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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONDUCTING SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK REMOTELY: A METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIVE IN QUEST OF TRUST IN AFRICAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Crisis contexts, particularly those related to security and health, seem to increasingly impose new practices on researchers in the collection of field data. Whereas anthropological or sociological fieldwork was once conducted through face-to-face interactions between the researcher and the subject, or even through the researcher's immersion in the group being studied, the inaccessibility of field sites due to a variety of causes, has now led to new approaches facilitated by digital technology. Do remote surveys enjoy the trust of the participants? The data addressing this question were collected both in person and remotely as part of a qualitative approach. The results highlight a lack of trust on the part of both potential respondents and the researchers themselves. For the researchers, the trust issue stems from concerns about depth and the pursuit of objectivity inherent in any research that claims to be scientific. In remote data collection, there is a loss of all the nonverbal cues that are, however, a valuable resource for the qualitative researcher. On the part of respondents, the lack of trust stems from the specific nature of digital tools, which facilitate the dissemination of information and thereby expose the participants. In this context, the researcher's verbal commitment to upholding ethical principles and maintaining the confidentiality of the collected data is not sufficient to convince them.

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INTRODUCTION

The existence of research standards does not shield scientific practice from the tides of time and societal transformations that often disrupt traditions. In the social sciences, direct, *in vivo*, *in situ* contact with the situations and populations under study has been the preferred practice for decades (Héas and Régnier 2022). Historically indispensable in anthropology and ethnology, conducting fieldwork has become a mark of scientific rigor in research across several disciplines (Palé *et al.* 2020). However, multiple crisis contexts that have rendered many field sites inaccessible, coupled with the growth of computerized communication networks worldwide (Jean 2015), have given rise to new methods of data collection: remote data collection using digital technologies. This is a process aimed at obtaining information from a group or community without the researcher's physical presence or face-to-face interaction with the individuals involved. This unfamiliar data collection method, which is gaining ground, raises a number of questions. Does this digital remote data collection enjoy the trust of the participants? What relationship do researcher-practitioners have with such a methodological approach? What level of credibility do respondents attribute to the remote data collector using digital technology?. The aim of this text is to provide some answers to these questions in order to shed light on this relatively new way of producing data, particularly in qualitative sociology and anthropology within an African context.

METHODS

The study was conducted using a primarily qualitative methodology that combined face-to-face and remote surveys of researchers and other stakeholders from various backgrounds (students, public officials, merchants, internally displaced persons). The field survey took place in two cities in Burkina Faso: Ouagadougou, the capital, where the in-person survey was conducted, and Kaya in the North-Central region, for the remote data collection. In total, forty-eight (48) people were interviewed, including twenty-two (22) people as part of the remote survey in the city of Kaya and twenty-six (26) people in Ouagadougou for the face-to-face survey. The individual semi-structured interviews conducted remotely were carried out via telephone calls or WhatsApp voice calls. The average duration of these interviews was twenty (20) minutes, while that of the in-person interviews was thirty-five (35) minutes. Data were collected in two phases (the first took place in October 2024 and the second in February 2025) and until saturation was reached. This refers to the "phenomenon that occurs after a certain period in qualitative research when the data being collected are no longer new. All efforts to collect new information are therefore rendered futile. Since what is gathered

then falls within already known frameworks, the research can be stopped (Mucchielli 1991:116). The sampling techniques used were purposive sampling and the snowball method. The latter technique was used primarily to reach internally displaced persons (IDPs) following the terrorist attacks. These individuals were invited to recount their lives as displaced persons, how they experienced the attacks, their escape routes, their current living conditions, and the difficulties they face in the host city of Kaya. This topic was chosen for remote data collection due to its relative sensitivity, in order to better gauge the reactions of respondents when faced with a researcher they do not know (or know only slightly) who is interested in their situation. We were introduced by a local social worker who assists these displaced persons with the distribution of food and non-food items. The data collected via smartphone or directly on the interview guides (some people refused to have their comments recorded) were transcribed and subjected to a qualitative thematic content analysis (Grawitz 2001). Emphasis was placed on the discursive dimension of the discourse by framing the interviews not merely as a collection of opinions or expert testimony, but as a discussion in which the researcher develops their own theses and, to a certain extent, engages in dialogue with a "colleague" (Dubet 1994). The thematic analysis, which was conducted manually, involved identifying all passages in the interviews that seemed significant, then identifying, organizing, and classifying the themes that emerged.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Remote qualitative data collection has become a standard practice in contemporary qualitative research, particularly in contexts of multiple crises (health crises such as COVID-19, terrorism, wars, etc.) that have rendered many research sites inaccessible. Traditionally based on face-to-face data collection, qualitative research has had to adapt its methodological approaches in order to continue producing data despite physical distancing . Several dimensions of this methodological innovation are discussed in the scholarly literature. Thus, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research is grounded in an interpretive logic aimed at understanding the meanings that participants attribute to their actions. Within this framework, the interaction between the researcher-data collector and the participant constitutes a central element of data production. The shift to remote research reconfigures this interaction by introducing technological mediations that influence relational dynamics and the construction of meaning. According to Mann and Stewart (2000), online research is not simply a transposition of traditional methods, but a transformation of the very conditions of the investigation. In the same vein, Hine (2015) notes that digital environments must be understood as fields in their own right, endowed with specific social logics.

From a methodological standpoint, the issue of the quality of data collected remotely remains a focal point of debate. Some researchers highlight a potential loss of contextual richness, while others emphasize that digital tools can facilitate data recording, transcription, and analysis (Namey *et al*. 2020). Furthermore, remote data collection can improve access to hard-to-reach populations, but it can also exacerbate inequalities linked to the digital divide (Roberts *et al*. 2021). Access to technology, digital skills, and material conditions influence participation. From an ethical standpoint, remote data collection poses specific challenges. The protection of personal data, the security of data exchanges, and informed consent must be adapted to digital environments (Townsend & Wallace 2016). Furthermore, online observation raises questions about the distinction between public and private spaces, as well as the legitimacy of using data available online without explicit consent. Some authors, however, remain optimistic regarding the legitimization of remote research in the academic world. According to Lobe *et al*. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of this method, contributing to its legitimization within the scientific community. However, such a stance warrants qualification in the African context, which has many unique characteristics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results can be organized into three main areas: the stakeholders' relationship to remote research, the foundations of this relationship, and finally, an epistemological approach to this data collection method.

Remote Data Collection Method: Several methods of remote data collection exist, and it can be difficult to establish a universally accepted typology. However, they can be grouped according to the digital tool or technology at the center of the data collection process. In this sense, we can distinguish between telephone surveys on the one hand and online surveys on the other.

The qualitative telephone survey: The concept of a survey encompasses a range of technically distinct investigative methods, all of which employ a declarative approach involving the questioning of individuals whose responses constitute the informational content (Caumont 2016). While the practice may be considered in its infancy in Africa, the use of the telephone to collect data in Western countries dates back several decades (Larmarange *et al*. 2016). More generally, telephone surveys involve interviewing people over the phone using an interview guide or questionnaire. In addition to so-called simple telephone interviews (without computer or software assistance), they include computer-assisted telephone interviews (where humans make the calls and collect information that is recorded on a computer, smartphone, or tablet), interactive response systems (software automatically calls respondents and collects information by guiding them through pre-recorded voice messages),and short message service (SMS) surveys (software sends short messages to respondents, who also submit their responses via SMS), all of which involve the use of a telephone, particularly a mobile phone, by both the interviewer and the respondents.

The online qualitative survey: There is no denying today that the internet has had a real impact on social science research (Frippiat and Marquis 2010). Like many other sectors, the world of research has viewed the internet as a major technological breakthrough (Ganassali and Moscarola, 2004): online data collection. Online surveys, also known as internet surveys or web surveys, refer to any method of data collection in which survey instruments are sent via the internet to respondents who have the option of responding online. Interview guides can be sent to respondents through various means, such as email, social media, or integration on a website, etc. Virtual focus groups and what some authors (Hine 2000) have termed digital ethnography (online observation) can be grouped under this type of survey. Online focus groups offer the

possibility of bringing together participants located in different geographic contexts. They can be synchronous (videoconferencing) or asynchronous (forums, digital platforms). Digital ethnography involves observing social interactions in online spaces such as social media, forums, or virtual communities. Kozinets (2015) uses the term "netnography" to refer to this adaptation of traditional ethnography to the digital environment.

In online surveys, respondents provide answers online using a web browser and the website's homepage. Survey responses are generally stored in online databases.

Regarding remote data collection methods: be wary of improvisation: When many stakeholders, particularly researchers, are faced with a choice between in-person, face-to-face data collection and remote data collection, they express a preference for in-person methods and consider remote collection only as a last resort. "Anthropology, just like qualitative sociology, is about fieldwork. And for an anthropologist, conducting fieldwork means engaging with informants in a professional manner to obtain the desired information. The researcher's presence in the field is always desired, if not required" (Faculty member). Thus, understanding the phenomenon within its context of production seems essential for the qualitative researcher. As Paillé and Mucchielli (2003:24) write, "qualitative analysis is first and foremost a phenomenological act, an experience of the lifeworld, an experiential transaction, an activity of meaning-making that cannot in any way be reduced to technical operations." Here lies a concern for immersion and lively interaction that drives the researcher and which they seem to present as indispensable for grasping the fullness of the social.

It is true that science advances by trial and error, but if we are not careful, remote research is a makeshift approach that risks stripping the social sciences of their axiological dimension Ly impoverishing them and bringing the old debate over their scientificity back to the forefront. "The remote researcher is unfamiliar with the data collection environment and the respondent, who provides information tailored to and adjusted for the context of the distance separating them." (Lecturer-researcher). Thus, remote data collection does not inspire confidence. It is even described as a makeshift approach that could undermine the robustness of the social sciences. But where does this perception come from, and what is it based on?

The Roots of the Lack of Trust in Remote Data Collection: The objections, or rather the reservations raised regarding remote data collection methods, generally relate to the presumed relative paucity of the resulting data and the scientific validity of the obtained results.

The poor quality of the data: The goal of any empirical research is to obtain as much and as diverse a set of data as possible, enabling researchers to answer the initial questions fairly easily and convincingly. On this point, doubts are often raised regarding the ability of remote data collection methods to meet this goal. The main issues at stake are the problem of non-response in quantitative surveys and the failure to account for the symbolic dimension of communication in the remote collection of qualitative data**.**

The Problem of Non-Response: Non-response to a survey is one of the most critical factors affecting the quality of research results (Groves 2004). Total non-response occurs when the respondent refuses to answer or cannot be contacted, whereas partial non-response occurs when the respondent does not answer part of the survey (Bornand and Feraud 2023). Some authors have observed an upward trend in non-response rates in surveys in recent years (Groves *et al*. 2009). "In our countries, where telephone networks are unstable and internet access is limited, collecting data by telephone or via the internet is not recommended. Generally, the response rate is low due to these uncertainties" (Professor-researcher). According to Brignier and Dupont (2005), this type of survey faces a twofold challenge: on the one hand, the rise in refusals to participate; on the other hand, the reduced accessibility of certain individuals. Even when the target population is fully reachable via the Internet, it is highly likely that a certain number of non-responses will skew the data, as this type of survey typically yields a relatively low response rate (Frippiat and Marquis, 2010). In developing countries in particular, in addition to low coverage, network failures (telephone and internet) and the digital divide push potential respondents to do the bare minimum to optimize their data usage, if not the connection itself failing, causing them in turn to abandon the researcher to their own fate.

The Lack of Symbolic Communication in Remote Interviews: The interview is characterized by both verbal and nonverbal interaction between the researcher and the interviewee. Conducting qualitative research is a way of examining social reality. Rather than seeking the right answers, qualitative research is also concerned with formulating the right questions (Kohn and Christiaens, 2014). Hence the importance of symbolic communication, which refers to all communication activities in which signs conveying a particular meaningful function are used. These nonverbal symbolic productions include gestures, body movements, images, objects, or drawings that research participants perform spontaneously or at the researcher's prompting as the study unfolds. Despite the methods for processing verbal language in the interview, the information obtained remains insufficient to account for the phenomenon in all its complexity. "The role of immersion in qualitative research is above all to allow the researcher to grasp the nonverbal through the other senses; what the ear cannot obtain or decode." (Professor-researcher). As Durand (1981) notes, people do not speak only with words, but also with their bodies, with objects, and through their organization of space and time. This is why symbolic communication in qualitative research is of such importance that it gives the research its full substance and richness. The human body is not only a vehicle for sensations and emotions, but it also carries meanings and significance that are quite valuable to the qualitative researcher. "Nonverbal cues can be used to control, filter, nuance, or even contrast the verbal responses provided by the respondent" (Professor-researcher). Yet, more often than not, researchers ignore or overlook these elements, which are a true treasure trove (Albarello 1999).

The reliability of the collected data: Assuming an excellent response rate in the quantitative survey and a wealth of verbal communication in remote interviews, one of the major concerns regarding telephone surveys is the quality of the collected data,specifically, its relevance. This may be due to false responses resulting from errors or misunderstandings on the

part of respondents, or to insincere answers reflecting varying degrees of resistance on the part of the respondents.

Given the researcher's absence from the field, in addition to misinterpretations of questions, forms of resistance,such as the desire to please the interviewer, the desire to provide a prestigious answer, or the desire to conceal a humiliating situation (Quivy and Van Campenhoudt 1995),may be employed to provide the researcher with poor-quality information. "There are things you can't say over the phone; anyone who wants to interview me this way should already know that and be satisfied with what we can tell them. Even with my wife, if it's over the phone, I'll hold back" (Public official; February 2025). Thus, respondents tend to adapt to this type of survey, characterized by mutual invisibility and the use of a tool deemed inappropriate for gathering intimate details or certain personal data. Despite the contact initiated by the social worker with whom the IDPs are in constant interaction, the displaced persons settled in the city of Kay remain reserved and seem to view the researcher's in-person presence in the field as an indispensable condition for a sincere and detailed account of their experiences of the terrorist attacks and the life they lead in the host city. "There's a lot to say, but I can't tell you via WhatsApp. If you're serious, come see me and we'll talk face-to-face. I can tell you it hasn't been easy. If you come, I'll give you the details" (IDP; October 2024). In this context, the remote qualitative researcher faces data loss, if not distortion, resulting from their absence in the field.

Qualitative research is an intercultural encounter more or less imposed by the researcher, where different and sometimes incompatible metacommunicational norms (Briggs, 1986) clash,norms that the researcher must manage professionally to ensure the sincerity of the information provided. And the physical and geographical distance between the researcher and their informant in remote research does not facilitate this professional management.

Sampling bias: When data is collected remotely via digital tools, the representativeness of the sample can be compromised in several ways. The most obvious bias is selection among those who have access to such tools (telephone, smartphone, computer, etc.). In some cases, proficiency with the technology can be a criterion for exclusion, and in others, it is the coverage of telephone or internet networks. Depending on the complexity of the tool or technology, a certain level of education is often required, and this can be a discriminating factor. In remote surveys using ICT, the problem we encounter on a daily basis concerns the sample, whose composition does not always follow the relevant sampling logic. If you conduct a web survey or a telephone survey, obviously those who will respond will be from the group that has access to these tools, and we systematically exclude those who do not have them. (Researcher, February 2025). According to Lee and Vaillant (2009), internet surveys based on panels of volunteer respondents may suffer from a combination of biases related to coverage, the absence of a probability sample, and non-response. Even though some authors mention possibilities for adjustment, the question is whether a series of manipulations on the convenience sample allows it to be attributed the same qualities as a sample drawn from a known and identified population (Frippiat and Marquis, 2010).

The issue of saturation: Remote data collection results in early and artificial saturation in the sense that it is obtained solely within the group that shares the possession of a digital tool or mastery of digital technology. It limits triangulation and iteration (Olivier de Sardan, 2008), which give saturation its full objectivity. With the rise of telephone interviews, I am afraid that even seasoned researchers may fall into the same practices as our students by declaring saturation that does not exist,not intentionally, but because information is inevitably sought from people with common characteristics; people whose common denominator is the possession of a telephone. (Researcher; February 2025). There is indeed a risk that this technique for assessing the plausibility and validating the results of qualitative research may be overused. Through saturation, the researcher is compelled not to settle for fragmentary or incidental data and to engage in a process of relative data validation by remaining open to the possibility of encountering divergent or contradictory data (Olivier de Sardan 1995). Once saturation is reached, it provides a fairly solid basis for generalization and, in this way, fulfills the same function for the qualitative approach as representativeness does in quantitative research. We can therefore conclude that all the concerns researchers have regarding remote surveys boil down to the question of the scientific validity of the results,whether it concerns sampling, the problem of non-response, the deficit in symbolic communication, the reliability of the information collected, or the issue of saturation.

Remote surveys: dual mistrust on the part of respondents

Potential respondents harbor mistrust toward the remote method of data collection via digital means. This lack of trust extends to both the researcher collecting the data and the digital tool itself.

The perception of the remote data collector: The researcher collecting data remotely is not always taken seriously, especially when this methodological practice is seen as an option rather than a necessity. "Someone who 'asks for information over the phone' hasn't taken what they're doing seriously, so I give them information that isn't very serious either" (Private-sector worker; February 2025). Thus, the telephone interviewer is given less credit due to their invisibility. Respondents do not always trust the person speaking to them over the phone or via any other digital technology. "Hello, sir. Actually, our social services manager did mention this to us during the last food distribution, but I'm going to have to decline because I don't discuss these matters over the phone. We don't know each other, and I can't take that risk. Thank you" (PDI; October 2024).

The researcher's absence and the lack of face-to-face interaction are often interpreted as a ruse allowing the researcher to obtain data that they can use as they please, without commitment or accountability. The difficulty of obtaining informed consent in remote research is both a consequence and a cause of respondents' caution. Traditionally, the research situation involves a clash of generally opposing interests, with enormous and highly complex stakes. Respondents have often employed strategies to gain an advantage from the interview: social prestige, financial compensation, validation of their opinions, or the hope of future support (Olivier de Sardan 2008). Remote data collection, which eliminates these stakes, transforms the

research situation into a game of deception that undermines the heuristic power of the research.

Mistrust of Digital Technology: While digital technologies and tools impact our daily lives, particularly by changing our consumption patterns, our ways of engaging with culture, learning, or conducting research, they raise many questions regarding data privacy and research ethics. "With social media, you have to know where to speak and who you're speaking to. I don't do phone interviews or WhatsApp interviews. If we can't speak face-to-face, it's better to just drop it" (Student; February 2025). Such remarks raise questions about the level of trust that stakeholders place in digital technology. Mistrust tends to grow when people are asked to participate in an online survey in which they must provide information that is relatively confidential or even personal data. Admittedly, it is well established that all research must adhere to ethical principles, especially when the research involves people and may affect them; however, the digital use of personal data raises new and crucial questions regarding both the loss of control over such data and the adequacy of regulatory frameworks or protection measures (Oberdorff, 2016).

When you don't have control over something, you have to be wary of it, and that's what I do. I will never agree to a journalist or a student staying in Ouaga and calling me on the phone or via WhatsApp so I can tell them about my life as a displaced person here in Kaya. I don't know, but it seems that with Facebook or WhatsApp, all it takes is a single click and everyone knows about your problem. (PDI; October 2024). The ethical dimension of implementing social science research methods has been the subject of intense reflection within the scientific community for several years now. This debate is not new, but it takes on full significance when research focuses on vulnerable populations (Mondain and Sabourin 2009). Remote research, through the tools it employs and the mutual invisibility of the participants that characterizes it in many cases, effectively reignites this issue, brings it back into the spotlight, and compels reflection in a context where mistrust of digital technology reinforces the mistrust directed at the researcher who uses it.

What epistemology of remote research?: The idealized fieldwork, aimed at immersion within the social groups under study and the comprehensive analysis of the categories that govern them, presents itself as an essential ph in anthropology (Hours and Selim 2000). However, we must acknowledge that research is undergoing transformations in its modes of organization and practices, which may vary depending on the context. The criticisms leveled against digital-based remote surveys are inherent to any paradigm shift. Just as revolutionary science is challenged by a normal science that has nevertheless exhausted its explanatory power (Khun 1983), remote research is poorly perceived and its shortcomings are often exaggerated in the face of this "immersive tradition" (Soulé 2007) of field-based socio-anthropology. Without denying its objective limitations, however, we must also acknowledge a number of its strengths. The quality of data collected by telephone or online, just like with other methods, remains a major concern for researchers. However, it appears that this method,particularly the use of the Web,does not pose more problems than other types of data collection (McGraw, Tew, and Williams 2000). Furthermore, several studies demonstrate that research results obtained via the internet can align with those obtained using more traditional methods (Davidov and Depner 2011).

The often fleeting nature of this data-collection method can make online participants more open and less prone to social desirability, thanks to greater distancing and a heightened sense of privacy (Joinson 1999). "It's true that this approach is still in its infancy, but I think that in qualitative research, it can serve as an antidote to respondent resistance, which is often seen as natural in face-to-face interviews" (Researcher; February 2025). Thus, while the researcher's physical presence in the field has often elicited resistant behavior from the respondent, remote data collection characterized by the researcher's absence gives the respondent the opportunity to express themselves without fear of being interrupted. Specifically regarding the use of the Web, it offers additional benefits related to the speed of data transmission and asynchronous communication, which allows participants to respond at the time most convenient for them. Even though this form of data collection reduces the researcher's control over the research environment, it is conducted without an intermediary. Consequently, online data collection can increase data reliability by eliminating interviewer bias (Braunsberger, Wybenga, and Gates 2007).

CONCLUSION

Despite the proliferation of crises in Africa in recent decades, remote surveys, particularly those conducted digitally,have had little success in convincing stakeholders, given a tradition of anthropological immersion and face-to-face qualitative sociology. This skepticism applies equally to researcher-practitioners and to all others from whom data may be requested for research purposes. Researchers in particular, obsessed with the quest for scientific objectivity, raise concerns about data quality, relevance, and richness,sometimes in relation to the representativeness or relevance of the sample, or the degree of saturation that this mode of data collection induces. The game of deception in which participants engage often leads to fragmented, incomplete, or insincere data. However, a critical examination of remote surveys may offer a different perspective. Their pitfalls should neither be overestimated nor underestimated. When the survey is anonymous, responses via telephone or the internet may be of higher quality than those obtained through other administration methods, as respondents may feel more comfortable speaking frankly because social control is less burdensome. Remote surveys can enable researchers to enhance the scientific rigor of their research, but only if they first come to terms with the loss of the inviolability of immersion and rigorously integrate it into traditional socio-anthropological research practices.

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