as…crucial…However, they do not specify what this comprises, how researchers are to demonstrate it, and how it can be assessed either by research ethics committees or by potential…participants.

Their focus is heavily on what the issues are, with comparatively little focus on what to do to resolve such issues; a theme we found across the articles we reviewed on youth and ethical issues in the field, where diagnoses of problems dominated over possible approaches and solutions. Guillemin and colleagues (2016:371) offered trust may be considered both a noun and a verb, "that is both something you aim for and actively do," and advocated for a *relational* approach to trust (Guillemin et al. 2016:373), which offsets the focus of gaining trust from participants, or projecting trust toward participants, to a more processual view of mutually reinforcing trust during the course of research. Considerations of trust apply in all phases of research, including the early design phases of research planning (Guillemin et al. 2016:375). Even during relatively short interviews with adolescents (roughly 30 minutes to 1.5 hours), rapport can develop quickly. Laenen (2009:326), who interviewed adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders using group-based qualitative methods, found "participants tended to let down their guard during the conversations, despite their initial reserve." This speaks to the *temporality of rapport and trust-building* in the researcher-participant relationship; time and the flow of conversation can have implications for how comfortable any participant feels in an interaction. In this article, we develop the idea of "fast trust," referring to how rapport and trust (with small "r" and "t") may be fostered over short periods, when researchers conduct interviews rather than protracted ethnography.

Good intentions alone are insufficient to address the effects of hegemonic discourses of youth and age. Such discourses tend to affect research. While the field is not oblivious to these challenges—in fact, far from it—*how* exactly to do research differently and in a manner that places young participants in more active, agentic positions remains inadequately addressed. As Lohmeyer (2020:39) argues, youth researchers have:

> develop[ed] and adopt[ed] a variety of techniques and ethical principles that attempt to position young people as active research participants. However, these methods and principles have not solved the challenges of youth participation, or the problems of power in the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative research more generally.

For Lohmeyer (2020:45), these ethical dilemmas surrounding asymmetrical power relations are "unsolvable." Others, however, have offered various approaches. Meloni, Vanthuyne, and Rousseau (2015), for instance, advocate for the application of an approach grounded in "relational ethics." They posit: "to critically rethink notions of voice and agency, and to redefine childhood within wider contexts of interdependence...we also point to the need to critically reflect on how these voices are produced, and where they are located" (Meloni et al. 2015:107). By extension, the authors assert that ethics itself may be defined as the mere "performative practice of intersubjectivity, relative to different modes of belonging" (Meloni et al. 2015:108). Perhaps one approach to move toward an effective relational ethics is a capacity to consent framework for research. In our experience, this framework, which is still somewhat new in qualitative research, is increasingly being recognized by research ethics boards. This constitutes a significant, albeit workload-intensive step (discussed below). We next turn to questions about the processes involved when applying capacity to consent in the field—the lack of knowledge being the root of the labor-intensive process.

Capacity to Consent, Youth Voice, and Agency

In recent decades, university research ethics boards (institutional review boards in the US) mandated parents to provide consent for research to be conducted with their children as participants. Children are positioned as an inherently vulnerable population. Due to this positioning, children and youth could *assent* to their participation, which was often required too, but were seen as having an *incapacity* to consent directly to research of their own accord. The notion that children and youth are incapable of demonstrating their capacity to consent is rooted in longstanding social norms and discourses. Such attitudes construct a view of youth as having limited maturity and thus, a greatly diminished capacity to fully comprehend the decision-making process that surrounds consent in research. Schelbe and colleagues (2015:507) note: "children's competence as research participants has now been recognized, whereas they were previously viewed as incompetent, passive, conforming, immature, incomplete, and highly vulnerable participants whose participation would be unreliable, susceptible to adult suggestion, and ultimately provide less legitimate knowledge." The capacity to consent framework encourages researchers to appreciate how teenagers, or even children of at least eight years old, can provide consent to participate in research, independent of their parents or guardians. The framework is influenced by the findings of developmental researchers, who noted that youth of 14 or so years old are mature enough to provide consent, though some argue children around eight or nine years of age are equally capable (Nadin et al. 2018). This involves demonstrating they are aware of not only the subject and scope of research, but they have the *ability to signal their independent willingness to participate*, appreciating details such as how researchers will protect their privacy, anonymize research findings, and so forth.

For our current study of youth pandemic experiences, we drafted an ethics application requiring parental consent and youth assent for all participants between the ages of 13 and 19 years old. In the past, we have incorporated potential participants who are legal adults, such as, for example, 19-year-old undergraduate students, under the "youth" umbrella (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019a). We did not, however, think that consent could be applied to younger teenagers, particularly those close to 13 years old. The feedback we received from the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board was both refreshing and exciting, as we were informed that applications with a capacity to consent framework were now being recognized and accepted for projects focusing on children and youth. In fact, we were actively encouraged to revise our protocols, including not just our letter of information but also our consent form and capacity to consent protocol. Ethics approval for our work was simply based on the understanding of a particular component of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2 2022:40), which asserts that "rather than an age-based approach to consent, this Policy advocates an approach based on decision-making capacity as long as it does not conflict with any laws governing research participation."[4]

Through a capacity to consent framework, decision-making capacity is treated as a process involving discussion with younger participants to determine their understanding of the study, its risks, benefits, and confidentiality. This is determined

[4] Tri-council refers to the three primary funding bodies for publicly funded research in Canada: Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. See: https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/documents/tcps2-2022-en.pdf. Retrieved July 07, 2025.

before commencing the interview by the interviewer and guided by a pre-designed protocol; no other source of verification is involved. This same protocol is read through with the participant, and care is taken to ensure all research protocols and processes are understood. The way this is accomplished includes having participants read the protocol back to the researchers in short segments that are discussed to ensure comprehension. Information letters and consent forms for the project were developed with attention to different levels of reading and comprehension abilities. Linked to reading comprehension level, we used the Flesch–Kincaid readability test to guide the writing of these documents.[5]

Our study was required to undergo ethics review by both the participating school boards and the CFREB. The ethics application process required the drafting of separate information letters and consent forms for youth and their guardians. The consent form would be reviewed with participants before interviews commenced. However, a separate capacity to consent protocol was designed to determine individual levels of understanding in younger participants, regarding confidentiality, data management, and their rights as participants. Some of the organizations and school boards involved had their own guidelines for requiring parental consent, which guided the design of our own consent procedures during data collection. We presented our plan for determining capacity to consent for younger teenagers, yet we were required to follow the guidelines of school boards and organizations, some of whom required parental consent and youth assent.

As we planned our project, we held active discussions about how we would be able to ultimately determine a participant's capacity to consent. In determining a suitable strategy, we found *defining what understanding looks like* important. In the case of Nadin and colleagues (2018:140), understanding must encapsulate a clear comprehension of "the study purpose and procedures." In their study, this entailed participants actively "explaining the nature of the study and the risks, benefits, and consequences of participating" (Nadin et al. 2018:140). However, this approach may still leave researchers with somewhat obvious questions about what signs, signals, words, or actions can be recognized as indications of genuine comprehension. Researchers may survey what is said and how it is said. Monosyllabic answers to questions of consent and understanding of project protocols (which we found expected among younger teens) may, in fact, signal a lack of consent (Brooks 2012:182), or signal the need for further questions to elaborate their understandings. Adjusted reading levels of information and consent forms notwithstanding, our experiences with younger tweens and teens in previous projects raised concerns about the extent to which verbal recall of the required sections of the protocol is a sufficient metric for measuring capacity to consent in any given case. Similarly, the problem of identifying when there is an *incapacity* to consent equally raises questions. Where a participant was, however, deemed not to have the capacity to consent independently, our protocol outlined the following response:

> In cases where participants are not able to affirm their capacity to consent (i.e., where their responses

[5] Flesch–Kincaid readability tests are geared to assess the ease or difficulty in understanding specific passages in the English language. The scores range from "very easy to read" for those in late elementary school (grade 5), up to "extremely difficult to read" geared more for university graduates. They can be used to calibrate the text used in letters of information and consent for research with children and youth to help ensure clarity and transparency (see Eastwood, Snook, and Luther 2015).

> to questions to summarize in their own words various sections of the consent form demonstrate a lack of understanding), we will *with care* inform youth that they will not be able to proceed with the research at the moment but have some options to consider. One option simply not to participate, the other to review an assent form and seek parental consent.

To date, we have not had a participant unable to affirm their capacity to consent, and there are a number of potential reasons as to why. One such reason is that this group of participants may have simply found clarity in both the consent form and our discussions of it. Moreover, there is also the potential for selection bias; those youth eager to participate may have had more experience with research projects in general, or some degree of awareness at least, of what they entail. If so, it is possible that when recruiting younger teenagers, we are missing those less likely to be able to demonstrate the capacity to consent.

As mentioned, for youth who do not indicate a capacity to consent, parental consent may be pursued. This raises further ethical questions—are we, in such cases, defaulting to a presumption that youth are unable to demonstrate capacity to consent (which we argue would be problematic), or should there be more room to determine this beyond the particular time and place when an interview is to be held? In practice, the second author reflects on his experiences conversing with younger teenagers to determine capacity to consent:

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> It may well be a cardinal mistake to assume that just because a potential participant has signed off on a consent form, they understand and consent to all aspects of the research indicated in the form they signed. I recall several younger teenagers really pumped to participate, eager to share their experiences during the pandemic, based on the initial letters of information circulated by the organizations. All these participants seemed quite knowledgeable about the project and aspects related to it, such as confidentiality, what happens with the interviews, and so forth. Yet, younger teenagers are often not very talkative. They are, based on my observation of their body language, willing to sit down with me for an interview and seem comfortable being there. We read the protocol together, and I get them to tell me key points back to me in their own words, stopping frequently to ask if they understand or if they have any questions. They often repeat the same words, and I'm trying to get beyond just the words to *how they're saying them* to get a sense of understanding. They often nod silently or shake their head "no," indicating they don't have any questions, and we ultimately proceed, but other ways to determine their understanding elude me. It's a bit much, perhaps, to ask a younger teen to state in different words what "confidentiality" means or explain in their own words how their data is protected after the end of the interview. In the end, we as researchers, sitting down with our participants, are responsible for making a final call to green light an interview or not. Perhaps the ideal scenario is for a social worker with expertise in interacting with children and youth or a child psychologist to come in to vet all this, but, of course, that is not likely feasible. I feel competent in conducting an interview with a young person, but this is more difficult. I wonder if there are any cases in the literature of researchers grappling with *incapacity* to consent—how this is identified and best responded to. I haven't found any to date, and maybe that is telling us more than we think.
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Billett (2012:44) observes that "existing research guides" are unclear in their guidance on "when and how a young person displays…competencies [to have the capacity to consent]." Based solely on the citations Billett provides, it seems there has been awareness since at least the 1990s, if not earlier, of the "fogginess" of how we are both assessing and engaging in the processes that surround youth capacities to consent. Consider this particular observation: "the conviction that parental and guardian consent is always in the best interest of a young person has come to be questioned by some researchers" (Billett 2012:45 quoting Gaylin and Macklin 1982). Researchers demonstrate an active engagement with questions about parental consent since at least the late 1970s (e.g., Gaylin 1977). Despite decades of attention to this area, little progress has been made. One line of inquiry would ask *why* this is the case. While it is encouraging that the TCPS2 has more recently rendered explicit the capacity to consent framework, significantly more training is likely needed to navigate the challenges of determining it in participants. Billett (2012:44) also notes that situations where parental consent is sought have traditionally been conceived "as a way of protecting young people," and while this certainly may be true in many cases, it is equally plausible that requiring parental consent is motivated by researchers hoping to protect themselves as opposed to ensuring that the participant understands their involvement. This potentiality is rendered more plausible still when one considers the wider context of legal liabilities, with the parents or guardians ultimately responsible for their children's involvement in any such work.

In their reflections on some of the ethical challenges that can unfold in studies with youth and children, Duncan and colleagues (2009:1693) detail their experiences of conducting a study on self-management of chronic illness. One participant had asked during the course of an interview "is my mum going to hear this or not?" to which the interviewer responded, "with a promise that his mother would not be able to listen to the interview" (see also Laenen 2009). This is an example of a particularly gray-area because, in theory, a researcher is right to give such assurances but in actuality, giving a cast-iron "promise" is perhaps reckless when researchers know there are contexts within which they have a duty to disclose the contents of an interview (i.e., where participants disclose the intent to commit a crime, or intention to harm someone). This reminded us of occasions during our interviews where teenagers asked us where and how the interview would be shared, which they often asked after the interview was completed. The capacity to consent framework protects youth from even disclosing their participation to parents or guardians, which is important, especially in projects that ask about youth experiences and behaviors that are illegal or may otherwise get them into trouble with their parents. Our project examining teens' COVID-19 experiences did not ask about illegal behavior, but did ask about experiences with parental responses to pandemic lockdowns and related experiences, which may raise sensitive if not distressing memories. However, our assurances are often centered on the fact that *researchers themselves* will not inform parents about their children's participation, nor the results of what they disclosed. Since we asked participants about their experiences of how their parents responded to the pandemic, this aspect of our design was significant. And yet we were, at times, surprised by situations where youth not only were very open with their parents about their participation but also had no qualms about conducting the interview with their parents present. The second author reflects:

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The capacity to consent framework of our research with teenagers provided the opportunity for teenagers to *consent* to research rather than *assent*, with the understanding that parental consent is not required so long as capacity to consent is ascertained prior to the interview. One situation where all this was flipped on its head, so to speak, involved a planned remote interview where the participant emailed to say they were running behind, leaving school a bit late. The Zoom call came in at the scheduled time, but, to my surprise, the participant was in a car driven *by her mother*, who was her ride from school. The participant asked if it was okay to begin the interview while in the car's passenger seat, though I suggested we wait until they were home, which is how we proceeded. I did not voice my concern about the mother's presence, though my question about delaying the interview was based primarily on concern over that issue. Some of my questions asked directly about experiences with how parents responded during the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether positive or negative. It is very likely that the participant's mother is highly supportive, and their relationship is a solid one based on mutual trust and respect, suggesting the parent's presence wouldn't "taint" the responses to my questions. Of course, this assumption is a big one, and it would in this case have been unethical to proceed based on said assumption.

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Overall, we are in strong support of the capacity to consent framework and its recognition of child and youth agency and voice. Still, the challenges in determining this in the field are worth considering in qualitative research, especially where projects involve researchers asking about youth experiences with parents or guardians.

Building and Maintaining Rapport and Trust

Here, we expand upon our reflections related to both our earlier focus group project and our current project examining youth pandemic experiences. Beginning with our focus group project, one of the more challenging aspects was developing rapport between researcher and participants, both because of the age gap between researchers and the teenage participants (senior research assistants were somewhat closer in age, but likely still perceived as "adults" by younger participants) and interactional dynamics that may be related to gender. Age and gender may also, in this case, be more relevant, as we asked teenagers about their experiences with sexting and later, as interviews progressed, we explored related areas, such as the involuntary reception from some female teens of "dick pics." The third author reflects here on her positionality and care over how this is approached within a focus group setting:

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In my 20 years or so of conducting interviews, I have spoken with many people who identify as part of a vulnerable population, including youth, who are inherently vulnerable as minors, but also many made more vulnerable by their gender identity, sexuality, their Indigenous, or racialized status. To reflect, I start by explaining my own positionality—as a person and a researcher. Then, I reflect on the nuance of interviewing and conducting focus groups with youth, who are vulnerable in many ways, about sexting. I have long struggled with various realities, beyond the scope of this reflection, that have shaped who I am but more so have created a space where I try to recognize individuality and how each person has their own story impacting their actions, thoughts, and feel-

> ings. My own experiences taught me quickly about the ignorance of judgment and the need to encourage people to be who they are and how they need to be to feel whole. Beyond being a wife, I am a mother of a gender diverse teen, twin teenage boys, and a ten-year-old girl. I strive to understand the phenomenon from as close a firsthand experience as possible—to learn how different truths can hold true in one space and to develop insight to do some good in practices, in policies, by learning, or by giving voice.
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> When interviewing youth—particularly vulnerable youth who have been or became the victim (rather than the consenting participant) of sexting, who are racialized, or gender or sexually diverse—there is an inherent power imbalance that evades discussions based on the participant's truth and may create tension or uncertainties. But, taking away their agency further impedes their power—thus assent helps empower. In any interview, the initial duty of the interviewer is to create a safe space. Almost legally, we as researchers may do so through consent forms detailing the parameters of the discussion, the use and storage of the data, and most nuances about the conversation. The real safe space, however, is beyond a consent form. The safe space must be created within the rapport built, the trust enacted and promised, and the freedom to encourage a youth to be themselves, whoever and however they see themselves at that moment in the developmental journey.
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The second author's daughter was about five years old when he began conducting these focus groups, and he reflects similarly on issues of positionality and the importance of developing trust:

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> I did not know what to expect when sitting down with small groups (about five or six on average) and asking questions about social media platforms unfamiliar to me, and how I would broach topics such as sexting; me, a white, straight, middle-aged male academic interviewing female teenagers as young as 13. My own daughter was much too young to share the experiences many of our participants had, and I admit to feeling nervous about what sort of things she would be exposed to in a few short years, based on stories we heard about "dick pics" and non-consensual forms of image based sexual abuse. Of course, the questions were there in the interview schedule, but this failed to answer *how to ask* those questions. I later came to develop my own thinking about the creation of safe spaces, be it in the classroom or in the field. Trust takes time, and I found the best interviews developed a sort of "fast trust"—not the sort of deep bonding social capital you get with a very close friend or romantic partner, but sufficient for the purposes of an academic interview that delves into rather personal and meaningful experiences and understandings. Perhaps it is worth considering fostering a safe space/time not just safe spaces. It helped, of course, that our more personal questions regarding cyberbullying and sexting were positioned about midway in the interview schedule. We began with "warm-up" questions, what social media platforms are being used (if any), what is the draw to them, etc.
>
> ***

Our experiences interviewing youth about emotionally charged topics such as IBSA (non-consensual sexting) involved an approach developed by Price (2002:276) called a laddered question technique. "Laddered questions" refer to "a technique for selecting the most appropriate level of question or researcher response to respondent dialogue, based on the premise that we share a common notion of what is likely to seem most intrusive during discourse." Irrespective of whether the semi-structured inter-

view schedule has specific questions about IBSA, when, and if such questions should be part of an ethical process, laddering questions are part of the *how* of accomplishing the rapport required to ask such questions to build trust. Price (2002:273, emphasis added) astutely observes "not only must researchers use dialogue for an inquisitive purpose… they must also *legitimize their questions*, helping respondents to evaluate the place of the research and their part in it…and involve issues of power."

While our ethical attention is, understandably and necessarily, on our younger participants, we must also consider how engaging in qualitative research can be emotionally draining and challenging for the researchers themselves. As the third author details how:

> ***
> Interviewing is essential emotional labor. For youth, I found their rationalities were at times difficult to comprehend without extensive explanation, and sometimes, they simply needed an opportunity to explain their thought processes, pressures, and ideas to show how their interpretations of the world resulted in their actions or thoughts. Doing qualitative research can shape the participants and researchers in different ways, in every interaction, and in every self-presentation. As a researcher, the need to be always present can be draining, and the interest in always hearing your speaker can be exhausting physically, socially, and cognitively. These realities are rarely spoken about in qualitative research. Yet, they are particularly salient when interviewing youth—the participant deserves undivided attention. The onus is on the interviewer to create a safe space centered around the youth that provides them comfort and freedom to be themselves without feeling judged. As an interviewer, if I were to be distracted, unfocused, or unsupportive, rapport would be negatively affected, and harm can result, which is particularly concerning when speaking to vulnerable people, and the power imbalance could easily suggest to the youth that they are lesser valued or not worthy of the required attention.
> ***

The impressions we give as researchers, and their impact on our participants, are important to foreground (Goffman 1955; 1959). Our unconscious concerns and anxieties may reflect upon our participants, potentially discouraging lines of inquiry. Research ethics boards formally vet questions during the review process, but equally, if not more important, is *how* such questions are asked: are pauses taken when needed to provide a space for participants to adjust if disclosing a particularly emotionally impactful experience? The first author, a senior research assistant on our youth and cyber-risk during the pandemic research, reflects on these points below, beginning with a statement on his positionality:

> ***
> I came to this project as somebody with a deep personal and professional interest in mental health. Not only have I experienced significant mental health challenges in my own life, some of which have led to hospitalizations, but I have also conquered those challenges and now work to support others in doing the same. In this sense, mental health is the body and soul of the work that I do. As an academic, I am very critical of the reach of the medical model as it relates to psychological suffering, which was an interesting dilemma to navigate during the project. In doing so, I also recognize that prior to this opportunity, I had virtually no experience in conducting qualitative interviews, which proved challenging at times. How-

ever, I also came to this work with some strengths, such as my ability to relate to younger students and understand the dynamics of being a student during the pandemic. I lived and worked in Brazil as a teacher administering the International Baccalaureate program during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing instruction to students between the ages of 10 and 18 in history and social studies, as well as supervising the Extended Essay project. The government of the day in Brazil arguably ignored the global consensus from the scientific community on COVID-19, and so I came to this research with a unique perspective having observed mental health challenges as a teacher, which has since allowed me to reflect upon how COVID-19 may or may not have impacted these issues. It is also worth noting that Brazil has a very active digital culture; the use of technology and social media is very strongly embedded into the modern social fabric of the country and its various communities.

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The first author proceeds to reflect upon the challenges alluded to for junior scholars who might be new to conducting qualitative research:

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In reviewing my transcripts for the interviews I have conducted over the past year, I recognized that I often struggled to navigate the question of "how far is too far?" when it came to needing to probe for further detail. We don't have much time during a 1:1 interview to really contemplate our decisions, and this can be very anxiety-inducing for new researchers. While I can put this down to experience and the amount of time spent practicing this particular qualitative method, it also presents somewhat of an ethical conundrum that I've rarely seen addressed in methodological scholarship. To some extent, I suppose that we almost need to "read the room" and gauge from a combination of context, topic—maybe even "vibes"—when it is most appropriate for us to probe deeper regarding a given topic. This had the unfortunate consequence of making me appear somewhat cold with participants at times, or as though I wasn't interested in hearing more about something they had shared. Furthermore, while I would consider myself to be quite perceptive of an individual's nonverbal cues, this does raise a broader question about how we make qualitative methodologies more inclusive for different groups of neurodivergent folks who, while navigating an interaction, may not easily be able to or who struggle to rely on such intuition. This is particularly true when we consider that it's rare for a qualitative researcher to stick exclusively to the script as laid out by the interview protocol. At times, I worried that the difficulties I had navigating these challenges in turn limited how much I could get out of an interaction with a participant.

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As a research team, we would go on to discuss our experiences conducting the interviews and the resultant transcripts. In the first author's case, it may have been that participants simply did not notice his reticence; he felt bound not to probe too deeply, concerned about violating our ethical protocols, yet wished to remain flexible in exploring directions participants felt comfortable with. Concern for the impressions we give came up in our reflective writing for this article. For the first author, this comes from a position of insecurity based on his perceived level of experience and position as a junior scholar. For the third author, similar concerns are reflected from a wealth of experience conducting not only interviews but ethnographies related to wider projects (see Ricciardelli 2022). How we interpret participant responses, including what they say and the body language used, is highly influenced by our own pro-

cess of interpreting the "looking-glass self" (Cooley 1902). Consider the first author's reflection here:

> ***
> Some of the last few interviews I conducted were with students from a more diverse range of ethnic and racial backgrounds. During these interviews, I perceived (at times) some difficulty in both understanding me as the interviewer and in their expressing themselves clearly in English. I found this difficult to navigate. In one interview in particular, a participant often recanted "like I said," or "like I mentioned before," in response to follow-ups that sought clarity on some of the responses given, and I could sense frustration with the interview process. This made me feel anxious and somewhat irritated. Similarly, the same barrier also made me feel as though I could not tap into the full range of experiences some participants had in relation to the questions at hand. Some responses were very limited or superficial, and I didn't always know how to seek more detail from them, as their initial response occasionally gave me little to work with.
> ***

The first author could be correct that participants were "frustrated" about needing to repeat themselves, or it could also be a case of simply misreading the room, which is a challenging decision to make when so much of how qualitative researchers navigate their work is left to their own impressions and assumptions. The second author has also experienced concern during interviews about how a young participant receives the questions being asked, consistently monitoring not only the participant's body language but also his own "self-talk" about what is happening. Sometimes participants have surprised him revealing they were thinking of things quite different from what he surmised. Asked if any participants have any questions at the conclusion of their interview, a researcher expects questions about what happens with the data, anonymization of findings, et cetera. However, unexpectantly, in one instance, the young teen asked him "Do you have a cat?" (a cat's meow could be heard in the background at times during the interview). The second author tried his best not to miss the beat—"Yes, I do," he replied and proceeded to describe his cat, before steering the discussion back. Upholding an active and reflexive presence while conducting qualitative interviews is thus essential, including the anticipation of the unexpected. This raises an important question: when are participants veering away from the themes we wish to explore, and at what point is it appropriate to steer them back on track? Price (2002:273) remarks "the researcher has power over respondents…possibly drawing [them]…back to the focus of the interview if they stray." However, we may further ask what constitutes "straying" and how we determine where "steering" is required. In the case of the interview above, the question of the cat occurred at the end of the interview, so some digression, the second author deemed, was acceptable. When in doubt about what our participants are feeling or thinking, it is always a good idea to ask directly: "I have some more questions about that, are you alright to proceed?" "Do you need to take a minute break?" "Don't forget to let me know if you have any questions." "Remember you can skip any questions you do not wish to respond to and we can even stop the interview at any time."

At other points during our earlier study, questions arose regarding how much to probe in new directions, especially during some of our focus groups with female teenagers, where the regularity of their receiving "dick pics" was actively discussed. Probing, involving "questions or requests that ask the participant to provide additional information about

their previous response," is a necessary, even essential, tool for enriching participant responses during interviews (Robinson 2023:382 quoting Given 2012). One of the group members referred to a plan they had to create a scrapbook of "dick pics" sent to them, explaining that this decision was based on how frequently those images were received. Quoting Janiya from the group:

> at the end of grade 12, as a grad gift, I'm making a scrapbook and the cover's gonna be a collage of all the dick pics we got in the last three years, and we did it, this beautiful, bound collaged dick pics collection. So, it becomes a funny thing, I found no one takes it seriously. [see laso Ricciardelli and Adrojan 2019:571]

The third author recalls Janiya's scrapbook experience,

> ***
> which I also witnessed being in high school when doing the interviews. Rapport must be built independent of or related to participants' lived experience, and my role is to make the participant whole or as close to whole—to feel fulfilled and safe as themselves—as they can be in that moment in their life.
> ***

The willingness to disclose this experience indicated a sense of safety and comfort in talking about harm and its impacts. The second author, who conducted the focus group, recalls his initial hesitation in asking about sexting in this group. This was ultimately minimized after the group's collective laughter and generally boisterous reaction to Janiya's plan. Over time, the second author contextualized the laughter and general jovial tone in a wider sociological frame—one where the group's response arguably indicates muted agency and resistance in the face of much wider gendered double standards and norms (see Ricciardelli and Adorjan 2019). The third author's reflections on asking questions about IBSA put forth further considerations when interviewing youth about vulnerability and harm:

> ***
> Certain conversations tend to resonate. I recall a female gay youth who had intimate photos of her circulate, speak how time heals, and people lose interest (first because of time and second, in her view, because she came out as gay). I recall a younger Indigenous youth speak to the challenge of receiving intimate pictures from someone she was not dating and the challenges those pictures caused in her current relationship. I recall another youth in their early teens telling me about when she throws her phone in shock over when she unexpectedly opened the intimate image a boy she "barely knew" sent. Thus, there were situations described where youth were made vulnerable through images (and sexual messages) received. But there were also ways that youth recipients of these images and messages could make their senders vulnerable. For example, being put off by the image received, sharing the image even if it was sent in confidence, and other ways in which the receiver treats the sender or the image.
> ***

Elaborating on the process of generating rapport and comfort and making participants feel "whole," the third author reflects:

> ***
> Perhaps the element of interviewing that is most necessary to making an interviewee feel whole in a safe and healthy space is to validate how a person expresses what they feel. In interviewing, then, I try to never use leading questions, such as "Did that make you feel

sad?" or probe or respond with statements suggesting impacts or views like "You must have been angry," because I cannot assume I know how someone else interprets an event. Validating a person is making one feel whole, no matter what course of action they selected or how they felt—recognizing and not judging or imposing society's expectations about appropriate actions/thoughts. Thus, I validate through language such as "what you felt is real" or "you are allowed to feel that way," while refraining from advice-giving, encouraging, sanctioning, or teaching morals, values, and ethics, or sharing a personal position. I do share scientific knowledge and academic findings or policy information, but never my beliefs, and I always try to minimize any reaction.

***

The third author's reflections here indicate how deeply personal conducting qualitative interviews can be. In such a dynamic, researchers often find themselves needing to ask about the extent to which we should, or even can, refrain from "being ourselves" in the research process. What participants tell us often resonates with our own experiences, emotions, and memories as researchers. The direction of the questions, and probes, we ask must be approached with care and sensitivity. As Robinson (2023:393) notes, "to ensure that sensitivity is maximized during a semi-structured interview, the direction and intensity of probing should be informed by a general understanding of the cultural norms of the participant group." The first author further reflects on rapport, assumptions, and emotions below, emphasizing how these may inhibit how we might best engage with our participants:

***

I had several very positive experiences that highlighted to me the gifts of qualitative work. One particularly memorable experience I had was with a participant who noted that our interaction allowed him to see me as somewhat of a father figure. This youth had lost his father and had struggled navigating his choices in pursuing education again. It emphasized that these interactions can be both informative and deeply meaningful for participant and researcher alike. Paradoxically, one of the things it made me contemplate further is whether the way we are trained as qualitative researchers needs adapting to better center these possibilities. At the moment, it seems as though we are confined to a strictly regulated space that impresses upon us the importance of maintaining rigid boundaries, distance from the participant, and ensuring we protect our participants' emotional well-being at all costs. In my view, this should be expanded to encapsulate the reality that sometimes conversations trigger difficult emotions, and it's very medicalizing to view that emotionality as a warning sign. Emotionality, even if it is "difficult," and even if it is tied up with challenging experiences, is not inherently bad nor in need of solving, fixing, or alleviating. Sometimes, we as the researchers, in my view, need to simply make space for those feelings to be safely felt, expressed, and then, if appropriate, for the topic to be tactfully brought back into focus.

***

Interview questions, which should be open-ended although can vary in structure, tend to be formally approached, akin to being in detective mode, as opposed to regular, less formal conversations (Price 2002:273). The first author recalls conducting an interview with a youth who had a great deal of difficulty openly responding to the questions. "I attempted to mediate this," he reflects, "by incorporating a more standard conversation into the interviewing process as a means of building rapport and inviting the participant to share more openly."

Reticence and silence are not inherently negative or anti-social. The first author elaborates:

> ***
> Something I think we often forget is that participants, especially youth participants, may not always have an answer to a particular question and may not always let us know that through a clear and direct statement of the fact. As researchers, we are often assuming the issue is an absence of willingness to share versus a genuine lack of response to a certain topic.
> ***

Price (2002) notes how nonverbal forms of communication, and their interpretation, are sources of knowledge for the researcher who can use such to help guide decision-making processes throughout the interaction. Nonverbal communication can reveal where the researcher should proceed in the interview, which questions to choose, how each question is communicated, et cetera. To appreciate nonverbal communication, the interviewer must learn to read body language. Price (2002:276) "spent some time learning how to read the body language of [the] respondent, quickly." The need for rapid adjustments syncs with our notion of developing "fast trust" and rapport during the interview. Price (2002:278) adds "evaluation of body language and verbal responses…serve to explain judgments of whether to probe more or less."

All this can be, of course, emotionally draining for the researcher (setting aside the very real emotional labor involved for participants alike). Ensign (2003:48) reminds us of "the very real danger of qualitative researchers getting emotionally drained and overwhelmed by the difficult lives and circumstances in which many research participants are found." Training ourselves to be mindful practitioners takes time and resources. However, a focus on the researcher as isolated from their wider research environment and community aligns with more neoliberal notions of responsibility. The emotional labor and ethical dilemmas of researchers should not be a carefully guarded secret, nor something conceived as a personal trouble. C. Wright Mills (1959) influentially drew connections between individuals' personal troubles to wider, collectively experienced public issues. The ethical concerns and experiences expressed in this article are not unique nor isolated incidents—they are shared with others, especially those learning the craft of conducting qualitative research. We need, in other words, an ethical and sociological imagination regarding experiences in the field of conducting qualitative research, including experiences with emotional labor (see Adorjan 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

We must, as researchers, always center the experiences of qualitative researchers in their pursuit of better approaches to the ethical conundrums commonplace in research today. Any qualitative research is emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), and rapport and trust problems are far from new, which is why we conceptualize fast trust (Haynes 2020). This speaks to the vast confidentiality and disclosure arising from interview processes in shared spaces fostered carefully at a point in time but lacking in duration and often never again to be repeated. The interview process can be grueling and rewarding, some suggest like "therapy," although interviews are never such, they are devoid of "homework" and are always supportive of the interviewee, no matter what is reported. Nevertheless, this very fact can affect the researchers' health (Dempsey et al. 2016), creating challenges when reflecting and leaving an imprint of all heard and learned.

Sociology and related fields have enthusiastically debated the issue of youth in research, particularly in relation to ideas about agency, positionality, voice, and power, as well as their ostensible inaccessibility or the notion of youth as "unwilling participants." These ideas—or rather, the "problems" that arise within them—are well-established in the literature, yet tangible solutions to them are often few-and-far-between. Within this article, we have set about the task of envisioning potential paths through some of the messiness that is often attached to participation and organizational collaborations in qualitative research with youth in Canada.

Part of the challenge of establishing a clear set of solutions to the problems we outlined, then, lies with our tendency to either infantilize youth and strip them of agency, unconsciously or consciously, or to overlook age with a view of trying "not to treat young people differently just because of their age" (Brooks 2012:183), or even to make assumptions about their interest in participating or willingness to be called upon for such. However, the debate requires greater nuance, for it is not always appropriate to overlook age either. We acknowledge how in erasing the consideration of age we may also jeopardize our ability to reasonably adjust many of the essential components of our praxis in the field, from our tone to our language choices, all of which, as we have argued, play a foundational role in transmitting impressions from researcher to participant. Also possible is that in limiting our consideration of age, we may unconsciously pivot *away* from the experiences that youths find themselves navigating, many of which are often unique to this specific social location.

A significant proportion of the qualitative researcher's craft lies with our freedom to pivot and to respond dynamically to the plethora of potential problems, or joys, that can arise at any moment during the research process. Some of these moments require shifts in response to the possible ways social demographic factors, like age, may be contributing to such occurrences in the process. Moreover, as the literature discusses, researchers have a responsibility to the community and must be reflexive yet open-minded about a full range of experiences and contexts in which youth (or adults) find themselves within (e.g., Lassiter 2005), often including in relation to age. How to be reflective and to enact our responsibility to the community is often neither discussed nor, unfortunately, expected (Lassiter 2005). Perhaps a way would be knowledge mobilization with a focus on ensuring practices respect age, yet the need to return information learned to participating youth or their overseers is rarely considered in the social sciences nor ensured, regulated, monitored, or enacted, with any sort of accountability on the part of researchers. One way to reveal "how" appears to be sharing or having shared experiences in the field, which we seek to do in the current article. Here, we strive to highlight "the types of difficulties that are so often left out of the polished, final accounts of research studies that we read and hear" (Duncan et al. 2009:1692). Moreover, we recognize where we have fallen short, creating reports based on our studies, where we could have also created information bundles, infographics, and other processes directed to the youth studied too. Positively, however, using a capacity to consent approach did move toward an effective relational ethics (Meloni et al. 2015), as youth can often understand and consent to sociological research, which provides agency, voice, and empowerment. Yet, what about how to identify when there is an *incapacity* to consent? Another area worthy of inquiry, beyond determinations of capacity, concerns how to equitably assess youth capacity to consent, including those who do

not demonstrate it, without causing harm or interpretations of inequity.

Nevertheless, in this article, we responded positively and took to heart in reflecting on our research designs and processes to the TCPS2's acknowledgement that age should not be the ultimate metric for assessing capacity to consent. While "ethics committees can assume an important role in checking that basic ethical principles have been considered" (Brooks 2012:181 quoting Bessant et al. 2012), we must also grapple with the reality of the impossibility for any board to fully account for the complete range of possibilities that come with any research project. Typically, research ethics boards and official guidelines are seen as the standard by which we must carve out our approaches to our fieldwork. And yet, to what extent has ethics simply become a hurdle for each researcher to clear? And what do they have the right to comment on beyond ethical processes? Can an ethics board in good faith request a copy of a research contract with an organization? Impose their interpretations? And what does it mean when the voices of youth are being further reduced by an ethics board that believes they "know best," despite expertise in the space or subject area?

With each review, we are often engaging in thought games about how we phrase something, what boxes we need to tick, and how we can get approval as quickly as possible to enable us to move forward with the work that has excited us for months, sometimes years, up to that point. In weaving a series of reflections and experiences from the field, we have laid the foundations for a renewed engagement that can provide possibilities beyond the rigidity of ethics board protocols.

To this end, we take to heart Duncan and colleagues' (2009:1692) idea of ethical mindfulness, which "involves the recognition of ethically important moments, giving credence to the feeling of being 'uncomfortable' about an event, being able to articulate what makes something an ethical matter, being reflexive and having courage." And we flip the idea too—when can others harm our own ethical mindfulness, and does an ethics board do so at times? The contribution here is to try to recognize, if possible, unconscious bias that, ironically, can undermine our ethical mindfulness, but how to ensure the biases of ethics boards do not hamper the researcher's own ethical mindfulness? These are areas requiring more research and understanding moving forward. Simply said, when you remove the voice of an already voiceless person, you make them even more vulnerable—this includes youth.

Our aim here has been to help inspire further conversations about such experiences and help researchers, especially junior scholars, not feel isolated in the challenges, and joys, experienced in the field.

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Recording Solo: Managing Long-Distance Data Collection within Audio Diary Research with Healthcare Professionals

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Keywords:
Audio-Diary; Remote Social Research; Healthcare Professionals; Long-Distance Reflexivity

Abstract: This paper explores the methodological and reflexive implications of using audio diaries in remote qualitative research with healthcare professionals. Drawing on a three-month study involving 18 participants who submitted audio recordings weekly, complemented by follow-up interviews, the article examines how this method enables the collection of rich, emotionally nuanced, and temporally proximate narratives. The audio diary format proved particularly effective for engaging professionals under high emotional and organizational pressure, offering a flexible and participant-led space for reflection. The study also sheds light on the challenges of sustaining participation over time, the importance of ethical responsiveness, and the role of the researcher in supporting engagement at a distance. Ultimately, the paper proposes the concept of long-distance reflexivity to describe how both participants and researchers negotiate meaning, presence, and vulnerability in fully remote research settings.

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Introduction: Remote Diaries within Social Research

Researchers in various disciplines, from psychology to anthropology, have often used diaries for data collection by asking participants to record personal content in the form of narratives (Sorokin and Berger 1939; Harvey 2011; Crozier and Cassel 2016). Diary research in the social sciences commonly takes the form of solicited diaries, which the researcher requests from participants to examine particular research questions in depth and elicit the protagonists' experiences through daily accounts of events, impressions, and emotions.

Solicited diaries can be used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, as an independent survey instrument, or to supplement other data collection techniques (Denzin 1970). Bryman (2001) outlines three main ways in which diaries have been used in social research: (a) as a researcher-driven method of data collection; (b) as an autobiographical historical record written spontaneously by the subject (mainly used by social historians); and (c) as a record of the researcher's activities similar to field notes written by ethnographers. The autonomy left to the subjects in the composition of content also depends to a large extent on the project's cognitive needs. Therefore, diaries have proven over time to be a versatile tool that can adapt to different disciplinary contexts and populations (Bartlett and Milligan 2015; Hyers 2018).

Diaries also help researchers understand the relationship between the subject and the surrounding physical and social environments, taking into account emotions, everyday practices, and participants' interactions with other people. It is also possible to examine participants and their experiences in real time in a longitudinal form that monitors change over time across a range of experiences (Moretti 2021).

Furthermore, many studies have demonstrated diaries' potential in rural contexts (O'Reilly et al. 2022), geographical sciences (Milligan 2005), within healthcare (Monrouxe 2009; Bernays et al. 2019), and with young people (Worth 2009).

In diary research design, as well as with many qualitative techniques, participant-researcher contact is activated and maintained through in-person meetings that normally help build a solid relationship between the two parties to establish trust and openness, while remaining connected during the study.

However, in some circumstances, encounters may not occur, and relationships may remain remote. The development of the diary in audio form is the result of a very recent journey and represents to date a field of literature that is still little explored: the earliest evidence of the use of audio diaries comes in 2008 with the studies of Monrouxe (2009) for the medical field, Milligan (2005) in the geographical sciences, and Hislop and colleagues (2005) in the social sciences. Researchers have repeatedly pointed out that the audio diary can be a comprehensive and exhaustive gateway to a participant's personal information that otherwise would not be recorded. In particular, capturing events in real time, analyzing changes, and participants' daily challenges enables the construction of a detailed dynamic film of the respondent's emotions and feelings (Monrouxe 2009). Additionally, the recent COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for many qualitative researchers to continue in-person research, thereby necessitating remote data collection.

This was the case for Seide and colleagues (2023), who investigated the subjective experience of minority stress among Latinas situated at the nexus of sexuality, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic marginality. Initially, the researchers who engaged in the field had planned to travel to San Antonio in person and use the life history method. However, because of COVID, the researchers worked remotely and adapted the study to an online format using a flexible diaristic interview method.

Similarly, Mueller and colleagues (2023) captured extensive data from marginalized groups remotely during a disaster, namely, 100 young diarists in Indonesia and Nepal with specific labor market vulnerabilities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors demonstrated, through their *Disaster Diary*, that the remote diary method offers particular advantages for qualitative research in crisis scenarios.

The use of remote diaries also facilitated access to several groups of diarists in geographically dispersed locations over extended periods (Almeida 2005; Rudrum et al. 2022) without sacrificing rich narratives of people's unique and complicated experiences (Johnson and Bytheway 2001; de Lanerolle, Schoon, and Walton 2020).

Given the numerous challenges and limitations of working with distance diary entries, remote diaries offered rich opportunities for qualitative field research while maintaining public health protocols. As Bernays, Rhodes, and Jankovic Terzic (2014) demonstrated, audio diaries can be qualitatively different in tone from interviews, and more openness was found in diaries compared to final interviews. It has been argued that subjects may have been more comfortable while recording on their own during the time available to them rather than during online interviews.

In addition to these methodological functions, diaries inherently invite reflexivity, both as a research goal and as an epistemological condition of qualitative inquiry. Reflexivity involves examining your judgments, practices, and belief systems during the data collection process. The goal of being reflexive is to identify any personal beliefs that may have affected the research (Woolgar 1988; Ashmore 1989; Lynch 2000).

Within diary research, this reflexive potential is amplified, as participants are asked not only to report on events but also to make sense of them through introspection, self-narration, and selective emphasis. The act of writing or recording a diary entry becomes a performative moment of reflection, in which experiences are not merely documented but interpreted in real time. This makes diaries powerful tools for capturing evolving subjectivi-

ties, shifting emotional states, and nuanced moral or professional tensions that might otherwise remain unspoken. For the researcher, engaging with diary materials also demands a reflexive stance, as the data are deeply personal and mediated by the participants' narrative choices, requiring ongoing sensitivity, positional awareness, and ethical responsiveness during both collection and analysis.

With this article, I aim to contribute to this body of work by detailing the use of diaries in a long-distance context within public health through healthcare professionals, with particular attention to the ethical, methodological, and reflexive dimensions that this approach entails. Analysis of diary entries, participant selection, trust relationships, and constant feedback requires a different design when the researcher has no real contact with participants in the field (Moretti 2021). Specifically, the communication process, mediated only by online interaction, proves effective in working with some specific participants in unique situations (e.g., with healthcare professionals in the pandemic context), but simultaneously generates questions related to reflexivity that need to be considered.

Therefore, in this paper, I first explain: 1) how to conduct a research study remotely, detailing each stage of the research, and 2) the profound ethical and reflexive implications of such remote research for both participants and the researcher.

Methodological Implications: Notes from Online Fieldwork

Research Questions

This study aimed to understand how to manage and perceive long-distance data collection through diaries from both participant and researcher perspectives. The use of audio diaries, in particular, enabled access to participants' reflections in close temporal proximity to lived experiences, allowing for the emergence of spontaneous and emotionally rich narratives. Unlike retrospective interviews, this method captured the immediacy of everyday tensions, ethical concerns, and relational dynamics that might have otherwise remained unspoken or rationalized after the fact. Therefore, the following questions were addressed in this research:

- How did participants experience full autonomy in data generation? What strengths and weaknesses of this method did they report?
- How can long-distance research help elicit narratives? What barriers (theoretical and methodological) might researchers encounter with this constant distance?
- What type of impact can remote data collection make within the relationship between researchers and participants?

Selection

This study was conducted entirely remotely (online) and is part of a larger independent research project launched in November 2020 that aimed to assess healthcare professionals' emotional labor and their relationship management with patients and informal caregivers. In-person meetings were not possible due to the pandemic context in which the study was conceived and conducted. Moreover, participants were geographically dispersed and professionally engaged in highly

demanding clinical roles, which further limited opportunities for physical encounters.

Specifically, to answer my research questions, and because this is an exploratory study, nonprobabilistic sampling, or grab sampling, was used to select participants through an online training program that a university in northern Italy offered. The program was selected for three reasons: a) its participants comprised healthcare professionals with varying geographic and sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., job title, gender, age, or ethnicity); b) it operated entirely online (in line with the research design), and c) it was aimed at training professionals by promoting social skills.

I initially reached out to the training program's organizing committee and made preliminary contact with the key tutors, who played a central gatekeeping role. After accepting the proposal, the organizers established a bridge between the researcher and the learners. Potential participants were introduced to the research generically in two online classes, after which I left my contact information for those interested.

To be eligible, along with providing informed consent to participate, individuals had to be employed at a healthcare organization, on the job at the time of the study, working closely with patients, and familiar with digital platforms.

Of all the course participants (about 40), 18 agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1 for participants' details). Participation was on a voluntary basis and without remuneration.

After communicating their willingness to join the study, the participants were scheduled for individual interviews through the online Teams platform to begin the training process.

Table 1. Participants' demographics

Interviewee Code	Gender	Job Title
01	M	Physiotherapist
02	F	Nurse
03	F	Nurse
04	F	Nurse
05	F	Physiotherapist
06	F	Nurse
07	M	Nurse
08	F	Physiotherapist
09	M	Physiotherapist
10	M	Psychotherapist
11	F	Physiotherapist
12	F	Psychotherapist
13	F	Psychotherapist
14	F	Nurse
15	F	Physiotherapist
16	M	Physiotherapist
17	F	Nurse
18	F	Nurse

Source: Self-elaboration.

Training

During the first individual interview, conducted in September 2022, the research rationale was explained, and instructions were given on how to make audio diary entries. The individual interviews were crucial because during the previous meeting, not all participants understood the study's purpose. Each participant was asked to register at least one audio per week over three months. This timeline was established for two reasons. First, consideration was given to participants' work schedules and the still-stretched rhythms and shift systems required in the healthcare profession. Second, it was preferable to keep audio diary production time-diluted

but constant, to evaluate the impacts of the long distance between the actors involved in the research. Finally, efforts were made to avoid fatigue in subjects already proven by heavier workloads/schedules during the pandemic as much as possible (Watson and Lupton 2022). The timeline was discussed with participants during the individual interviews, and all respondents accepted it. Data collection occurred from October 2022 to January 2023.

Before they began to submit audio diaries, the participants were instructed on how to conduct *solo* recordings.

First, as the researcher was unable to meet the subjects face-to-face in advance to provide them with formal equipment, the participants were asked to create recordings with their devices. They could use the "voice memo" function on their smartphones, other messenger platforms, or even a professional microphone. Most chose the memo option, and in only one case was a specialized tool used.

Second, considering the participants' significant workloads in their field, they were free to submit their audios daily, weekly, or at the end of the period under investigation.

Third, no minimum recording length was agreed upon, leaving the subject completely free to choose their diaries' duration, thereby developing a free narrative of self (Fitt 2018). The audio diaries' durations varied widely, ranging from a minimum of 60 seconds to a maximum of 17 minutes, reflecting the participants' freedom and willingness to share as much or as little as they saw fit. In total, each of the 18 participants submitted approximately 12 diary entries—one per week over three months—resulting in a corpus of 216 recordings. All participants adhered to the proposed rhythm, and the data collected proved rich in detail, tone, and emotional nuance.

Fourth, a thematic list of diary prompts (see Table 2) was assigned to each participant to aid in storytelling. All assigned prompts were asked to be tapped each time the diary was being recorded, while still leaving the subject free to add their ideas, considerations, themes, and experiences. Thus, an effort was made to respect the participants' subjectivity as much as possible (Mueller et al. 2023). The list of diary prompts was developed based on existing literature on diary-based methods and prior research on healthcare professionals' emotional experiences, work environments, and relational dynamics (e.g., Monrouxe 2009; Bartlett and Milligan 2015; Bernays et al. 2019).

Table 2. Diary prompts

Feelings	Spaces and places	Relationship
During your day, how do you feel?	What are the areas that most affect your work?	How do you evaluate your relationships with colleagues?
What are the obstacles you encounter daily?	How are they distributed?	Are there any times of conflict?
How do you feel about your work?	What are the spaces you have visited most today? Which ones have you avoided?	How do you interact with roles other than your own?

Source: Self-elaboration.

In addition to recording audio diary entries, I asked the participants to take part in a final online interview, and all 18 subjects agreed to participate.

The participants were provided with sufficient information to make informed decisions about participation, and completion of the interview was viewed as consent to participate. Due to the persistent distance, and in addition to routine ethical procedures used in research, other research-related issues were brought to the participants' attention. Since we never could meet physically, the subjects were informed that if they stopped sending audios, it would be viewed as equivalent to not wanting to continue in the study. In this sense, the subjects could be free to choose how much to share. Furthermore, it was agreed that the researcher would not process the data collected for publication until the study ended. Likewise, during the final interview, subjects were free to decide whether to authorize the researcher to process all collected material (audio diaries and final interview data) or only a portion of it. Additionally, while I was collecting data, I followed a privacy-by-design approach, in which no sensitive data left the device (or side) of the participant. All other transferred data required user consent and were fully anonymized.

To handle distance most effectively, the researcher can provide unobtrusive assistance to the diarist by supplying small, weekly, supportive online inputs while still paying attention and not influencing the diarist. These gentle reminders can help participants recognize their efforts (i.e., those most engaged) or support others in case of a loss of motivation. In this case, weekly messages (via email) were sent to help participants generate content. Messages included brief encouragement, inquiries about any potential difficulties they might have encountered, and a reminder that the researcher was always available for clarification or support. This approach aimed to balance autonomy with care, ensuring participants felt accompanied throughout the process without exerting pressure or influencing the content of their entries.

The Final Interview's Value

In addition to audio diaries, I conducted a final follow-up interview with each participant, during which probing questions were asked to uncover specific details needed to complete the narrative. Furthermore, it is the only occasion during which it is possible to obtain feedback from the participant about their experiences taking part in the study in real time and validate my impressions with them. With the research conducted entirely remotely and alone, participants played a central role because they were able to corroborate what emerged and what the solo researcher could analyze. In essence, the participants took part in data triangulation that enabled capturing salient and targeted aspects that have remained excluded from autonomous content production in a *process of crystallization* (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

The interviews were conducted 10 days after the recording period had ended (end of January 2023), giving the subjects time to process their lived experience. Similarly, the researcher had some breathing room to reframe the content that emerged and process the diaries sent later. The final interview makes it possible to guide initial work and investigate the diary recordings' "behind the scenes" aspects (Bartlett 2012).

During the interviews, the following themes (Table 3) were deepened:

Table 3. Final interview

Final interview themes
The personal experience of recording audio diaries
Challenging moments
Possible advantages/limits of being distant/remote from the researcher
How the autonomous production of the data was handled
Ethical considerations

Source: Self-elaboration.

The opportunity to express oneself during a final interview can also be useful in assessing the participants' level of openness about the research.

Diary Analysis

As a prelude to the results section, outlining differences (in timing and analysis) between the two types of data collected—audio diaries (first phase) and interviews (second phase)—is critical.

Audio diaries were transcribed *verbatim* every time they were sent to me, allowing for a process of constant comparison (Charmaz 2003) using a grounded theory approach. I also dealt with the participants' voices, so I wrote several memos to save my ideas, insights, interpretations, and growing understanding of the collected data. Furthermore, unlike interviews, which usually capture people in a single moment, in a diary study, participants self-report data longitudinally. For this reason, taking notes about the language used, content, and voice intonation at a particular point during a conversation was fundamental to keeping track of the participant's evolution. In another way, because of this longitudinal component and the large amount of qualitative data produced by the participants, I needed to re-evaluate the research objective that I targeted throughout the study. Simultaneously, due to this long-distance relationship, I kept notes about my feelings and how I was dealing with this remote data collection.

To systematize the diary analysis process, I developed a *long-distance evaluation matrix* to highlight the participants' longitudinal dimension by examining three interactions: topic, researcher, and technique (see Table 4).

Specifically, the topic "interaction" was evaluated following an open coding process (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in which an initial open category system was outlined with maximum flexibility. This coding's purpose was to fragment the data to derive properties, creating a taxonomy of concepts and categories.

In particular, the relationships with the researcher and technique were discussed during the final interview. Having been unable to meet any subjects in person, I needed final validation about what emerged from the analysis. Therefore, the participants gave me their reflections on my interpretations.

As for the final interviews, they were also transcribed *verbatim* with NVivo 12 software used for the analysis, in which I created codes iteratively rather than attempting to fit the data into preconceived standardized codes. The categories that emerged from my analysis are discussed in the next section.

Table 4. Long-distance evaluation matrix

Topic	Researcher	Technique
It concerns how participants interact with proposed topics.	**It refers to the relationship between participants and the researcher.**	**It embraces all interactions with the audio diary technique.**
Questions leading my analysis: • What are the topics covered? • Are there recurring themes, or does each audio tell a different story? • Compared with the track provided, have all the themes been touched upon? What was left out? • What kind of reflections emerged? • Does the narration follow a chronological order?	Questions leading my analysis: • How does the interaction with the researcher turn out? • How intimate does the conversation appear? • What tone does the narrator use to address the researcher (e.g., intimate, formal, informal, etc.)? • How does the researcher convey the conversation? • What emotions did the narrator bring into their recordings? How do they convey them (e.g., what expressions, terms, etc.)?	Questions leading my analysis: • How did the narrative unfold? • How many days did it take? • Did any difficulties emerge while using audio diaries? • What are the advantages of this type of narration? • How does the narrator's mood seem (elements of tension, hesitation, etc.)? • Did the protagonist seem comfortable? • Why do I think the narrator chose these episodes/stories?

Source: Self-elaboration.

Transcripts of both interviews and diaries were made in the original language (Italian), then translated into English, with special attention paid to not altering the participants' narration.

Findings: *Verba Manent*

In this section, I present the findings from both the transcribed audio diaries and interviews. From my analysis, and thanks to the evaluation matrix that highlighted the participants' longitudinal dimension, I identified two folk categories generated by the remote interactions: *trust* and *research fatigue*. The following categories demonstrate the complex relationship between researcher and diarist, and the difficulties of long-distance management of research involving audio diaries.

Staying Distant: A Matter of Trust

The first category that emerged during the analysis relates to the relationship created between the researcher and participant, involving the emotional and cognitive bonds formed. Different modes of "distance interaction" between the diarist and researcher emerged from the data analysis. First, the diary format allows the research to proceed, as far as possible, in the absence of the researcher, rather than having participants simply respond to questions or prompts:

> Hi. It took me a while to decide to record. It's a new thing that scared me, but most of all, I was scared that I didn't really understand the mandate and that I was going off topic. However, after your email reminder, I made up my mind, and now I am recording. I went back and read the emails [and] reread the instructions. [Diarist 15, audio number 1]

> Good evening, [my name]. I wanted to send you the audio message that you asked us for… Even though I have to admit that it's not exactly easy to rearrange the ideas. Let's just say that I made a little effort because you asked us for it [laughing]. [Diarist 16, audio number 2]

With diaries, participants can have more autonomy to share what they want, as well as where and when:

> Yesterday was a very unusual day... I was going to tell you about work, but then I got into a fight with my mother-in-law, who lives in the apartment above ours. I already came back from work exhausted, and then I also had to get into a fight at night. So, there you go... I haven't been able to record anything for you, and even now, I'm still not in the mood. [Diarist 11, audio number 3]

This often happens to the same person, particularly if the diaries are recorded a short distance from each other:

> Hi, [my name]. I'll just finish telling you yesterday's story with my mother-in-law... Then I promise that from tomorrow [on], I'll focus on work. [It's] just that I am really nervous since yesterday... [Diarist 11, audio number 4]

As much as a diarist may feel comfortable making light of the themes recorded, the request to make these reflections explicit is always artificial and often demanding. Reflecting on some things because it is required is actually not a natural process for most people, and even if participants are asked to relate their thoughts to their everyday experiences, there will necessarily be moments of alienation and difficulty:

> [my name], I'm xxx, and I'm sending you my first message even though I was supposed to start a week ago. I've had basically a chaotic week... [Diarist 9, audio number 1]

> Hi, [my name]. I wanted to share with you today's itinerary because that's what you asked us to do… I'm trying to reflect on my feelings, but honestly, I'm really overwhelmed. And what can I tell you? I've been doing some crazy shifts. [Diarist 12, audio number 9]

The diarist has the freedom to decide on the timing and content of the flow of information they choose to express. This is likely to lead to a more spontaneous and less-directed relationship:

> No work today. I am actually also hung over [laughing a lot] because I went drinking with my colleagues yesterday, and maybe we had too much wine. But I knew I wasn't going to work today… [Diarist 17, audio number 6]

> Hi, [my name]. I'm on my way to work… I mean, actually, I'm already in the parking lot because this hospital parking lot is crazy, in my opinion. I start working at 8 a.m., [so] I have to leave home at 6:40 a.m. And you will ask, "But do you live far away?" NOOOOO! I live 13 kilometers away, but this parking here is wild, so if you want to park, you have to arrive early. [Diarist 15, audio number 7]

> Today, I was finally home, so I enjoyed my family a little bit. We went to eat at my parents' [home] with my husband, and I think that these moments are precious. His parents, on the other hand, are sometimes a bit intrusive… For goodness' sake, I love them. However, I feel like they treat me a bit too childishly... [Diarist 4, audio number 5]

> At the end of this period, I realized that I often told you more about my personal life than about my work, as you had asked me to… Soooooooooory! [Diarist 17, audio number 12]

Beyond the challenges of overcoming the power dynamic that pervades any interaction situation between the diarist and researcher, a less-detectable aspect of diary analysis also exists, in which responses appear to be entirely spontaneous. Diaries recorded from a distance are structured inevitably. In all the narratives produced, having been prompted by the researcher, the scientific expectation underlying the narrative itself remains very evident. Data produced away from the researcher are not meant to remove such constraints, but rather to access subtle nuances generated by the constant production of content over an extended period. In this way, although a diarist's position on a particular issue may not be overturned explicitly, it is possible to follow the complex and sometimes conflicting ways in which opinions are formed and challenged.

Relationship with the Technique: Research Fatigue

The second dimension concerns the diarist's relationship with the technique and data production. One aspect that emerged from the diaries is what has been termed *research fatigue*, that is, participants' psychological and emotional exhaustion—more specifically, the feeling of extreme fatigue generated from data production and the audio diary method repetitiveness:

> I wish I could tell you something good about my work, but I can't. Today, especially, I can't see anything good, also because it seems to me that I tell you the same thing every day. [Diarist 01, audio number 8]

> Sorry, I haven't sent you more audio, but I am a little tired these days. I have a thousand commitments, and [I'm not in the] mood to send you audio about my work. [Diarist 16, audio number 3]

Although diaries leave room for autonomy and freedom for participants, allowing them to reveal what they want and at the best time, the technique requires time and dedication from participants:

> So, I anticipate that I forgot the third audio from last week, but I don't have too much time in this period. [Diarist 09, audio number 3]

> Sorry, [my name], I am having a hard time keeping this diary going partly because of time and partly because when I get off work, I really don't want to talk about work! [Diarist 18, audio number 6]

This is particularly evident during the final interview, which is designed to provide context for the diaries and control for artificiality and performance:

> I must admit it: [Taking part in this research] was more tiring than expected... By the end, I had lost my patience a little bit because I didn't feel like recording anymore... I knew that I had to go ahead because by now, I had made a commitment. [final interview with Diarist 15]

> By now, I had made a commitment to you. If I had known, I would not have accepted [laughs]. [final interview with Diarist 09]

However, for other diarists, the opportunity to communicate through a diary was viewed in a positive way:

> There were some moments that were easier than others... Let's say it was like talking to a friend on the phone and telling her things that I didn't feel like sharing with my family. [final interview with Diarist 10]

One possible cause of this data irritation may also relate to the type of group involved with the research, that is, groups that are particularly susceptible to research projects may demonstrate reluctance and fatigue as far as continuing their efforts to answer scientific questions. In this case, research fatigue can be said to occur when individuals and groups become tired of engaging in research and can be identified through a demonstration of reluctance to continue to engage. It is undeniable that COVID has elicited fatigue among health professionals who have been the subject of numerous studies. Various professionals have been asked to express their opinions, feelings, experiences, and expectations throughout the pandemic and in different roles—as experts, victims, frontline workers, ordinary citizens, et cetera. In practice, research fatigue and commitment increase when one feels "over-studied."

Let us take three separate diaries from the same person as an example:

> It may be because with COVID, the shifts at work have doubled, or because there is a general weariness among me and my colleagues to talk about COVID and our work... [Diarist 3, audio number 2]

> Then, today, I was reflecting on the fact that at the end of November, there is going to be the national health professions conference... which I decided not to attend, however, because they are talking about COVID and more about post-COVID. So, the topic is still that… [Diarist 3, audio number 6]

> Hi, [my name]. Let's just say that on evenings like these, I get hope that we can see some light at the end of the tunnel. [Diarist 3, audio number 9]

Diary research tends to entail collecting data over a longer period than many other qualitative methods, which is valuable for studying changes in health professionals' well-being. Using diaries to follow individuals' narratives over time, rather than considering individual data, offers distinctive insights because attitudes and experiences can be cross-referenced across entries, such as to determine whether hopes for the future were well-placed.

Discussion: Long-Distance Reflexivity

This study's central methodological goal was to follow the participants' reflections from a distance and over time on a range of complex topics open to different interpretations. In analyzing the diaries, specifically when focusing on the practice of recording events, the principal aspect that emerges in entirely remote research concerns the reflexivity created.

While conducting research fully remotely and working with healthcare professionals, some challenges arose. During the first few weeks, some critical issues emerged from the inability to meet with participants periodically. The lack of direct, in-person contact can decrease the participants' motivation. Keeping a diary is a habit that few people practice, and most of the subjects taking part in the study did

not follow such a routine before joining the study. The experience of reporting chronologically follows the researcher's needs rather than the participants' experience of time (Gershuny and Sullivan 1998).

Furthermore, diaries may cause concern and provoke some discomfort for participants because the act of recording and reflecting on events may cause emotional crises (Smyth 1998; Bernays et al. 2014). As researchers, we can take on a scholar-activist role (Markham and Pereira 2019) and practice a relational ethic of care (Ellis 2007; Gillies and Alldred 2012) based on feminist and intersectional values (Miller et al. 2012) geared toward "identifying and respecting diversity, paying attention to how our research may affect those under study, and articulating and acknowledging our intent as researchers and participants, including whether and how we aim to generate potentially transformative engagements" (Luka and Millette 2018:4). However, when reflexivity is elicited in participants, considering the type of critical relationship triggered between participant and researcher is crucial. Hanna (2018) described this as "distanced empathy," in which the usual strategies of offering participants a break or more physical or visceral demonstrations of empathy are not available. Therefore, it is important to reassure participants that they will be able to validate collected data at a later meeting and decide what the researcher can publish.

Finally, in long-distance research, several difficulties also arose for the researcher herself. A crucial part was framing my reflexivity while conducting the research. Through interviews and formalization of sociological categories, knowledge is constructed and situated, calling on the researcher to take responsibility for their positioning and on participants to reflect on the experience. In my case, much personal information and many observations were amassed, considering that I was separated from my participants during the entire data collection process. Furthermore, I had to manage my personal feelings and emotions on many occasions when participants revealed personal details about their lives. While being physically distanced from the participants, the support that I continued to provide and the awareness that I could not act *in situ* impacted my analytical procedure. Therefore, in this study, my self-reflexivity became a form of "meta-analysis" (Markham 2020:229).

I proposed to frame the concept of *long-distance reflexivity* in both participants and the researcher.

The possibilities that audio offers make the recording process even more favorable for participants and help the researcher avoid missing voice nuances, laughter, and mood alterations involved in the recording. These aspects are even more central when the research is conducted entirely from a distance, with no opportunity to meet the participants in person. In actuality, long-distance data collection opens up unseen spaces of reflexivity (Rees, Crampton, and Monrouxe 2020) that deserve specific examination.

Participants' Long-Distance Reflexivity

Regular diary entries for extended periods invite diarists to share detailed accounts of daily situations and ongoing processes, offering narratives on one's "internal" thoughts and feelings, as well as "external" situations, events, and the larger (changing) context (Meth 2003; Filep et al. 2018). With long-distance data collection, participants' reflexivity requires creation of dedicated times, spaces, and contexts (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Keeping audio

diaries is one way to create such spaces, particularly in contexts in which opportunities for other forms of reflective practice are limited, such as confrontations with the researcher or other participants. The participant's relationship with the researcher is nonetheless present, albeit remotely. Neale (2021) described this as intensively walking alongside people to gain a processual understanding of how experiences and perceptions are created, negotiated, lived, and processed (Bartlett and Milligan 2015; Karadzhov 2020).

Following Latham's (2003) lead, I regarded the audio diary as a kind of performance of subjectivity and the follow-up interview as a re-performance or re-enactment of subjectivity. In the process of audio diary research, all participants' subjectivities and identities are continually (re)configured and (re) formed in ways that repeatedly (re)align and renew the ethical terrain. However, when participants' identities are in some respects myriad and shifting remotely, the role of "data producer and collector" is no longer marked strongly through physical meetings, creating what Watson, Lupton, and Michael (2021) described as "leaky boundaries."

For this reason, attention to participants' long-distance reflexivity must be considered not only in the data collection process, but also in the elaboration by which these data were generated, partly because participants' choices about how to represent their narratives also contribute to the meaning of the content they include. To situate participants' reflexivity in a remote relationship, I echo what Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) have proposed, stating the dual role that diarists play: naive performer and reflective informant. As performers, participants move through their regular activities as if the research were not present. However, the subjects also become informants because they reflect on their performance and other completed activities.

By asking people to keep a chronologically organized diary or log of daily activities, we effectively have asked for a record of their activities and simultaneously for their interactions in their daily lives (Znaniecki 1934). In this sense, diaries function like field notes taken in ethnographic research. Therefore, participants can be viewed as "added ethnographers" for research purposes.

This diarist's self-reflexivity can be compared with that experienced by the researcher in the definition of research. Borrowing Markham's (2019) approach, subjects construct their meanings and actions in different environments and when stimulated to one's self-reflexivity. The main idea is for individuals to become "auto-ethnographers of their own lives" and "help people find modes and means of critically examining and understanding the contexts within which they are drawn into a neoliberal position through...seemingly innocuous practices" (Markham 2019:759). Applying an autoethnographic lens can lead to rediscovery of narrative as a means of conceiving and analyzing human experience, thereby encouraging researchers and participants to focus on "narratives of the self" (Denzin 1997). Self-reflexivity should help the diarist better understand how information is generated, how personal perspectives shift, and how interpretations are constructed over time.

Personal narratives have been recognized "as sense-making tools with the capacity to produce, challenge, and change the identities of individuals as well as collectives" (Andersen, Ravn, and Thomson 2020:367). This can be achieved by helping participants become qualitative researchers of their ex-

periences; identify how cultural identities, events, and formations are measured; and, most importantly, interrogate how their behaviors, activities, and personal relationships—in the form of information—can be collected and stored.

Considering diarists' self-reflexivity allows us to think deeply about the methods we use in research and the epistemological commitments that support them. As Finlay (2002:531) noted, "coming out through reflexive analysis is ultimately a political act. Done well, it has the potential to enliven, teach, and spur readers towards a more radical consciousness. Voicing the unspoken can empower both researcher and participant."

Researcher Reflexivity

Recently, feminist researchers raised questions about emotion and reflexivity, that is, researchers' ability to "study" others' emotional experiences without simultaneously considering their own emotions' role along the way (Bondi 2005; Schurr and Abdo 2016).

On many occasions, I have found myself listening, coding, rereading, and analyzing intimate sharing, confidences related to relationships, difficult working interactions, domestic frustrations, fear, grief, and anxiety. In this sense, Scott (2022) offers insight into the impact the researcher's emotions may have by specifically focusing on longitudinal, diary-based methods. Following her findings, while conducting diary-based research, it is fundamental not to underestimate the emotional burden, ensure that meaningful debriefing is available, establish boundaries, and make space for emotion throughout fieldwork, as well as during analysis and writing.

Another crucial aspect of conducting research entirely remotely concerns the researcher's constant online presence. During the pandemic, some researchers lamented the shift in social science research to digital platforms, as they perceived deficits from the lack of embodied encounters that could serve as the basis for shared relationships (e.g., McCoyd et al. 2022). Furthermore, in some cases, the continued use of digital platforms to conduct research has resulted in a phenomenon termed "Zoom fatigue" (Shklarski, Abrams, and Bakst 2021; Aagaard 2022).

In recognition of such complexities and to mitigate any effects from long-distance data collection, it is fundamental that researchers employ several protective strategies to ensure that methods of data collection and analysis are appropriate and valid (Bornat and Bytheway 2012). Along these lines, researchers must treat their results responsibly and respectfully to ensure that they neither harm nor stigmatize participants or groups. This can be negotiated during final interviews by discussing the material that emerges from diarists and selecting together what may be appropriate to report.

Conclusion

This article has explored the methodological challenges and opportunities involved in conducting long-distance data collection with healthcare professionals through the use of audio diaries. By combining audio diaries with follow-up interviews, the study has shown how this method can elicit rich, contextualized narratives that illuminate the social and emotional dimensions of healthcare work.

Theoretically, this study contributes to discussions on research reflexivity, narrative temporality, and emotional labor in healthcare. It expands current

understandings of qualitative research methods by demonstrating how audio diaries, as asynchronous and self-recorded tools, create a space for more spontaneous, situated, and affective storytelling—particularly when traditional face-to-face methods are not viable. While participants still shape their narratives with awareness of the research context, the distance and temporal flexibility foster new forms of reflexive engagement and emotional disclosure.

Methodologically, the research illustrates that audio diaries are a feasible and valuable strategy for collecting longitudinal and multi-layered data among healthcare providers, especially during crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the study also highlights important limitations, including the potential for participant fatigue and the emotional toll on researchers engaged in long-term remote fieldwork. These findings call for an expanded ethics of care in remote qualitative research, attentive to both participants and researchers.

In sum, this article contributes to the field of qualitative research by advancing a critical understanding of audio diaries as both a methodological and epistemological tool. It invites further reflection on how distance, time, and voice reshape the ways we produce and relate to knowledge in emotionally-charged professional contexts.

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