

The future of face to face interviewing

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FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH**

Face to face (FTF) interviewing

- Mainstay of social and economic measurement for years
- Typically, trained interviewer (I) meets in home with respondent (R) asking standardized questions and recording answers (on paper or laptop)
- Worldwide, hundreds of thousands of interviews each month, contributing to official statistics that inform policy

But FTF not the only interview mode

- Has lived alongside paper-and-pencil (mail) and (landline) telephone surveys for years
- With rise of mobile devices and new kinds of “self-administered” surveys—web surveys, touchtone IVR, surveys via mobile apps—FTF interviews are numerically the minority these days

Assumed FTF advantages

- Researchers
 - can be confident about R's identity and location
 - can be visibly nonthreatening and friendly
 - can build rapport and motivate R to answer conscientiously and disclose sensitive information
 - can ensure accurate data entry and recording
 - can view R's nonverbal demeanor and circumstances
- Respondents
 - can see how nonthreatening I is
 - can have an extra (if unusual) social interaction
 - can feel a “human touch” as they contribute to research

But

- Researchers
 - intrude into people's homes and schedules
 - spend substantial time and resources traveling
 - have to be nonthreatening as they probe about potentially embarrassing opinions and behaviors
- Respondents
 - have to allow a stranger guest into their homes
 - must be prepared for a social encounter
 - can't multitask while answering
 - may feel embarrassed to admit socially undesirable opinions or behaviors in person

Multiple trends working against status quo in FTF interviewing

- Massive transformations in daily communication habits with technology revolution
 - It is now ordinary for people to choose among multiple modes of communication all day
 - Talking, texting, emailing, videochatting, posting to multiple audience members via social media
 - Communicating through a personal device while mobile and multitasking
 - FTF communication continues, but is far from the only option people expect or prefer

Multiple trends (cont'd)

- Proliferation of survey participation requests
 - Not only from official or government sources
 - But from corporations, marketers, pollsters, Facebook friends, etc.

Multiple trends (cont'd)

- Proliferation of other plausible interviewing modes
 - Interviewer-administered, e.g.
 - (Landline) telephone interviewing
 - Mobile phone interviewing
 - Video interviewing (Skype)
 - Text surveys
 - “Self-administered,” e.g.
 - Paper-and-pencil (mail) surveys
 - Web surveys
 - Automated telephone surveys (Speech-IVR)
 - Automated text surveys

Multiple trends (cont'd)

- Declining survey response rates
 - Large-scale probability sample surveys now routinely report response rates $< 10\%$
 - “Mixed-mode” surveys, trying multiple modes, can be needed to get even to low participation rates

Multiple trends (cont'd)

- Alternative complementary data sources beyond surveys—potentially less costly?—under investigation
 - Administrative records?
 - Social media or internet search data?

Empirically documented advantages for FTF interviewing?

- Less direct systematic evidence with fair comparisons than one might expect
- Many comparisons allow alternate interpretation
- Very little recent data—most comparisons from 1970's-2000, before recent mobile communication revolution, rise of Skype, rise of social media, etc.

Good example study: Holbrook, et al. (2003)

- Direct comparison of RDD telephone interviews with FTF in three datasets
 - 1982 US National Election Study Methods Comparison Project (MCP)
 - 1976 experiment by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center (SRC) for Groves and Kahn (1979)
 - 2000 experiment conducted as part of US National Election Study

Fair comparisons

- essentially identical lengthy questionnaires
- administered to separate groups of individuals interviewed either FTF or by telephone
 - not previously interviewed
 - selected from households by the same method
 - telephone interviews conducted with national RDD samples
 - FTF interviews conducted with national area probability samples

Evidence: FTF advantages

- FTF respondents
 - less likely to satisfice (as evidenced by no-opinion responding, nondifferentiation, and acquiescence)
 - Less likely to present themselves in socially desirable ways
 - Rated by I's as more cooperative and engaged in the interview
 - Less likely to express dissatisfaction with the length of the interview
 - Less suspicious about the interview process
- Suggests FTF leads to highest quality data

But at the same time...

- Growing substantial evidence that people disclose more socially undesirable information in self-administered modes (e.g., Tourangeau & Smith, 1996; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007)
 - Web surveys, even paper-and-pencil
- And their answers are more likely to be accurate when compared with official records
 - E.g., Kreuter, Presser & Tourangeau (2008)

Changing FTF practice: Rise of ACASI

- (Audio Computer-Assisted Self Interviewing)
 - In many FTF surveys, I's now turn laptop over to R for sensitive questions
 - R inputs answers while no one else—I nor other household members—even knows what is being asked
- Practical evidence that research community no longer sees unmediated FTF as unambiguous gold standard for collecting high quality data

So what is the future?

- Implicitly, research community continues to assume that benefits are substantial enough to continue investing in FTF for a number of high-profile surveys
 - E.g., initial FTF interview in US Current Population Survey—60,000 households per year—followed by subsequent telephone interviews

But FTF costs are high enough that pressure will be to reduce

- E.g., in one research center (University of Michigan Survey Research Center):
 - For one survey, 2015 travel costs for data collection were > \$728,000, 17% of annual data collection budget
 - For another US federal survey, 2018 travel cost estimate is > \$634,000, nearly 5% of total budget

New evidence on interview modes

- Raising new questions about whether FTF interviewing should still be assumed to be the gold standard for highest quality data
- Example: Lind et al. (2013) comparing responses to FTF interviewer with three different web-based self-administered “interviewers” asking same questions of 235 lab respondents:
 - High-animation agent, motion-captured from interviewer
 - Low-animation agent
 - Audio-only agent

High animation



Low animation





- ☐ Excellent
- ☐ Very good
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Fair
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Don't know
- ☐ Not sure

Repeat Question

Next →

Pattern of results

- For 8 survey questions, Rs' gave more socially undesirable responses with audio-only interface than to interviewer (consistent with ACASI findings)
- For these questions, same reduction in disclosure with High- and Low-Animation interfaces as with live human interviewer!

“Face to face” effects

- Emerging even with a non-human automated face...
- And the “face” did not promote improved data quality
- At least in some cases, the *lack* of a facial representation may promote disclosure
 - Consistent with existing social forms of confessional booth and psychoanalytic couch...

Improved data quality with *less* social presence?

- Schober et al. (2015)
- Recruited iPhone users to participate in a research study
- Randomly assigned participants to answer survey questions via Voice vs. Text with either a Human or Automated interviewer

Experiment: 4 modes on iPhone

		Medium	
		Voice	SMS Text
Interviewing Agent	Human	Human voice (R speaks with I)	Human text (R texts with I)
	Automated	Speech IVR (R speaks with system)	Automated Text (R texts with system)

Text as a mode of interaction

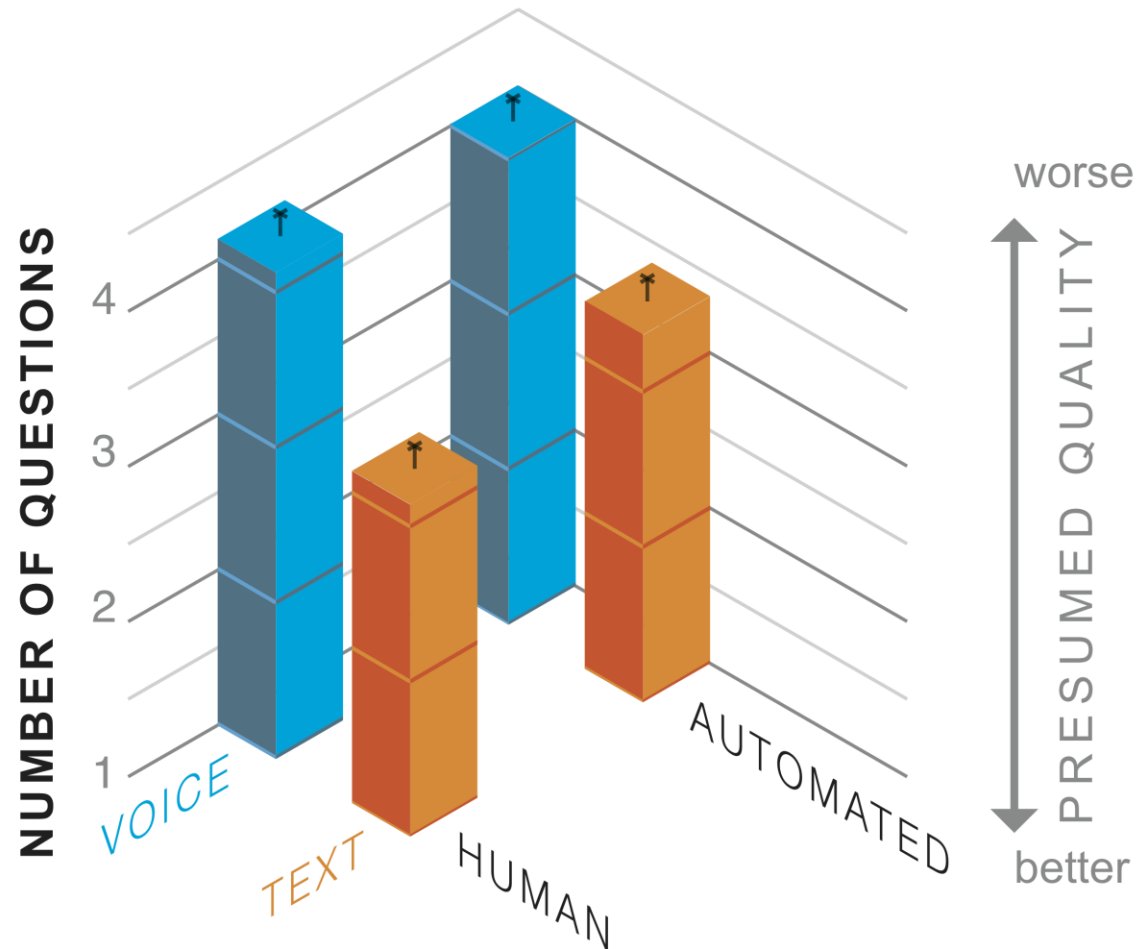
- Turn-by-turn
 - Threaded (on a smartphone)
- Responses don't need to be immediate
 - Allows multitasking
- Works even with intermittent network/cell service
 - unlike voice
- Does not require web capacity on device
 - unlike mobile web survey



Property	^t Voice	Text
Synchrony	Fully synchronous	Less or asynchronous
Medium	Auditory	Visual
Language	Spoken/heard	Written/read
Conversational structure	Turn-by-turn, with potential for simultaneous speech	Turn-by-turn, rarely but possibly out-of-sequence
Persistence of turn	No	Yes
Persistence of entire conversation	No	Yes, threaded
Social presence of partner	Continuous (auditory) presence	Intermittent evidence (when texts arrive)
Character of multitasking	Simultaneous, especially when hands free, unless other task involves talking	Switching required between texting and other tasks
Impact of environmental conditions	Potential interference from ambient noise	Potential interference from visual glare
Impact of nearby others	Others may hear answers; potential audio interference from others' talk	Others unlikely to see text and answers on screen, though possible

A: Rounding

Numerical answers ending in 0 or 5

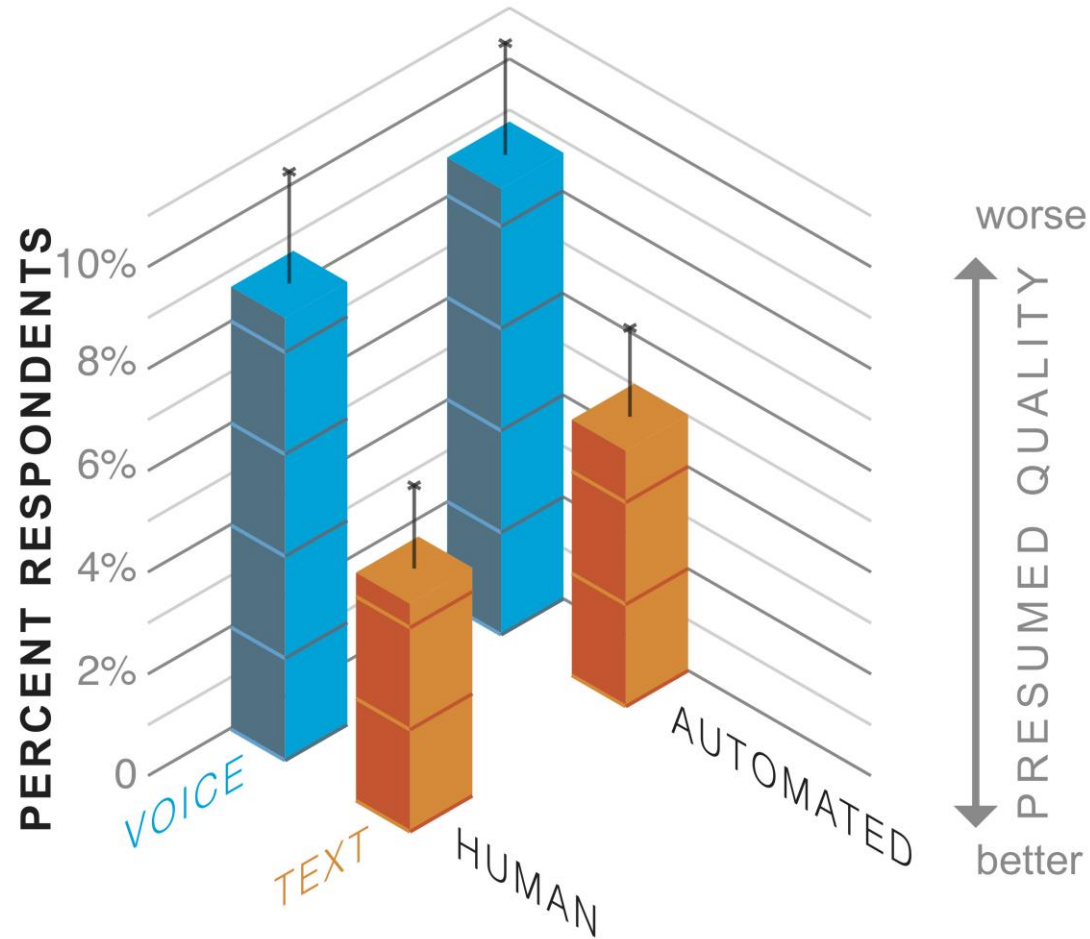


Conscientious responding: Straightlining

- Q: support for various dietary practices (eating red meat, limiting fast food, etc.)
 - » strongly favor
 - » somewhat favor
 - » neither favor nor oppose
 - » somewhat oppose
 - » strongly oppose
- We define answers in battery as “straightlining” when at least 6 of 7 responses are the same
- Significantly less straightlining in text than voice

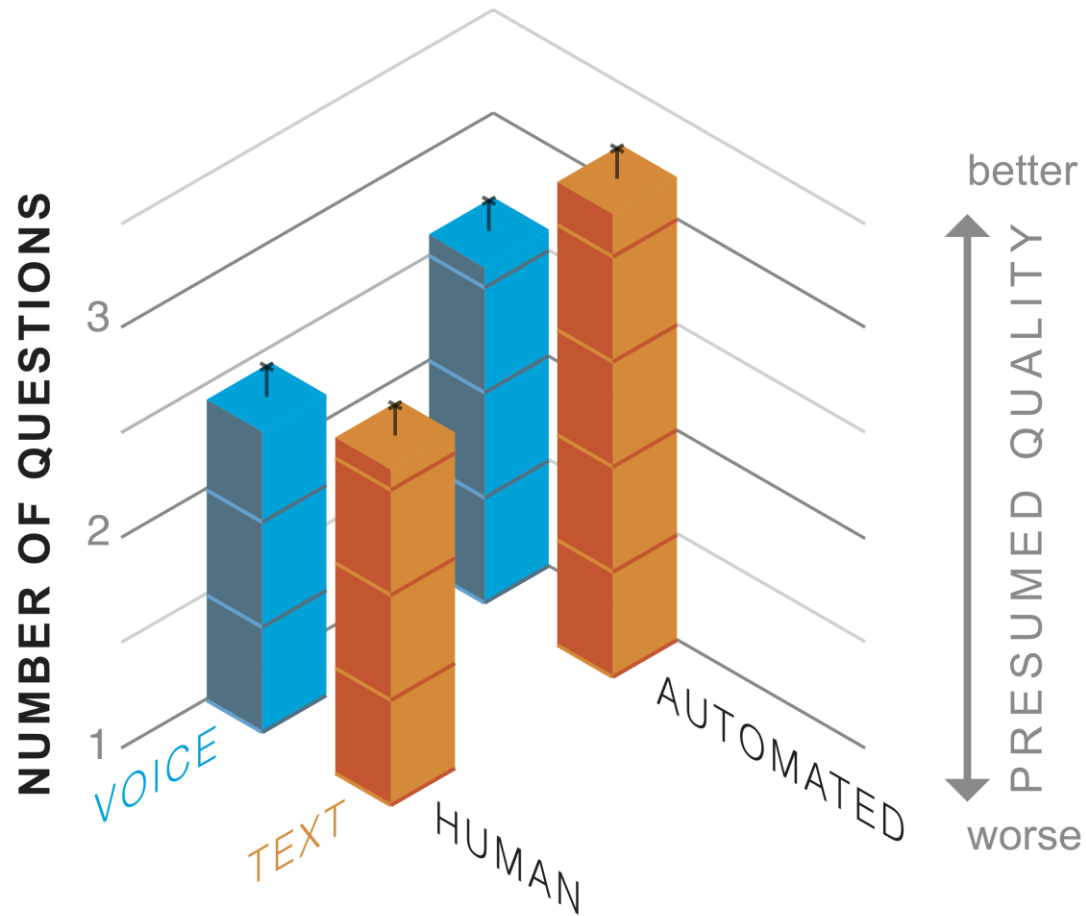
B: Straightlining

Respondents selecting same response option for at least 6 of 7 questions

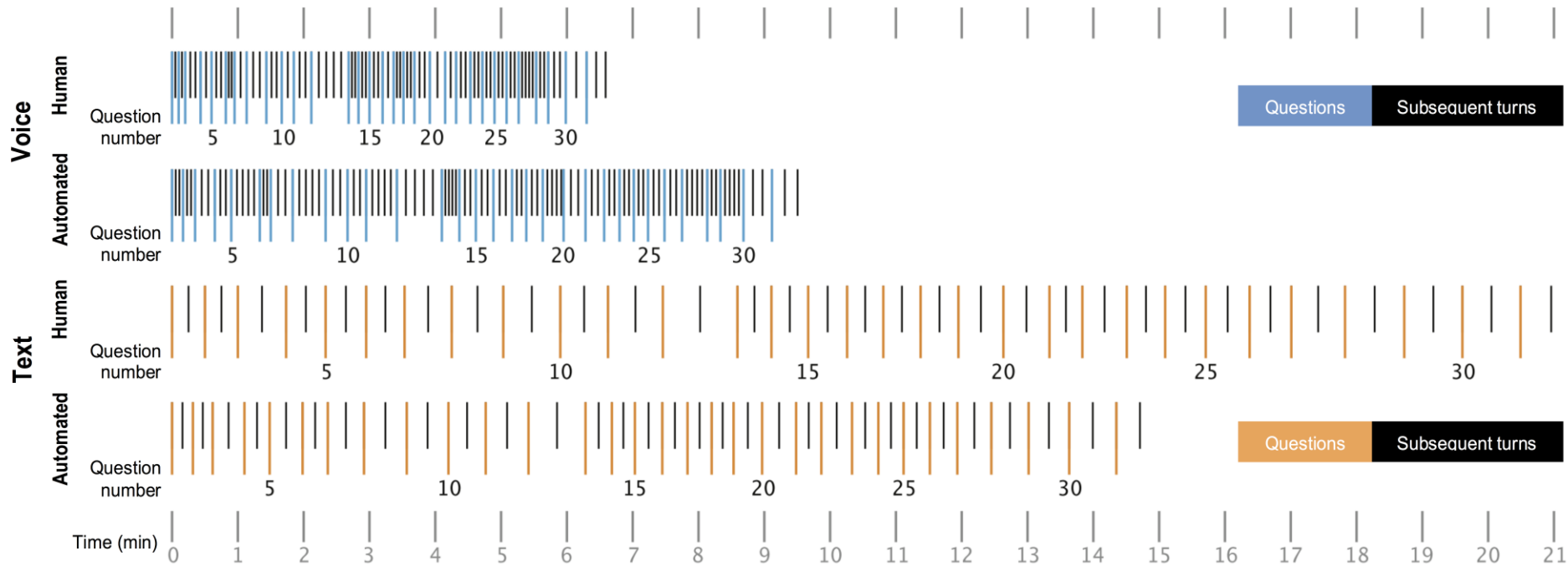


C: Disclosure

Number of most extreme
(socially undesirable) answers

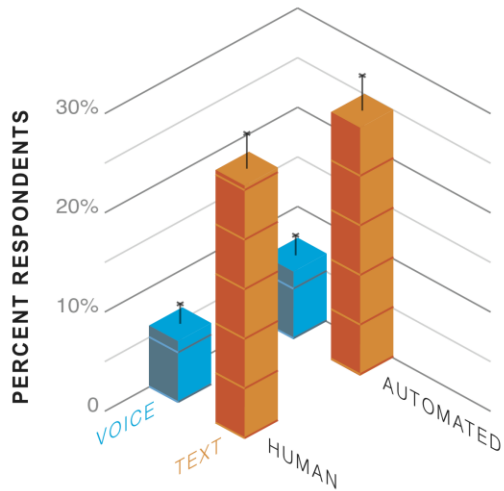


Median time to answer questions

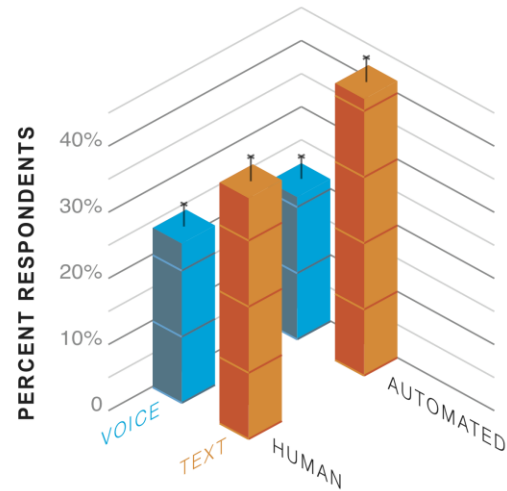


Multitasking (self-reported)

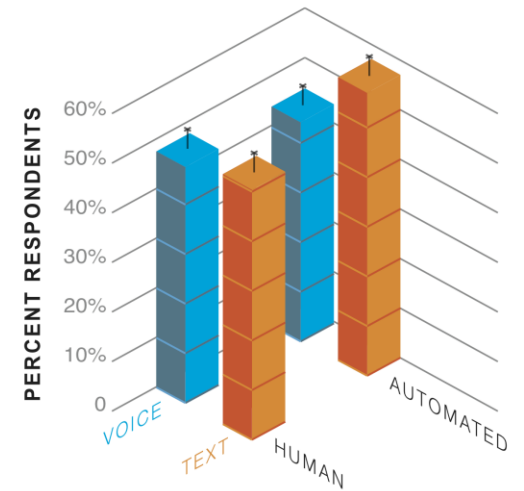
A: Communicating with someone else during interview



B: Doing something else on iPhone during interview



C: Carrying out other activities (not on iPhone) during interview



Pattern of evidence

- Better data quality via multiple measures in text vs. voice
- Greater disclosure in text and with automated interviewers
- Despite the very different dynamic of text interviews:
 - texting R's were more likely to be mobile and multitasking
 - Text interviews lasted much longer, but with fewer interchanges
- → A non- or less-synchronous interviewing mode may well be preferable in a smartphone era

Giving respondents a choice of mode?

- Conrad et al. (2017)
- Recruited additional iPhone users to same four modes; this time they had to choose whether they would stay in mode of invitation or switch modes

Findings

- R's who chose mode produced higher quality data—in each of the modes!
- All four modes preferred by some R's
 - Some R's preferred talking with a human, and some wanted more privacy
 - Some R's wanted the convenience of answering at their own pace, others wanted to finish quickly
- --> Might including FTF among mode options also improve overall data quality and satisfaction?

A new kind of FTF: Video interviewing?

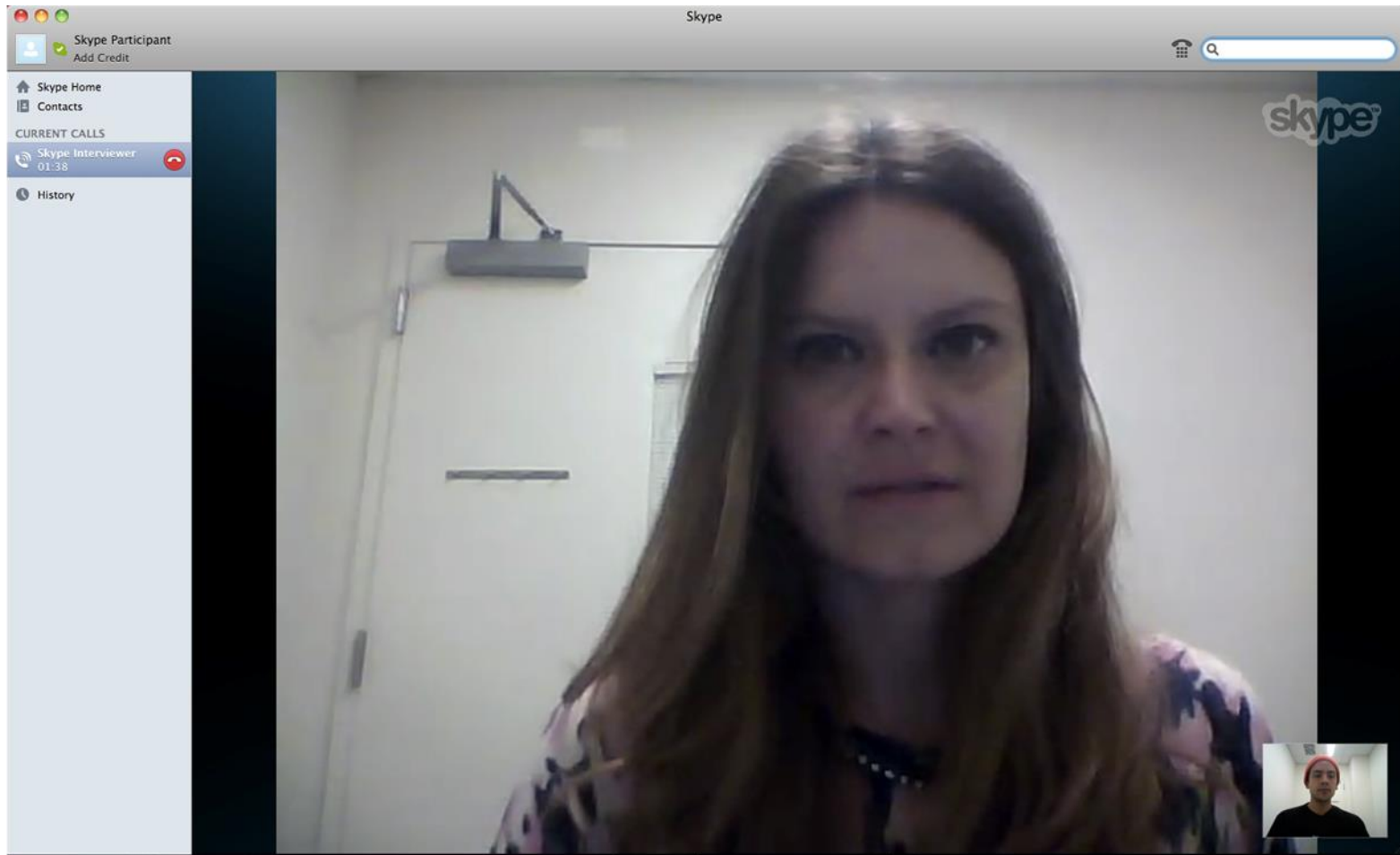
- Potential to have some of the benefits of FTF at lower cost
- Evidence from telemedicine and telepsychiatry that videomediated therapy not only can lead to outcomes as good as FTF, but sometimes even better
 - Video may lead to a useful “privacy barrier” for some purposes
- Of course, video access and comfort vary across different subgroups, so may not be suitable for all

Many new variables to consider

- Opportunity to use video in one's social network or work environment
- Adequate network connectivity
- Familiarity with video technologies and confidence in the ability to troubleshoot problems
- Comfort with remote interaction vs. physically copresent human contact
- Comfort with self-view window and evidence of being watched
- Reaction to "intrusion": some people would never invite a stranger into their home for an interview, while others—e.g., some socially isolated people—might welcome it

New “FTF” effects in video?

Self-view: R can see I and self



New “FTF” effects in video?

No self-view: R sees only I



Feuer & Schober (2015)

- R's randomly assigned to Skype interviews with self-view window (vs. no self-view window)
 - Reported more socially undesirable behaviors
 - Perceived the interview as less sensitive
 - Reported feeling less copresence with the interviewer
- New possibilities for FTF interviewing with technological mediation—for good or ill

Predictions for future of FTF interviewing?

- Unknown where FTF interviewing now falls in comparison with other modes
 - Likelihood of participation
 - Data quality
 - Satisfaction
- Human interviewers tend to elicit higher participation than automated systems, but not clear that FTF always wins
- It is no longer obvious that FTF is the gold standard in all cases

FTF interviewing increasingly costly

- There will be serious pressures to replace costly FTF interviews, with the attendant personnel and travel costs, with
 - more affordable remote interviewing (telephone, video, text)
 - more affordable automated “interviewing” (web, text, voice), perhaps with non-probability panels
 - alternate data sources when at all feasible

Prediction: FTF interviewing *will* be needed

- Some R's will prefer the “human touch”—to feel social presence and rapport with an interviewer
 - For some R's, the ONLY way they will agree to be interviewed will be FTF, with “doorstep” contact
 - At present it is impossible to predict how large a proportion this will be, or whether they could be satisfied with alternate kinds of social presence (e.g, video contact)

More methodological comparisons needed

- Tracking people's preferences—which are likely to evolve—in different communities will be a challenge
 - Technology adoption and preferences are a fast-moving target!
- It would be a mistake to assume that today's preferences will hold constant
- It would also be a mistake to sound the death knell for FTF interviewing
- Continued calibration of data quality across modes, including FTF, will surely be needed