Using Diaries for Social Research
INTRODUCING QUALITATIVE METHODS provides a series of volumes which introduce qualitative research to the student and beginning researcher. The approach is interdisciplinary and international. A distinctive feature of these volumes is the helpful student exercises.

One stream of the series provides texts on the key methodologies used in qualitative research. The other stream contains books on qualitative research for different disciplines or occupations. Both streams cover the basic literature in a clear and accessible style, but also cover the ‘cutting edge’ issues in the area.

SERIES EDITOR
David Silverman (Goldsmiths College)

EDITORIAL BOARD
Michael Bloor (University of Wales, Cardiff)
Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (University of Gothenburg)
Norman Denzin (University of Illinois, Champaign)
Barry Glassner (University of Southern California)
Jaber Gubrium (University of Missouri)
Anne Murcott (South Bank University)
Jonathan Potter (Loughborough University)

TITLES IN SERIES
Doing Conversation Analysis  
Paul ten Have

Using Foucault’s Methods  
Gavin Kendall and Gary Wickham

The Quality of Qualitative Research  
Clive Seale

Qualitative Evaluation  
Ian Shaw

Researching Life Stories and Family Histories  
Robert L. Miller

Categories in Text and Talk  
Georgia Lepper

Focus Groups in Social Research  
Michael Bloor, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas, Kate Robson

Qualitative Research Through Case Studies  
Max Travers

Gender and Qualitative Methods  
Helmi Jarviiluoma, Pirkko Moisala and Anni Vilkkio

Doing Qualitative Health Research  
Judith Green and Nicki Thorogood

Methods of critical Discourse Analysis  
Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer

Qualitative Research in Social Work  
Ian Shaw and Nick Gould

Qualitative Research in Information Systems  
Michael D. Myers and David Avison

Researching the Visual  
Michael Emmison and Philip Smith

Qualitative Research in Education  
Peter Freebody

Using Documents in Social Research  
Lindsay Prior

Doing Research in Cultural Studies  
Paula Saukko

Qualitative Research in Sociology: An Introduction  
Amir B. Marvasti

Narratives in Social Science  
Barbara Czarniawska

Criminological Research: Understanding Qualitative Methods  
Lesley Noaks and Emma Wincup

Using Diaries in Social Research  
Andy Alaszewski
Using Diaries for Social Research

Andy Alaszewski

SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi
© Andy Alaszewski 2006

First published 2006

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver’s Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 7290 0
ISBN 0 7619 7291 9 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number 2005925804

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed on paper from sustainable resources
Printed in Great Britain by [to be supplied]
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)
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 Shandasani, 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.