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***(Non)corporeality in Online Studies – Reflections  
of Researchers on Conducting Online Focus Interviews  
(Bez)cielesność w badaniach na odległość –  
refleksje badaczek nad prowadzeniem  
wywiadów fokusowych online***

**ABSTRACT:**

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**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The aim of the article is to consider the presence and significance of the body in designing and conducting remote (online) ethnographic (field research) studies.

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**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The research problem refers to answering the following question: What is the significance of corporeality in conducting remote (online) studies? In attempting to answer the research question we made use of autoethnography, treating it as method and research strategy.

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**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** Inspired by the conclusions drawn by Anna Kacperczyk regarding ways of defining corporeality in ethnographic studies, the authors intend to present their reflections regarding their own research conducted in virtual space in 2021. These considerations refer to studies on academic education during the pandemic.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** Reflections on corporeality in ethnographic studies allowed us to frame our experiences in three dimensions (perspectives): the body as a source of individual corporeal experiences, the body (corporeality) of the researcher and of the respondent during an ethnographic study and the body as a topic of individual self-reflection and as a subject for theorizing.

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** (Non)corporeality turned out to be ambiguous, thus we decided to treat it in a multidimensional manner, considering corporeality as a value regardless of the circumstances of the study (in-person vs online). The significance and role of the body in ethnographic studies conducted remotely (online) are equally important to those in studies conducted in-person (traditionally). In remote studies corporeality is restricted to some

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extent for both researcher and respondent, however, focusing on other sensory impressions (e.g. auditory) allows us to experience another dimension of corporeality.

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→ **KEYWORDS:** **BODY, CORPOREALITY, QUALITATIVE STUDIES, AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, FOCUS INTERVIEWS**

## STRESZCZENIE

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**CEL NAUKOWY:** Celem artykułu jest refleksja nad obecnością i znaczeniem ciała w projektowaniu oraz realizowaniu badań terenowych na odległość (tj. online).

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**PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE:** Problem badawczy odnosi się do odpowiedzi na pytanie: jakie jest znaczenie cielesności w prowadzeniu badań na odległość (tj. online)? Poszukując odpowiedzi na postawione pytanie badawcze, posłużyliśmy się autoetnografią, traktując ją jednocześnie jako metodę oraz strategię badawczą.

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**PROCES WYWODU:** Inspirując się rozważaniami Anny Kacperczyk, dotyczącymi sposobów definiowania cielesności w badaniach etnograficznych, zamierzamy przedstawić nasze refleksje dotyczące badań własnych, prowadzonych w wirtualnej przestrzeni w 2021 roku. Rozważania nawiązują do badań dotyczących kształcenia akademickiego w czasie pandemii.

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**WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ:** Refleksja nad cielesnością w badaniach etnograficznych pozwoliła na uchwycenie naszych doświadczeń w trzech wymiarach, tj. perspektywie ciała rozumianego jako źródło odczuć i doznań cielesnych podmiotu, ciała (cielesności) badacza i badanego w trakcie badania etnograficznego oraz ciała jako tematu autorefleksji podmiotu i jako obiektu teoretyzowania.

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**WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE:** (Bez)cielesność okazała się niejednoznaczna, stąd zdecydowałyśmy się na ujęcie jej wielowymiarowo, uznając ją badawczo wartościową, niezależnie od okoliczności, w jakich prowadzone są badania (stacjonarnie vs. zdalnie) (tj. online) są równie ważne, co w badaniach realizowanych tradycyjnie (tj. stacjonarnie). W badaniach prowadzonych na odległość cielesność jest w pewien sposób ograniczona, wyjęta poza nawias dla badaczy oraz badanych, koncentracja na odmiennych wrażeniach zmysłowych (np. słuchowych) pozwala na doświadczenie innego wymiaru cielesności.

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→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **CIAŁO, CIELESNOŚĆ, BADANIA JAKOŚCIOWE, AUTOETNOGRAFIA, WYWIADY FOKUSOWE**

## Introduction

Field studies require 'personal' intellectual, emotional and corporeal (physical) involvement from the researcher. When applying the ethnographical method it is assumed that a scientific study is a type of process managed by a researcher, who, through his or her own body and corporeality, interacts with the 'object' of cognition, and based on this

combination of experiences attempts to reconstruct a specific fragment of social reality (Kacperczyk, 2012). The stage of conceptualization of a research project and its realisation, i.e. the gathering of empirical material, is not a mechanical process. It requires skill in using research techniques, a sense of direction, the ability to find and connect certain points of contact, and most of all reaching the respondents (Kacperczyk, 2016; see Fine & Hancock, 2016). The researcher gathers and records the collected empirical material using various sources defined as phenomena, with which the researcher interacted on a sensory level. As a result, the researcher is involved in the research process via his or her body, remaining physically in the field and carrying out particular planned stages.

It is worth emphasizing that in field research the corporeal (co-)presence of the researcher is obvious and indisputable. It allows one to learn about and understand the studied fragment of social reality. However, little is said about the experiences of researchers, their corporeal experiences collected in the course of research or their definition of corporeality. All of this is relevant to the way in which researchers function in the field and learn about it, and to the process of collecting and interpreting empirical data (Kacperczyk, 2012). "The researcher's corporeality must be bracketed and pushed beyond the area of acceptable conclusions from the study, despite the fact that it could be the key to understanding what was of interest in the first place, i.e. the corporeal functioning of the subject of study" (Kacperczyk, 2012, p. 59) (translator's note: own translation).

Having become familiar with various ways of understanding and interpreting categories of corporeality we would like to consider the presence and significance of the body in designing and conducting remote (online) studies. This unusual situation was brought upon by healthcare restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the researchers were forced to modify the methodological assumptions of their research projects. One of the main and most radical changes was collecting empirical material remotely and becoming familiar with the field from a distance, using the lens of the computer screen. As a result, we posited the following research question: What is the significance of corporeality in conducting remote (online) studies?

## Research methods

In our search for the answer to this question we used autoethnography (Ellis, 1995, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Adams et al., 2014; Fine & Hancock, 2016), treating it both as a method and as a strategy (Kacperczyk, 2014). Autoethnography has enabled us to use our own bodies as our research tool (see Fine & Hancock, 2016). It exposes what is personal and intimate for the researcher (Ellis, 2004) and „brings us into lived experiences in a feeling and embodied way" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 439). Anna Kacperczyk "introduces three aspects in which the body (corporeality) of the researcher and respondent reveals itself during an ethnographic study: (a) the body as an operating subject, (b) the body as a source of the subject's physical experiences, (c) the body as a topic of self-reflection for the subject, and an object of theorisation" (2012, p. 32) (translator's

note: own translation). As a result, the author highlights the significance of corporeality in the research process and suggests a reflection on the body and corporeality of the researcher in the course of research.

In the following sections we will refer to experiences from our studies, conducted as part of the project titled "Kształcenie akademickie w czasie pandemii COVID-19" ("Academic Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic") (translator's note: own translation)<sup>1</sup>. The research was carried out during the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the spring of 2021. The aim of the project was to reconstruct the experiences of participants of online academic learning. The respondents included students and academic teachers from various higher education institutions in Poland, representing various scientific disciplines. Purposive sampling was used in the research. Interested people responded to the notice posted on the Internet. As a result, we conducted two focus interviews with a total of 20 participants. We assumed a perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 2007; Hałas, 2012), which allowed us to include the dynamics of a new social phenomenon and the significance attributed to it by its participants. The result was the collected empirical material, which facilitated the identification of specific strategies employed by participants of online academic learning to cope with the crisis situation. The data was analysed through the lens of crisis theory (Caplan, 1964), lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2004), and the concept of learning in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The results were published in scientific papers (see Walczak-Człapińska et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Because of the ongoing pandemic situation the authors decided to conduct focus interviews online (Morgan, 1988; Merton et al., 1990). The main theme of the interviews was academic education during the pandemic, which, in Poland, was provided mainly via videoconference apps such as Microsoft Teams.

## (Non)corporeality of researchers in the field

Reflections on embodiment were initiated in the works of phenomenologist E. Husserl (1975), who made a distinction between material body and lived body. The distinction between these two dimensions of the body lies in the phenomenological level of the relationship between subject and body. The material body is experienced as foreign, external, physical, whereas the lived (experienced) body is accessible only to us, it is that which is internal (Hanna & Thompson, 2012). When considering the multidimensionality of this term we can assume another perspective representing the experience of 'possessing a body' and 'being a body.' The latter, from the corporeal perspective, becomes primal in conceptual and metaphysical terms (Hanna & Thompson, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Project carried out by Karolina Walczak-Człapińska, Katarzyna Miśkiewicz and Gabriela Dobińska, *Department of Social Pedagogy and Rehabilitation*, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Lodz.

Work on the concept of embodiment was continued by M. Merleau-Ponty (2017), who stressed that sensory experience of the world should not be limited to abstract operations on symbols, as it is entangled in the human body. Merleau-Ponty inspired young researchers to discover new dimensions of embodiment, which yielded results in the works of psychologists (Gibson, 1986) and cognitive scientists (Chemero, 2009; Hanna & Thompson, 2012). Through cognitive theories the category of corporeality significantly impacted linguistics and literary studies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1988) as well as ethnology and anthropology (Harris, 2016). As a result of the developments in studies of embodiment and given its interdisciplinary character, studies on the body were replaced (complemented) by studies respecting the perspective of a corporeal being in the world (Harris, 2016).

Thomas Csordas refers to 'embodiment' as "an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world" (1994, p. 12). After Merleau-Ponty, for whom embodiment is akin to a prerequisite for the existence of culture and the 'ego,' Csordas perceives it as a paradigm for the analysis of these two phenomena (Csordas, 2002). As highlighted by A. Biernacka, W. Rorot and R. Statkiewicz

[...] the methodological foundations of these scientific fields are often at odds. Thus, it may be surprising that the term 'embodiment' in all its iterations actually describes the same phenomenon. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask whether – and how – to conduct an interdisciplinary dialogue on embodiment? Do studies on embodiment constitute a whole, beyond field divisions? Discrepancies between disciplines do not blur the fundamental role which this category has always fulfilled, i.e. that of an anti-dualistic methodological perspective, which draws attention to actual, material conditions of human beings and the way in which the experience they world (Biernacka et al., 2019, p. 3) (translator's note: own translation).

Work on the body and corporeality in field research have emerged in the field of social sciences (see Kacperczyk, 2012; Jakubowska, 2012), however, it is not a popular issue among researchers. Analyses highlight the significance of cognitive, behavioural and emotional processes of the researcher, as well as socio-cultural conditions for the production of their knowledge. Moreover, it is stressed that the researcher's body is a cognitive tool of sorts. A human being is an embodied individual located in a specific social context, which is connected with methods and results of scientific queries.

The body of a researcher, as his or her cognitive instrumentarium, actively participates in the process of generating and analysing data. This takes place not only through physical presence at the site of the study, but also on the most basic level of receiving signals and information from the field, through looking, listening, reading and sensing (Kacperczyk, 2012, p. 37) (translator's note: own translation).

One's own living body is a 'guide' to corporeality, a living corporeality moved by sensitivity 'conducts' sensory impulses to one's own living body. Through the body, which is exposed to the exterior and present in the world, corporeality 'receives' sensory impulses, 'processes' them and 'returns' them to the exterior (Walczak, 2021, p. 26).

If we assume that corporeality is the capacity to experience located within, then the origin of this dynamic is the relationship with the exterior, through experiencing one's own body (Walczak, 2021).

## Conducting focus interviews online – reflecting on the presence and significance of the body

The most significant difference in conducting field research at a distance (online) in the context of the presence of the body is the fact that both the researcher and the respondents experience completely different sensations than those during a meeting in-person (see Kacperczyk, 2012). In response to the suggestion made by Kacperczyk (2012), we intend to present our considerations regarding our studies, in reference to the three aforementioned aspects of the emergence of corporeality in the course of ethnographic research.

In the first stage, in the process of developing the research concept, we determined that a study conducted via Internet is the only possible alternative. On the one hand, we treated this solution as an opportunity and a challenge. On the other hand, we had numerous concerns regarding the realisation of the study and the quality of the collected empirical data. Assuming that signals received during physical and direct contact with another person, through mutual corporeality and the experience of the same space 'here and now,' would provide richer experiences, we were afraid that online studies would not satisfy our expectations or those of the respondents. In the course of subsequent stages, after reflection and close observation, we discovered an abundance of signals which are equally valuable, though different from those received in physical contact. In this context corporeality appears in a multitude of dimensions.

## The body as a source of the subject's physical experiences

As the research was conducted remotely, each respondent participated in 'his or her' known and safe space, which provided them with a multitude of signals received by the senses, which others could not experience. We did not ask the respondents where they were at the moment of the study, however, the circumstances of the surroundings of each participant, and their responses defining the places they were in, indicated that in most cases (though not always) they were at home. Source literature on methodology indicates the significance of the choice of place for the meeting, the initial contact and conversation, and even ways of arranging the space in which the study is conducted (e.g. it is recommended to conduct focus interviews at a round table, so that each participant can see everyone else) (see Barbour, 2011; Lisek-Michalska, 2013).

The elements mentioned above are particularly significant for further stages of research. On the other hand, studies conducted online are in a way deprived of this. In spite of this loss, respondents experience greater comfort, as they decide on the place

of the meeting. They connect from a chosen location which they deem safe and which allows them to speak freely. This could be a room at their home, an office or other locations difficult to identify due to the 'background effects.' These locations had a significant impact on the ultimate course of the interview (see Barbour, 2011).

Each participant (informer and researcher) had different sensory experiences – smells, sounds (their dynamics, intensity, volume), temperature, etc. Moreover, we noticed that the computer assumed the role of a 'smokescreen' or 'protective layer,' as respondents who sat in front of their screens could choose when to turn on the camera and/or microphone and speak.

I connect from my home and feel comfortable, I'm at my place. I put on a nice top and sit in my pyjama pants, because no one will see that anyway. I know that I can decide when to speak, and if something happens I can turn my camera off. I wouldn't leave a meeting, I think it would be more uptight with strangers at the same table (U1).

Participants hid behind colourful avatars. During team analyses we devoted a lot of attention to sensory experiences such as the respondents' timbre and tone of voice. During in-person studies researchers do not focus on such nuances and details. Our senses changed the trajectory of their focus. The body became a 'medium' for experiences other than those which occur during traditional studies, which does not mean they were less valuable. What is more, during interviews some mimic and pantomimic reactions were incomprehensible, as the connection was delayed. This required repetition which was deprived of spontaneity, generating communication barriers.

## Body (corporeality) of researcher and respondent during ethnographic studies

Conducting an interview online was challenging in itself. Interactions between people who participate in a discussion vary from interactions between people engaged in direct conversation. Initiating questions and exchanges between informants took on a less dynamic course than during in-person interviews, especially at the beginning. Lack of physical corporeality constituted a significant problem, as gesticulation was limited. Many of the informants had their hands concealed by the limited scope of the camera lens, and the cameras would lose focus. Non-verbal communication was very limited, discussion between participants assumed a more ordered form than in direct contact. Participants interrupted each other, began speaking simultaneously and disciplined themselves, which resulted in unnatural pauses in the discussion.

During the discussion on the analysis of the collected empirical material each researcher focused on different subjects raised by the respondents. In ethnographic studies triangulation allows researchers to provide various elements of analyses and interpretations. However, in the case of remote studies, in which the field is inaccessible (or at least different than in the case of a traditional ethnographic study), triangulation is entangled in

the (non)presence of the bodies of the researchers and respondents. The body becomes dependent on the technical conditions and taken out of the research situation. This means that analyses provided by researchers significantly change their context.

The reason behind the differences in the scope of the researchers' perceptions and experiences was the research situation itself, transmitted via the Internet. Everyone saw the same image on the monitor, participants resembled busts arranged in a row of tiles like avatars. During a traditional interview, despite the fact that researchers and respondents share the same space, they sit in different places, which means sense different smells, sounds and images. All of this means that the polysensory character of the meeting becomes empirical material.

## The body as a topic of self-reflection for the subject, and an object of theorisation

We wanted to capture a 'semblance of the body,' which, as a result of Internet transfer, became dependent on the quality of the connection and on technical conditions. Interestingly, in traditional conditions a face to face meeting would have been a natural and obvious choice at the research conceptualisation stage. In order to obtain 'naturalness' in artificial conditions we made director-like efforts, trying to capture on film the stories of the main protagonists. That is why, ensuring proper technical conditions, we made the decision to limit the number of participants, to make the transmitted image clear and the user 'tiles' larger. This attention to the entourage and the technical facilities meant that it was significant for the team-made analyses.

Furthermore, at the stage of conceptualisation, as we were looking for theoretical-methodological inspiration, we encountered certain obstacles, which resulted from a negligible number of research compilations on the course of qualitative studies conducted online. That is why our team devoted so much attention to the discussion on the development and realisation of studies, while reflecting on the problem of our corporeality in the process of collecting and analysing empirical material from ethnographic studies. However, this did not fully prevent the unease resulting from 'virtual corporeality' in the process of collecting empirical data.

## Conclusions

(Non)corporeality turned out to be ambiguous, which is why we decided to present it in a multidimensional manner, regarding corporeality as a value regardless of the conditions of the research (in-person vs remote). Analyses of our experiences and considerations made in the context of the presence and significance of the body in the process of collecting empirical material, allowed us to conclude that the significance and role of the body in ethnographic studies conducted online are equally important as in the case



of traditional studies. They provide equally important data. Studies with the use of web cameras arguably provide somewhat different data and result in other research dilemmas (cf. Walczak-Człapińska & Dobińska, 2020), however, these are not less valuable than in the case of studies where informers meet in the same space.

The term (non)corporeality we use in our considerations is a conscious choice, which illustrates the ambiguity of this category. That is because in studies conducted online corporeality is limited in a way, taken out of the picture for both researchers and respondents, while focusing on diverse sensory experiences (e.g. auditory) allows us to experience another dimension of corporeality.

To sum up, in the course of conducting the research we made effort to preserve a 'semblance of corporeality,' which, as it turned out on an analytical level, was present throughout the entire research process (i.e. conceptualisation, realisation, analyses, interpretation). The body (corporeality) in online studies has a new, different dimension, which was previously unknown and ignored. The question whether 'ethnographic studies can take such a form' and 'whether they are still ethnographic then' will be the subject of subsequent discussion. Corporeality is always present and its role is equally important, regardless of circumstances and the manner in which the study is conducted. However, depending on the conditions, it assumes a different dimension, providing different experiences.

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