

Forensic assessment via videoconferences in family law proceedings: from the experience during the COVID-19 pandemic to the new perspectives

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Abstract

The literature has long been interested in using videoconferencing in the clinical context, while its applications in the psycho-forensic context have been little studied. The diffusion of COVID-19 has forced experts to use forensic telepsychology, and this work aimed to evaluate the representations of a group of experts in child custody disputes in family proceedings.

Method: Two focus groups were conducted with 13 experts (psychologists, psychiatrists, neuropsychiatrists, and psychodiagnostics) with a mean age of 57.08 (SD=9.88). Focuses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We coded and classified the raw data by analyzing the transcripts for potential conceptual categories; the data collected were grouped into five macro-categories and twenty-one sub-categories (Difficulties linked to the methodological issues, Positive aspects, Emotions, Locus of control, Beliefs for the future). Descriptive and correlational analyses were carried out.

Results: Experts identified methodological difficulties in the pandemic period related to the setting in online interviews, the use of PPE in face-to-face interviews, the assessment of non-verbal communication, increased complexity, and the assessment of minors. Positive aspects related to the acquisition of new skills and the development of alternative strategies also emerged. They expressed negative emotions such as rejection, uncertainty, confusion, fatigue and difficulty, and even optimism, and confidence, especially among older experts. The tendency to self-attribute difficulties and the need for guidance emerged. For the future, the idea of sustainable change emerged.

Conclusions: The data confirm the importance of expanding research on the effectiveness of VC in the forensic context.

Keywords: child custody, forensic assessment, videoconferencing (VC), forensic telepsychology, COVID-19.

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Forensic assessment via videoconferences in family law proceedings: from the experience during the COVID-19 pandemic to the new perspectives

Introduction

Conducting an online forensic assessment via videoconferencing (VC) is a possibility that has been explored in the literature for several years (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2015; Brett & Blumberg, 2006; Saleem & Stankard, 2006), but in fact, has been little used in the forensic field (Batastini et al., 2020) and even almost forgotten (Bernhard et al. 2021), which according to Khalifa et al. (2008) is also due to a lack of willingness on the part of professionals to get involved.

So-called telepsychology was therefore considered a working method to be used in forensics only in exceptional cases, mainly to reduce time and costs and to overcome geographical distances, especially in countries where distances can be considerable (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2015).

On the other hand, telepsychology in forensics became necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic to conduct forensic assessments during lockdown periods or when social distancing rules and personal protective measures (PPE) were in place. During these periods, many court hearings were suspended or conducted online or in writing, and forensic experts in various fields also had to find solutions online.

This paper aims to trace the initial concerns, resistance, and hopes that forensic child custody experts had about having to carry out interviews, observations of family relationships, and tests via videoconferencing to reflect on how these constraints have influenced attitudes toward online assessment.

Telepsychology is a topical issue in all professional and social contexts because, although the return to face-to-face work is now predominant, the long experience of working online during the pandemic has led in several contexts to the retention of some activities online, not only because of the economic and organizational advantages, but also because of the possibility of being more inclusive, allowing greater participation, and timely, given the possibility of completing work in reduced time frames (Dale & Smith, 2021; Drogin, 2020).

Forensic evaluations have covered a range of areas, particularly those involving children with an urgent need for intervention decisions, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brown et al. (2021) noted that online interviews with children in cases of maltreatment and abuse allowed for early intervention, which was beneficial for recall and decision on the case.

Concerns about telepsychology in a forensic context have mainly related to technical difficulties with

connectivity (Batastini et al. 2020, 2023; Dale & Smith, 2021) and the use of the computer medium, both by the practitioner and the interviewer (Daffern et al., 2021). Networking and technological difficulties have often proved to be a more complex reality to manage than anticipated (Bernhard, McDowell, & Vincent, 2021; Dale & Smith, 2021).

It should be borne in mind that, more generally, psychology and psychiatry have long since adopted the system of videoconferencing in health care and therapeutic interviews, also trying to highlight the extent to which the online context produces adaptations and changes in the manifestation of symptomatology and personality traits (Recupero, 2010), not to mention the further development of telemedicine following the pandemic, while forensic psychology has lagged just for the use of online assessments (Kois et al., 2021).

The perplexities noted are related to distrust in one's training and individual negative incidents of VC use in one's professional life (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2015; Mulay et al., 2021).

In addition to IT resistance, there are also concerns about one's ability to manage an online assessment and the reliability of standardized tests and assessment instruments administered via VC, as well as the need for training and guidelines: For example, Batastini et al. (2020) found that 85% of forensic experts expressed concerns about their ability to administer assessment tools via VC.

In addition to personal resistance, many experts objected to the lack of validity of online administration of instruments (e.g., self-report inventory). In this respect, research has already shown positive correspondences between face-to-face and online psychodiagnostic methods (Brodey et al., 2000). Some psychodiagnostics tools have been tested for remote and face-to-face administration without significant differences (Lexcen et al., 2006).

In the case of family law and child custody decision-making, the need to continue to make decisions and intervene to protect children, even during the pandemic, has led to extensive use of VC in evaluations, and Dale and Smith (2021) have named these evaluations Remote Child Custody Evaluations (RCCEs).

Therefore, it seems very important to study experts' opinions on the difficulties encountered in online family assessment, which is considered one of the most complex, given the number of subjects involved, both adults and minors, the different dimensions to be assessed (parenting skills, individual characteristics), the several evaluation tools, the importance of the consequences for people's lives

(Austin et al., 2016; Otto et al., 2000; Pajardi, 2024; Procaccia et al., 2020), the necessary involvement of party counselors (Verde & Passoni, 2009) or social services and additional intervention figures (Pajardi et al., 2019).

Dale and Smith (2021) pointed out that the emotional dimension is central to these assessments; therefore, concerns have arisen among experts about the difficulty of empathizing with the people being assessed and correctly understanding their non-verbal communication in online interviews. Grady et al. (2011) had already highlighted the communication problem by pointing out that, when using VC, the experts' interaction style should also adapt to this channel and be more flexible and creative.

Even before the increase in VC administration that occurred with the pandemic, there was research interest in the reliability of tests administered via VC and the validity of their results (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2015). However, this issue has since been more thoroughly addressed by professional practice guidelines that also consider the ethical standards of this application (Corey & Ben Porath, 2020).

However, specific procedures have been developed via VC for administering certain tests, such as the MMPI, Millon, and PAI (Dale & Smith, 2021).

The scientific literature considers essential training in telepsychology, and demand for it has increased significantly since the pandemic's start (Bernhard et al., 2021). Authoritative references have been identified as a need for professional methodological support and greater credibility with adjudicators (Luxton & Lexcen, 2018).

As a result of the massive use of telepsychology in the forensic field, this need has become particularly urgent. It has led to the development of guidelines, both internationally and locally. From an international perspective, the APA has published on its website both guidelines for the administration of tests to minors (Banks & Butcher, 2020) and an update of the literature on the subject. In terms of APA guidelines, the 2022 update of the 'APA Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings' encourages the use of telepsychology in situations of emergency, distance, financial constraints, and deadlines, recognizing that it can make a significant contribution when used responsibly. The APA recommends assessing whether the technology used affects the results' reliability and implementing appropriate strategies to ensure privacy, working alliance, and safety with the evaluatees.

However, at the national level, some associations and expert groups have developed guidelines that could support professionals in this delicate phase of their professional activities. One example is the Association of Forensic Clinicians for Families (Associazione Clinici Forensi per le Famiglie - ACFF) in Italy, which already, in May 2020, developed and published (www.acff.it) indications on child custody assessments. These guidelines are addressed to professionals for online assessments concerning adult and child interviews and psychodiagnosis.

Methods

Participants

In order to better understand how experts have approached VC assessments in child custody evaluations, this study aims to explore experts' opinions, attitudes, and perceived difficulties regarding the new opportunities opened up by the 'forced' situation created by the pandemic.

The study sample consisted of 13 participants (12 female, 1 male) aged 42-74 years (mean age=57.08, SD=9.88). Inclusion criteria were: 1) to work as a forensic expert in the evaluation of child custody in legal proceedings in the case of separation and divorce; 2) to be a mental health professional (psychologist, psychiatrist, etc.); 3) to have worked in the field for at least 5 years; 4) to be a member of ACFF (Association of Forensic Clinicians for Families). 69.2% were psychologists, 15.4% were psychiatrists/neuropsychiatrists, and 15.4% were experts in psychodiagnosis.

We randomly divided into two groups with a similar distribution of age and profession (Table 1).

Total number	13	
Occupational status		
psychologist	9	69.2%
psychiatrist or neuropsychiatrist	2	15.4%
experts in psychodiagnosis	2	15.4%
Gender		
male	1	7.7%
female	12	92.3%
Age (years)		
mean (SD)	57.08	9.88
min-max	42	74

Table 1 – sample characteristics

Procedures and Instruments

Participants took part in two focus groups moderated by two experts in the tool: the first had 6 participants, and the second had 7 participants. Each focus lasted two hours and occurred in February 2021 during the pandemic emergency related to Covid-19. It followed the traditional qualitative research methodology (Powell & Single, 1996).

Each participant completed an informed consent form, which described the study's aims and permitted the focus to be audio recorded. The study complied with the Ethical Code of the Italian Psychological Association and was approved by the Ethics Committee of e-Campus University (prot. n. 6/2021).

The participants' data were handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and EU Regulation 2016/679.

Specifically, the moderators worked with a non-prescriptive, semi-structured interview schedule that included the following topics: methodological issues in

forensic evaluation during COVID-19, disadvantages and problems, strengths and new acquisitions, feelings and emotions, and beliefs about the future. We divided each focus into two phases: a free narrative phase prompted by an open-ended question and a more directive phase prompted by the moderators through specific questions. The focus group was the first step in a multi-method research aimed at gathering information about changes in forensic assessment during and after the pandemic to construct a questionnaire to be administered to a larger sample of forensic assessment experts.

The results of the second phase will be presented in a forthcoming paper.

Strategies of analysis

Each focus was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The methodological approach to analyzing the texts followed grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We coded and classified the raw data by examining the

transcribed discussions for potential conceptual categories, using the guiding questions as initial categories. The utterances made by each participant during the focus were pooled, and all words and/or phrases that met an analysis criterion, which was mutually exclusive, were counted for each participant. We converted the raw data into percentages based on the number of words produced by each participant.

Two independent judges coded the texts, with a third judge intervening in case of disagreement (inter-judge agreement=0.80). We grouped the coded data into five macro-categories and twenty-one sub-categories (Table 2).

Finally, the data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21.0 through descriptive analysis (mean and SD of each analysis category transformed into percentages based on the number of words spoken) and correlation analysis between age and analysis categories.

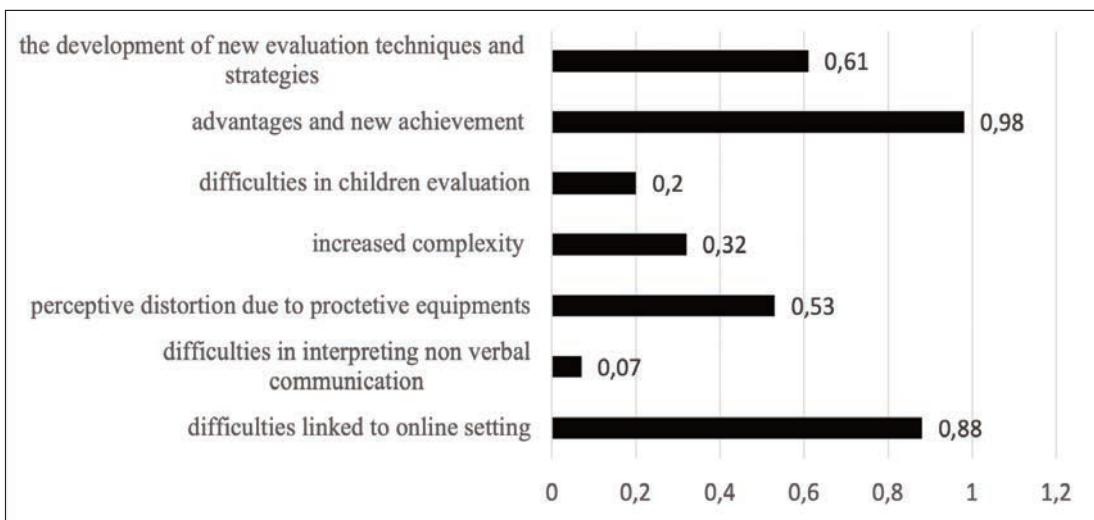
A) DIFFICULTIES LINKED TO THE METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES	1) Difficulties linked to the setting
	2) Difficulties in interpreting nonverbal communication
	3) Difficulties due to perceptive distortion linked to protective equipment
	4) Increase in complexity due to the need to find an agreement with the legal parties, the subjects evaluated and the experts
	5) Difficulties in children online assessment
B) POSITIVE ASPECTS	6) Advantages and new achievement thanks to online assessment
	7) Development of new evaluation techniques and strategies
C) EMOTION	8) Confusion
	9) Persecutority
	10) Refusal and revulsion
	11) Fear
	12) Sense of inadequacy
	13) Anger
	14) Sense of nostalgia and loss
	15) Fatigue and difficulty
	16) Uncertainty
	17) Optimism and confidence
D) LOCUS OF CONTROL d1) INTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL d2) EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL	18) Self-attribution of responsibility of the difficulties
	19) Choices forced by circumstances
	20) References to Guidelines or Authorities
E) BELIEFS FOR THE FUTURE	21) Lasting Covid-19- related change in forensic evaluation practices
	22) Expectation of many similarities between pre- and post-Covid-19 evaluation

Table 2 – Narrative Categories

Results Expert beliefs about forensic assessment during and after Covid-19

As regards the first macro-category, Difficulties linked to the methodological issues, participants reported above all difficulties linked to the limits imposed by the changes in the evaluation in the online setting (means=0.88; SD=0.56), followed by difficulties due to perceptive distortion caused by the use of protective equipment during face-to-face interviews (means=0.53; SD=0.39), the increase in complexity due to the need to find an agreement with the legal parties, the subjects evaluated

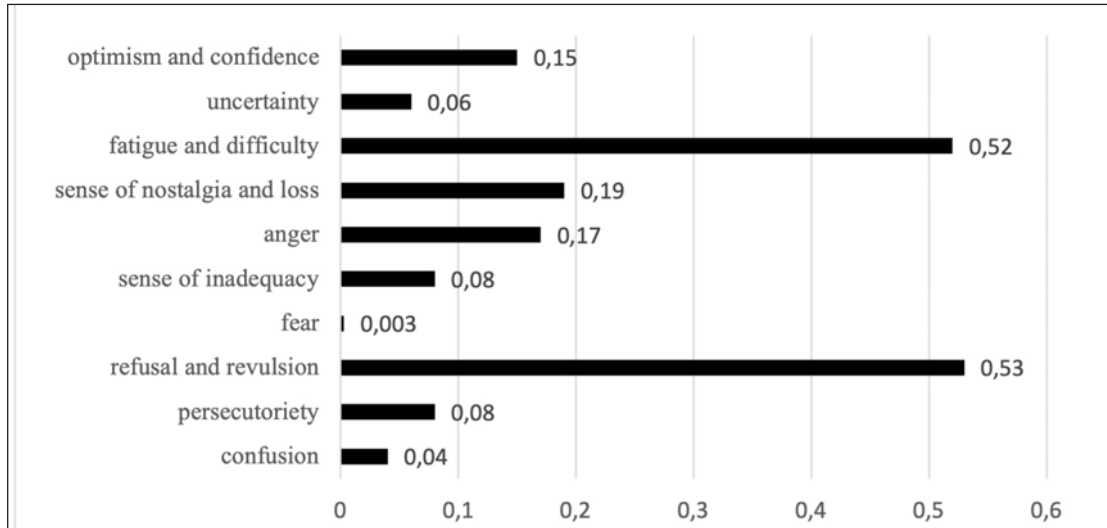
and the experts on several aspects that were not considered in the past (means=0.32; SD=0.45), problems with children online assessment (means=0.20; SD=0.14) and critical issues in interpreting nonverbal communication online, cause the mediation of video, and in face-to-face interviews cause to the presence of PPE (means=0.07; SD=0.12). Regarding the second macro-category, Positive aspects, experts first represented advantages and new achievements thanks to online assessment (means=0.98; SD=0.79) and secondarily, the development of new evaluation techniques and strategies (means=0.61; SD=0.43) (Graphic 1).



Graphic 1 – Difficulties linked to the methodological issues and Positive aspects

As regards Emotion, participants reported predominantly negative emotions. Specifically, they reported above all refusal and revulsion (means=0.53; SD=0.31), fatigue and difficulty (means=0.52; SD=0.66), followed by a sense of nostalgia and loss of aspects not present in the online setting anymore (means=0.19; SD=0.33), anger (means=0.17; SD=0.48), persecutoriness

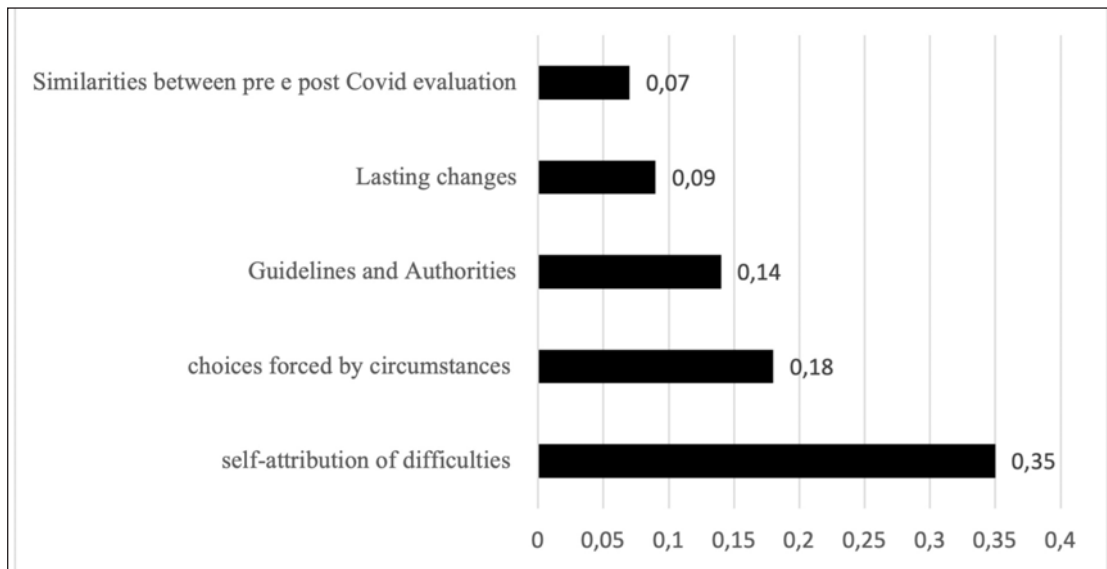
(means=0.08; SD=0.13), sense of inadequacy (means=0.08; SD=0.23), sense of uncertainty (means=0.06; SD=0.12), confusion (means=0.04; SD=0.06) and fear (means=0.003; SD=0.01). The only positive emotion presented is optimism and confidence (means=0.15; SD=0.12) (Graphic 2).



Graphic 2 – Emotion

About the macro-category Locus of control, participants showed an internal locus of control with self-attribution of difficulties encountered in online assessment (means=0.35; SD=0.67), but also an external locus of control speaking about choices forced by circumstances (means=0.18; SD=0.15) and references to Guidelines or Authorities (means=0.14; SD=0.15).

Finally, as regards the Beliefs for the future, experts reported the idea of a lasting Covid-19- related change in forensic evaluation practices (means=0.09; SD=0.12), but at the same time, they expected there to be many similarities between pre- and post-COVID-19 evaluation (means=0.07; SD=0.09). (Graphic 3)



Graphic 3 – Locus of control and Beliefs for the future

Correlational analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was carried out to assess the association between the registries variables of the sample and the narrative categories. Age positively correlates with optimism and confidence ($r=.571, p<.05$). Length of speaking negatively correlates with a Sense of inadequacy ($r= -.582, p<.05$), fatigue and difficulty ($r= -.685, p<.01$), and Self-attribution of responsibility ($r= -.649, p<.05$).

As regards the Difficulties linked to the methodological issues, difficulties linked to the online setting positively correlate with Difficulties due to perceptive distortion caused by the use of protective equipment during the face-to-face meetings ($r=.818, p<.01$), sense of inadequacy ($r=. 606, p<.05$), anger ($r=. 732, p<.01$), sense of nostalgia and loss ($r=. 653, p<.05$), fatigue and difficulty ($r=. 697, p<.01$).

Difficulties in interpreting nonverbal communication positively correlate with difficulties due to perceptive distortion linked to protective equipment during face-to-face meetings ($r=.777, p<.01$) and several negative emotions, as the sense of inadequacy ($r=. 654, p<.05$), anger ($r=.640, p<.05$), sense of nostalgia and loss ($r=.607, p<.05$), fatigue and difficulty ($r=. 638, p<.05$). Conversely, it correlates negatively with references to guideline and authority ($r=- .653, p<.05$).

Difficulties due to perceptive distortion linked to protective equipment during face-to-face sessions also positively correlate with confusion ($r=.626, p<.05$), anger ($r=.872, p<.01$), and fatigue/difficulty ($r=.807, p<.01$).

The increase in complexity positively correlates with an external locus of control, with both references to choices forced by circumstances ($r=.598, p<.05$) and with the need for guidelines or authorities ($r=.604, p<.05$). On the contrary, the positive aspects referred to the development of new evaluation techniques and strategies negatively correlates with confusion ($r=-.633, p<.05$) and fatigue/difficulty.

About Emotion, confusion positively correlates with fatigue and difficulty ($r=.566, p<.05$); persecutory correlates positively with fear ($r=.707, p<.01$) while it negatively correlates with external locus of control as choices forced by circumstances ($r=-.571, p<.05$). Fear also positively correlates with need to refer to guidelines and authority ($r=.579, p<.05$) and to beliefs that in the future there to be many similarities between pre- and post-COVID-19 evaluation ($r=.724, p<.01$).

Sense of inadequacy positively correlates with a sense of nostalgia and loss ($r=.960, p<.01$), fatigue and difficulty ($r=.709, p<.01$), sense of uncertainty ($r=.797, p<.01$) and self-attribution of responsibility of the difficulties ($r=.936, p<.01$). Positive correlation between anger and fatigue ($r=.740, p<.01$), between sense of uncertainty and sense of nostalgia and loss ($r=.724, p<.01$) were also found ($r=.792, p<.01$).

Finally, as regards the locus of control, self-attribution of responsibility positively correlates with a sense of

nostalgia and loss ($r=.911, p<.01$), fatigue and difficulty ($r=.710, p<.01$), and sense of uncertainty ($r=.765, p<.01$).

Discussion

The data support international findings (Drogin, 2000) on fears and critical issues related to videoconferencing (VC) in forensic evaluations. However, the experts were adaptable in coping with changes in evaluation caused by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in both online and face-to-face sessions with the aid of PPE.

The experts who participated in our study perceived limitations imposed by the setting as critical issues. These limitations include difficulties with assessment tools, privacy protection, and the technological medium itself. Additionally, the experts noted increased complexity and elements to find an agreement with their interlocutors.

These findings are consistent with those of Batastini et al. (2020), who conducted a survey on videoconferencing among forensic evaluators before the pandemic. The study found that approximately one-third (34,8%) of the 155 participants used videoconferencing for various psycho-forensic assessments but expressed concerns about the ability to administer some measures properly (85,3%) and the risk of technical difficulties (81,4%).

Qualitative themes of concern about videoconferencing methods fell into several categories. Some of them are like the results of our research: restricted assessment (61,3%), security and privacy (48,4%), technology concerns (21%), relational aspects (17,7%), control over the environment or evaluation (12,9%), ethical concerns (8,1%).

Notable issues that also emerged among our participants were the difficulties associated with using PPEs in face-to-face sessions and assessing non-verbal communication, both in remote sessions through video and, as mentioned above, in face-to-face sessions through PPEs. Specifically, the elements most frequently mentioned by our experts were the distortion of the physical perception of the subjects to be evaluated, perceived as a limitation of the "clinical gaze", which makes it possible to understand valuable aspects of functioning through the analysis of how the person moves in space, how they occupy it, the gestures with which they accompany speech, which is limited by the presence of PPEs, but also by the position in front of the PC.

Lis et al. (1995) emphasize the significance of non-verbal communication. While words facilitate conscious communication, non-verbal cues also play a crucial role in soliciting non-selective attention at a preconscious level. Some of our participants noted this bidirectional process. Non-verbal behavior influences the initial impression that an expert or subject forms of an individual behavior, including facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures. The subject typically controls the verbal component more, while the non-verbal component is linked to more

affective and instinctive aspects, making it more immediate. These are aspects that experts may have overlooked in videoconference or face-to-face interviews where IPRs were necessary.

Some participants also expressed a lack of physical contact, such as a handshake, which can convey empathy and help establish a diagnostic alliance (Chuk, 2004).

These elements confirm what was already noted by Dale and Smith (2021), who pointed out that a concern with the use of videoconferencing for assessment was the difficulty of empathizing with the people being assessed and correctly understanding their non-verbal communication, a critical aspect also highlighted by Kennedy et al. (2023).

Daffern et al. (2021) noted the same difficulty as in our study regarding the limited visual perspective and possible perceptual bias associated with VC. On the other hand, the potential zoom fatigue and distraction mentioned by Kennedy et al. (2023) were not found.

The topic of assessment of children via videoconferencing generated conflicting positions among our participants.

Many participants and authors expressed skepticism about the possibility of conducting remote assessments with children, citing concerns about the reliability of interaction between a parent/guardian and one or more children (Batastini et al., 2023). However, some participants in our focus groups found the digital tool particularly useful for adolescents and in situations where a child refused to meet a parent. They noted that adolescents accustomed to using the tool were more open and willing to talk. It is important to note that this evaluation is subjective and should be marked. In the second case, however, the online tool mediated the interaction, which bridged a greater distance than direct contact. The mediation by VC made it possible to circumvent refusal and lower the assessed subjects' defenses. They agreed to meet the parent even after very long periods of interruption of visits. Another topic that aroused interest among our participants was the assessment of children by videoconferencing. However, conflicting positions were taken on this matter.

Participants in our study identified other positive aspects of videoconferencing evaluations, such as the opportunity to try out new strategies and learn new techniques, to reduce time and costs, and to facilitate situations where subjects were geographically distant or to facilitate contact with other practitioners, confirming the findings of previous research (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2015).

Although there was no lack of verbalization of positive emotions such as optimism and confidence in our group, the most frequently expressed emotions were negative, such as rejection, fatigue, difficulty, nostalgia and loss, anger, feelings of inadequacy, confusion, and uncertainty.

However, it is interesting that correlational analyses showed that emotions of optimism and confidence were

expressed more frequently by older experts. This finding seems to contradict findings in the literature suggesting that younger people are more likely to use videoconferencing and online assessment tools (Kirschstein et al., 2023).

Batastini et al. (2020) have already pointed out that clinicians had more moderate opinions about the validity of forensic mental health assessments (FMHA) conducted via VC, because of problems related to the assessment administration and the possible development of ethical or legal problems. The authors thought it was logical that mental health professionals, who are primarily trained to provide services in face-to-face settings – a training emphasizing relationship building – would have concerns about interpersonal connection or loss of relevant information during an online assessment. However, as in our study, there was a positive age effect: more experienced subjects tended to be more optimistic about the ethics and legality of VC in FMHA. We could explain that older evaluators have greater confidence in their ability to evaluate adequately regardless of the medium than younger ones.

Concerning locus of control, a tendency to resort to self-attribution of difficulties in evaluation emerged in our study, confirming the findings of other studies that linked perplexity in the use of VC to distrust in one's specific training (Adjorlolo & Chan, 2015; Mulay et al., 2021). However, our data also show numerous references to an external locus of control, such as the experience of making forced choices and the need for guidelines and guidance from the authorities. Previous studies had already emphasized the latter aspect, which indicated the need for good practice guidance both as professional and methodological support and to gain more credibility from judges (Luxton & Lexcen, 2018).

In a forward-looking way, some participants expressed beliefs for the future related to the permanence of videoconferencing assessment tools, primarily to facilitate time, cost and contact with other practitioners, facilitated by remote. Still, others felt that, in some respects, there were no major differences between videoconference and face-to-face evaluations, confirming findings from previous studies (Lexcen et al., 2006).

Regarding the results of the correlational analyses, we would like to discuss a few aspects that have provided interesting insights. Some of these aspects were already evident in the descriptive analyses.

As previous studies have indicated (Batastini et al., 2020, 2023; Dale & Smith, 2021; Daffern et al., 2021), the more difficult it is to assess verbal communication and the more distortion it is due to the use of IPR in-person interviews during the pandemic, the more negative emotions are expressed. These emotions include a sense of inadequacy, anger, nostalgia, loss, fatigue, and difficulty.

A sense of persecution also emerged, indicating that the assessment may have been too intrusive and entered too directly into the homes and intimacy of the subjects. This feeling correlated with experiences of fear, which led

to the need to use authoritative sources to legitimize one's techniques. Similarly, the perception of increased assessment complexity links to a greater need for clear indications from authorities and guidelines to reinforce a sense of security. In contrast, self-attributed difficulties correlate positively with a sense of nostalgia and loss regarding the past and a sense of uncertainty and fatigue.

Positive adaptation experiences and acquiring new techniques and strategies functioned as protective factors against developing negative emotions, particularly confusion and fatigue.

Conclusions

Our data highlight a cautious attitude on the part of the experts who had to use VC in forensic evaluations. Although areas of limitation and criticality were highlighted, positive insights of optimism and confidence were not lacking.

The study has revealed challenging reflections and insights, but it has limitations.

Firstly, it collected experts' impressions and representations during the COVID-19 pandemic but did not empirically examine whether FMHA conducted via video conferencing is comparable to the traditional in-person approach.

Nevertheless, it is one of the few studies to have examined this issue. As suggested by Batastini et al. 2020, research on the actual reliability and validity of FMHA between VC and face-to-face still needs to be improved. Therefore, further research is urgently needed to support VC as a viable option for this purpose and to develop best practices to reduce barriers and identify the types of candidates and psycho-legal issues for which VC may be most appropriate. For example, Dale and Smith (2021) suggest that, if properly conducted, child assessments (RCCEs) are a viable alternative that can help resolve child custody disputes, as they allow parent-child dynamics to be observed in their natural context, increasing the ecological validity of the observation (Comer et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the limited sample size does not allow for the generalization of the findings.

However, the fact that we worked with a focus group formula that discussed on a few topics, rather than a questionnaire that was predetermined from the start, as other authors have done, also allowed us to capture an emotional dimension and more specific topics from the experts. This study will form the basis of a questionnaire that is currently in progress, which, being more articulate and detailed, will allow us to capture the attitudes of a large sample of experts in the actuality of overcoming the pandemic.

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