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6 Methodological issues and future directions

In this final chapter, we consider the implications of issues arising in previous chapters for the future of diary methods. We begin by synthesizing conclusions drawn by other researchers who have used this approach and identify strength, limitations and strategies for addressing those limitations, as well as recommendations for good practice in the application of diary methods based on the key principles of inclusive research design and practice.

We then go onto discuss how modern transitions in academic practices, including the growing importance of co-production, mean that diary method can be designed and used in collaborative ways with research participants. Finally, we reflect on the ways in which digital technologies and social media, such as blogging, are creating new possibilities for this method.

Summarizing the strengths and limitations of diary techniques

In reflecting on the case studies, research papers and book chapters that we have drawn on in writing this text, we have been struck by how heavily biased these studies are towards health-related topics – from nutrition to disability, sexual activity, sleep patterns and psychological stressors. Of course this is not the sum total of diary work – indeed the book draws on other examples throughout, but nevertheless, it *does* raise the question of why social scientists have been slower to engage with solicited diary methods that perhaps can be said of those working in the health field. Is it because there remains a dominant perception that solicited diaries are largely quantitative and used to count the number of times an event occurs over a predefined period of time? Is it because social researchers perceive the effort required in undertaking solicited diary techniques may be disproportionate to the value

of the data gathered? Is it because there is a misperception that diary techniques are exclusionary to certain groups of people? Or, is it because social researchers have yet to realize the innovative potential that new technologies – from audiovisual to web-based – can offer researchers desiring to use solicited diary techniques? It may even be because diary-based research is actually a complex methodology, particularly when it involves technologies, which requires the researcher to have advanced skills and knowledge in the practice of data collection and analysis. Whatever the case, our aim in this text has been to open up to the reader the wide range of possibilities and benefits that solicited diaries can bring to the social researcher's methodological toolbox. Indeed, other disciplines and fields of research could learn much from how health researchers are using diary techniques and the wide range of participants they are engaging with – including those groups of people often defined as 'vulnerable' – such as young children, victims of sexual abuse, people with dementia and other disabilities.

As we have illustrated throughout the text, solicited diary methods offer far more scope for creativity and methodological complexity than, for example, the structured survey or the semi- or unstructured interview commonly used in social research. The ability to capture events as they happen, using a wide range of paper-based, electronic and web-based approaches, enables a much deeper, insightful and accurate understanding of how specific aspects of a person's life, their experiences of issues or events unfold and change over time. Furthermore, unlike question and response techniques, diaries suffer far less from those problems of recall bias that, some have argued, call into question the internal validity of studies using self-reported data. As noted in Chapter 4, the growing use of portable technology in diary research offers even further potential to reduce any recall bias by enabling participants to record diary data in real time. Moreover, as society become more 'mobile and 24/7 orientated', it is important that researchers develop and use methods (like email diaries) that reflect the day-to-day experiences of its participants (Jones & Woolley, 2014, p. 1).

The examples and case studies on which we have drawn have demonstrated how solicited diary methods can be used as a stand-alone methodological technique using purely written, audio or visual diaries or any combination of these approaches to diary keeping. The rise of audio

and visual diary keeping in particular has been important in addressing critiques that diary approaches favour educated middle-class participants and thus are likely to exclude large sections of the population. The visual can also offer unique insights about the body and bodily behaviour 'in the telling'. The many examples we have drawn on in this book reveal the wide range of people from different age groups, cultures and dis/abilities who have participated successfully in diary studies. In particular, the studies we have drawn upon illustrate how participants' choices about what to reveal and what not to reveal in their solicited diaries capture the weight and meaning they attach to particular experiences and events in their lives that is often by-passed in more question and response techniques. Where accuracy and time are methodologically important, they can also capture a level of detail that is often forgotten in more retrospective accounts.

As we have demonstrated throughout the book, solicited diaries can be used in a spectrum of research designs from the very simple (structured diary responses given over a short but intensive period of time) to the more detailed semi- and unstructured diary using a mix of written and/or audio or visual techniques to highly complex multi-method studies using a range of techniques of which the solicited diary may be just one element.

For us, the 'added value' of solicited diaries, whether used as a stand-alone technique or part of a mixed methods study, lies in the time context that underpins it. Not only are data gathered in real time (or as near real time as possible), but by doing so over a defined period of time, it facilitates the unfolding of a longitudinal story, related to the topic of interest, that is framed within the participants' own words or pictures. This time component is one that is wholly absent from the one-off survey, interview or focus group techniques. Even where repeat interviews or surveys are undertaken, they are not gathered at the point of occurrence of the event of interest. Neither do they afford the participant the freedom and control to record the event as and when it makes temporal sense to do so. The solicited diary, however, offers the opportunity to reveal within-person changes over time and a greater reporting of unseen behaviours and settings. It is certainly true that observational or ethnographic techniques are a useful way of uncovering otherwise unseen behaviours, but most contemporary ethnographies

(or mini-ethnographies as they are sometimes referred to) no longer engage in those deeply immersive anthropological studies of the past. For the most part, they comprise a series of audiovisual observations of the relational engagement between people and particular environments, settings or events carried out over relatively short, but purposively selected, time frames over a defined period of time. Here, then, the use of solicited diaries *alongside* ethnographic research could considerably strengthen our understanding of important but potentially unseen events that occur when the ethnographer is not 'in the field'.

But the strength of the time context within solicited diary method also relates to the opportunities it offers research participants to think through and record their diary response at their own pace – to structure and restructure their responses should they so desire, until they feel that the response they have given is an accurate reflection of what they actually wanted to say. It is this aspect of solicited diary method, we maintain, that makes it a more empowering technique for research participants. Furthermore, as we have demonstrated, the emergence of new approaches to diary keeping that take the solicited diary technique beyond the traditional paper and ink approach has proven inclusive of a wide range of individuals – overcoming critiques that diary method is exclusive of those whose physical, cognitive or educational attainments prohibit their involvement. It should also be pointed out that people are likely to improve their ability to capture data as time goes on; indeed, we highlighted in Chapter 3 how some studies have involved people in keeping a diary for a year or more. Thus, diary keeping allows for a slower-paced, longitudinal type of research, which may better suit some participants, topic areas and/or settings.

Of course, we cannot ignore the 'messiness' of doing diary research nor the complexities involved in using this method – this temporal unfolding of data within diary techniques presents challenges for analysis. Not only does diary data generate significant amounts of data that need to be sensitively handled, but, as discussed in Chapter 3, to truly gain from these temporal insights we need to avoid falling into the trap of resorting to traditional modes of analysis – whether quantitative or qualitative – in order to ensure that this temporality is not lost. Within quantitative approaches, this may require the researcher to use multilevel modelling techniques and examine the data for lagged effects. Qualitative approaches also need

to adopt techniques for analysis that ensure the time context is not lost, for example, by engaging with narrative modes of analysis over thematic or content analysis. In other words, we need to ensure that in seeking to understand key elements of a particular 'scene', we do not lose our understanding of the overall 'plot'.

Addressing limitations

In thinking about the complexities of diary research, we have to recognize that while this approach has many strengths, it also requires considerable effort on the part of both the participant and the researcher if good completion rates are to be assured. We have touched on this in earlier chapters but we cannot reinforce enough the importance of ensuring participants are fully apprised of what is involved at the outset and ensuring appropriate support mechanisms are in place. Regular contact between the researcher and researched can be critical in maintaining participant motivation, alleviating possible respondent fatigue and encouraging continued diary submission where a participant may have stopped returning diary data for any one of a myriad of reasons. In other words, the more effort put into the development and ongoing process of conducting diaries as whole or part of a research study, the greater value you will gain from the data.

Despite our enthusiasm for diary method we need to point out that just like any other approach, it has both strengths and weaknesses. We have set these out for the reader in order to enable him or her to make an informed decision about when, where and with whom the solicited diary might most usefully contribute to the methodological design of a research study and the form it might take. We have summarized these strengths and limitations below, but at the same time, we have set out some strategies to mitigate these limitations. We make no claim that the contents of Table 6.1 are all-encompassing and conclusive – indeed we have every hope that as new approaches to this method develop over time, researchers will update, refine and add to this as a means of providing those researchers who may be newer to this technique with a useful and easily accessible schematic to help inform their methodological decision-making.

Table 6.1 Diary techniques – Summary of strengths and limitations

Strengths	Limitations	Strategies to mitigate limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides information recorded at point of action or soon after that may be forgotten in an interview or other responsive mode methods. So reduces recall bias• Ability to verify date and time of entry using technologies increases quality and confidence of data• Involves the users in an active manner. Provides deeper understanding of the activities the users engage in• Is useful for obtaining real-life measures/ accounts of the activities and experiences of participants• Useful for collecting sensitive information that may be less readily gained using face-to-face research techniques• Can be used to supplement other research techniques with a rich source of information on respondents' behaviour and experiences on a daily basis• Relatively low cost to administer• Flexibility: can be used to collect numerical or textual data or a combination of both	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can demand considerable effort both physically and cognitively from participants• Requires different levels of technical competence of researcher and participant to programme and use equipment• As with surveys, structured diaries can be difficult to interpret due to lack of context information• Can generate significant amounts of data taking time to analyse• Relies on the informant's ability and motivation to complete diary• Where recording is required over a period of time, study fatigue may set in resulting in poorer quality recording towards end of study• Attrition and gaps in entries may be an issue• Diary-keeping equipment may add costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inform participants of demands at the start; make reasonable adjustments to diary-keeping procedures to enable participation• Build in time and resources for training researchers/ participant in use of equipment and checking• Consider building in time for follow-up diary interviews• Provide participants with an upper and lower limit for audio-diary entries and photograph; select relevant data for analysis; accept that some data will be unusable• Provide financial incentives; remind people of the importance and value of the data they are collecting• Offer support to participants while they are diary keeping; consider using electronic diary• Set a realistic diary-keeping time frame; consider including gaps in data collection; consider electronic diaries where reminders can be set• Take the cost of equipment into account when deciding on the form of diary keeping; ask participants to use own equipment (e.g. smartphone) if appropriate

Solicited diaries: Co-production and inclusive research

The Research Councils UK Public Engagement with Research Strategy (2014) notes that:

Relevance, trust, accountability and transparency are the cornerstones of the relationship between research and society. It is vital that the public have access to the knowledge research generates and the opportunity to influence the questions that research is seeking to address (Research Council, 2014).

This changing landscape of research has arguably been led once again by a health research framework developed in the mid-1990s and concerned to increase the impact and relevance of health research through embedding public and patient involvement in research and a more general shift towards co-production (see NIHR INVOLVE, <http://www.invo.org.uk/about-involve/>). Recognition of the value of this approach is evident through its increased adoption in other spheres and fields of social and applied research. As we have discussed in Chapter 5, this involves research *with* rather than *on* people – well-designed semi- or unstructured solicited diary studies provide participants with the opportunity to shape both the pace and nature of diary data collection. It enables them to give voice to those thoughts, experiences and actions that are meaningful to them, giving them choice and control over what they choose to reveal and how they reveal it. Recording the data in the absence of the researcher facilitates a sense of non-judgementalism and addresses those traditional imbalances of power that often exist between the researcher and researched. This approach to the application of diary methods offers opportunities for good research practice based on the key principles of inclusive research design and practice.

The pedagogical landscape

While the diary method has much to recommend it, from our experiences, it does not tend to be privileged or taught as part of the panoply of approaches to research methods at undergraduate, graduate or doctoral level. Pedagogically, research methods teaching tends to privilege either the interview or focus group approach in qualitative methods teaching

(with occasional forays into ethnography and documentary analysis) or the survey and/or randomized control trial approaches within quantitative techniques. As even a cursory investigation of research methods courses advertised online reveals, rarely does diary method feature on the syllabus. Yet its potential for time-sequenced investigation using a vast range of techniques from the documentary and linguistic, to the visual, thematic, statistical and multilevelled analysis makes it a valuable research tool – one that, as already demonstrated, addresses critiques of recall bias often directed at more commonly taught research methods. At the very least, those designing research methods courses would do well to rethink their methodological priorities and introduce students to the possibilities of solicited diary techniques. Indeed, we would argue that pedagogically, diary methods should not be viewed as an uncommon technique with limited utility, rather they need to be seen as a methodological tool that is equally, if not more, valid than those more commonly taught techniques.

Future directions

In this section, we discuss some future directions for those interested in engaging with diary research. As discussed throughout the text, a growing number of researchers are beginning to recognize the potential added value of solicited diary method in social research – whether as a stand-alone method or as an approach in part of a multi-method study. We foresee that this will continue to grow in strength and that, of itself, will trigger further innovative developments. However, it is perhaps the rise of digital technologies and their integration into research methods that holds the most promise. These developments mean that researchers will increasingly find themselves having to engage with, and adapt to, the digital culture. The growth of ubiquitous technologies, smartphones, tablets and so forth means that we are shifting towards a scenario in which the research equipment required for undertaking solicited diary research may be significantly simplified. The capability is now there for research to be undertaken through one device that has multiple capacities and features to facilitate video, audio and electronic-written diary keeping. Such devices will become an increasingly common part of daily life within many households, particularly in high-income countries. While currently technological advance still raises issues of access for older people who are

less conversant or comfortable using these new technologies, the next generation of older people – for example, the baby boomers and those following in their wake – will be increasingly comfortable with these new technologies opening up new opportunities for how solicited diaries can be developed and the multiple forms diary data can take. We should not forget, however, that access to, and familiarity with, digital technologies can still raise issues of access for those who are less affluent (including those living in less developed parts of the world) and those whose physical, sensory or cognitive limitations may require specially adapted equipment. Yet even in developing countries, access to the internet is becoming a growing necessity in the information and digital age that we live in – although clearly who has access to this will vary significantly. For some people, more traditional audio or ‘paper and pen’ based diaries will continue to remain the most accessible approach – but even here, software advances in voice recognition may facilitate the ability of those with visual or physical impairments to participate.

In recognizing how technology is opening up new opportunities and new forms of structured diary research, we also need to recognize how technology is changing the nature of our society. The growth of self-disclosure practices through blogging, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, the rise of the ‘selfie’ is re-energizing the practice of diary keeping but in much more public and interactive ways than we have seen in the past. Weblogs, for example, are simultaneously public and personal diaries. They are intended to be read and to provoke dialogue with others. This presents opportunities for researchers to solicit online diaries or to analyse existing online diary data in ways that have not previously been possible. Arguably, then, the boundaries between solicited and unsolicited diaries are blurring due to web-based applications and practices such as blogging and Facebook, presenting researchers with challenges to the traditional notions of solicited and unsolicited diaries.

Final remarks

Clearly, the internet and digital technologies are opening up a whole new avenue of potential for the solicited diary method. However, while the possibilities are endless, these developments will inevitably raise tensions and dilemmas – not least the ethical dilemmas of how to distinguish between the public and private in new online forms of diary keeping, the boundary

between solicited and unsolicited diary data and who (if anyone) may find themselves excluded from these new technological approaches to diary research. Given the pace of change, however, the challenge will not simply be one of ethics and how to incorporate technology into the design and application of solicited diary research, but one of keeping up with these rapidly shifting technologies themselves. Hence, while technology offers exciting new opportunities, it is highly likely that paper-based approaches will still have a place for the foreseeable future.