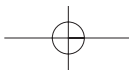
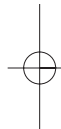
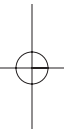


Using Diaries for Social Research



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Using Diaries for Social Research

Andy Alaszewski

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Contents

Preface	vi
Acknowledgements	viii
1 The Development and Use of Diaries	1
2 Researching Diaries	24
3 Getting Started: Finding Diarists and Diaries	46
4 Collecting the Data: Diaries, Guidelines and Support	66
5 Analysing Diaries: Numbers, Content and Structure	84
6 Conclusion: Exploiting the Potential of Research Diaries	112
References	123
Index	131

Preface

**A writer does not always know what he or she knows,
and writing is a way of finding out. (Alan Bennett, 1998,
pp. 539–40)**

I first became interested in using diaries for social research in the mid 1990s when I was commissioned by the English National Board for Nursing Midwifery and Health Visiting to undertake a study of the ways in which community nurses managed risk in their everyday practice. As part of this research, the research team wanted to capture and analyse actual clinical decisions and explore their risk implications. Both of the two established approaches, interviewing and observation, were flawed. Interviews rely on memory, and inviting nurses to recollect specific decisions was likely to generate generalised and idealised accounts of the ways in which nurses felt that they should make decisions and manage risk rather than how they actually did deal with the complexity of specific situations. Observation also presented problems. It would have intruded into the potentially sensitive relationship between the nurses and their clients and might have distorted the very processes which we were seeking to capture. We therefore decided to use a less intrusive approach by inviting nurses to act as self-observers and to record their observations in diaries (Alaszewski et al., 2000, pp. 81–2).

We then looked for texts that could guide us in this approach. We searched the obvious social science databases. There was some practical guidance available, for example Corti (1993), and a number of major studies in our area of interest had used diaries, for example Robinson (1971) in his study of the process of becoming ill. However the literature was patchy and we found it difficult to identify a major overview which would provide systematic guidance on the ways in which diaries could be used for social research. We did identify an article by Zimmerman and Weider which described a diary-interview approach which they summarised in the following way:

Individuals are commissioned by the investigator to maintain ... a record over some specified period of time according to a set of instructions ... The technique we described emphasizes the role of diaries as an observation log maintained by subjects which can be used as a basis for intensive interviewing. (1977, p. 481)

PREFACE

vii

Since this approach seemed to meet our requirements, we decided to use it. However we found it difficult as there was little guidance on the type of instructions to provide, the precise form of the diaries, the ways in which the contents of the diaries were analysed and the ways in which these analyses informed the intensive interviewing.

While the literature on the use of diaries for social research is growing, it does not match that on other commonly used social research methodologies. For example researchers who want to use focus groups as a research method have the choice of a number of excellent texts (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Kreuger, 1994; Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). Diaries seem to be a neglected source even in areas where one would anticipate they would be a key resource. For example Roberts's (2002) text on biographical research included only one relatively short discussion of diaries.

I really recognised the need for a book on diary research when Bob Heyman invited me to take part in a workshop on qualitative research in primary health care in the North of England. At the conference there were detailed presentations on focus groups and conversational analysis but nothing on diary research apart from my paper. I discussed this with David Silverman and suggested there was room for a book on diary research in the qualitative research series he edited for Sage. He agreed and I offered to submit an outline. I had in mind editing a text that would bring together a range of expertise on the use of diaries, especially in qualitative research. The proposal was accepted with the proviso that it should be a single authored text and should cover the use of diaries in quantitative as well as qualitative research.

It was a considerable challenge, which I am very pleased that I accepted. In writing the book I found that I knew more than I had anticipated, even if some of this knowledge was only dimly remembered from past academic work and had to be considerably refreshed. However there were still considerable gaps, and writing this book gave me an opportunity to explore areas and forms of research of which I had very little experience or expertise and also made me aware of how flexible and useful diaries are in the research process. This book is designed to contribute to the literature on the use of diaries by providing a text for researchers who are interested in using this methodology. I hope this book will stimulate interest in the use of diaries and stimulate others to write about diary research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Silverman, editor of the series, for responding positively to my initial suggestions, encouraging me to write a broad overview text and commenting on initial drafts. It has been challenging and it took far longer than anticipated. Partly this reflects my misplaced optimism about the amount of time it would take, but it also reflects some unexpected events in my personal life including a major job change, three house moves and a serious illness. I would like to thank my wife Helen for all her love and support during what was at times a difficult period and for her helpful suggestions for and comments on drafts of this book.

In retrospect my illness did have some positive aspects. It made me concentrate on what I wanted to complete if things went wrong. Getting this book finished became one of my main priorities. The progress of this book was a regular topic of conversation when I met Sarah Beasley and her colleagues at the Maidstone Oncology Centre in Kent and I hope that it justifies the decisions we made.

Writing this book has enabled me to read some wonderful diaries and to find out far more about some fascinating research using diaries. As will be clear I am indebted to some first rate researchers, in particular to Anthony Coxon who commented on an early draft of this book and gave me permission to make use of the first class work published by Project SIGMA. I would like to thank Anthony Coxon and Cassell for permission to quote from his book based on Project SIGMA data, *Between the Sheets* (Coxon, 1996), Louise Corti at the University of Essex and Nigel Gilbert at the University of Surrey for permission to quote from issue 2 of the *Social Research Update* (Corti, 1993) on 'Using diaries in Social Research', Oxford University Press for permission to quote from Alan Bryman's (2001) text on *Social Research Methods* and the management board of *Sociological Research Online* for permission to quote from Heather Elliott's article on 'The use of diaries in sociological research on health experience' (1997). I would also like to thank Jill Manthorpe, Kirstie Coxon and David Wainwright for their comments on early drafts. While I have found all these comments helpful, the final judgement on and responsibility for the published text is mine.