

## 2

### Researching Diaries

Diaries tell the truth, the partial truth, and a lot more beside the truth ... In them, you seek – and often find – an atmosphere, a sense of mood of the moment, which could not be acquired in any other way. They should never, ever, be taken as the last word. But as raw material for reconstruction of the past they are as invaluable as they are savagely entertaining. (Pimlott, 2002, p. 2)

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#### **Key aims**

- To examine the ways in which diaries have been and can be used for social research.

#### **Key objectives**

- To consider the different ways in which social research projects can be designed and the implications of different designs for diary research.
  - To examine the use of diaries in experimental and social survey research, historical research and naturalistic research.
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#### **Research designs and strategies**

Each research project has its own unique purpose. Researchers should use methods of data collection and analysis which will enable them to achieve their purpose efficiently, effectively and in a way which is considered acceptable by the users of their research. To avoid reinventing the wheel and to demonstrate the credibility of their research, researchers can make use of established research designs and strategies.

Blaikie (2000, p. 40) in his text on research design asserted that there are well-established social science research designs and identified 12 different designs:

- experiment
- survey
- fieldwork/ethnography
- comparative/historical
- case study
- content analysis
- secondary analysis
- observation
- simulation and gaming
- evaluation research
- social impact research
- action research.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 20) in the introduction to their *Handbook of Qualitative Research* defined nine 'research strategies':

- study design
- case study
- ethnography, participant observation, performance ethnography
- phenomenology, ethnomethodology
- grounded theory
- life history
- historical method
- action and applied research
- clinical research.

Given the emphasis of their text on qualitative research, experimental and survey research were notable absences from their list.

It is the purpose of this study not to review research designs *per se* but to consider how diary research can be used within different research designs. Therefore in this chapter I will concentrate on four contrasted designs that are important within social research – experimental, social survey, historical, and ethnographic or naturalistic research – and the ways in which diaries can be used within these designs.

Experiments and social surveys are based on primary data, i.e. data collected for the purposes of the research. In both there is an emphasis on the scientific role of the research and a concern to minimise extraneous factors that are not relevant to the research and cause bias. The main emphasis is usually on deduction or testing, which begins with:

a hypothesis derived from social theory which is then tested against empirical observations and then subsequently used to confirm or refute the original theoretical proposition. (Brewer, 2003d, p. 67)

Experimental and survey researchers can use diaries to overcome one major cause of bias: recall or memory problems. Historical research relies extensively on the use of secondary sources – information which has been recorded in various forms, often for purposes other than research, and is reused by the researcher to provide an understanding of past events, actions, relations and social formations. Historical researchers can use diaries as an additional source of data or as a prime source of evidence when other sources are suppressed or the focus is on a specific individual or group of individuals. Ethnographic or naturalistic research relies on primary data. It exploits the relationship which the researcher establishes with the participants in the research and their willingness to trust and share their lives with the researcher. Ethnographers can use diaries to gain privileged access to the lives of the individuals and communities they are studying and their own journals or fieldnotes can provide important insight into the ways in which their understanding and relationships developed.

**Box 2.1 Key issues which researchers need to consider when selecting research designs (developed from Blaikie, 2000, p. 42)**

*Research design*

- *What will be studied?*
- *Why will it be studied?*
- *How will it be studied?*

*Selecting research strategy and methods*

- *What research strategy will be used?*
- *Where will the data come from?*
- *How will the data be collected and analysed?*

*Using diaries*

- *How relevant are diaries for the overall purpose of the research?*
- *How can diaries form part of the research strategies?*
- *Can diaries provide a valuable source of data?*
- *What are the benefits and drawbacks of using diaries compared to other methods of accessing information?*

**Diaries in experimental and survey research**

*Experimental and survey designs*

In both experimental and survey designs researchers tend to adopt the role of the neutral scientist who is concerned with recording and analysing facts. This

approach is more clearly developed in experimental and quasi-experimental research in which the researcher seeks to use facts to test theories and hypotheses:

*Experimental designs test casual relations by randomly assigning individuals or entities to experimental and control groups and then applying different procedures or treatments to these groups. Quasi-experimental designs also test casual relationships by using some compromise on random assignment to the experimental or control groups. (italics in the original: Blaikie, 2000, p. 41)*

In survey research the researcher collects facts to increase understanding and explanation of social phenomena such as voting behaviour or lifestyle choices. Surveys can be used to formulate hypotheses as well as test them (Moser and Kalton, 1971). Wells, in an early poverty survey, defined his social survey as a:

Fact-finding study dealing chiefly with working-class poverty and the nature of problems of the community. (cited in Moser and Kalton, 1971, p. 1)

Marsh noted that social surveys involve collecting and analysing data in a specific way and she defined a survey as:

an investigation where:

- (a) systematic measurements are made over a series of cases yielding a rectangle of data;
- (b) the variables in the matrix are analysed to see if they show any patterns;
- (c) the subject matter is social. (1982, p. 6)

In both experimental research and social survey there are circumstances in which the use of methods such as observation or interview is restricted and diaries provide an important source of data.

### ***Use of diaries in experiments***

In medical research, experimental designs such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are designed to measure the impact which specific interventions have on treatment group and compare this with a matched control group. For many medical researchers the RCT is the gold standard of research (Cochrane, 1972) and the Cochrane database of RCTs records about a third of a million a year (Lilford and Stevens, 2001, p. 8). The emphasis is on identifying observable and measurable differences. Most studies use researchers' objective physiological measures or assessments to assess the impact of treatment on outcomes. For example, RCTs on hypertension used a diastolic blood pressure of 90 mmHg and above as the criterion of entry and then tested the hypothesis that life could be prolonged through the use of hypotensive drugs to reduce blood pressure below that level (Cochrane, 1972, p. 49).

In studies which focus on chronic illnesses such as asthma, not only is it difficult for researchers to observe and record the changing physiological indicators but other outcomes such as the individuals' own feelings of pain or fatigue are important. Furthermore patients' experience of pain and feelings at

the time of any investigation or interview may bias their recall (Stone, et al., 2003, p. 182). Diaries can be used to overcome memory or recall problems. As Stone and his colleagues noted:

By limiting recall and capturing experience close to the time of its occurrence, diaries are thought to produce more accurate and less biased data. Diaries are currently used for the collection of medical symptoms in many therapeutic categories, particularly those where the symptoms are subjective and/or variable. Indeed, it is estimated that diaries are used to collect data in 25% of all phase II–IV pharmaceutical trials. (2003, p. 182)

Parkin and his colleagues (2004) showed that diaries were an effective way of capturing the symptoms associated with multiple sclerosis and could therefore be used to evaluate the impact of beta interferon therapy on individuals who had relapsing–remitting multiple sclerosis. Patients recorded their own assessment of symptoms plus their own measurements of physiological indicators. Hyland and his colleagues (1993) undertook a similar study of asthma patients, inviting them to record physiological data such as peak expiratory flow.

#### ***Use of diaries in surveys***

Marsh noted many surveys use one-off interviews or questionnaires that include memory questions such as ‘Have any of your family had a serious accident in the last year?’ (1982, p. 82). She maintained that respondents’ ability to recall even quite major events could not be relied on, as telescoping occurs in which individuals allocate to a period an accident which occurred outside the period.

Diaries have been used in surveys of areas such as household expenditure and accidents to overcome memory problems. In the United Kingdom the Expenditure and Food Survey, originally known as the Family Expenditure Survey, has since 1957 been using diaries to monitor the expenditure of households. The Expenditure and Food Survey is based on a voluntary survey of private households which are defined as ‘a group of people living at the same address with common housekeeping’ (Botting, 2003, p. 162). Expenditure on major items is assessed by a household interview but all other expenditure is assessed using diaries kept by household members:

Each individual aged 16 or over in the household visited is asked to keep diary records of daily expenditure for two weeks. Information about regular expenditure, such as rent and mortgage payments, is obtained from a household interview along with retrospective information on certain large, infrequent expenditures such as those on vehicles. Since 1998–99 the results have also included information from simplified diaries kept by children aged between 7 and 15. (2003, p. 162)

There are also examples of the use of diaries in *ad hoc* surveys. For example Sissons Joshi and her colleagues (2001) used diaries to examine the risks – accidents and near-misses – which road users experienced in and around the city of Oxford

in England. The study recruited through major local employers: 577 employees agreed to keep diaries and 299 returned their diaries. The diaries were a rich source for incidents. Diarists recorded 727 incidents, an average of 2.5 per diarist (2001, pp. 264–5).

### ***Diaries and concealed actions***

Experimental and survey research often uses diaries to overcome recall problems. However there are other reasons why conventional data collection techniques may be difficult to use. The behaviour which the researcher wishes to access may be seen as discrediting and therefore individuals may wish to conceal such behaviour. One such area is sexual behaviour. Since the development of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, sexual behaviour, especially risky or 'unsafe' sex, has attracted considerable attention. A major programme of research in this area, Project SIGMA (2003), used sexual diaries to provide insight into and information on gay and bisexual men's sexual activity and the contexts within which it occurred (Coxon, 1996). The project used diaries to overcome the disadvantages of conventional methods such as interviews:

- The diary method was more 'natural', as 'it exists in common social practice' and is 'written in natural language'.
- The data were more accurate, as the diary 'is designed to minimize recall and memory errors and cognitive strain'.
- The information was more detailed and precise in terms of both context, such as the sort of partners or setting, and actual activities (1996, p. 21).

The project built up a dataset of diaries kept by men who have sex with men and used this dataset to explore patterns of behaviour. Coxon and his colleagues used data from 1035 diarists covering 2182 individual diary months, and from a subset of 628 diary months which included one or more acts of anal intercourse, to explore the amount of risk activity, the number of men engaging in a given risk activity and the riskiness of sexual sessions (Coxon and McManus, 2000, p. 2). From their diary data they concluded that a small group of active men accounted for a large percentage of the recorded anal intercourse. However these 'active' men tended to be prepared and use protection. A high proportion of the 'risky' sex involved individuals who had anal intercourse infrequently as they tended not to be prepared (2000, p. 5).

### ***Comment***

While diaries can be used in experimental or survey research, they tend not to be the dominant or main source of data. Experimental research relies heavily on observational techniques while surveys tend to use interviews or questionnaires to access data. Generally diaries are used to supplement and overcome

the limitations of these methods, especially recall or memory problems, and when such methods are unlikely to access the desired data. When diaries are used in experimental or survey research, the diarist acts as an agent making observations and recording data on behalf of the researcher.

**Box 2.2 Key issues which researchers should explore when considering the use of diaries in experimental and social survey research**

- What are the main aims and characteristics of experimental and social survey research?
- What are the disadvantages of using diaries in experimental and social survey research designs?
- What are the advantages of using diaries in experimental and social survey research designs?
- In what circumstances do diaries provide access to data that other methods cannot?
- What are the limitations of using diaries and how can they be overcome?

### **Historical methods and diaries**

History can be defined as a study of the past (Jordanova, 2000, p. 1) and is based on the interpretation of sources especially records – mainly written documents but also audio or video recordings, objects and images of the past, which may be collected and stored in and accessed from archives (2000, pp. 28–33). As Jones noted:

Documentary evidence is the raw material of the historian, whose interpretation of the past is constructed through a careful sifting of many documents of varying kinds: official government records, parliamentary debates, political speeches and election manifestos, mass opinion or surveys, diaries and memoirs, private correspondence, oral testimony, and statistical data. Increasingly, historians have to come to terms with visual evidence as well: propaganda, cartoons, photographs, and advertisements. (1994, p. 5)

Thus diaries form one source of evidence amongst many. For many researchers, the personal nature of diaries makes them an unreliable and biased source. Seldon notes:

Diaries, it should be remembered, are just one person's record, often jotted down in haste, of feelings at a particular point in time. At worst, they are dull, plodding and misleading; at best, as with Adrian Mole's, witty, colourful and full of insight. (1994, p. 29)

Traditionally historical research has been concerned with identifying objective facts about historical events and people, especially political events and political elites (Postan, 1971, p. 50). The focus of historical research has expanded with the recognition that historical research not only uses but also creates narratives, i.e. specific situated interpretations of the past (Jordanova, 2000, p. 156). The scope of historical research has also broadened to encompass groups, activities and events outside political elites. Within this broader approach, diaries provide an important source of information. As Jordanova indicated, there is actually a strong fit between historical research and diaries, for both use and ascribe meaning to time:

The basic measures of time – hours, days, weeks, months and years – were not invented by historians. But they use them as fundamental, taken-for-granted tools, and give them meaning by assigning additional tags to them, as Daniel Defoe did when he wrote *Journal of the Plague Year*, an account of the Great Plague of 1665 by an invented eyewitness. (2000, p. 114)

Thus it is possible to identify the use of diaries within a variety of aspects of historical research, including relatively traditional research on political events, as well as research on groups traditionally neglected in such research and even ethnographic research on culture contact.

### **Political research**

Diaries can form a valuable source of information when other sources have been restricted by, for example, state censorship. During the second half of the seventeenth century in England, the restored monarchy exerted strong control over the media and therefore diaries such as Pepys's and Evelyn's form a valuable source on both political events and social changes. In the twentieth century diaries have also provided a valuable source of information. Paradoxically the increase in public access to information has made politicians more self-conscious and resulted in considerable self-censorship. Tosh noted the value of diaries in this context:

In the 1920s ... the select publications of official records grew out of all proportion, as governments strove to excuse themselves, and blame others, for responsibility for the First World War ... Ministers and civil servants, especially those concerned with foreign policy, became more inhibited in their official correspondence; what they wrote to each other privately, or recorded in their diaries, therefore gains in interest ... the vast majority of the diaries and letters available to the historian were written without thought of a wider readership. Of all sources they are the most spontaneous and unvarnished, revealing both the calculated stratagems and unconscious assumptions of public figures. (1984, p. 40)

Diaries and other personal documents form an important source for case studies which focus on specific decisions or events. For example Bale (1999)



used a variety of sources including published diaries and memoirs to explore economic decision-making in the Labour government in the mid 1960s. Using these sources he was able to show how in 1964 ministers' personal convictions, plus their perceptions of the electoral unpopularity of devaluation, meant that they resisted strong economic pressure to devalue. In contrast, the changed political circumstances after the government's victory in 1966, plus changed personal perceptions, created the context for devaluation in 1967.

Diaries are an important source for political biographies, which can be seen as historical case studies. Gladstone, a major nineteenth century politician, kept a diary for over 71 years, making an entry for nearly every day between July 1825 and December 1896 (Beales, 1982). Morley (1903), who published a major three-volume biography, had access to and published extracts from the diary. However other scholars were denied access because of the diary's 'introspections, its spiritual misgivings and self accusations and ... the fact that the confessions of human weakness are definitely connected with the other sex' (Herbert to Henry Gladstone, cited in Beales, 1982, p. 463). In particular the diary revealed 'not only the extent and some of the ramifications of Gladstone's work to reclaim prostitutes, but also his practice of self-flagellation' (1982, p. 463).

Gladstone's diaries are a rich source of evidence for his attitude to and influence on specific political developments. Beales himself noted some of these areas, for example the development of Anglo-Irish relations and especially Gladstone's changing view on the role of the established Anglican Church in Ireland. Gladstone wrote on 19 June 1845 which he marked secret:

Keep religion entire, and you secure at least to the individual man his refuge. Ask therefore on every occasion not what best maintains the religious repute of the State but what is least menacing to the integrity of Catholic belief & the Catholic Church. (1982, p. 466)

### ***Social and anthropological research***

Political history tends to be top-down history which focuses on the role and development of political elites. The specific impact of 'great men' such as Gladstone, and the privileged access which personal documents such as diaries give to personal developments, perceptions and motives, are important for understanding political decisions and events. However increasingly historians and social scientists working with historical sources have focused on broader social processes and on groups who are relatively excluded or only exceptionally given voice in the official record.

*Social history* is concerned with the ways in which social relations and structures are formed within specific societies at specific times. The emphasis tends to be on groups who are excluded from traditional historical narratives. This is reflected in the growth of oral history in which interview techniques are used to access evidence from excluded individuals and communities. For example Redlich (1975) argued that autobiographical sources such as memoirs and

diaries were rich sources of data which have been neglected by historians and should be used to develop a fuller understanding of the ways in which small social changes contributed to more fundamental changes. MacFarlane (1970, p. 3) has asserted that materials such as diaries can make a major contribution to understanding the past by overcoming the limitations inherent in other records.

Some of the well-known diaries have contributed to social history. For example, Pepys's diary provided substantial information about both working conditions in the emerging civil service and domestic relations. Westhauser (1994) has compared Pepys's diary with that kept by Adam Eyre. Westhauser noted that friendship and marriage made competing demands on men in the seventeenth century. High status men who had made good marriages tended to use their own homes as a basis for sociability and hospitality. Lower status men and those with 'bad' marriages tended to use public houses. Both Adam Eyre and Samuel Pepys were men of the 'middling sort' who were rising to prominence at the end of the seventeenth century; social change had implications for their sociability and their relationships with their wives, with a move from meeting in public houses to meeting in their own homes.

One group often excluded from the historical record are women, and there has been substantial use of diaries in both studying the life history of women and exploring their roles and relationships. Botankie (1999) noted that in seventeenth century England the Protestant duty of self-examination stimulated diary writing among women as well as men and this enabled women to pursue a male activity, writing, as well as to expand into other areas of male activity such as providing spiritual guidance. However such activity was restricted to the elite until there was wider access to requisite resources for keeping a diary in nineteenth century industrial societies (see for example Huff's 1985 bibliography of nineteenth century women's manuscript diaries).

Huff (1985) used diaries to explore the ways in which Victorian women constructed childbirth and motherhood. She argued that excessive reliance on fictional sources for personal and emotional responses to childbirth has meant that images of women as devils or angels have persisted. She showed that Victorian women used their diaries to record the details of their pregnancy and childbirth and that such practices helped develop relationships between women sharing the same experiences. These diaries could also be used as sources of information on parturition and disease.

Diaries provide a rich source of data for researchers who wish to explore the development of an individual life, and the activities and relationships of particular groups in society. The utility of diaries may be restricted by their availability but it may be possible to minimise such limitations by seeing an individual diarist or group of diarists as typical or representative of a wider group. Diaries can be used to access information within a specific society or social group and to explore the relationships between groups and even between cultures in historical anthropology.

*Historical anthropology* can be seen as a form of social history that deals with the development and interactions of cultures. An emphasis on culture involves a particular interest in the development of the collective mental life of groups and the ways in which they perceive and mentally organise the world they live in.

MacFarlane used Ralph Josselin's diary to 'step back 300 years and to look out through the eyes of an Essex vicar of the mid seventeenth century' (1970, p. 11). MacFarlane examined the demographic and social issues, such as Josselin's relationship with his kin, godparents, servants and neighbours. However he was more interested in the cultural dimensions of these relationships and the diarist's life. He noted that:

The use of a diary as a prime source, rather than the parish registers or probate inventories upon which most social history is at present based, allows us to make a more personal and intimate study. It enables us to probe a long-vanished mental world, as well as to describe the social characteristics of a previous civilization. (1970, p. 3)

MacFarlane developed a picture of Josselin's mental world, especially the importance of religious and magical thinking evident *inter alia* in the millenarian images associated with the Second Coming in his diary:

This mental world, so full of omens and symbolic nuances, contained few barriers against rumours of witchcraft and the millennium, of monstrous births and meetings with the devil. Analysis of the Josselin family's dreams has already shown that during the 1650s they dreamt fairly frequently of strange fires and figures in the sky, which seemed to fit in with the prophecies in the Book of Revelation concerning the Second Coming. (1970, p. 190)

Sahlins (1995) also used diaries for a historical ethnography seeking to explain how native Hawaiian islanders made sense of an unprecedented event, their first encounter with Europeans. Sahlins used a variety of diaries and other documents kept by Captain Cook and his crew and compared them with oral traditions and histories from the islands. Sahlins argued that the islanders tried to make sense of the situation by using their experience and understanding of the world to interpret the new situation. The best fit between the new situation and previous experience was that Cook was an incarnation of the god Lono and this interpretation played an important role in events, especially Cook's death.

The starting point for Cook's analysis was the accounts of events in the various diaries. Sahlins started with an account published by Heinrich Zimmermann, a German seaman who kept notes in German. He used these notes to publish his own version of the voyage, which appeared in 1781 before the Admiralty's official version in 1784:

Zimmermann's text indicates he was present – 'We held the five boats at a short distance from the land' – and reports one of the interviews [between the party sent to recover Cook's body and the islanders]. The Hawaiians, he wrote, 'showed us a piece of white cloth as a countersign of peace but mocked at ours and answered as follows: "O-runa no

te tuti Heri te moi a popo Here mai” which means: “The god Cook is dead but sleeps in the woods and will come tomorrow.”... The Hawaiian here is again decipherable, but is more straightforward than Zimmermann’s translation: ‘Cook is indeed Lono; he is going to sleep; tomorrow he will come’ – no death, no woods. The apparently curious statement fits into the range of European accounts of the incident, all of which cite Hawaiians to the effect that Cook would return the next day. (1995, p. 18)

Sahlins supported this analysis with a review of the events of Cook’s visit to Hawaii in 1778 and 1779. He noted that there was documentary evidence that Cook was greeted in Hawai’i island as a personification of the New Year god Lono (1995, p. 20). Sahlins argued that events associated with Cook’s visit and his death provided insight into the islanders’ rationality, the way they thought about the world at the time. This rationality included the possibility that in certain circumstances gods, humans and natural entities such as winds shared characteristics and could have a common identity. Therefore it was not irrational for the islanders to see and treat Cook as a manifestation of one of their gods.

Both MacFarlane and Sahlins show the sophisticated ways in which diaries can be used to explore the culture and mindsets of past social groups. This is particularly challenging in the case of other cultures where some of the evidence is embedded and has to be deciphered from the diary, as in the case of the Cook voyage diaries. However, in such research it is important that the interpretation is supported from other sources such as oral traditions which themselves may be recorded in travellers’ or missionaries’ journals or anthropologists’ fieldnotes.

### ***Comment***

Diaries are a valuable and comparatively neglected resource for historical research. They can provide supporting evidence for traditional political histories. In social and anthropological studies that use historical data they are a unique source offering a way of accessing information that could not be accessed in any other way.

#### **Box 2.3 Key issues which researchers should explore when considering the use of diaries in historical research**

- What are the main aims and characteristics of historical research?
- What are the disadvantages of using diaries in historical research designs?
- What are the advantages of using diaries in historical research designs?
- In what circumstances do diaries provide access to data that other methods cannot?

### Using diaries for naturalistic research

While research designs such as social surveys provide cost-effective ways of collecting large bodies of data, the explanatory value of these data is often limited. While survey research is good at explaining what people do, it is rather less effective at explaining or understanding why they do it. Accessing individuals' interpretations of their world is the only way to do this. As Porter has noted in a review of qualitative analysis in nursing research, the premise of naturalistic research is that:

the social world we live in can only be understood through an understanding of the meanings and motives that guide social actions and interactions of individuals ... Qualitative analysis is concerned with describing the actions and interactions of research subjects in a certain context, and with interpreting the motivations and understandings that lie behind those actions. (2000, p. 399)

Researchers can access these types of data by becoming part of the 'natural setting' (Fielding, 1993) and participating in the social life of the people who are being researched. The aim of naturalistic research is to study the world as far as possible in a state that is not contaminated by the research process, so that "natural" not "artificial" settings, like experiments or formal interviews, should be the primary source of data' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 6). Naturalistic researchers are committed to seeing the world from the social actors' point of view, and to do this they seek to participate in the everyday life of a community so that they can see the world from the point of view of a member of the community. Blaikie described the chief characteristic of this approach in the following way:

[It] is a commitment to viewing the social world – social actions and events – from the viewpoints(s) of the people being studied. This commitment involves discovering *their* socially constructed reality and penetrating the frames of meaning within which they conduct their activities. (italics in the original: 2000, p. 251)

Diaries provide an important and often neglected source of data for naturalistic researchers, as they can be seen as documents of life which 'give "voice" to other people' (Plummer, 1983, p. 1). While there are a variety of such documents, Plummer noted that:

The diary is the document of life *par excellence*, chronicling as it does the immediately contemporaneous flow of public and private events that are significant to the diarist. The word 'contemporary' is very crucial here, for each diary entry – unlike life histories – is sedimented into a particular moment in time. (italics in the original: 2001, p. 48)

Diaries are particularly suited to a naturalistic approach as they facilitate 'the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context' (Bolger et al., 2003, p. 580).

***Diaries providing insight into taken-for-granted activities***

Diaries can be used to access those facets of social life which members of social groups take for granted and are therefore not easily articulated or accessed through research methods such as interviews. Interactions within social groups imply common and shared characteristics, for example members of the groups can competently speak the same language and have sufficient agreement about the nature of the world to facilitate meaningful communication and interaction. The shared agreements or tacit knowledge about the world which Schutz (1971) called 'common sense' tend to be internalised through the processes of socialisation.

Diaries can be used to access such tacit knowledge. For example Robinson (1971) generated insight into the ways in which people decided they or significant others were ill. While he identified some elements of formal explicit decision-making, much assessment was grounded in tacit knowledge. Robinson noted that for the most part actors did not consider more than one course of action and responded with 'no thinking out and weighing up of alternative strategies' (1971, p. 36). So when faced with familiar situations people used their common sense; they 'knew what to do and did it' (1971, p. 36). In addition to household interviews, the wife or mother in each household was invited to complete a diary for a four-week period and 20 did so. Robinson used these diaries to identify patterns which indicated how individuals made sense of their situation and did or did not invoke the concept of 'illness' in this process. In particular he identified an 'incubation' stage during which the diarist recorded concerns about his or her health or those of a household member. These concerns then led into a decision to seek help which either resolved the matter or led to further action. For example he noted how Mrs S. who was a pregnant woman with a two-year-old child, used her diary to document a series of concerns about her health and to record how these concerns were resolved by a visit to an antenatal clinic (see Figure 2.1).

***Diaries as a means of providing insight into the ways in which individuals perceive and interpret situations***

Diaries can be used not only to identify patterns of behaviour but also to provide greater insight into how individuals interpret situations and ascribe meanings to actions and events and therefore how actions that may appear irrational to outsiders are rational to the diarist.

Merton and his colleagues (1957) used diaries in their classic study of the education and socialisation of medical students. They examined the ways in which the students perceived and evaluated their situation and how the formal and explicit parts of their learning interacted with informal learning and the overall shaping of their attitudes to medicine and patients. Initially four and

<i>Day</i>	<i>Symptom</i>	<i>Action taken</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1	My nails are splitting badly		
2	Nothing		
3	My legs are swelling badly		Wish I had time to rest my legs more
4	My legs still swelling and nails splitting. I have had a lot of constipation lately	Taken laxative for constipation	
5	I still have Wednesday's symptoms		
6	I still have the same symptoms		
7	My body is feeling very weak and my nerves are still bad		
8	Just the same as Sat.		
9	I have constipation	Taken laxatives	
10	I had very bad back and stomach pains before the laxatives work		
11	I had very bad wind in my back, eating far too much last week or so. But just can't stop myself	Had J. [husband] to rub my back until wind came up	
12	Now I have haemorrhoids	I went to antenatal clinic. Told doctor my symptoms	Doctor told me I am overweight and must stop eating too much
13	Nothing		
14	Nothing		
15	Nothing		
16	Nothing		
17	Nothing		
18	Nothing		
19	Nothing		

Figure 2.1 *Extract from a family health diary (Robinson, 1971, p. 31)*

subsequently two students in each of the four years of the training course kept a 'detailed journal'. One of the research team read each weekly instalment of each diary to identify:

tentative hypotheses about the distinctive aspects of the social environment and their significance for processes of attitudinal and cognitive learning. (Merton, 1957, p. 46)

Since these hypotheses were explored through 'intensive interviews' with the student diarists, little of the original diary material made it through to the final analysis. For example, Fox's (1957) analysis of the ways in which student physicians learnt to deal with the uncertainties inherent in medical practice relied heavily on data from the 'intensive interviews'. The only acknowledged direct quotations from the diaries come in the methodology section where Merton provided two extracts from diaries to illustrate how two students presented the same event, a below average mark in a chemistry examination, in different ways:

*Student A:* Monday, we got back our chem. Exams. As I supposed, I did flunk it. The marks in general were good; most folks about me got high 80's and 90's. *I guess some of us are just naturally born stupid and careless.*

*Student B:* Well, we got our chemistry tests today. I didn't do as well as I should have, but I passed with a very high C ... I really knew about a B's worth of material ... I seemed to see a lot of 100's and 90's floating around the lab, but what can you do about that? *So many of the fellows were chemistry majors and/or took elementary biochemistry in undergraduate school.* (italics in the original: 1957, p. 45)

### **Diaries and ethnography**

Naturalistic research underpins ethnographic designs that were initially developed for the anthropological study of other cultures. Since Malinowski pioneered intensive fieldwork techniques by leaving the safety of the colonial enclave and living with and sharing the lives of Trobriand islanders in the 1910s, anthropologists have been committed to naturalistic research. Fieldnotes form a central component of fieldwork and these take the form of the researcher's contemporaneous record of observations and reflections, in other words a journal or diary:

Field notes are the bricks and mortar of an ethnographic edifice. These notes consist primarily of data from interviews and daily observations ... Fieldwork inundates the ethnographer with information, ideas, and events. Ethnographic work is exhausting, and the fieldworker will be tempted to stop taking notes or to postpone typing the day's hieroglyphics each night. Memory fades quickly, however, and unrecorded information will soon be overshadowed by subsequent events. Too long a delay sacrifices the rich immediacy of concurrent notes. (Fetterman, 1998, p. 114)



Similarly Emerson and his colleagues note that 'the ethnographer writes down in regular, systematic ways what she observes and learns while participating in the daily rounds of life of others' (1995, p. 1).

In de Munck's (1998) account of the life of a Sri Lankan village, he described how he observed and interpreted the conflicts between members of the village. The raw data for his analysis were two notebooks, which he used to maintain a daily record. One of these notebooks he classified as official as it included his formal records, his 'field jottings, maps, diagrams, interviews and observations' whereas the other was an 'unofficial' notebook that contained his personal reflections, 'mullings, questions, comments, quirky notes, and diary type entries' (1998, p. 45).

Anthropologists use fieldnote journals as the material for their accounts of the people they study. It is possible to use both the journals and published ethnographies to gain insight into the process. Malinowski's accounts have been subjected to particular scrutiny. He was a pioneer of fieldwork and his books were designed to give readers the feeling that they were participating in the lives of the people he studied. In the preface to *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* he states that:

In this book we are going to meet the essential Trobriander. Whatever he might appear to others, to himself he is first and foremost a gardener. His passion for the soil is that of a real peasant. He experiences a mysterious joy in delving into the earth, in turning it up, planting the seed, watching the plant grow, mature, and yield the desired harvest. If you want to know him, you must meet him in his yam garden, among his palm groves or on his taro fields. (Malinowski, 1966, p. xix)

Surprisingly there is little evidence that Malinowski's fieldnotes have been re-examined. Uberoi (1971) reworked Malinowski's analysis of the Kula ring, stressing its political role in a competitive environment that lacked the moderating influence of centralised political authority, but he used published ethnographic accounts not original fieldnotes. However the diaries which Malinowski kept while he was doing his fieldwork (Firth, 1989, p. xi) have been published and subjected to analysis, especially by Geertz (1988). Malinowski's *Diary* (1989) provided a rather different account of the development and practice of fieldwork to the conventional version. As Geertz notes, Malinowski's *Diary* showed that he 'did not, in fact, always maintain an understanding and benevolent attitude towards his informants, his state of mind in the field was anything but coolly objective' (1988, p. 112). Malinowski's comments on both islanders and Europeans were often highly judgemental, as can be seen in the following extract:

Thursday 21 [1918]. Slept a long time – 'catching up on my sleep' – I feel I need it. I feel a little knocked out; but not unwell ... Wrote diary, neglected since departure from

Sanaroa. I must draw up a system of investigation on the Amphletts. In the morning I wrote a long time, started ethnogr. fairly late. Worked first with Anaibutuna and Tovasana [Tovasana was the main headman in the Amphletts; Malinowski was staying in his village, Nu'agasi on Gumasila, and used him as an informant (see *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, particularly Chapter XI) (editor's notes)] who are not bad, *but not first-class informants*. After lunch Kipela and an old man; I got annoyed with the latter and chased him away. For a moment I was afraid that this would spoil my business, then Kipela successfully resolved the difficulties. (emphases in the original: 1989, pp. 228–9).

Geertz (1988) has analysed Malinowski's *Diary* and his other published work as texts. He has identified an oscillation in Malinowski's texts between two images, that of a scientific observer, 'a figure ... rigorously objective, dispassionate, thorough, exact, and disciplined ... and dedicated to wintery truth', and that of a compassionate and skilled fellow human being who has 'enlarged capacities for adaptability and fellow feeling, for insinuating himself into practically any situation, as to be able to see as savages see, think as savages think, and on occasion even feel as they feel and believe as they believe' (1988, p. 79). He argued that Malinowski constructed his text in this way so that he could overcome the fundamental problem of ethnography, creating an intelligible and persuasive account of another culture:

The problem ... is to represent the research process in the research product; to write ethnography in such a way as to bring one's interpretations of some society, culture, way of life, or whatever and one's encounters with some of its members, carriers, representatives, or whomever into an intelligible relationship. Or ... it is to get an I-witnessing author into a they-picturing story. To commit oneself to an essentially biographical conception of Being There, rather than a reflective, an adventural, or an observational one, is to commit oneself to text-building. (1988, p. 84)

Geertz identified this diary approach to ethnography in other texts including Read's (1965) account of life in Highland New Guinea. He noted that while Read presented himself in a very different way, he shared with Malinowski the same confessional approach to creating ethnographic texts:

Instead of the Dostoevskian darkness and Conradian blur [of Malinowski's text], the Radian 'I' is filled with confidence, rectitude, tolerance, patience, good nature, energy, enthusiasm, optimism – with an almost palpable determination to do what is right and think what is proper. If the *Diary* presents the image of the womanizing café intellectual cast among savages, *The High Valley* presents one of an indefinite country vicar. (1988, p. 85)

Geertz's textual approach to ethnographic narrative provides one way of exploring how such narratives are constructed and used and has stimulated an interesting interaction between textual analysis and social sciences. Diaries form an important source of data for such analyses and such analyses can

contribute to our understanding of the ways in which diaries work as texts. I will therefore return to these issues when I consider the analysis of diary evidence in Chapter 5.

### **Comment**

Given the stated aim of researchers using a naturalistic approach to study individuals and communities in their natural setting and to minimise intrusion, diaries offer an attractive source of information. Since diarists control the recording of information, diaries appear to offer privileged access to the diarist's perceptions and world. This characteristic has made them attractive as a way of exploring tacit knowledge that is difficult to articulate in, for example, interviews because such knowledge is grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of the world. While diaries may be seen as a means to an end, they can also be seen as texts in their own right used by the diarist to construct his or her own identity to support an account of the social reality. The nature and structure of such accounts can be explored using techniques developed in literary or textual analysis.

#### **Box 2.4 Key issues which researchers should explore when considering the use of diaries in naturalistic research**

- What are the main aims and characteristics of naturalistic research?
- What sources and texts are available and how would diaries add to these sources?
- What are the advantages of using diaries in naturalistic designs?
- In what circumstances do diaries provide access to data that other methods cannot?

### **Summary and comment**

Diaries can be used in a wide variety of research designs. In experimental and survey research, they can be used either to overcome the recall problems present in synchronic techniques of collecting data, such as the one-off interview, or to explore areas of human life concealed from investigation such as sexual relations between men. In historical research, diaries provide a valuable source of information, which can both supplement other sources and for some purposes and in some circumstances form a key source. Diaries form an

important source for the development of life histories and biographies that are used in traditional political history as well as in social history. Diaries can also play a part in developing anthropological histories and providing insight into other cultures, whether these are in seventeenth century rural England or eighteenth century Hawaii. For research using a naturalistic approach, diaries provide an important resource. While it is clear that diaries in the form of field-notes have formed a key part of ethnographic fieldwork since Malinowski's pioneering work in the 1910s, it is not clear that the full potential of diaries is recognised in this area.

## KEY POINTS

### Overall

- Diaries can be used in a range of research designs.
- Diaries can be used on their own or in combination with other methods.
- Diaries provide a means of accessing hard-to-reach groups or activities.

### Experimental/survey

- Diaries can be used where there are practical problems in making suitable observation, because the relevant events or activities are rare or difficult to observe.
- Diarists can act as a surrogate for the researcher in recording data.

### Unsolicited/historical

- Unsolicited diaries provide a major source of data, especially when other sources have been censored or are absent.
- Historical research using diaries is restricted to those periods when diary keeping was established and for those groups amongst whom diary keeping was a regular habit.

### Naturalistic/ethnographic

- Diaries provide a way of accessing data in a relatively natural form and can therefore be used to explore the taken-for-granted aspects of social interaction.

**EXERCISE**

Diaries have been used in a variety of different research projects with different research designs. To familiarise yourself with diary research and to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities offered by using diaries, you should look at one or more example from each of the types of research identified in lists A, B and C. You should then consider the issues which I have outlined.

***Diaries which can be used in the exercise***

The diaries are grouped into three categories: experimental/survey, historical/unsolicited, naturalistic/ethnographic.

***List A: experimental/survey***

- Coxon, A.P.M. (1996) *Between the Sheets: Sexual Diaries and Gay Men's Sex in the Era of AIDS*, Cassell, London.
- Parkin, D., Rice, N., Jacoby, A. and Doughty, J. (2004) Use of a visual analogue scale in a daily patient diary: modelling cross-sectional time-series data on health-related quality of life, *Social Science and Medicine*, 59, pp. 351–60.

***List B: historical/unsolicited***

- MacFarlane, A. (1970) *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin: a Seventeenth-Century Clergyman. An Essay in Historical Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Pollock, L.A. (1983) *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sahlins, M. (1995) *How 'Natives' Think: about Captain Cook, for Example*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

***List C: naturalistic/ethnographic***

- Crossley, M.L. (2003) 'Let me explain': narrative emplotment and one patient's experience of oral cancer, *Social Science and Medicine*, 56, pp. 439–48.
- Jones, R.H. and Candlin, C.N. (2003) Constructing risk across timescales and trajectories: gay men's stories of sexual encounters, *Health, Risk and Society*, 5, pp. 199–213.

*(Continued)*

***Issues which you should consider***

- 1 Identify the key aims and objectives of each research study.
- 2 Examine how and in what ways diaries were used to contribute to the achievement of these aims and objectives.
- 3 Were diaries the sole source of data?
- 4 If not, consider their relationship with other forms of data collection and their distinctive role.
- 5 How were the data from the diaries collected and analysed?
- 6 What contribution did the diaries make to the findings and conclusions of the study?
- 7 What status was given to the diary data?