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1 The development of diary techniques for research

Introduction

Everyone understands the idea of a diary. We have all kept a diary for various reasons and in various ways. For some people it may simply be used as a reminder for appointments or events, detailing where they need to be and what they need to be doing at different times; others may keep a more detailed diary or personal account of what they are doing and perhaps what they were thinking and feeling at the time. Individuals often develop personal preferences, routines and systems for keeping a personal diary and choose to keep what they record private. Others may choose, or be invited, to publish their diary; think, for example, of the British journalist and political aide Alastair Campbell who has published three volumes of diaries about his time serving alongside the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair. For many people, there is something inherently absorbing about writing and/or reading someone else's personal diary.

In this book, we review and discuss how diary method has been used by researchers in the social and health sciences and suggest that technologies and modern forms of communication are transforming this method of data collection. Diary method has arguably been the 'poor relation' of the methodological family in qualitative research, compared, for example, to interviews. As Atkinson and Silverman (1997) pointed out some time ago, we live in an 'interview society' where the only route to 'truth' is thought to be through a face-to-face interview. One only has to consider the amount of research textbooks on qualitative interviewing, compared with what has been until now a single text on diary method (Alaszewski, 2006a). Or, the fact that several well-regarded and popular texts on mixed methods and qualitative research make very little, if any, reference to diary method (see, e.g., Bowling, 2014; Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2014). Yet, even a cursory search of the research literature published since 1990 reveals over 4,800 papers using diary method. Moreover, the method continues to provide researchers

with a flexible tool for collecting rich data, especially in light of digital, web and social networking technologies. In this book, we therefore aim to clarify the role of diary method in the researchers' toolkit and illustrate through empirical examples the value and limitations of this method for eliciting information and engaging participants in research. In particular, we consider a range of structured, semi-structured and unstructured approaches to diary method; some of the practical issues in designing diary research; and how this method can be modified and used to enable participants to take part in a study and have control over the process of data collection.

A distinctive feature of this book is the consideration given to how and why the diary method is used and might be modified for children and for adults who are frail or physically, cognitively or intellectually impaired in some way. Rather than assuming capacity (like standard research texts) we will discuss the strengths (and limitations) of utilizing diary method to collect data from people who may experience problems in remembering, writing, talking, thinking clearly and using diary-keeping equipment, such as electronic diaries and cameras. We discuss the importance and implications of modifying the diary method in the context of emerging inclusive research methodologies and outline the ways in which researchers have adapted the method to enable the participation of different groups in research.

Another distinctive feature of this book is the consideration given to technologies and modern forms of communication. As other researchers in this series have noted, probably the most significant development in research methods in the past decade is the advancement of digital technologies (Wiles, 2012). Digital devices, weblogging and social media sites like Facebook facilitate and encourage people to maintain and share a personal record of their everyday lives, and the information is stored in a chronological order, as it is in a diary. The question as to whether this constitutes a form of diary keeping that researchers can use is often asked by students and will be discussed in Chapter 4. In this sense, the book fits well with the 'What is?' series, as we consider the value of diary method not only from a historical and present-day perspective, but also its future potential in the hyper-digital age.

Differences between unsolicited and solicited diaries

A key distinction to make before discussing diary method in any great depth, and in the context of social research, is between unsolicited and solicited diaries. Diaries which people choose to keep voluntarily are an

example of an unsolicited diary: no one has asked the diarist to keep the diary. We have already mentioned Alastair Campbell's prowess in diary keeping, and many others in the political arena have maintained and published an unsolicited diary, including Galeazzo Cino (1903–1944), Foreign Minister of Fascist Italy, and Tony Benn (1925–2014), British Labour politician, to name just two. Some individuals seem to be natural diarists and committed to recording their lives for others to read.

Unsolicited diaries have been kept by men and women and have been published for centuries. *The Diaries of Samuel Pepys* (1633–1703) is perhaps one of the earliest and most well-known examples of an unsolicited diary, but there are countless other examples written by ordinary people, some of whom find themselves in extraordinary situations, which have been published. As well as the *Diary of Anne Frank*, there is *Dorothea's War*, which comprise the diaries of the First World War nurse Dorothea Crewdson; and the diaries of Martha Ballard (1785–1812), a midwife living in New England, have been researched and used by an historian to explore the community life and health care of post-revolutionary America (Ulrich, 1991). While these are fascinating accounts of everyday life, they are not the main focus of this book, which perhaps should be more accurately entitled: What is *solicited* diary method?

Solicited diaries are diaries that people have been asked to keep for a particular reason, notably for research purposes. This approach, in which a participant records his or her thoughts, feelings and/or behaviours under the direction of an individual researcher, has been part of the researcher's toolkit since the 1930s and is the main focus of this book. Perhaps one of the earliest and best examples of a traditional solicited diary is the Mass Observation Project (MOP), described below.

The Mass Observation Project (MOP) has been recording everyday life in the UK since 1937, when they called for people from all parts of the country to record everything they did from when they woke up in the morning to when they went to sleep at night on 12th May. This was the day of George VI's coronation. The resulting diaries provide a glimpse into the everyday lives of people across Britain and have become an invaluable resource for those researching countless aspects of the era.

The MOP was revived in 1981 and currently has a national panel of 500 volunteer participants who respond to 'Directives' or open-ended questions sent to them by post or email three times a year. The Directives contain two or three broad themes, which cover both personal issues and wider political and social issues and events, including, for example, the Scottish Referendum 2014 and Eurovision. Participants retain anonymity and therefore write openly and candidly. Researchers are invited to collaborate with MOP to help develop new directives.

This text and further information about MOP can be found on the website http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass_observation_project.html.

Another example of how and why a diary might be solicited to gain rich insights into a certain aspect of life can be seen in relation to the activities of think tanks. In May 2014, the Commission on the Future of the Home Care Workforce solicited a series of diaries from home care workers and published these on their website as a blog. The diary blogs provide an account of the home care workers' visits to people with high support needs and the range of challenges they encounter, notably a lack of time to engage with service users and talk to them about their care needs. An extract from one of the blogs is given below.

Monday

Well it was a struggle to get out of bed today, day 15 without a break. I have to work extra to be able to afford essential repairs to my car, without the car I am limited to the amount of work I can do and areas would need to be restricted meaning less money to live on. Yet there is no petrol allowance or consideration to the increase in my insurance.

My first call today is to assist a lady out of bed; it's a two person call as she is very disabled. When I arrived there was an awful smell, I then noticed that her commode had not been emptied the night before and had been placed right next to her bed, how she managed to sleep is a

wonder! We have 1 hour to assist but once she is safely seated I left the other carer to assist with her breakfast and tidying up as my next call often takes much more time than is allocated.

This text and further information about the project can be found on the website <http://www.lgiu.org.uk/2014/05/12/diary-of-a-home-care-worker-part-1/>.

Each blog ends with the amount of miles the care worker has travelled and the total sum of unpaid travel and work time. These entries highlight the need for more investment into social care and reveal the value of solicited diary method for giving voice to a group of people who may go unheard, in this case, home care workers. However, while these provide useful examples of solicited diary method, these approaches are not the main focus of the book either. Rather, our focus is on how solicited diary method has been and could be used as part of an individual researcher's toolkit to collect data about a given phenomenon.

Solicited diaries as part of researcher's toolkit

Asking people to keep a regular record of their experiences can capture rich data on personal events, motives, feelings and beliefs in an unobtrusive way and over a period of time. Researchers who use diary method come from a wide range of disciplines, including health sciences, medicine, economics, sports science, human geography, transport planning, psychology and gerontology. As such, the method has evolved as a data collection tool over the years.

Today there are various forms of solicited diary, each one reflecting researchers' particular domain of interest and preference in terms of study design. Perhaps one of the most established forms of solicited diary is the time diary. This involves participants recording events at a specified time or between a particular time frame. Time diaries are favoured by researchers wishing to examine patterns of behaviour and draw some kind of comparison. For example, in one study, researchers invited 165 couples

with children to fill out a separate time diary for two days – a typical work-day and non-workday for twenty-four hours. The time-diary technique allowed them to compare mothers' and fathers' reported involvement with childcare (Bureau, Services, & Science, 2005).

Another popular form of solicited diary is the travel diary. This is often used by transport planning researchers to elicit data regarding travel behaviour. Participants are typically asked to self-record the details of every journey they make on each occasion they can make it, so in effect the diary becomes an extended survey. This form of diary was used in the German *Mobidrive* study, which involved recruiting a total of 317 persons in 139 households to keep a six-week travel diary to investigate the rhythms of daily life and travel (Axhausen, Löchl, Schlich, Buhl, & Widmer, 2006).

Other forms of solicited diary have evolved within the health sciences to research health-related behaviours or bodily functions. For example, the 'food-diary method' has been used by researchers to investigate the eating and drinking patterns of healthy and diabetic subjects; this particular form of diary is so widely used it has become a validated measure, thus allowing for comparisons to be drawn between different nationalities (Bellisle, Dalix, & de Castro, 1999). Urinary diaries (micturition charts, frequency, volume and bladder diaries) provide another example of a particular form of solicited diary which has evolved; used in over sixteen studies, urinary diaries provide health researchers with useful numerical data (Bright, Drake, & Abrams, 2011). The development of different diary forms highlights the versatility of this method for collecting various sources of data, a point we return to in our discussion of study design in Chapter 2.

Although solicited diary method can be used on its own, it is perhaps more commonly used alongside other methods to investigate a research topic. The studies outlined below have all used diary method as part of a mixed methodology – that is, it has been used in combination with other methods, such as interviews and questionnaires, to provide a more detailed picture of the topic under investigation. Using a combination of data collection methods adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness, depth and creativity to the research; plus it allows the limitations of one method to be offset with another (Bijoux & Myers, 2006).

Diaries and questionnaires were used to investigate the sexual behaviour of homosexual men Coxon (1999).

Audio diaries, photos and interviews were integrated in a study to explore the experiences of disabled young men transitioning to adulthood (Gibson, 2002).

Diaries and focus groups were used to explore the experiences of older people as customers of various public and private services (Koopman-Boyden & Richardson, 2013).

Daily diaries and weekly cognitive and affective assessments were used to determine the side effects of certain medications in people aged 65+ (Katz et al., 2005).

Diaries and semi-structured interviews were used by health researchers in a phenomenological study of midwives' experiences of intrapartum care (Bedwell, McGowan, & Lavender, 2012).

Written, photo, audio diaries and interviews were used to investigate the experiences of men and women with dementia who campaign for social change (Bartlett, 2012).

Diaries, interviews and self-directed photography were used by human geographers to understand movement through everyday spaces (Bijoux & Myers, 2006).

Audio diaries and pre- and post-season interviews were used to investigate young female athletes' ability to cope with stress (Tamminen & Holt, 2010).

Audio sleep diaries and interviews were used by sociologists to explore how children's sleeping patterns affect parents' sleep (Venn, Arber, Meadows, & Hislop, 2008).

It is apparent from the studies featured above that diaries are commonly combined with an interview. Often referred to as the diary-interview method (DIM), the technique involves a pre-diary interview and post-diary 'debriefing' interview, as well as the diary-keeping phase (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). One geographer who researched urban public culture using diary-interview method describes it like this: 'the diary becomes a kind of performance or reportage of the week, and the interview a recounting or reperformance' (Latham, 2003, p. 2002). Greater depth can be obtained

by diary-interview method as participants have the opportunity to talk about diary entries and the researcher is able to explore in more depth the entries diarists have made.

Combining methods to collect data is a complex and challenging process, and it is beyond the remit of this short text to discuss mixed methodology in any great detail. Besides, there are several key texts on mixed methods for readers to access, most notably by John Creswell and the *What is Qualitative Research?* published in this series, which discusses some of the issues raised by the mixed methods movement (Hammersley, 2013). Nevertheless, it is helpful to identify and reflect on the ways in which researchers have used diary method alongside other data collection techniques; thus some of the specific issues that arise in combining diary method with other approaches are picked up and discussed in Chapter 2.

What insights are provided through diary method as a data source?

So what is the appeal of diary method? Why do so many researchers choose to integrate this approach into their study design? First and foremost, diary method is favoured by researchers for ‘capturing life as it is lived’ (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). Rather than someone recounting an event or feeling (as is the case with a qualitative interview), diary method allows the participant to record it as it occurs (or at least closer to the moment that it occurs). This is thought to reduce recall bias, a point we return to in several places in this book.

Not only does diary method allow participants to record events as and when they occur, but the method allows for an extended period of data collection. Participants are typically asked to maintain a diary over a certain number of weeks, sometimes months, depending on the phenomenon under investigation. In one diary-interview-based study on athlete stressors and coping strategies, for example, it made sense for the sixteen adolescent basketball players to complete pre- and post-season interviews and maintain an audio diary across the three phases of the season (early, mid and late) (Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Being able to gather data for a longer period of time is important when seeking to understand the daily rhythms of everyday life, or if you wish to study changes within a person, such as coping strategies, as was the case with the athlete study. As such,

the micro-level data provided through diary techniques can shed valuable light on areas of a participant's life that one would not otherwise be able to access, as outlined below.

Within-person variation and effects. Diary method is ideal for capturing data about changes within a person, because the reporting period is extended with a diary. For example, Cleveland & Harris (2010) used written diaries to investigate young people's substance misuse cravings over time. In another study, participants were asked to keep a crying and mood diary ranging in days between 40 and 73 (Bylsma, Croon, Vingerhoets, & Rottenberg, 2011). Also, the effects of daily stressors, such as commuting between home and work, caring for others and problems with technology, are processes that occur within the individual that has been captured through diary method (Seltzer et al., 2010).

Greater reporting of sensitive or otherwise 'unseen' behaviours.

Several researchers report on the value of using diary method to research sensitive behaviours such as sexual activity and sexuality. In fact, so many researchers use diary method to research this topic area, and a handbook has been published on conducting human sexuality research using diary method (Okami, 2002). Sleep is another aspect of life that is researched using diary method, particularly audio diaries, because the method lends itself to eliciting what sleep researchers have called 'narratives of the night' (Hislop, Arber, Meadows, & Venn, 2005).

Unique insights about the body and creative practices. Information about how someone looks, speaks, behaves and touches can all be gained through diary method, particularly, visual, audio and/or photo diaries. For instance, video and audio diaries can make the body 'knowable' because they make known how a participant moves and sounds (Bates, 2013), and photo diaries can reveal the importance of touch as a homemaking practice (Morrison, 2012). A leading proponent of sensory methods describes the data elicited through video and audio diaries as performative and dynamic (Pink, 2007).

Having identified the particular insights gained through diary method, it is possible to summarize the main topic areas that have been researched using diary method; these are:

- Eating and drinking habits
- Sleeping patterns
- Sexual activity
- Travel behaviour
- Sports and sports coaching
- Living with a disability, ill health or long-term condition
- The practices and attitudes of health-care workers
- Use of physical space and interactions with the built environment
- Daily stressors and coping strategies

The list of topics is not exhaustive; a diverse range of topics have been explored using solicited diary method, as we have already mentioned, and it is an extremely versatile and widely used data collection tool.

Researching this book

This book aims to provide an up-to-date, accessible and complete account of diary method in the context of social science research. It is based on a comprehensive review of the research literature; key databases were searched for research studies that have used diary method and a further 'sweep' for evidence was conducted using Google scholar to identify all published literature in English regarding solicited diaries. If a paper or document featured the term 'diary method' or a derivative thereof – for example, 'e-diary' or 'diary-interview method' – in the title and/or abstract, it was downloaded, stored onto a reference manager and organized according to the chapter themes. Given the emphasis in this series on the social sciences, we concentrated on those studies that have used diary method in cognate fields and filtered out those from other disciplines such as computer science and engineering. Many of the social science-related studies we identified are cited and described in this text. As such, the book functions as a useful and comprehensive reference point for researchers considering using diary method in their project.

In terms of the structure of the book, having provided a brief overview of diary method in this introductory chapter, we move on in Chapter 2 to discuss the process of engaging with diary techniques in more depth. This chapter covers the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of diary method and outlines the type of research questions best addressed through solicited diary method. In Chapter 3, we focus on the practical

aspects of designing a diary study and analysing diary data, including audiovisual data. Close attention is paid in this chapter to the analysis and interpretation of diary data and we discuss aspects of this method most likely to be of concern to researchers, including, for example, how to ensure rigour, validity and reliability and trustworthiness of findings. Chapter 4 engages with the digital age and explains how new technologies and electronic devices are changing the nature of diary method. Chapter 5 turns to issues of empowerment, control and ethics, and appraises the strengths and limitations of diary method in the context of participatory research and building equitable relations. Finally, in Chapter 6 we conclude by outlining the strengths and limitations of this method before suggesting there is a shifting practice in diary keeping from traditional low-tech to hi-tech contemporary method (from pen to pen-drive!).