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Remote Interviewing and Creative Methods in the Gendered Journeys Project: Building Bridges Over Zoom

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has created methodological challenges for social researchers, primarily for conventionally face-to-face interviews and focus groups. As part of an ambitious mixed methods project, the Gendered Journeys team used creative methods in remote interviews to create a participatory research environment that helped overcome some of the barriers of Zoom. Creative methods enable more participatory research practices, breaking down researcher-researched power dynamics and producing varied and multiple sources of data (Kara, 2015). This paper sets the mixed methods context and discusses two such methods: a hybrid eco-map/timeline that contributed to interviews with postgraduate students in India; and LEGO sets that were sent to data scientists in the UK. Here, we discuss to what extent adding these creative elements to remote interviews aided in building rapport between researcher and participant, and whether engaging in a research practice prior to the interview encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences (Brown and Collins, 2018; Ayrton, 2020; Ivanova, Buda and Burrai, 2020).

Paper: Girls and women are underrepresented in STEM education and employment in most countries globally (WEF, 2020). STEM is crucial to tackling the current and future needs of the global population, particularly as we increasingly begin to feel the impact of climate change (UNESCO, 2015, 2017). Such important fields not representing populations limit the potential to innovate and come up with solutions to local and global problems (FAWE, 2010). Working towards gender equity in STEM will help create societies that are more equitable, sustainable and better equipped to face current and future challenges. Within this global picture, each of the countries in the Gendered Journeys project – India, Rwanda, and the UK – have striking gendered inequities in higher education and skilled employment (Gupta, 2016; IMF, 2017; WEF, 2020). Gendered Journeys is investigating gendered experiences and inequalities in STEM education and the transition to employment in all three contexts.

The project has an ambitious methodology that involves primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data. Mixing methods provides insight into different elements of these experiences and inequalities across the three contexts, from national gender imbalances in STEM programmes, to the

individual fine-grained experiences of studying STEM at university. The quantitative methods involve administrative Higher Education data (to date, only for the UK), and a large-scale online survey recruiting STEM undergraduate students in the UK, Rwanda, and India. The two quantitative strands provide large-scale data that create context and highlight trajectories and trends of experience in STEM students.

While the quantitative side has largely been able to go ahead despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the health crisis has created methodological challenges for social researchers, primarily for conventionally face-to-face interviews and focus groups. Remote interviewing - whether online or by phone - seems an obvious solution, providing a 'Covid-safe' way of speaking with participants. However, it comes with its own downsides, such as concerns over the ability to build rapport, possible intensification of researcher-researched power dynamics, and doubts over the richness of the data (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Drabble *et al.*, 2016). In this paper, I demonstrate how the Gendered Journeys teams used creative methods to mitigate these limitations. Creative methods enable more participatory research practices, breaking down researcher-participant power dynamics and producing varied and multiple sources of data (Kara, 2015).

Firstly, the team created a hybrid eco-map/timeline that was used in interviews with postgraduate students in India. Eco-maps create a visual representation of important events and relationships in an individual's life (Bennett and Grant, 2016). Although the details may vary, eco-maps tend to use nodes to represent a person or event, and lines between nodes represent connections. On the other hand, timelines create a chronological visual representation of events in an individual's life, allowing them to reflect on past, present, and future key events (Pell *et al.*, 2020). These two methods, as with other creative methods, encourage participants to engage in reflection and can enrich the experience of data collection for both researcher and researched (Kara, 2015). By combining an eco-map and timeline (see Figure 1), we have been able to engage our participants in a deeply reflective process that focusses on key events and people in their journey through STEM education, onto employment and their future aspirations.

In a 'spin-off' pilot project, I explored gendered experiences in the Data Science and Artificial Intelligence (AI) fields in the UK. This project aimed to address a gap in the literature whereby academic research and grey literature on gender in STEM often neglects these cutting-edge fields (UNESCO, 2017). Globally, fewer women than men enrol in STEM (36.2%) and ICT (29.2%) undergraduate programmes, generally the first step in a data science career (Wajcman et al. 2020). The project was conceived mid-pandemic with an awareness of the limitations of zoom. Inspired by Brown and Collins' (2018) successful use of LEGO, LEGO sets were sent to participants who built models representing their career journeys. Building the LEGO model enabled participants to reflect on both their experiences and how to represent them (see Figure 2). This created an engaging research environment for the interview with participants empowered to lead the discussion by describing the model and their building process.

The creative methods discussed here demonstrate how to create engaging research encounters despite the limitations of online interviews, some of which even took place across continents. Creative methods facilitate the breaking down of researcher-researched hierarchies, encourage reflection, and create rapport (Kara, 2015; Brown and Collins, 2018; Ayrton, 2020; Ivanova, Buda and Burrai, 2020). Perhaps most importantly, these methods make participating in research more fun, as

one participant said about the LEGO in particular “I loved it!”

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Figure 1:Timeline/eco-map hybrid

Figure 2: LEGO model of participant's career journey

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