Strengths and Limitations of an Online Qualitative Survey in Times of Social Crisis: Example of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to argue that an online qualitative survey (OQS) is a useful research technique that is feasible to apply during a social crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. An OQS has an unclear status in the spectrum of research techniques, as it combines features of quantitative and qualitative research, and there is little recognition in the literature of its advantages and disadvantages in the context of other research techniques used during a social crisis. We describe our research experiences of using this technique and the experiences of our survey participants. We also compare the strengths and limitations of using an OQS during the COVID-19 pandemic against other techniques used at the time.

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In this article, we argue that an online qualitative survey (OQS) is a useful research method during a social crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, especially its first wave. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was distinguished by the strict lockdown, and it caused organizational chaos in academic institutions, where we could observe a lack of solutions and strategies for adaptation to the new and highly unpredictable social reality. In some universities in Poland, it was forbidden to conduct face-to-face research, which was problematic, especially for qualitative researchers. Our solution in those turbulent times was a qualitative survey. This technique[1] "consists of a series of open-ended questions, crafted by a researcher and centred on a particular topic (...), self-administered, with questions presented in a fixed and standard order to all participants" (Braun et al. 2020:1), where qualitative data and qualitative analysis are prioritized (Braun, Clarke, and Gray 2017) and open questions dominate in numbers (lower level of standardization compared to computer-assisted web interview [CAWI]). To analyze the data from an OQS, researchers usually use thematic analysis, that is, multiple reading, coding, and categorization (cf. Peel 2010; Terry and Braun 2013; Braun et al. 2020). To date, it has been argued that OQS is useful, for example, in research with vulnerable people (Braun et al. 2020), the analysis of public policies in international comparative studies (Seixas, Smith, and Mitton 2018), and studies on ethics and spirituality in social work (Canda, Nakashima, and Furman 2004). A number of examples of the use of this technique, although referred to as a qualitative questionnaire, are also found in health research (Daniels, Arden-Close, and Mayers 2020; Fernholm et al. 2020; Hanna and Gough 2020; Grung et al. 2022).

Our literature review shows that during the COVID-19 social crisis, this research method became more popular than it had been before, but it was still rarely used compared to other research methods. Between 2020 and 2024, according to data collected from Scopus, 45 articles published in the field of social sciences applied OQS. Before the pandemic years, there were only 13 texts using

[1] In this article, we do not distinguish between research technique and method, although we are aware that they are sometimes defined differently in the methodological literature.

this technique. Just to give a brief comparison: there are over 40,000 articles that are based on in-depth interviews—one of the most popular research techniques among qualitative social researchers; over 1500 articles were published during this time with the use of a type of quantitative online survey (e.g., CAWI). Altogether, between 2020 and 2024, only 14 articles have a pandemic context (out of 45), and the pandemic crisis effect is mostly visible in 2022, with 7 pandemic OQS articles published that year. There are only two articles published during this time based on OQS by the Polish authors (both written by the Authors of this manuscript [Kalinowska et al. 2022; Surmiak, Bielska, and Kalinowska 2022]).

Following Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen Douglas (2017:323), we understand the social crisis "as impactful and rapid societal change that calls existing power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question." During the global social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, social researchers opted for various forms of online research, including synchronous and asynchronous qualitative interviews (e.g., among many others, 't Hart 2021; Howlett 2022; Lawrence 2022; Estrada-Jaramillo, Michael, and Farrimond 2023), quantitative surveys (Krajewski et al. 2021), and non-standardized written statements (Łukianow et al. 2021; Radzińska 2022). Some researchers decided to use creative forms of conducting research, such as collaborative autoethnography (Roy and Uekusa 2020), synchronous deliberative processes (Willis et al. 2023), smellwalks (Allen 2023), remote participatory video (Marzi 2023), or remote participatory action research (Börner, Kraftl, and Giatti 2023). These new or renewed forms of research were not so rarely "forcibly" applied—as one researcher wrote in an honest way: "many of us have been forced to change our research plans" and apply "new armchair approaches" (Howlett 2022:388; cf. Eggeling 2023).

In our view, the limited use of OQSs during social crises is due to two issues. First, an OQS has an unclear status in the spectrum of research techniques, as it crosses the divide between qualitative and quantitative forms of data acquisition. Second, there is not much recognition in the literature of its advantages and disadvantages in the context of other research techniques (except, e.g., Braun et al. 2017; Braun et al. 2020; Thomas et al. 2024).

Relying on our research experience in using OQSs during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, we indicate how and why OQSs can be used during social crises. We also compare OQSs to other qualitative and quantitative techniques to show its advantages when conducting research during a social crisis.

OQSs[2] in the Social Science Literature[3]

Vagueness of OQS Classification

First, the limited use of OQSs during social crises is because it has an unclear status in the spectrum of research techniques. OQS combines features of quantitative and qualitative research. For example, similarly to the quantitative approach, there is a standardized (uniform) list of questions that every participant is supposed to answer, and the questions are asked in the same order and form (Terry and Braun 2017). Concurrently, as in most qualitative ap-

[2] In the following section, we do not distinguish between online and offline qualitative surveys, as they are treated similarly in the context of classification in the analyzed literature.

[3] The literature review was based on the keywords 'qualitative survey' and 'qualitative questionnaire' in the Google Scholar and Scopus databases.

proaches, participants can give an in-depth answer (in writing) using their words (access to participants' language and terminology). Sometimes the quantitative data are collected during the process; however, the qualitative data and the qualitative analysis are prioritized (Braun et al. 2017). In social research, qualitative and quantitative approaches are often seen and presented as contradictory ways of analyzing social phenomena, despite the increasing significance of mixed-method research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017; Timans, Wouters, and Heilbron 2019) and advocacy research that finds this dichotomy irrelevant (Denzin and Giardina 2012). Perhaps because of this ambiguous status of OQSs in social research methodology—a technique that meets the requirements of neither qualitative nor quantitative research—they are relatively rarely used in social research, especially in sociology[4] (Jansen 2010; Thomas et al. 2024).

Furthermore, in the tradition of sociological research, the term "survey" is reserved for quantitative research (Groves et al. 2004). Using it in juxtaposition with the word "qualitative" may be perceived as incorrect by social researchers. Survey techniques with a structured questionnaire are defined as (highly) standardized and based on indirect communication (response is given in writing, not within direct face-to-face communication) (Groves et al. 2004). A qualitative survey was presented by Virginia Braun and colleagues (2017) as one of the innovations in qualitative methods, one that "has been released from their *quantitative* moorings" (Braun et al. 2017:245). It is worth noting that an OQS is referred to in some articles as a qualitative questionnaire (understood as a research technique, not only a research tool). It may be assumed that this term is somehow safer for researchers. They thus avoid the connotation of survey techniques—a term specific to quantitative research (Groves et al. 2004).

The difference in terminology may also be related to the traditions of ethnologists' use of qualitative questionnaires to collect factual data, a kind of inventory of a place created by the inhabitants of the area. Over time, this type of ethnological research has changed its direction: from positivist fact-gathering to collecting the individual experiences of those surveyed, yet the name of this technique has remained the same (Rivano Eckerdal and Hagström 2017). However, Gareth Terry and Virginia Braun (2017:17) state that using the term "questionnaire" may not be accurate; they claim that "only survey refers to the process of sampling a population for information, opinions, experiences, or practices," not just to a research tool. They also underline that in psychology, questionnaires usually include questions based on quantitative scales, which need to be validated and tested in terms of their reliability (positivists' empiricist research paradigm). Surveys, according to these authors, do not require this, and they can be more open and explorative (Terry and Braun 2017). Having this in mind, when analyzing the examples of the application of a qualitative survey in social research, we found various terms used in reference to this technique: semi-structured questionnaires sent by e-mail and post (Turner and Coyle 2000), open-ended survey (Whelan 2007), qualitative online survey (Jowett and Peel 2009; Peel 2010), and online mix-methods survey (Terry and Braun 2013). What is more, Terry and Braun (2017:18) not only place OQSs as one of the modes of qualitative sur-

[4] There are more publications based on the results of an OQS and other modes of the qualitative survey in critical social psychology (cf. Braun, Tricklebank, and Clarke 2013; Braun et al. 2017; Braun et. al 2020; Terry and Braun 2017, etc.).

vey (next to a paper and an e-mail mode), but also present a classification of different types of qualitative survey techniques from "more to less qualitative surveys": a) the fully qualitative survey: with only open-ended questions, relatively less popular; b) the mixed (qualitative dominated) survey: with open-ended and closed questions (supportive role: yes/no questions, demographics), more often used; c) the fully mixed survey: with balanced qualitative and quantitative components when research questions need both types of data; and d) the mixed (quantitative dominated) survey: used most often, with a minor role of qualitative questions (which might be utilized to add "depth" of response or to encourage responses the researchers might not have expected). The OQS conducted by the authors and described in further parts of this manuscript represents the second type of this classification.

As stated by Harrie Jansen (2010), in many classifications of qualitative research to date, an OQS does not appear as a separate research technique. Jansen gives a brief consideration of its position within qualitative research, analyzing it in relation to five research traditions: biographical, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study. However, he fails to give a clear answer as to within which tradition he would see OQSs and, indeed, locates it as a method that can be used within each of these traditions.

Advantages and Disadvantages of OQSs

We propose the following discussion written from the perspective of the classical epistemology of qualitative research, placing the well-being of both the participants and the research process at the center of interest. In this sense, the following subsection does not capture all qualitative research traditions, for example, ethnomethodological or conversation analysis, and only partially reflects the values behind advocacy research.

Virginia Braun and colleagues (2020), whilst analyzing the online version of a qualitative survey, point out that it is in line with the tradition and values of qualitative research, as it places participants at the center of the research. The researcher gives up much of the control over the research process—the participants can write as much as they want and when they want.

Merran Toerien and Sue Wilkinson (2004:70-71) emphasize that an OQS "provides a balance between structure and openness" because a qualitative survey allows for the standardization of questions and their easy comparison (as in quantitative research) while obtaining in-depth[5] answers (as in most qualitative research). Braun and colleagues (2020) share a similar opinion and argue that by analyzing the entire dataset (i.e., the answers to research questions are reached by analysis of all the responses; Toerien and Wilkinson 2004:73: "across questions, rather than for each open-ended question individually"), an OQS provides rich and in-depth data, even though individual contributions might be very short or very long. Similarly, Samantha Thomas and colleagues (2024:12) claim that "While online qualitative surveys engage participants in a different type of conversation, they have design features that enable the collection of rich data." Also, according to Johanna Rivano Eckerdal and Charlotte Hagström (2017), "qualitative questionnaires" make it possible to generate rich material on many aspects of daily life, past and present. The authors compare the data obtained from such

[5] Understood as Clifford Geertz's thick description.

questionnaires to diary entries. In both cases, we are dealing with memories, opinions, and experiences. However, in the case of a questionnaire, we have a specific situation, since the statements are formulated in response to questions posed by the researcher and additional instructions (e.g., which period participants are to refer to or which aspects they should pay special attention to).

Furthermore, an OQS allows for quick and cheap data collection, reaching geographically diverse populations. The online format and rather short time commitment may result in some people participating who otherwise would not have due to location or time constraints (Davey, Clarke, and Jenkinson 2019; Smith et al. 2022). An OQS also allows for the possibility of reaching larger groups of people than is typical of (most) qualitative research, such as interviews (Toerien and Wilkinson 2004), and to reach populations defined as professionals: academics, STEM professions, educators, or therapists (e.g., Bouziane et al. 2020; Feijt et al. 2020; Aluko and Ooko 2022; Tackie 2022; Gallant, Watermeyer, and Sawasawa 2023; Tripp and Liu 2024). A larger sample, as Emily Opperman and colleagues (2014) point out, can give access to a sense of wider patterning of meaning, while Virginia Braun, Gemma Tricklebank, and Victoria Clarke (2013) argue that the self-recruitment sample may lack the votes of marginalized and minority groups or people with limited computer access, so the picture obtained is partial.

The high degree of anonymity could also enable disclosure, especially if the research topic is sensitive (e.g., body image after mastectomy) (Grogan and Mechan 2017) and/or the research group is vulnerable (e.g., adult children of lesbian, gay, or transgender parents) (Clarke and Demetriou 2016; Boulton and Clarke 2024).[6] Thus, according to many scholars, it is a very useful technique for study of sensitive topics (Toerien and Wilkinson 2004; Terry and Braun 2017; Daniels et al. 2020).

Many scholars indicate other limitations of OQSs, especially the lack of opportunity to ask additional questions, which is provided, for example, by an in-depth interview (IDI) (Frith and Gleeson 2008; Braun et al. 2013). Gareth Terry and Virginia Braun (2017) also argue that in this technique, follow-up data collection and sending reminders are less possible than in other qualitative methods. However, Mirko Prosen (2022) notes that by using this technique, the person surveyed has the chance to reflect and elaborate on their responses before submitting them. Similar considerations are found in the article by Emily Daniels and colleagues (2020), who reiterate Prosen's conclusion about the impossibility of questioning further. However, they also point out that the OQS technique is a good basis for selecting people with specific experiences in the next stage of research (e.g., based on IDIs). Although the collection of contact details makes the survey non-anonymous, the participants' data are confidential and protected. It is also important to emphasize to the participants that the provision of their data is voluntary.

The experience of these authors may also indicate that surveys conducted using the OQS technique should not be too extensive. In their study, it took about an hour to complete the survey, resulting in as many as 140 people starting the questionnaire but

[6] Our literature review based on the Scopus database shows that among 45 articles applying OQS published between 2020 and 2024, there are 21 texts that may be classified as concerning sensitive topics or vulnerable groups (e.g., LaMarre, Gilbert, and Scalise 2023; Harvey et al. 2024; Hayfield, Moore, and Terry 2024).

not completing it. In addition, such a lengthy survey of sensitive topics might also cause additional stress to the participants. Similar recommendations are made by Braun and colleagues (2020).

Daniels and colleagues (2020) also draw attention to "recall bias"[7] and warn against using such research techniques to collect experiences from the distant past, although the authors do not mention that this is not only characteristic of qualitative surveys but also other methods, such as IDIs.

Terry and Braun (2017) warn against "trolling" and "zingers" (short, witty statements created to gain likes on social media, usually artificial and impersonal), which may reduce the quality of an OQS.

Research Methodology

OQS

OQS [the online mixed (qualitative dominated) survey, Terry and Braun 2017:18] was conducted by three authors of this article between 21 April and 30 May 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic in Poland. A total of 193 people took part in the survey. The OQS was conducted by women with a doctoral degree and several years of experience in conducting qualitative and quantitative research, sociologists and ethnologists, employed at public universities, a research institute, and a private university in research and teaching positions.

We sought to address two main research questions: How have social researchers responded to the emerging methodological and research ethics problems in their research projects (actions/practices)? How have social researchers perceived methodology and research ethics during COVID-19 (perception/evaluation)?

The OQS was aimed at social scientists and humanities researchers from public, private, and non-governmental institutions. It included open-ended questions on their experiences in conducting research (problems and solutions) and ethical and methodological reflections, as well as their demographics. Most of the participants worked in public (N=157) and/or private institutions (132), both as leaders and members of research teams. The sample was dominated by those with doctoral (76) and postdoctoral (42) degrees; early-stage researchers (PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, and assistants) numbered 24. More than half of the participants (106) carried out statutory research (funded by university funds), 72 indicated grants as a source of funding, 60 were self-funded, and 23 carried out commercial research. The participants included 147 from the social sciences and 83 from the humanities, as well as 109 women and 81 men.[8]

The OQS was prepared using the LimeSurvey software. We used three types of sampling: purposive (people from the social sciences and humanities maximally diverse in terms of gender, stage of academic career, and place of work), snowballing (using the social networks of researchers and participants), and availability-based (Babbie 2014; cf. Patton 2014). We shared the OQS on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn), emailed it to institutions

[7] Recall bias is bias caused by inaccurate or incomplete recollection of events by the research participant. It is a particular concern for retrospective survey questions (*Recall bias* n.d.).

[8] Questions on gender, discipline, and stage of academic career were open, and questions on place of work and source of research funding were closed multiple choice. Whenever data did not add up to 193, other response categories were given or there were missing data.

and associations, and forwarded it to researcher acquaintances.

The survey was exploratory (the participants were informed of this) and was the basis (pilot) for designing IDIs. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data (the whole dataset, not individual responses, was taken into consideration to find answers to research questions) following the dominant analytical method used by researchers applying OQS (see Introduction). Researchers read the entire dataset multiple times. Then all answers (participants often included mixed and broader information in an answer to a particular question than we expected) were organized by themes found in the empirical material and later categorized. This analysis was then used to construct typologies of ethical strategies and approaches to research methods during the first wave of the pandemic. The analysis process is described in detail in other texts (Kalinowska et al. 2022; Surmiak, Bielska, and Kalinowska 2022).

We did not encourage participants' feedback; however, we received their spontaneous comments via email and telephone calls. We use these data in the Findings section. The approval of an ethics committee was not required; however, the study was conducted according to the rules of "The Sociologist's Code of Ethics" of the Polish Sociological Association (2012).

Other Sources

In November 2022, all four authors wrote up their experiences of the OQS technique. The three researchers who conducted the study in 2020 described their experiences of conducting the study, and the fourth author, who joined the team later, described her reflections on her participation in this study (she had completed the survey before she became one of the members of our research team). We also included the analyzed email and telephone exchanges with survey participants within additional sources. All of these written accounts totaled 15 standardized pages and were subjected to thematic analysis.

Application of the OQS during the Pandemic Crisis: Ethical, Methodological, and Practical Dimensions

Authors' Experiences: Choosing OQS

The decision to conduct research with social scientists and humanities researchers in the first wave of the pandemic using an OQS was a two-step process.

First, in the spirit of rapid methodology/hot sociology[9]/urgent anthropology, we decided that it was worthwhile conducting a survey with researchers to document research and ethical changes during this period. We recognized that the time of the pandemic was conducive to testing unusual ways of doing research (see Kalinowska et al. 2022; Surmiak, Bielska, and Kalinowska 2022). Investigating these changes seemed important and necessary, and we were also simply humanly curious about the research work of our fellow researchers. Conducting OQS would allow for a fast speed of reaction to these changes.

However, due to ethical and practical considerations on our personal academic and family burdens at the

[9] In Polish sociology, "hot" sociology (*socjologia gorąca*) is used more often, which could also be translated as "instant," "topical," or "engaged sociology." It is a rather intuitive term since there is no formal definition in sociological literature. We understand it as conducting research on atypical phenomena taking place at the same time as the research is being conducted, very often in crisis circumstances.

time (conducting research started before the pandemic or related to the pandemic, online teaching, and childcare), as well as the complex emotions prevailing among researchers, we had qualms about involving people in research in a situation similar to ours. Ultimately, we recognized that carrying out research during a time of crisis could be of therapeutic value to the participants by providing an opportunity to share difficult experiences, opinions, and emotions.

In the second step, we had to decide on a specific research technique. Firstly, we did not want to expose the participants to the risk of harm (compromising health due to potential COVID-19 infection), so we immediately abandoned the idea of conducting contact research (offline interviews). Secondly, we wanted to ensure that participation in the planned study did not require extensive time and logistical commitment from the participants, causing discomfort (cf. Clarke and Demetriou 2016; Davey et al. 2019). Therefore, for practical reasons, we opted out of online interviews, which require equipment, good internet connection, digital competence, and the organization of an intimate space in flats by researchers and participants (cf. Rahman et al. 2021). Thirdly, we had no external funding, and our time resources were limited.

We were also concerned about the critical reception of the survey form by future participants. We expected our survey to be one of the many links sent to researchers' emails at a time of increased communication in the online space (cf. Meskell, Houghton, and Biesty 2021). The above concerns were compounded by the fact that we all tend to use interaction-based methods (IDIs, ethnographic observations) in our daily research work, the foundation of which is prolonged, direct contact with participants, which makes research interactions unique and allows for greater influence on the research situation.

At the time, we did not know how long the pandemic would last. Wishing to avoid a lengthy conceptualization and operationalization phase, we rejected the option of a quantitative survey. The exploratory purpose of the research was also in favor of choosing an OQS. It required a flexible technique oriented toward a broad view of the phenomenon under study. An OQS—structured to a small extent, consisting of open-ended questions involving a broad spectrum of experiences—seemed to meet these conditions (cf. Braun et al. 2020; Toerien and Wilkinson 2004).

OQS was rarely used in Polish academic sociology as a research technique but was used in social and market research. Before the pandemic, one of us had had experience using an OQS as an effective research technique in application research (diagnostic and evaluation) in the field of culture and education. This was research subordinated to practical considerations (short timetables, small budgets), carried out without in-depth conceptualization (exploratory, predictive, and evaluative objectives), and aimed at developing practical recommendations. The conditions for conducting rapid and relatively low-cost evaluative research seemed to resemble the uncertain and rapid-response circumstances of a pandemic crisis.

Beyond ethical and practical arguments, our greatest concerns were related to the fact that the qualitative survey is perceived in the sociological community as an illegitimate research technique—neither qualitative nor quantitative. We have diverse epistemological approaches in our research team, which is due to our different professional backgrounds: we have a background in sociology or sociology and

anthropology; we come from different academic centers (oriented toward academic sociology or interdisciplinary, oriented toward applied research); we have different embedding in the academic world (the three of us have combined academia with applied and market research); we work in different qualitative paradigms (mainly symbolic-interactionist and feminist, but each of us also has experience in quantitative research). Nonetheless, our concerns about the adoption of research using the OQS technique in the sociological community were shared, as we perceive the sociological community in Poland as methodologically conservative (cf. Konecki 2020), having repeatedly encountered in our careers the depreciation of qualitative research, the use of quantitative criteria to evaluate it, and distrust of research techniques that deviate from accepted definitions or borrow from applied research. In deciding on the OQS, we were therefore oriented toward the need to use arguments from the repertoire of both qualitative and quantitative research to justify the value of this technique for academic sociology, as is reflected in the argumentation that follows.

Authors' Experiences: Collecting Data via OQS

Data collection was safe and comfortable for both us and the participants (no one was exposed to COVID-19 infection or much interference in their daily lives through the survey). Thus, we minimized the risk of harm to research participants, which is one of the key goals of research ethics.

Giving study participants power over the extent of information they would share with us was, we felt, a step toward equalizing the power position in the researcher-participant relationship (cf. Toerien and Wilkinson 2004; Frith and Gleeson 2008).

The OQS proved to be a technique that allowed for anonymity (cf. Toerien and Wilkinson 2004; Grogan and Mechan 2017; Terry and Braun 2017), which is important in the context of surveying one's professional group to obtain reliable data and a sense of security. During analysis, our colleague was unable to recognize her statements in the dataset. She noticed that many of the responses were similar to each other, and she was unable to recall the specific words in which she described her experience at that time. The feelings written down in the heat of the moment were, according to her, characterized by brevity, little reflection, disorder, and the use of common, uncharacteristic phrases. The answers given were taken out of the context of the biography and, after some time, even their author found it difficult to identify with them (the software did not allow participants to keep a copy of their responses). At the same time, they were given a new context—that of other statements in the collection—which, on the one hand, ensured the anonymity of the individual narratives and, on the other hand, allowed for a thematic analysis of the materials as a whole.

The qualitative survey contained three simple open-ended questions and was easy to fill in. Moreover, the survey was to be conducted among social scientists and humanities researchers working in academic institutions and research agencies, that is, among the intellectual elite with the linguistic competence to freely provide longer written statements (cf. Doliński and Żurko 2016).

The weakness of the chosen technique was the lack of control over the selection process sampling (we had no knowledge of who took part in our study) (cf. Braun et al. 2013). From the analytical point of view, it would be valuable to get as diverse a sample as possible in terms of the academic career stage of the

participants, their place of employment, and their discipline to reach different people with potentially diverse experiences. In the end, 193 people participated in the survey, which we consider a satisfactory result, given that we recorded 569 clicks on the questionnaire link. Moreover, 109 people left their contact details and expressed willingness to participate in the next stage of the research, resigning from their anonymity (cf. Daniels et al. 2020). However, the structure of the sample shows that men were more motivated to fill in the questionnaire than women; there were more representatives of public institutions than private entities; scholars with PhD constituted 39% of the sample; the sample was also dominated by social scientists. This structure may also be proof that the survey was filled in mostly by people of similar professional status to us, who came from our circles of colleagues and whose academic careers resembled ours. It seems that we might not have reached many people whose experiences are very different from ours.

The weakest element of the tool was the demographics, which included open and closed questions. Whilst analyzing the filled-in answers, we realized that information about demographics may have been more useful if asked as closed and standardized questions. Our decision to leave them as open-ended questions caused problems in characterizing the sample. In one question, we asked study participants to self-describe their position in the academic world using various characteristics: "Career/academic stage (e.g., degree/title/profession, position/function in team, seniority)." This resulted in obtaining data that were difficult to compare and aggregate, as some people gave their professional degree or academic title here, while others gave the name of the position or function held. These data were used to characterize the sample and were not intended to be analyzed qualitatively (although they may be). At the further stage of the research, incomplete data from the demographics made it difficult to recruit people for the IDIs. For example, it was not always possible to deduce from the available information what stage of career a person was at,[10] and this was, along with gender, one of the main criteria for sample selection for the interviews.

We were able to execute the study expeditiously. It took only two months from its original conception to the completion of the data collection phase. The first partial results were presented at the end of the first wave of the pandemic (see Męcfal et al. 2020). The choice of an OQS as a research technique proved practical. The research was feasible during social isolation; it could be started without delay; and required no financial support (cf. Clarke 2016; Terry and Braun 2016).

Despite all the challenges mentioned above, OQS proved to have great analytical value. It allowed us to construct typologies of ethical strategies (nothing has changed, opportunity-oriented, and precautionary) and research methods approaches (resignation, suspension, continuation, and research (re)construction), which occurred during the first phase of the pandemic. The analytical unit in these analyses was a research project, not an individual researcher—as researchers applied different strategies in different projects (Kalinowska et al. 2022; Surmiak, Bielska, and Kalinowska 2022).

[10] As evidenced by the sample self-descriptive characteristics of survey participants: 'senior lecturer, so a non-research position' (ID148), 'market researcher' (ID194), 'account manager' (ID196), 'Project manager' (ID227), 'Director, member of the governing body' (ID329), 'Formerly manager of large major projects, mainly in the public sector, now freelancer' (ID370), 'Advanced' (ID484).

Some contributions were lengthy, illustrated with examples, with thoughtful composition, and were similar in nature to the data obtained in journal or diary studies. An example of this type of in-depth material is the following response to a question about the problems of implementing research in a pandemic.

> In December of the previous year [2019], I had scheduled my dissertation research for March-April 2020, unknowingly, at an epidemiological peak. My dissertation schedule was very tight, and postponing the completion of the research would have posed a serious risk of the whole plan crashing. This tension stemmed from the changes introduced by the new Higher Education Act on those who had opened a dissertation procedure under the "previous system." In a word, if the scientific council does not approve my PhD defense before 31.12.2021, my PhD procedure will be closed with negative consequences—no one knows what will happen next, the world will end and the ships will fall into the abyss from the border of the flat seas. To prevent this drama, I had to make changes to the formula for the planned research. I decided to try to conduct biographical interviews online. The biographical method presupposes very precise rules of conduct at every stage of implementation (from material collection to analysis and interpretation), and online activities are not among these rules. This may also be due to the fact that the formula originated in the second half of the 20th century and has remained essentially unchanged since, protected by a scientific community that diligently guards its purity. The decision to conduct online research was therefore fraught with some risk of encountering criticism of rule violations. However, I had made the assumption that the epidemiological situation could drag on for many months, and I did not have the option of changing the biographical interviews to other research solutions (...), so action had to be taken if I wanted to write a PhD at all. At first, I envisaged doing just a little exploratory work—doing 1-2 interviews to embrace whether such a formula could work. [ID95]

Some people answered the same question in shorter but specific terms, as in these quotes.

> In our project, we planned qualitative research, strictly semi-structured face-to-face interviews. An epidemic situation forced us to carry them out through a telephone interview. [ID87]

> Lack of opportunity for direct contact with respondents. [ID1]

> Lack of access to libraries, which was a place to work and a source of literature. [ID55]

Other contributions were brief, not in-depth, or provided fragmentary information that could not be deepened due to the one-off, asynchronous nature of the contact with the participants (e.g., numerous contributions such as "Change in methodology," "Nothing has changed" regarding the impact of the pandemic on the research) (cf. Opperman et al. 2014). Some contributions indicated a misunderstanding of the question by the participants or provided answers that were difficult to interpret clearly, for example, in the statement by a professor of pedagogy: "Since I am conducting qualitative research, COVID-19 did not prevent me from doing it."

We also noted missing responses in a few surveys, which is also a risk characteristic of quantitative surveys. We initially struggled to decide how to analyze such a heterogeneous dataset but were helped by the instructions in Braun and col-

leagues' (2020) text on strategies for analyzing OQS data as an *entire* dataset.

Participants' Experiences

In the second phase of the study, we were joined by the fourth researcher, who had completed our survey. When we invited the new team member, we did not know that she had been an OQS participant. From the point of view of the participant, a sociologist teaching social sciences methodology, the research tool seemed disappointing, flawed, and chaotic. The three short open-ended questions seemed to her clearly insufficient to investigate such a complex and new social situation as the pandemic. This discouraged her from taking the survey seriously and resulted in her completing it unenthusiastically, failing to elaborate or leave her contact details. At the same time, she noted that taking the survey was possible despite the many teaching and emotional burdens she experienced at the start of the pandemic, as it required relatively little involvement in formulating the responses. The unobliging form of the survey helped her to overcome initial ethical doubts about conducting research with people in the first wave of the pandemic.

There were also other critical reactions to our survey. Several participants did not address the questions in the answer boxes. This is exemplified by these entries posted by participants in response to a question about thoughts on conducting research during a pandemic.

> It is not good to invent artificial problems. [ID484]

> The scientific system should take a better look at the topics of the funded work (some, pardon the pun, bullshit about 'gender on Mexican television'). Why waste money on that? [ID273]

The format of the questions discouraged some participants from giving an honest, comprehensive, and thoughtful answer. One person gave us email feedback that they had expected more detailed questions. Another posted a comment directly on the form regarding our research, rating a survey containing only open-ended questions as uncomfortable. In this entry by a psychologist, the critique of the tool was formulated from the perspective of a quantitative researcher working in a positivist paradigm, treated as the default way of doing research.

> I have spent a lot of time making sure that my research (those related to the pandemic, but also those I have done before and now continue to do) is of good quality, with the following main considerations:
> 1. A form that will be as easy as possible for the respondents (because I think it is a sign of respect for them. It's also making sure that, having taken part in my research, they want to take part in the research of others, too).
> 2. When planning a study, I always try to know how I am going to analyze the data (this is probably obvious to you, too—because making hypotheses is done by everyone) and what I want to test, to describe.
> In my opinion, giving people open-ended questions alone doesn't meet any of these criteria. But I don't know, maybe there's a survey further down the line rather than blanks for an online qualitative interview. [ID65]

There were few such critical reactions. However, it can be argued that these participants had a sense of wasted time and effort. On the other hand, the survey was so short that this individual 'cost' can be considered small.

However, we each also received a lot of positive feedback via email or phone calls, in which the researchers wished us well and expressed gratitude that they were able to share their perspectives.

To sum up, the experience of the Authors and Participants shows the specificity of the use of the OQS during the social crisis in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in three dimensions: ethical, methodological, and practical.

In the ethical dimension, OQS was beneficial to the ethical conduct of research because it did not generate a risk of COVID-19 infection, gave participants control over the research process, although with limited freedom of expression, and a high sense of comfort and anonymity with no face-to-face contact and simple logistics. In the methodological dimension, OQS was characterized by a low level of difficulty and a small burden on participants and allowed responses to be collected from a diverse and fairly large group. It was suitable for this particular group of participants (researchers able to construct complex written statements). We had, however, limited control over the selection process, as the survey was based on indirect communication with participants, and there was no possibility for data deepening. On a practical level, the OQS allowed for rapid conceptualization and data collection, involved very little organizational effort, and did not require fundraising. The legitimation of the technique in the sociological community was also questioned.

OQS and Other Techniques Applied during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Comparison

To more accurately capture the specificity of the application of the OQS in the pandemic crisis, we decided to make a comparison with other sociological research techniques. We chose some qualitative and quantitative techniques, similar to an OQS, which appeared in the literature about research conducted during the pandemic. It was also important for us to include in the comparison techniques based on direct and indirect communication with participants; therefore, we excluded collaborative autoethnography. We started from Lutyński's (1969]) classification of research techniques, but we also selected for our comparison those techniques that are popular in Polish sociology and have some characteristics similar to the qualitative survey (such as non-standardized written statements). As a result, we proposed a comparative description of the OQS with CAWI (quantitative survey), IDIs, and non-standardized written statements (e.g., diaries) in terms of ethical, methodological, and practical criteria.

We used criteria developed in two analytical stages: first, we compared the selected techniques according to research process phases; second, we additionally applied the empirical categories used in the description of our experiences. Some of the criteria we applied for the purpose of this comparison were relevant to the research participants (P), some to the researchers (R), and others to both sides involved in the research (B).

Firstly, OQS use is ethical because, unlike, for example, more intrusive online interviews, the participant has a great deal of control over the extent of the information provided. In an OQS, the researcher and the participant share control over the research process, which may reduce power imbalances in the research interaction. This seems particularly important during social crises, which, due to their unpredictability and the breakdown of the known social order, can cause great stress and emotional strain, as in the case of the

first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a crisis context, it may be one of the principal ethical solutions to pay attention to such a social research design in which the individual has a sense of agency. In addition, an OQS, like other forms of research based on indirect communication (e.g., diaries, quantitative survey; e.g., Krajewski et al. 2021; Łukianow et al. 2021), ensures comfort for both participants and researchers, as there is no need for a face-to-face encounter in a mutually convenient setting—an issue that is difficult to achieve in a social crisis involving, among other things, the risk of infection with a deadly disease. Avoiding the risk of harm is, therefore, indicative of the ethicality of the OQS from the point of view of both sides participating in the research. Moreover, compared to diaries or online IDIs (with the use of software for video calls), in an OQS, it is also difficult to identify the participant, which may give those completing the survey a sense of security (see Table 1 for a summary of the ethical dimension).

Table 1. Ethical dimension of selected techniques available in the pandemic crisis

Feature	Online Qualitative Survey (OQS)	Online Quantitative Survey (CAWI)	Non-standardized written statements (e.g., diaries)	Online in-depth interview (IDI)
Risk of harm (COVID-19) - B	none	none	none	none
Relations of power and control over the research process - B	Participants' control over the research process. Limited freedom of expression for the participant.	Researcher's control over the research process. No participant influence on the research tool (no freedom of expression).	Participants' control over the research process. Freedom of expression.	Researcher's control over the research process. Freedom of expression.
Comfort - B	High sense of comfort. No face-to-face contact. Simple logistics.	High sense of comfort. No face-to-face contact. Simple logistics.	High sense of comfort. No face-to-face contact. Simple logistics.	Low sense of comfort. Technical, logistic, and interaction limitations.
Sense of anonymity - P	High sense of anonymity	High sense of anonymity	Medium sense of anonymity	Low sense of anonymity

Source: Self-elaboration. B—from both sides, R—researcher's side, P—participant's side.

Secondly, an OQS is advantageous in times of social crisis for methodological reasons, as it is a smaller burden for participants than diaries or online IDIs. Not every participant is able to produce an elaborate narrative, especially at a time of high social uncertainty and high stress. Then, an OQS is an easy technique from the point of view of the participants, although it seems to be more effective for those able to build complex written statements. Moreover, an OQS allows for reaching a geographically diverse and larger number

of potential survey participants—an advantage also often highlighted in the literature (Braun et al. 2020; Prosen 2022). Furthermore, as with CAWI, an OQS allows for rapid data collection, which is crucial when trying to capture a phenomenon or opinion in a dynamically changing social reality. On the other hand, the researcher has limited control over sample selection, which is a methodological limitation of an OQS. In addition, due to the indirect contact between the two sides involved in the research, the researchers do not have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions (a standard practice whilst conducting IDIs and a major advantage of the direct contact with a participant). At the same time, an OQS differs from a CAWI in its level of standardization (open versus closed questions) (cf. Terry and Braun 2017; Thomas et al. 2024), which is its strength in the case of crisis research. In times of the pandemic social crisis, and especially in its first phases, it can be difficult for participants to find themselves in closed conceptual categories created by researchers, so an OQS with open questions seems to be a more suitable technique for almost any category of participants than CAWIs. Moreover, researchers themselves may find it difficult to create such a standardized research tool that is adapted to a new and unpredictable social phenomenon (see Table 2 for a summary of the methodological dimension).

The third argument for the use of an OQS in times of social crises is practicality, which is particularly important from the point of view of researchers. An OQS allows quick research responses because it does not require, like an online IDI, a lengthy process of conceptualization and creating research tools. Research using an OQS can be launched and implemented quickly. Furthermore, such a technique is inexpensive, as it can be used without external resources, which is a major advantage over other techniques involving written statements or IDIs. In addition, it proves effective in situations of social isolation, provided that potential participants have access to a computer and the internet and have basic digital competencies. An OQS can also, as Daniels and colleagues (2020) write, provide a good basis for further research, such as IDIs. However, in our experience, to use an OQS in this way, the demographics need to be standardized so that we know exactly who participated in the study and had the possibility to leave their contact details (the practical dimension is summarized in Table 3).

Despite the mentioned ethical, methodological, and practical advantages, we also recognize the limitations of OQSs. For example, the lack of knowledge of the direct responses to the questions asked, as in the case of an online IDI, means that it is often difficult to fully interpret the obtained statements. We agree with the opinions that this technique could provide rich data, but not always does (cf. Rivano Eckerdal and Hagström 2017; Braun et al. 2020). One of the obstacles to obtaining in-depth statements is the lack of possibility, mentioned in the literature, to question participants about issues of interest, which means that the information obtained may differ significantly in length and degree of depth (Daniels et al. 2020; Prosen 2022). In our experience, there is also a risk that the inclusion of only a few open-ended questions in the questionnaire, rather than encouraging free and thoughtful statements (Braun et al. 2020; Daniels et al. 2020), will result in little commitment to participating in the survey and brief answers. In our opinion, this technique allows not so much for deep insights but for a broad view/overview of the phenomena under investigation, that is, for capturing certain impressions and emotions and collecting general reflections, especially in the initial phases of a crisis when other ways of contact with potential participants are much more challenging.

Table 2. Methodological dimension of selected techniques available in the pandemic crisis

Feature	Online Qualitative Survey (OQS)	Online Quantitative Survey (CAWI)	Non-standardized written statements (e.g., diaries)	Online in-depth interview (IDI)
Research tool – level of difficulty, burden on participants - P	Easy to fill in research tool, few questions, small burden	Easy to fill in research tool, many questions, medium burden	General instructions from researchers; freedom of the participant's form of expression; burden under participant's control	Interview script: questions asked by the researcher, big burden due to lengthy research process
Sample – diversity and size - R	Possibility of reaching a diverse group of people, also geographically; large sample in a short time	Possibility of reaching a diverse group of people, also geographically; large sample in a short time	Possibility of reaching a diverse group of people, also geographically; possibility of reaching large sample, but over a long time	Possibility of reaching geographically diverse group; small sample over a longer time
Sample – availability of the technique for participants, conditions of participation - P	Suitable for most groups of participants; more effective in case of people able to build complex written statements	Suitable for most groups of participants	More suitable for people able to build narration	More suitable for people able to build narration
Sample – control over selection process - R	Limited control over the sample selection process; social media/ internet	Limited control over the sample selection process; social media/ internet	Sample selection based on availability; sampling by ads on social media, on websites, or in the press	Purposive sampling, or following 'sample theoretical saturation,' greater control over sampling
Type of researcher –participant contact - B	Indirect communication; no contact	Indirect communication; no contact	Indirect communication; no contact	Direct communication, synchronic contact
Influence on the research situation - R	None; no possibility for data deepening	None; no possibility for data deepening	None; no possibility for data deepening	Big influence; possibility for data deepening

Source: Self-elaboration. B—from both sides, R—researcher's side, P—participant's side.

Table 3. Practical dimension of selected techniques available in the pandemic crisis

Feature	Online Qualitative Survey (OQS)	Online Quantitative Survey (CAWI)	Non-standardized written statements (e.g., diaries)	Online in-depth interview (IDI)
Time – speed of conceptualization - R	fast	slow	fast	slow
Time – speed of reaction - R	fast	fast	slow	slow
Time – duration of research - B	short	short	long	long
Organizational issues, e.g., software, internet connection, equipment - B	Low logistic requirements	Low logistic requirements	Low logistic requirements	High logistic requirements
Organizational issues – funds - R	Low cost of research	Low cost of research	Medium cost of research (organization and development may be costly)	High cost of research

Source: Self-elaboration. B—from both sides, R—researcher's side, P—participant's side.

Discussion

Our article reinforces the position expressed by Norman Denzin and Michael Giardina (2012), among others, according to whom the opposition of qualitative research-quantitative research is unfounded. Therefore, although OQS has an unclear status in the spectrum of research techniques, its mixed "nature" could be its advantage. The analysis of our experience confirms the advantages and disadvantages of OQS mentioned in the literature, supplementing them with features of the OQS rarely referred to. Additional disadvantages of OQS include: not understanding the question by participants, getting vague and difficult to analyze answers, feeling uncomfortable by participants, and weak legitimization in the community of researchers from a given discipline (in our case, Polish sociologists). The last of the mentioned disadvantages depends, to an extent, on an individual researcher. However, in the context of the remaining remarks, a question may arise as to whether the listed disadvantages concern the technique in question or rather indicate a lack of our research skills. We believe that this is at least partly related to OQS being applied in a situation of a new and unpredictable social crisis when there is no time for meticulous, long-term preparation of a research tool because the social reality that is being attempted to be captured is changing very quickly. In the case of additional advantages of OQS, rare-

ly mentioned in the literature, we have highlighted ethical issues related to ensuring the comfort and well-being of research participants and researchers. In our opinion, this is one of the reasons for the usefulness of this technique during social crises such as the first wave of the pandemic.

In our opinion, OQS is particularly useful for pilot studies because it not only captures the picture of the phenomenon, allows collecting data that will help design the sample selection, but also allows gathering contacts for conducting further qualitative research.

Limitations of Our Research

As this study concentrated only on researchers in Poland, different responses could have been observed from researchers in other countries. The sample was not typical for social research: the participants were researchers themselves, so they had a better understanding of the research process and were probably highly motivated. As the data were gathered in the first wave of the pandemic (an unfamiliar situation to most), the conclusions could not be directly applied to circumstances in other waves.

Conclusions

Drawing on our experience of using an OQS during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have argued that a qualitative survey is a useful technique during a social crisis since, despite certain limitations, it allows for reaching a selected category of participants quickly, cheaply, and safely for participants as well as for researchers. It is also an inclusive technique: it allows participation even in the situation of location or time constraints, and it offers anonymity for people from hidden populations and comfort while discussing sensitive topics. An OQS does not overburden the participants and respects their comfort and anonymity.

Additionally, this method creates the possibility of obtaining rich empirical primary data and allows researchers to capture a broad and accurate idea of research phenomena. In our case, an OQS allowed us to understand how differently researchers responded to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, such a method is suited to a situation in which the researcher attempts to capture crisis-related changes. The listed characteristics give OQSs an advantage over other standardized and non-standardized data collection techniques during a social crisis. In our opinion, this applies to social crises where contact research may involve various forms of potential risk of harm, not only physical but also psychological (e.g., due to a high sense of anxiety and threat in potential participants).

To conclude, an OQS is a method suited for a specific purpose (reaching a broad idea of a research phenomenon) in a specific context (rapid unpredicted social change that creates a context in which traditional research methods may harm and/or overburden participants), especially when the possibility of face-to-face contact with participants is limited.

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