**Capturing the Complexities of Daily Workplace Experiences Using Qualitative Diaries**

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**Introduction**

We are all familiar with diaries; from diaries we rely on to effectively plan our time, to more extensive journals capturing our daily experiences, thoughts and emotions. Researchers, particularly those who tend to utilise qualitative approaches, frequently keep personal reflective diaries with the aim of enabling greater critical awareness of their own impact on the research process, therefore enhancing the quality of qualitative research (e.g. Johnson and Duberley, 2003; Nadin and Cassell, 2006). In this way diaries are acknowledged as useful ways to record and analyse our personal experiences, encouraging introspection and reflection, and, in doing so, learning more about ourselves, our feelings, our thoughts and our behaviours.

Thinking about diaries in this manner allows us to easily consider how they might also be useful in collecting interesting participant data, encouraging participant introspection and permitting in-depth insights into daily experiences and processes. Diaries offer clear potential in terms of their ability to uncover and explore the meaningfulness of participants’ ordinary lives in everyday situations, enabling our understanding of events from their perspectives. In thinking about the purpose and aims of a substantial amount of management and organisational research, we are often concerned with processes, including how and why people behave in the way they do. Indeed, editorial boards of leading journals, including the Journal of Organizational Behavior and the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology have made calls for more dynamic research in the field of Organisational Behavior. For instance, a call for papers issued by the Journal of Organizational Behavior (Hofmans et al, 2016) asks for contributions that ‘capture the dynamics of work’, noting that there is an increasing awareness that much organisation and management phenomena are inherently temporal in nature and therefore that it is vital that we capture, explore and subsequently begin to understand, how such phenomena evolve and change over time.

Such calls, and a parallel awareness of the importance of approaches that can capture temporal elements of experiences in moving organisation and management research forward, are increasing in frequency. For instance, Spector and Meier (2014) have expressed concern with the infrequency with which research in this area focuses explicitly on exploring processes as they unfold over time, but instead relies heavily on cross-sectional research. They concluded that repeated assessments afforded by daily diary studies could be particularly useful in illuminating organisational behaviour processes to explore how sequences of events, and related states, unfold. Qualitative diaries have also previously been recognised for their capacity to enable deep analysis of individuals’ internal processes and practices within organisations (Symon, 2004; Plowman, 2010), as well as of the internal workings of organisations themselves (Plowman, 2010).

When considering such research aims, along with the capacity of diaries to achieve these aims, it might initially be somewhat surprising that diaries, particularly those that are qualitative in nature, are utilised relatively infrequently. One apparent reason for the underutilisation of diary research in the field of organisations and management is that, while highly rewarding in terms of their capacity to capture dynamic organisational phenomena, there are also numerous challenges in using this approach; from acquiring participants who are willing to give up their time on a regular basis, to ensuring that diaries are effectively completed without the presence of the researcher (Radcliffe, 2013). Such challenges will be discussed later in this chapter, whilst also arguing for perseverance in order to achieve the rich data collection benefits that this method affords. While currently underutilised, diaries are increasingly recognised as a valuable method in organisational and management research (van Eerde et al, 2005) and in recent years we have seen a resurgence of interest in this approach. This perhaps reflects a time where the monopoly of positivistic notions of rationality has been weakened within the social sciences, and an increased appreciation of the role of narrative in enabling us to uncover new ideas and connections between events, has come to the fore (Roe, 2008).

The chapter begins by providing a brief overview of prior research utilising diaries in the management field. It then focuses on making a case for greater use of qualitative diaries in management and organisational research, with the aim of highlighting the importance of capturing, and understanding, complex daily processes, practices and experiences. Next, the practicalities of conducting qualitative diary research are discussed, with the aim of making such research more accessible to those interested in using the approach. This includes exploring some of the challenges that might face researchers when using qualitative diaries, as well as some potential ways to address these challenges. In order to more effectively illustrate these practical issues, I make reference to my own experiences of using qualitative diaries throughout. Towards the end of the chapter I briefly explore some of the new, and potential future, developments related to the use of technology in qualitative diary design, considering how this might revolutionise diary research of the future. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting how this methodological approach can help move management and organisation research forward by gaining fresh and original insights into important issues that affect people in the workplace on a daily basis.

**Previous Diary Research in the Field of Management and Organisations**

Diaries have been used since the beginning of social research and are therefore not a new method as such. For instance, the mining engineer and subsequent sociologist Frédéric Le Play (1806–1882) used diaries to collect information about family budgets, capturing earnings and expenditures, aiming to express the family’s life in figures (Gobo and Mauceri, 2014: 10). Despite the aforementioned challenges of conducting research using diaries, researchers in the field of management who have utilised this method have achieved a variety of interesting findings.

Diaries can be qualitative or quantitative, or a mixture of both. To-date the majority of diary studies conducted in this area have employed quantitative diaries, which consist of surveys completed by participants on a daily basis, or perhaps more regularly. Such diaries have been used to explore a variety of work-related issues including stress at work (Sonnetag, 2001; Jones and Fletcher, 1996; Daniels and Harris, 2005; Daniels et al, 2009; Beattie and Griffin, 2014), affective experiences at work along with subsequent behaviours (Weiss et al, 1999; Ilies et al, 2006; Miner et al, 2005; Beal and Ghandour, 2011; Ouweneel et al, 2012), workplace gossip (Waddington, 2005), fairness at work (Conway and Briner, 2002; Loi et al, 2009) job resources and work engagement (Xanthopoulou et al, 2009; Bakker and Bal, 2010), goal-setting (König et al, 2010; Claessens et al, 2010) and work-family spillover, conflict and facilitation (Jones and Fletcher, 1996; Judge and Ilies, 2004; Butler et al, 2005; Derks and Bakker, 2014), including across couples (Williams and Alliger, 1994; Doumas et al, 2003; Ilies et al, 2007). Such quantitative diaries provide a useful way of capturing the dynamic nature of daily experiences as they highlight daily changes, which other more retrospective techniques would be unlikely to recognise. The use of quantitative diaries has therefore received increasing attention in recent years, including being the core subject of text books in related fields (e.g. Mehl and Conner, 2010) reflecting the diary researchers predominant focus on quantitative methods. However, because such diaries use self-report scales, each consisting of a small number of pre-defined items, they can overlook other important factors, neglecting valuable insights participants might have to offer, and therefore limiting the potential in-depth findings that diary research has the capability of capturing.

Despite qualitative diaries being utilised much less frequently within the field of management and organisations, there are some notable exceptions, including qualitative diaries exploring stress at work (Clarkson and Hodgkinson, 2005), transient work patterns (Crozier and Cassell, 2015), organisational change (Balogun and Johnson, 2004), transfer of learning (Brown et al, 2011; Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2007), gender and power in organisations (Plowman, 2010), work-family conflict decision-making (Radcliffe and Cassell, 2014), and experiences of flexible working (Poppleton et al, 2008; Radcliffe and Cassell, 2015). The use of such qualitative diaries to capture daily events and experiences is the focus of the remainder of the current chapter.

**Why use Qualitative Diaries?**

Authors across the organisation and management field have raised concerns that the most frequently used methods within management research cannot adequately capture the complexity of the numerous interactions that are essential to our understanding of organisations (e.g. Kiessling and Harvey, 2005, Guest, 2011). Everyday organisational realities are dynamic, existing within an uncertain and changeable world where moods, experiences and behaviours fluctuate daily, or perhaps more frequently (Ohly et al, 2010). It is this daily element that many frequently used data collection methods are less able to capture (Radcliffe, 2013). Qualitative diaries have the potential to offer several key benefits for management and organisational research; the ability to capture the specifics of events and processes, including thoughts, feelings, considerations and reactions; the ability to capture these events as they happen to avoid the problems associated with retrospect; and their capacity to do this over numerous days therefore enabling a longitudinal research design. Such an approach can lead to the revelation of new and interesting insights and details that remain unnoticed when employing other methods of data collection. Beyond this, research has demonstrated that involvement in qualitative diary research can have therapeutic effects on participants (e.g. Suedfeld and Pennebaker, 1997). This section will explore each of these key benefits in greater depth.

*Qualitative Diaries enable a detailed exploration of events, experiences and processes*

Qualitative diaries allow researchers to explore events, experiences and processes within the natural and spontaneous context of daily life in a way that is not possible using more traditional methods (Reis, 1994). This approach, in conjunction with the qualitative nature of the research, allows participants to express their own perception of their experiences of a specific event without restriction, therefore providing the opportunity to uncover thoughts and feelings that have not previously been exposed, generating enormous amounts of detail which would be difficult to achieve using other methods (Symon, 2004). As mentioned earlier, diaries that have been employed in previous studies in this area (e.g. Williams and Alliger, 1994, Weiss et al., 1999, Doumas et al, 2003, Butler et al, 2005) tend to be quantitative, in other words they are surveys that are completed by participants on a daily basis, therefore losing their capacity to collect rich, in-depth data. Conversely, those studies that have utilised qualitative diaries have demonstrated how the rich, introspective data acquired from participants about their particular daily experiences, has led to important new insights.

For example, Plowman (2010) demonstrated the value of qualitative diaries within her research where staff and managers, within a case study organisation, were asked to record their individual self-reflection of daily events in the workplace. Her findings from this application of the diary method affirmed the value of qualitative diaries for uncovering the internal workings of organisations by revealing what goes on in the unofficial organisational sphere, which would normally remain undiscovered. The use of qualitative diaries enabled her to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of “gendered” organisational culture and consequently this enabled her to identify what needed to change within the organisation, as well as being able to support her suggestions with a clear rationale.

Within my own research exploring how dual-earner couples manage daily work-life conflict (Radcliffe and Cassell, 2014), taking a qualitative, episodic approach enabled the discovery of thought processes and concurrent feelings related to the selection of particular strategies for dealing with these conflicts. One example of this was the negotiation of reciprocal arrangements with others, which involved building, and maintaining, agreements of mutual reciprocation both within couples and externally with other parents. This was predicted by the estimated ability to reciprocate and maintain such relationships equitably and was also stimulated by various emotions including stress and guilt. I would suggest that such depth of understanding regarding the complexity of how these strategies were (de)selected by participants would not have been possible using other, more traditional approaches to data collection.

*Qualitative diaries take a non-retrospective approach*

The most consistently noted benefit of diary methods, both qualitative and quantitative, is the lesser time lapse that exists between event occurrence and event recording. An increasing body of literature from the cognitive sciences draws attention to the complexity of the recall process required when participants are asked to responds to retrospective questions (e.g. Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001). Retrospection can lead to lapses in memory in terms of specific details of experiences, thoughts and feelings, to the degree that, for some events, little useful or relevant information will be available to participants attempting to construct a response. In such instances, individuals might resort to drawing on personal theories or ideas regarding what they believe is likely to be the case (Christensen et al, 2003). There is also a propensity for state-congruent recall, where the participant’s current mood or frame of mind leads them to draw on similar instances from the past, rather than drawing on instances that more accurately reflect their daily experiences, as well as recall of past events being distorted based on knowledge of subsequent event outcomes (Robinson & Clore, 2002).

When considering qualitative diaries specifically, this reduced retrospection offers the opportunity for as much detail as possible to be recalled and reported. This enhances the benefits of the approach by not only capturing the specifics, but by capturing as many of the specifics as possible, and in as much detail as possible, due to increased effectiveness of participant recall. A better recollection of thought processes and emotions attached to events, experiences and decisions is much more likely if these events are recorded as soon after they happen as possible (Bolger et al, 2003). By allowing participants to express their own perception of their experiences of a specific event or process freely, and with a lesser time lapse between the event occurrence and recording, qualitative diaries are able to uncover the previously undiscovered (Radcliffe, 2013).

The use of this approach in my own research (Radcliffe and Cassell, 2014) enabled the discovery of previously unrecognised factors that are important to participants when making decisions in incidents of work-family conflict (e.g. Powell and Greenhaus, 2006). For instance, participants frequently recalled making fairly intricate fairness judgements regarding others when deciding how best to manage specific conflicts. This might include decisions to seek support from an available party being influenced by the amount of support they had already provided over a particular time period, their reaction to support-giving in the past, and their own personal circumstances at that particular time. Such considerations had not previously been explored in relation to work-family conflict (Radcliffe and Cassell, 2014). It is unlikely that these factors would have been recalled within an interview, at a time far removed from the actual event, as it is less likely that participants would be able to remember their exact thought processes at that time, as well as recalling all the influencing factors that led to a specific outcome (Radcliffe, 2013).

In this way, qualitative diaries offer, not only the advantage of immediacy (Symon, 2004) offsetting the problems of retrospective accounts, but also enabling recent events to be recalled in the kind of rich detail that permits new insights into complex phenomena (e.g. Poppleton et al, 2008; Radcliffe and Cassell, 2014; 2015).

*Qualitative diaries permit a longitudinal element*

Research has long shown that there is substantial variation in people’s experiences on a daily basis, including their moods, experiences and interactions with others (e.g. Eckenrode, 1984; Bolger et al, 1989; van Eerde et al, 2005). Life in organisations is also far from static, consisting of events and behaviours that fluctuate in frequency and intensity over time (van Eerde et al, 2005). Rather than examining one specific occurrence at one specific point in time, the qualitative diary enables researchers to examine unfolding processes, within-person variations, and how individuals respond to changes in events or behaviours over time, therefore gaining rich insights into such regular fluctuations. In this way they are able to capture context by demonstrating the impact of past experiences on subsequent experiences. Taking events, feelings or decisions in isolation often gives an incomplete picture, therefore capturing immediate, and not so immediate, outcomes is important in terms of viewing the big picture. Outcomes can be thought of in two senses: the actual behavioural arrangement, or the subjective evaluation of those arrangements (Szinovacz, 1987). A within-person analysis over time, exploring both practical and emotional outcomes over numerous days, permitted by the qualitative diary method, can lead to deeper insights, particularly in terms of emotions and the impact that these emotions have on a person over time. The more in-depth recall of specific events and related feelings permit the mapping of the impact of such emotions on events on subsequent days.

For example, previous literature has highlighted mixed results regarding the benefits of flexible working. Some studies have reported that ‘family-friendly’ policies, such as flexible working arrangements, actually demonstrate positive relationships with family to work conflict (Hammer et al, 2005; Lapierre and Allen, 2006). Employing qualitative diaries, I also found that those who used flexible working experienced a greater number of conflict incidents (Radcliffe and Cassell, 2015), however, what previous studies have not shown is the longer-term daily impact on the employees themselves, and subsequently the organisation. My research demonstrated how a lack of flexibility can continue to be damaging after the event due to the constraints this puts on daily decision-making. Although a lack of flexibility at work often meant that participants were more likely to take part in the work domain, when faced with a work-family conflict, such constrained decision-making often led to further work-family conflicts. For example, one participant reported experiencing constraints placed upon her decision-making by an inflexible work context that prevented her from being able to start work at 10am rather than 9am on an occasion where she was required to work away from home. Her concern about this situation continued to have a knock on effect on both her work and personal life over the following days. The longitudinal nature of the qualitative diaries employed enabled the observation of the impact that imposing such constraints on decision-making can have over time. Beyond this, the necessity to continuously make decisions under such constraints was shown to lead to individuals leaving their organisation or intending to do so (Radcliffe and Cassell, 2015).

Specific events and experiences are inextricably linked to previous and subsequent events, and how these are experienced. Qualitative diaries provide an opportunity to capture and explore these links in a way that other methods cannot.

*Positive Impact on Participants*

Diaries can be used not only as a research tool but also as an intervention having the capacity to enable reflection and raise consciousness about the reported topic, allowing a deeper understanding and space for thinking and acting on change (Alford et al, 2005; Plowman, 2010). Self-reflection has been well-documented as having positive therapeutic outcomes, as well as being important for personal learning and development (e.g. Suedfeld and Pennebaker, 1997; Moon, 2013). The process of maintaining regular qualitative diary entries within research practice, permitting space for such personal reflection, has therefore been linked to therapeutic outcomes for individuals, due to this process of recollection and self-reflection (Suedfeld and Pennebaker, 1997; Progoff, 1992; Milligan et al, 2005). Furthermore it has also been linked to organisational learning and change (Symon, 2004).

Within my own research, participants expressed how the process of keeping a qualitative diary, “made me think more about what I actually do” with some suggesting that it led to greater self-awareness such as enabling them to “analyse my motives and realise that they are usually family orientated” and others expressing greater awareness of their partner’s roles and responsibilities, “realising more what the demands are on each other”. For some participants this led to decisions to change behaviour such as one participant, who worked from home, realising that much of his stress emanated from trying to engage in work and home roles simultaneously: “It causes stress doing something and then going back and checking my emails and then doing something so I’m not doing it anymore”. In this way, qualitative research diaries also have the potential to positively impact participants by encouraging self-reflection, self-awareness and subsequent learning, development and change.

**Conducting Qualitative Diary Research: Potential Challenges and Practical Suggestions**

In this section I will outline some important considerations when employing the qualitative diary method, beginning with the design of the study, before considering recruitment of participants, maintaining participant commitment throughout the study, and finally discussing some relevant ethical issues. I will also draw on my own personal experiences of conducting qualitative diary studies, exploring how dual-earner couples experienced and resolved work-family conflict, as a way of offering useful practical examples. In doing this, I will address some potential challenges that researchers might face as well as making practical suggestions, with the aim of providing some guidance to researchers who are beginning their journey with qualitative diaries.

*Designing the Qualitative Diary Study*

Before beginning qualitative diary research, it is important to consider the design of the study as a whole, as well as the design of the diary itself. Such design considerations are particularly important in the context of diary research to ensure that significant details are recorded in sufficient depth by participants. When using other, more frequently employed qualitative methods of data collection, such as the interview, the researcher is usually present throughout the duration of the data collection process. This enables them to ask and answer questions, prompt participants, or request a more detailed response where necessary. However, this is not the case during qualitative diary completion, as the researcher cannot be present throughout this process. In order to prevent the loss of important information, and to retain the detail and depth that the qualitative diary method has the potential to afford, the various design details of such research must be carefully considered.

*Diary Study Design*

Using diaries in conjunction with interviews has been considered, by various researchers, to be highly beneficial in terms of the quality of data collected (e.g. Plowman, 2010; Radcliffe, 2013). The diary-interview method was first described by Zimmerman and Wieder in 1977, where structured diaries were designed to record daily interactions and were followed by an in-depth and intensive interview reviewing and exploring each aspect of the diary in order to gain additional details, as well as to check the internal consistency of diary entries (Toms and Duff, 2002). In this way, Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) suggested that the follow-up interview should focus on expanding what was reported in the diaries in order to ascertain further details, as well as to uncover the meaning and significance of what was recorded. Incorporating such follow-up interviews in the design of diary studies therefore provides opportunities to clarify, and discuss in more detail, the issues raised in the diaries. Beyond this, when using qualitative diaries, which encourage participants to engage in reflection over time, it is good practice to discuss impact with participants. Follow-up interviews also offer an opportunity to do this; to discuss what impact, if any, keeping the diaries has had on participants.

Plowman (2010) refers to the diary-interview process as ‘the diary project’ making reference to the idea that initial briefings and follow-up interviews are usually considered to be important elements of qualitative diary research. Initial interviews prior to diary completion are an opportunity to discuss the research with participants in person, provide them with the opportunity to ask questions, and to ensure that they have a clear and specific understanding regarding specifically what they are expected to report, and in how much detail. Detailed instructions, including a clear definition of triggering events where appropriate, are essential because any ambiguities may cause participants to omit relevant information and detail (Bolger et al, 2003).

For example, in my own research, I used the initial interviews to emphasise the importance of recording minor and routine work-family conflicts, including the discussion of specific examples, to emphasise the amount of detail required in their entries. As part of this initial interview I employed the critical incident technique (Chell, 2004) asking interviewees to recall a recently experienced work-family conflict incident. This provided me with the opportunity to talk through this incident with participants, identifying their decision-making process and any impacting factors, and encouraging them to express the level of detail that I was looking for them to record within their future diary entries. This allowed me to make clear links between this discussion and their recording of such incidents in their diaries, therefore enabling participants to understand the type of incidents that should be recorded, as well as the importance of including adequate detail in terms of their decision-making process and all the factors involved.

*Designing the Diary*

In order to encourage effective recording it is also important to consider the design of the diary carefully. There are three general categories of diary methods in the literature (Eckenrode and Bolger, 1995; Ronka et al, 2010). These are:

1. Interval-contingent, where experiences are recorded at regular, predetermined intervals of time;
2. Signal-contingent, where participants report experiences whenever they are contacted by the researcher;
3. Event-contingent, where participants report every time a pre-established event takes place.

Considerations regarding which of these is most appropriate for any particular research must, of course, be based on the research aims of that particular study. For instance, within my research I employed an event-contingent schedule, as this made most sense given that the purpose of the research was to explore specific work-family conflict incidents, since providing reports at fixed times each day would not ensure that a specific incident had occurred and could be reported.

A related issue, when considering the design of qualitative diaries, is how much structure, if any, to incorporate. It is important to focus the research, drawing a line around what will, and will not, be investigated within a particular study. However, considering one of the aims of utilising a qualitative approach is to permit expression of participant experiences and perceptions, imposing a structure onto participants which is not their own should be avoided. Keeping diaries unstructured prevents participant’s discussions being confined, in any way, by the researcher’s preconceived ideas, an important benefit of utilising qualitative, rather than quantitative, diaries.

Conversely, participants faced with a blank page may feel daunted, particularly those who have not written for a significant period of time, whereas the inclusion of a number of open-ended questions can make diary completion more efficient and straightforward (Toms and Duff, 2002; Radcliffe, 2013). It is also important that the diary is designed in a way that encourages the reporting of as much relevant information as possible and there is the danger that, less focused diary structures may lead to participants recording fewer relevant events (Johnson & Bytheway, 2001; Radcliffe, 2013). For instance, when pilot testing an unstructured/ blank diary, along with a semi-structured diary containing four open-ended questions, my participants explained that, without the prompts of the semi-structured diary, they “would just have written what happened, and not any feelings or why”. They also commented that they “did think about it more” when completing the semi-structured diary. As a result I employed a semi-structured diary but with an additional blank space for participants to record any details that did not fit within the four daily questions, but that they considered to be relevant and important. In this way, pilot studies are particularly useful when designing qualitative research diaries, as they allow for the consideration of the structure most effective for the particular aims of the research.

As well as considering the most effective and appropriate structure for qualitative diary design, there are also a variety of mediums that can be utilised for diary reporting including traditional paper and pencil diaries, diaries completed electronically and sent via email, audio diaries (e.g. Boyd et al, 2004; Crozier and Cassell, 2015), video diaries (e.g. Gibson, 2008), and the more recent development of smartphone diary apps (e.g. Chong et al, 2014). Paper and pencil diaries are still the most commonly used diary medium as some authors claim that they are the easiest for participants to use (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003).However, as technology capabilities continue to develop at a rapid pace, increasing benefits of more modern diary mediums are being recognised (Green et al, 2006). Such technological advancement, and their potential implications for qualitative diary research, will be discussed later in this chapter.

When considering the most appropriate and effective diary medium to utilise in a particular research study, in order to further facilitate regular and detailed responses, it might be useful to provide participants with the opportunity to select from a variety of options therefore enabling them to select the approach that is most comfortable and convenient for them personally. For example, the use of a diary formats heavily reliant upon technology may be difficult, and less than comfortable, for participants who are not used to using technology, whereas other participants, who utilise technology readily within their daily lives, might find diary reporting much easier and more convenient using such mediums. Therefore, where possible, considering providing participants with the option to select from diary mediums such as traditional paper and pen, electronic, audio or even mobile diaries, is likely to enhance commitment to the study and therefore continued detailed recordings over time. Issues surrounding participant commitment will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

*Recruiting Participants and Maintaining Commitment to the Study*

One of the biggest challenges of using qualitative diaries is recruiting willing participants, and subsequently maintaining the level of participant commitment and dedication required to successfully complete regular diary entries over a prolonged period of time. As such a level of commitment is rarely required in other types of research (Bolger et al, 2003), the challenge of finding participants willing to commit to being involved in such research is one of the first real hurdles that researchers are likely to encounter. Agreement to take part is most likely to occur if personal contact with the researcher, or with others who are already involved in the research, is already somewhat established (Bolger et al, 2003; Radcliffe, 2013). Snowball sampling can work particularly effectively, as participants who are already taking part in the research can recommend relevant others with whom they will then share their own knowledge of the experience of being involved. This can encourage others based on the positive experiences of current participants engaged with the research, as well as providing them with an opportunity to ask existing participants questions about the process.

This also provides a further rationale for qualitative diaries being utilised as part of research strategy involving other methods, which enable initial face to face contact between the researcher and participants to establish and build rapport. It might be that interviews, for example, can be the initial step in a research process, where participants subsequently have the opportunity to take part in additional research elements, should they be happy to do so. Here researchers have the opportunity to explain the purpose and importance of the research, as well as any potential benefits, directly to the participant, as well as to address any initial concerns that participants might have about taking part. Downplaying the commitments required might be tempting when trying to recruit participants for qualitative diary research, however, it is important to be transparent from the beginning, not only ethically, but also in order to decrease the likelihood of participants dropping out of the research later (Radcliffe, 2013).

Once participants have been recruited, maintaining commitment to the research becomes the next challenge. Without the continued presence of the researcher, it is quite possible that forgetfulness, lapses in participant motivation, as well as external constraints to diary completion, may occur. It is therefore necessary for a high level of commitment to be maintained throughout, and for the research to remain in the minds of participants, if they are to complete the type of substantive daily diary entries required to ensure the effectiveness of qualitative diary research. When diaries are not completed on time this not only slows down the process of data collection and analysis but can also lead to concern that participants resort to completing diaries in retrospect, which can potentially undermine one of the key benefits of using the diary method; the minimisation of effects of retrospection on recall of daily experiences. This is referred to as ‘backfilling’ (Piaseccki et al, 2007), where participants might potentially even resort to recording numerous diary entries on the final completion day, immediately before they are to be returned to the researcher.

As a means of addressing this problem, it is especially important to maintain contact with participants throughout the period of diary completion. Previous research has highlighted that “personal contact retains participants more so than monetary incentives or dependence upon goodwill towards science” (Bolger et al, 2003, p.595). It is therefore important to contact participants regularly during diary completion to ensure any concerns are raised by providing further opportunity to ask questions. This helps to ensure that issues are dealt with as they occur as well as preventing loss of data due to misunderstandings or disillusionment with the study. Prior to the commencement of the diary study it can be useful to agree with participants how they would like to be contacted during this period with the hope of avoiding, or at least minimising, the disruption to their daily lives (Radcliffe, 2013). During my own research, I contacted participants via telephone, text or e-mail, depending upon preference, several times during the four week period to provide the opportunity for further questions and to make sure they were happy to continue.

Another useful strategy is to agree exactly when and how diaries entries should be made. Some modern electronic diaries have signalling features with the ability to inform participants of when to record an entry, which can be useful where researchers can employ signal-contingent, or even interval-contingent, design into their study. Such technological advancements will be considered in further detail within the following section. However, if participants are being asked to report events as they occur these signalling features are less likely to be useful. In such ‘event-based’ studies, it should be considered whether or not it is reasonable to ask participants to report an incident in their diaries immediately after the event has occurred. This can often be unrealistic; therefore, a more realistic approach might be to allow participants to postpone responding until a more opportune moment. A discussion regarding when participants would complete their diaries during an initial interview or meeting, along with encouragement to report events as soon as possible, can help to reduce fabrication due to highly retrospective accounts. For instance, Symon (2004) suggests that a participant regularly completing their diary on the train on the way home from work was free from distractions, therefore producing concise, diary entries that were consistently recorded at the same time each day. It can also be helpful to ask participants to record the date and time of their diary entries, as well as an approximate time of the event to which they are referring, or to note how much time has passed between the event and the recording. This not only gives researchers a clearer picture of the degree of retrospection within the account, but may also encourage participants to make greater efforts to record their experiences as close to the event as possible.

*Considering Ethical Issues*

From a researcher’s perspective, when qualitative diaries fulfil their potential in terms of leading to the exposing and reflection of in-depth personal issues and insights, this is extremely beneficial in terms of the rich data that can be attained. As previously discussed, there may also be potential benefits for participants in terms of enabling reflection, personal development and change. However, this can also heighten ethical issues with regards to the impact that such in-depth reflection could have on participants, particularly if the topic under discussion is of a personal and sensitive nature. Such issues are further enhanced when the researcher considers conducting follow-up interviews with participants after reading personal disclosures within their diaries.

As previously mentioned, follow-up interviews can often be an important element of the qualitative diary method as they provided vital opportunities to clarify and discuss, in more detail, the issues raised in the diaries, in order to gain a more complete and in-depth understanding. However, bringing emotive issues to the surface can potentially have a negative impact on participants’ emotional state (Corbin and Morse, 2003) and, in some cases, where sensitive issues and conflicts arise, it may not be ethical to raise the topic in the follow-up interview. Some authors have chosen not to conduct follow-up interviews because of such issues, deciding instead, to only undertake single interviews (e.g. Gatrell, 2009). As qualitative researchers, it is vital that we prioritise the interests of participants above our own desire to collect data and, in accordance with this, ethical guidelines iterate the need for researchers to protect participants from potentially harmful effects of qualitative research interviews (e.g. British Psychological Association, 2010). Subsequently follow-up interviews should be conducted with careful consideration regarding whether it is appropriate to raise issues that could potentially cause harm to participants. The medium through which follow-up interviews are conducted could also be considered here, in terms of those which permit some degree of personal distancing for participants, such as via telephone (Gatrell, 2009; Radcliffe, 2013).

**The Future of Qualitative Diary Research: Considering New Technological Developments**

As a result of the increasing application of technology within research projects, debates have begun to emerge in the literature regarding the most effective tools for conducting diary research (Green et al, 2006). Such debate regarding innovation in diary design has also been stimulated by the greater potential to assist in maintaining participant commitment, encouraging continued regular responses. Technology-based mediums for collecting participant responses have been discussed as potentially being more reliable than paper and pencil approaches (e.g. Green et al, 2006; Mehl and Conner, 2012).

Currently, personal digital assistants (PDAs), hand held computers presenting custom designed questions, are the platform most widely used to collect diary entries electronically. Database software permitting researchers to design diaries using PDA platforms can now be readily purchased (See Mehl and Conner, 2012). However, custom-designed PDA-based diaries are likely to be too cost prohibitive for smaller scale research projects (Piasecki et al, 2007), and more importantly, at present, the use such programs has been focused on quantitative diary formats (e.g. Barrett and Feldman Barrett, 2000). Therefore, their feasibility for incorporating open-ended responses required for qualitative diaries currently remains difficult, yet perhaps there is room for adaptation in the future.

Diary data may also be collected via the internet by creating online diaries, providing participants with the relevant web-link and passwords, and asking them to log on to complete their diaries. Such online diaries have the advantage of centralised data collection (Piasecki et al, 2007), meaning that data cannot be lost, or found by others, in the same way as might be possible when using PDAs, if they are lost or broken. However, such methods require participants to have access to a computer that is connected to the internet in order to complete their diary entry, which may be inconvenient (Anhøj & Nielsen, 2004). Greater potential may exist for those online diaries that can be created specifically for use on mobile phones or tablets.

Considering the potential created by the extensive use of smart phones by the public also provides possibilities in terms of ‘diary apps’ that can be easily accessed by participants as they are ‘on the go’. This is an area that, as yet, remains fairly underutilised, particularly in terms of qualitative diary research, but offers great future potential. One example of such innovations is research by the Digital Brain Switch team who have created ‘squeeze diaries’ where participants are given a squeeze sensor that can be squeezed for a short duration to trigger an event instance in the related smart phone app (Chong et al, 2014). The instance is then logged (along with relevant cues, such as location and time) on the mobile phone allowing the user to record a qualitative reflection on the recorded instance, at a more convenient time. There are clearly issues of cost and programming here, as well as extra time needed for training participants on how to use these devices. While some may be very familiar with such technology, others could be less comfortable. However, it certainly does offer interesting and fruitful possibilities for innovative diary studies moving forward, which could help to address some of the aforementioned challenges of qualitative diary research.

**In Conclusion**

This chapter highlights the numerous benefits of using diaries, particularly qualitative diaries, as part of management and organisations research. It also explores some of the practical considerations required when designing qualitative diary research, including addressing some of the associated challenges. Although the use of the qualitative diary method can entail numerous challenges, it is argued here that the benefits far outweigh the difficulties and, in this respect, perseverance and determination are advocated due to the rewards that this method affords.

Using qualitative diaries enables the in-depth exploration of everyday situations therefore increasing our understanding of experiences, events and processes from the perspectives of various individuals, permitting within- and between-person analyses of detailed descriptions of experiences. In my own personal experience, using qualitative diaries enabled novel findings due to the substantial amount of detail attained using a non-retrospective, episodic and longitudinal approach, permitting participants to record their own perception of experiences freely, and as they happened. Beyond this, the use of qualitative diaries enabled thoughts and emotional experiences to be captured at the time of event occurrence, the details of which could otherwise have been lost or diluted using more retrospective techniques (Symon, 2004). The longitudinal nature of qualitative diaries also offers insights into the impact that both practical and emotional outcomes, experienced at a particular time or on a particular day, can have on subsequent experiences, thoughts, feelings and actions in the future. Such findings can throw new light on important workplace issues, enabling new insights into complex daily experiences and processes. When considering these substantial benefits, in terms of the rich understanding of organisational issues that have the potential to be uncovered using qualitative diaries, it can only be argued that qualitative diaries are extremely useful tools for researchers looking to add new and valuable contributions to the management and organisations field.

**Further Reading**

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