In March 2020 United Kingdom Research Innovation responded to the Covid-19 emergency by launching a rapid response fund which would support impactful research across the humanities, social and natural sciences. In this briefing paper we describe and reflect on how we have used rapid response research methods to ‘work nimbly’ (Ledger & Sherlaw-Johnson 2019), illustrated by examples from our project which explores the criminal justice system’s response to domestic abuse during and immediately after the COVID 19 emergency period.

Rapid Research Methods

‘Rapid’ methods have been predominantly used in drugs, health and clinical settings but are equally applicable across the social sciences (United Nations Office for Drug Control & Crime Prevention 1999; Coomber 2015). Rapid research can take many forms, but usually involves short timeframes, team-based research, and iterative data collection and analysis (Vindrola-Padros, 2019). It can include collection of quantitative data (through surveys, and reviews of existing data sets); qualitative data (through formal and informal interviews with key informants); and the mapping of affected populations and other phenomena (McNall and Foster-Fishman, 2007). Together, the respective work of McNall and Foster-Fishman (2007), Johnson and Vindrola-Padros (2017), and Vindrola-Padros and Johnson (2020) develops ideas that we have found useful in navigating a new and developing area of research methodology:

“Due to the immediacy of the situation, research in this context demands the sharing of findings in almost real time, requiring a type of data analysis that is not common in the social sciences. It also requires that “actionable” findings are shared. This refers to straightforward recommendations that can be easily understood and translated into changes in policy and/or practice.” (Vindrola-Padros et al 2020:2).

One would hope, of course, that all social science research would be able to effectively and quickly contribute to easily understood policy and practice recommendations. However, the difference may lie in prioritising the dissemination of findings for effective and speedy impact with policymakers and practitioners rather than the publication of academic literature. Vindrola-Padros et al (2020:10) are aware of this as a potential tension in comparison to ‘standard’ academic research: “Our study designs might also be interpreted as instrumental in the sense that all studies sought to produce findings that could be used to make changes to policy and practice, in the first instance, and considered the production of knowledge of interest to academic audiences as a secondary aim.”
They acknowledge that these kinds of rapid research approaches are unconventional in their research area (qualitative health research) and in the social sciences generally. Whilst they are not commonplace in criminological or criminal justice research, we suggest that the context of Covid-19, needing rapid solutions to extremely challenging problems, means that this approach is likely to grow in the next few years.

**Rapid Funding**

The methods that would facilitate rapid research became a vital consideration for applicants to the rapid funding schemes that were put in place in March to September 2020 (https://www.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/ukri-open-call-for-research-and-innovation-ideas-to-address-covid-19/). Dispensing with much of the bureaucracy normally accompanying applications to the UK Research Councils, applicants were asked to provide a short case for support and approximate budget following a tight deadline call for applications. As soon as the call was announced, a team from the University of Liverpool met to discuss how they could use their skills and experience to understand police responses to the increase in domestic abuse that was widely feared (and which seemed to have taken place according to support services) as a result of the lockdown restriction which came into force in late March 2020. The team also wanted to see the impact of any delays in dealing with domestic abuse cases in the courts resulting from the closure of most of the UK Crown and Magistrates Courts between April and July.

Between March 31st and September 1st, 2020, UKRI received 2,500 Rapid Research bids. In June the team received notice that Domestic Abuse: Responding to the Shadow Pandemic (ESRC ES/V00476X/1) was one of three domestic abuse focused projects that had been recommended for funding (https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/law-and-social-justice/research/coronavirus-research/the-shadow-pandemic/). Overall, a significant number of projects were funded across a wide range of areas. The funders required a quick start-up, the immediate gathering of empirical evidence, and the immediate dissemination of preliminary results to criminal justice agencies – the project team were asked to work rapidly.

**Working Rapidly**

Working rapidly requires a number of practices and systems to come together in a co-ordinated manner. This is something which cannot be taken for granted. To take one example, ethical practices and philosophies have to be at the forefront of research projects, and all aspects of the research and its methodology have to be carefully thought through. As with many universities, non-invasive research, as in our proposed project, is normally dealt with expeditiously. This still involves rigorous peer-review, and it is still time consuming. For a ‘normal’ grant with a longer lead-in time, this is relatively unproblematic. For a rapid response project, time is valuable, and even a week or two’s delay (which may be necessary and inevitable) was still problematic, not least because funding is usually conditional on ethical approval having been gained. Accordingly, within the framework of rapid response methodology, we adapted our research methods in a way which prioritised effective and speedy research. Whilst awaiting ethical approval we carried out a survey of police websites and Facebook pages and published a set of recommendations in June 2020 (https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/law-and-social-justice/3research/Policing,Domestic,Abuse,-,Covid,Website,Reviews.pdf). As soon as we received ethical approval on 9th June 2020 (ref. 7858), questionnaires about police response to domestic abuse during the lockdown period were sent out to Domestic Abuse Leads in each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales via the National Police Chiefs Council (https://www.npcc.police.uk) –
which enabled rapid and targeted coverage. In order to work rapidly and to quickly initiate research projects of this kind, we recommend:

- That all applicants are included in the development of the bid, and that PDRAs are named in the application so as to remove delays in advertising and appointing staff to the project.
- That the process of applying for ethical approval, where possible, should be started at application stage, not approval stage. Although this seems wasteful of academic time (both in submitting and reviewing potential proposals which may not be funded) there is a great time saving in having ethics processes completed at (or near to) the point when funding is confirmed.
- That universities and UKRI synchronise their responses to rapid funding mechanisms both during the application procedure and, critically, when funding has been secured. There are many complex behind-the-scenes processes, human resources, compliance, financial, and so on, which are necessary for good governance, and to comply with internal and external regulations. However, where possible, universities should strive to ensure that these do not inhibit the fast take-up of research opportunities and consider developing a fast-track system for projects funded through rapid-response schemes.
- Do something. When delays occur, and barriers to planned research emerge, change tack, and carry out other forms of research which can be started and completed quickly whilst waiting for internal university processes to take place.

**Working Remotely: interviewing**

Of course, there is a broad spectrum of approaches to, and methods of, conducting interviews. Textbooks and handbooks explain why, how, and where to conduct interviews as an integral part of qualitative methods (see for example, Morris, 2015; Flick, 2018, Silverman, 2017). Until recently, researchers have tended to assume that face-to-face interviews are the best option by default, due to the ability to develop rapport, to see more of the context and status of the interviewee, and through the ability to use and interpret non-verbal cues (Morris, 2015). Most of the literature published before 2020 is written from the understandable (but what would now perhaps be considered luxurious) viewpoint of being able to choose between either online or face-to-face interviewing. However, although the door to new ways and formats of interviewing was already ajar by 2019, COVID 19 pushed it fully open. From March 2020, for a period of months, face-to-face interviews became impossible, and alternatives had to be found.

Using Salmons' (2016, 2020) terminology, our interviews can be described as ‘elicited data collection’, using remote technology as the medium. We have chosen to use the term ‘video conferencing’, as our interviews are conducted through platforms that enables visual as well as oral communication. (Other terminology includes VOIP, or Voice Over Internet Protocol). Archibald et al (2019), in a paper published pre-COVID-19, draw attention only to the ‘potential’ of VOIP platforms for interviewing in qualitative research, and highlight the limited literature in this area. different operating systems, functionality with low bandwidth, and security settings. Their advice on using videoconferencing during social distancing is, unsurprisingly, to identify the platform that best fits the project.

The police installed MS Teams on all their machines in March, so we used that platform in police interviews and for them the security settings of this platform made it preferable. The suggestion that professional bodies were unfamiliar with VOIP use had become outdated after the first half of 2020, and the key factor in our choice of platform was that we used any platform preferred by our participants.
Our interviews were carried out with respondents predominantly in two environments - offices, and homes. These were obviously the result of the personal preference of respondents and partly dictated by the ‘work from home’ guidance issued during the CV19 lockdown periods. One might expect that professional environments allow professional contexts (interviews that were more formal) to predominate, but we did not experience different levels of intimacy/distancing/professionalism within any of the environments people chose to be interviewed. A few people chose to obscure their backgrounds, so we did not know where they physically ‘sat’, but again there was no noticeable difference in the ‘feel’ of the interview. This was not the case for the two interviewee respondents who could not (for technological reasons) use their laptop camera. This did seem to engender a distance between the interviewer/interviewee. In essence it changed a face to face (online) interview into a phone call, and, although the transmission of information was unaffected (they seemed to be similar in character to other interviews), we felt more distanced from the interviewee. For the academic team, the settings for the interviews were a home-office, and a kitchen. Neither setting was particularly grand – we avoided the long book-filled shelves that are often used for establishing academic prowess. The home/work environments for interviewers and interviewees were, in fact, very similar. This lessened power-imbalance and gave opportunities for the early establishment of rapport. Our interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes, with an average time of 55 minutes. We had allowed an hour when arranged the interviews but expected them to last less than this. This suggests to us that the interviews were at least equivalent to face to face interviews in terms of potential depth. We also think that this may be longer than a similar face-to-face meeting with a professional would have been.

There were occasional unforeseen interruptions which would not have taken place in face-to-face interviews (not as much anyway). Interruptions were revealing of details of participants (both interviewees’ and interviewers’) lives and living conditions which both equalised and personalised the experience of the interview, and perhaps lessened any power-differential. Interruptions can be a risk to the presentation of self, and the professionalisation of the interview. These risks lessen with second and repeat interviews as trust is extended and a bond is formed between the parties. However, the sudden appearance of a neighbour or delivery person at the window, a pet coming into view, or some other incidental unanticipated activity must either be acknowledged or ignored. In our case, it often prompted a quick conversational aside whilst ‘normality’ was resumed. Although it could be seen as disruptive, and could, depending on what the interruption is, be seen as unprofessional or disorganised, in the majority of cases it was a welcome glimpse of the sometimes-haphazard nature of home-working, and did not disrupt the interview.

There were, however, significant sets of differences from face-to-face interviews in our experience of online interviews. The first set are obvious and relate to logistics. In avoiding travelling to places around the UK we could easily have timetabled four or five interviews in a day – although we limited it to three per day (and usually two) so that we could leave time for post-interview project discussions and reflections. We could also react to timetable changes which arose through policing emergencies to quickly reschedule meetings, and, of course we reduced the financial costs of the whole process considerably by not incurring unnecessary travel costs.

Second, it became possible for all the project team to attend every interview. It would, of course, have been possible for the whole project team to attend each face-to-face interview, but this rarely happens. We took an early decision to have everyone attend because it seemed more likely to facilitate rapid research – removing the time to bring non-participating team members up to date about the contents of an interview, for one thing – and chose to retain this practice as the group approach seemed to produce better quality interviews, more rounded, with more thought and time taken to answer questions, and the opportunity for different members of the team to pick up on issues as the interview unfolded. Although there was still a question/answer format, the team approach led
to different areas being explored within each interview. For two of our interviews, there was more than one police officer attending in addition to our group of three.

It must be stated here that we would not take this team approach to interviewing with participants who were not taking part in a professional capacity, or who were vulnerable in any way. In that context, three interviewers would have been overwhelming and possibly created anxiety in interviewees. Given our focus on technical and process knowledges as opposed to experiential knowledge the team approach suited approach to talking with professionals and by the same token would not have been appropriate with other groups.

We noticed that it took our team some time to learn how to pick up online visual cues and non-verbal signage from each other and from interviewees. These are much easier to pick up in face-to-face interviews. It was also harder, at the beginning, to leave time for the natural gaps, ‘thinking time’, and pauses that are replete in interviews. It is tempting to rush in to fill gaps and silences, which can feel more exaggerated in online interviewing, in a way we did not seem to resonate with ‘normal’ face-to-face interviewing, when gaps can feel more natural. We learned not to ‘rush in’, in time, and also to give time to think about what was being said or starting to analyse what was being said whilst we were in the interview itself. For this reason, transcribing the data was an important stage for us.

**Working remotely; transcription**

Given the rapid nature of our research, we had not planned to carry out time-consuming full verbatim transcription. However, the availability of auto-transcription meant that we did produce comprehensive transcripts of every interview. A major advantage of Zoom and MS Teams is the ability to record and auto-transcribe the interview (we asked the permission of everyone that we interviewed before starting the function) within the platform itself. All that is required post-interview is the checking and correcting of the automatic transcripts which takes approximately one hour per one-hour interview. This represents a large timesaving over manual transcription, which would have taken 5-6 hours for each hour of a face-to-face interview. In carrying out our preliminary set of interviews, we collected approximately 25 hours (or 200 thousand words) of data.

Transcription can be mind-numbingly boring, and is always extremely time-consuming, but it has long played an important part in immersing the researcher in their interview data. There is therefore always a trade-off between the use of academic time and the benefits of personal engagement with data. This will be a decision that should be made consciously by the research team following consideration of online transcription facilities. We found that we were as immersed in the data as we would have been involved in transcribing by hand. Both face-to-face and online interview techniques have advantages and disadvantages. However, we suggest that remote interviews should be the default method for interviewing professional respondents because of the advantages they offer.

To work remotely and effectively we therefore recommend:

- Giving respondents the choice of which platform to use.
- If possible, ensure that the team (assuming it is not too large) attend every interview.
- In terms of setting, make the respondent feel comfortable whichever setting they have chosen; and ensure that your setting is appropriate. In terms of clothing, present yourself in the same way as you would for a face to face interview; professional respondents may wear office wear even if they are working from home.
- Try to allow your respondents to think about their answers, pausing and reflecting where necessary; and remember to do this yourself even though silences may seem longer than they actually are.
- Employ auto-transcription and set time aside for checking the transcript.
• Allow time for reflection between interviews. Although it is possible to maximise time by interviewing more than three respondents per day it may not always be prudent. The overuse of Teams and/or Zoom can be just as tiring as spending too much time in face-to-face concentrated conversation.

Once the data collection and analysis phases are complete, dissemination and the issuing of sets of recommendations which can change policy and practice are the next step.

**Working responsively**

Rapid research is likely to be commissioned at short-notice and require rapid dissemination of results (often with sets of recommendations for practitioners and policy makers). The production of reports and recommendations after a few months of a project’s start is unusual and there are trade-offs to be negotiated. Working responsibly also means working responsibly, producing recommendations which are going to improve the situation early in the process in order that the work is effective; but at the same time recognising that good research is ready only when it is ready. The need to produce speedy policy should never be used as an excuse for undermining the quality of the research. Working responsively in the interests of producing quality also means working in environments and with people that are also subject to change.

In working responsively, we believe that there are certain things to bear in mind:

- The balance between the need to produce results quickly, and to produce high-quality recommendations, should always fall decisively in favour of quality
- Recognise that the bodies you are working with will be experiencing change (in policy and personnel) during the research period. Be flexible, and sensitive, ensure that the recommendations you make are in areas that they are interested in – so that they are receptive to making the changes you suggest.
- Anticipate that the fast delivery of research results and the transformation of analysis into recommendations will involve concentrated work for the research team over shorter periods of time than that taken in normal academic research. Reactive timetabling and the development of good flexible working relationships across the research team are critical. It may be that the opening phases – or indeed every phase – can be time intensive. In gaining rapid research funding and trying to make a difference with the production of high-quality recommendations, diaries may need to be cleared.
- Some rapidly produced recommendations can be quickly implemented, others will roll-out over a much longer period of time. It is vital to start this process as soon as possible.

Overall, the key thing to remember is that carrying out data collection, subsequent analysis and the production of reports/recommendations is exhaustive of resources – yours and the bodies you are working with. To effectively respond to important and rapidly changing conditions, it is important to work nimbly.

**Conclusion: Working nimbly**

Our project, though delivering results rapidly, lasts for 18 months – so is there a place for longitudinal rapid-response research? Longitudinal rapid-response research would involve; returning again to the participants for additional interviews to capture a changing situation; having the opportunity to explore some areas in more depth, through case studies; making recommendations and being able to see whether they are implemented and looking to establish the efficacy of the implementation process. The extent to which such longitudinal rapid response research would look different from or
the same as other forms of action research is perhaps moot. However, the demands of working rapidly, remotely, responsively and nimbly carry with them greater risks than other forms of action research since rapid response work is often conducted within an environment also characterised by rapid change. Thus, rapid response research, in demanding nimble working (responding quickly to a changing environment and what that implies for the project planning, resources and so on) also demands a research team willing to take risks in constructing nimble responses to the research process itself.

References
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