

Using Diaries in Social Research:

Transcript



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Emma Wincup: Hi. I'm Emma Wincup, and I'm presenting a session today with Kirsty Patrick on using diaries in social research. We're from two different organisations, but we're both founder members of the National Centre for Research Methods Participatory & Collaborative Methods Special Interest Group. You'll hear us talk about how we've used diaries as fundamental to our work in two different sectors, academia and the charity sector.

So, just a quick overview of what we're planning to do today. We'll introduce ourselves and our work, and then talk you through some of the more practical aspects of using diaries in social research. We'll then take a moment to reflect on the values of using diaries, making comparisons quickly to other qualitative methods to highlight some of the distinctive features of using diaries in social research.

So, I joined the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2019, so I've been there almost six years. JRF is an anti-poverty charity. You can see our mission on the slide that's in front of you. We do a wide range of work then that's all connected to poverty. That might be anything from looking at housing to social security to employment and lots more. And I joined the Joseph Rowntree Foundation from academia, where my main discipline was criminology, and I hadn't used diaries at that point. It didn't seem to be a well-used method within that discipline. I came in as a qualitative specialist to JRF and are fortunate to have the freedom to use the most appropriate methods to support the work we do, and that work is about developing the evidence base quantitatively and qualitatively, but it's also very policy-focused as well, thinking about how we can develop new policies, how we can be involved in campaigning, how we can shift public attitude.

So, one of the projects I developed with colleagues is the Grounded Voices programme. It's been running now for two years or so. It started off by us talking to people who were experiencing financial hardship about how they wanted to share their experiences. And right from the start, diaries came through as a way in which people wanted to share their experiences, so we did some work then testing a programme before rolling it out. Particularly keen to use the programme then to amplify the voices of people struggling to afford what they need, so making sure that people, particularly those often not heard in debates about financial hardship, had the opportunity for their experiences to feed into that work we do, so a very kind of practical-orientated programme. And we used diaries within this programme as part of a mixed methods approach, so we also get to know people initially through doing one-to-one interviews, and then we use focus groups to delve deeper into some of the issues people share within diaries. And you can read more about the programme at the link there. I'm part of that insight infrastructure team at JRF. And we particularly work to make sure that insights about poverty are going to be shared quickly within our own organisation but with other organisations too, so it really makes a difference to people experiencing poverty.

Kirsty Pattrick: Thanks, Emma. I'm Kirsty Pattrick, and I joined Mass Observation in 2011 with a background in history. So, Mass Observation is an archive of everyday life in Britain, people's thoughts, feelings and experiences. It was founded in 1937 as an independent social research organisation and continues today as a national charity in the care of the University of Sussex, so we're based down in Brighton. And we continue to be a source of qualitative narrative data used for learning, teaching and research both in academia but also for the wider public. One method we use to generate our material is the day diary, and this is similar to some of Mass Observation's early work in the 1940s, when they got people to write both day dairies and longer submissions throughout the Second World War. And today we use open calls nationally to generate this material.

So, why 12th May? This was Mass Observations first activity in 1937, it was the day of the King's coronation and they were keen to know what people... what they were doing and what they were thinking and feeling about this event, whether they were taking part, or we have opinions saying there was too much pomp and ceremony and it was a time of economic crisis. So, we chose that date and in 2010 project was reignited and we asked people across Britain to document their day, what they do on 12th May from when they wake to when they go to sleep, what they do. And the value is in the ordinary, that which would be otherwise unrecorded, very much the minutiae. So, what boxes you're putting your recycling into, what podcasts you're listening to, what you've been buying in the shops and who you've been talking to. So, what we have now is a strength in the longitudinal because we've got 15 years' worth of narrative data, and we find that it's our more diverse collection because it's less... it's not so much of an ask and people can take part in creative ways. Predominantly it's been used for learning and teaching, but more increasingly research, especially our most recent collection from Covid 2020, which just struck a cord when everybody was in lockdown. And you can find more information on our website below.

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Emma Wincup: Okay, so we're going to talk through now some of the different aspects to think about when you're contemplating using diaries, so we'll start first with recruitment. So, for the Grounded Voices project, we set up a purposive sample. We want to make sure we included a range of people who are experiencing financial hardship, so we looked at the groups of people who would need to be included and made sure they were there, so, for example, unpaid carers, people with disabilities and health conditions, as well as making sure we included people from different demographic groups as well, over sampling for people from minoritised ethnic communities. That's quite a big ask, so we do use a recruitment company to help us identify people because we want to make sure we've got people living across the UK, in England and in the devolved nations, and a good mix as well of people living in urban and rural areas. It doesn't have to be done this way. It might be something that if you had a more targeted group or you're working in a

smaller geographical area that the recruitment could be something you could manage yourself through establishing connections with organisations and doing more public calls.

Just worth emphasising though that we don't use the recruiters solely to establish informed consent. We make sure that we have follow-up calls with people who've expressed an interest in the project so they understand what the commitment is because it's quite a lengthy commitment, as you'll see in a moment, and that's supported then by hopefully a very accessible participant information sheet that we send out after the call.

Kirsty Pattrick: So, for 12th May day diary, we used existing networks and developed new partnerships. We sent out publicity packs which has links and templates that can be downloaded. There's a dedicated website page to 12th May with information for not only individuals but community groups and schools. We do a lot of work with third-sector organisations and prisons across the UK. We're a very small team with a national reach, so for us it's really important, obviously, to make these networks and partnerships because we couldn't have the success we do otherwise. And we push a lot through social media as well, and that's increased over the years. And the strength of working with wider organisations, an example is when we worked with Action for ME, and they were able to publicise it to all of their members across the country, which obviously provided really valuable content which we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise.

Emma Wincup: So, let's talk a little about the kind of methods and the type of data that you can generate through using diaries. So, the Grounded Voices project we use a specialist app. There's a number of apps that are there. They've mostly developed to support market research but work well in a social research context. It's often possible to try them out, particularly if you're a student without cost. So, we use the app then to set two tasks each week for 12 weeks. The tasks go out on a Monday morning. They are in a written form but also in a video form because that's more accessible to some people. And we allow people to put their entries into different formats. And they tend to mimic the ways in which people communicate in their everyday lives. There's more people communicate through

social media platforms in particular. So, people tend to choose the way of sharing their experience and their thoughts and feelings that works best for them, but we do encourage people as well to try out different formats. The nice thing about using the app is it's also possible to have a dialogue with participants so if people raise something and don't give lots of detail or you're not sure about something, you could ask them a question. Or you can simply thank them for their contributions if they've shared quite a lot already, and that feedback to people is really important in terms of shaping their positive experience of taking part in the research.

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Kirsty Pattrick: Thanks, Emma. So, as I mentioned, for 12th May, we have templates that people can download, but they can submit their writing or their creations, their artwork and photographs and either post these into us at the archive where we're based at The Keep or via email. And in the last few years we've also set up an online survey all for 12th May, so people can have that flexibility to submit on their device at the end of the day or if they're on their phone on the train home. So, there's a variety of methods and we don't have a deadline to, again, give that flexibility.

Emma Wincup: Okay, so the participant experience is obviously really important and we want it to be a positive experience for people taking part, and without it being a positive experience the data process wouldn't continue. So, for the Grounded Voices programme we do talk to people throughout the programme about their experience of taking part. That's one of the feedback loops we have, as well as sharing what we've heard as well at different points either in a group session or in a written summary. People consistently tell us that that space for private reflection is really important. Often people are so caught up in managing their financial hardship, they don't necessarily take the time to think about what they do and the impact it has on them, so that's important. And they don't often talk about things with other people too. So, being part of that wider community where you can talk about things that are still stigmatised in some respects, talking about money is not something people tend to do much, particularly some of the more

difficult aspects, like being in debt, is important. So, even if they don't meet other people because they don't come to a group session, knowing that there are other people who are in a similar situation who are sharing their experiences is something that's important to them.

We try and build in some participatory elements too as well, so people can feel they've got some input into the programme. We do have an advisory group made of previous participants, but the main thing is while the diaries are running is we ask people about the kind of things they want to talk about in other weeks and reflect also on what we've heard in the diaries and ask people what groups they'd like to come to as well.

Kirsty Pattrick: Thanks, Emma. So, with our work, it's obviously been an incentive that we have diaries from the Second World War that are heavily used and people know that their diaries are going to be part of this archive, but I think what that shows is that it shows the relevance of being able to leave a legacy and that their writing is safely kept for posterity. So, that's quite tangible in them understanding how it's going to be used and its value, although we've got lots of researchers using it within months of it being submitted. And it's just emphasising in our communication and in our publicity that it provides an opportunity for people's voices to be heard, that they are of value, and that's where a lot of our workshops in advance of 12th May are important, working with these minority groups, our outreach managers going into prisons and going into schools to highlight its value and make those connections, and then that word of mouth is very powerful. So, we've got lots of people who submit year on year. And, as Emma said, making sure we feed back, having that acknowledgement going back to people, which we obviously had on the online forms and email and where we can post, so to just thank people for their contributions is really important, and that's helped us being able to continue each year.

Emma Wincup: Okay, so this is a whistlestop tour through using diaries, and so we'll say something very, very briefly around analysis, not to provide a guide to analysis, but perhaps just encourage you to think about how you might analyse the data before you collect it. I just wanted to... there's many analysis challenges, but

there's a couple that I probably wanted to flag up particularly given the diary work I do and the context of the organisation I work in. One is that we have very quickly amassed a lot of data, and it's data in many different forms, and that's just from the diaries, and then we have other methods too. And that adds to the richness of the data and the depth of understanding, but it can be a challenge for analysis. And I suppose laid on top of that, for me working in an organisation that's doing proactive work but also trying to respond to a very fast-moving political environment often, it's the need for colleagues to have timely data as well. So, analysis can be a long and quite a laborious process, but there's not always the time to do that, so it's thinking what the trade-offs might be in terms of getting things out quickly compared to looking at things in more depth. The platform has some tools built in that we do use. There's a tagging function which allows you to sort and retrieve data. There's also an AI analysis tool that's built in, far from perfect, but just to get you over that initial stage of starting the analysis and staring at a blank piece of paper.

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Kirsty Pattrick: Thanks, Emma. So, just really to add onto that, we're seeing more use in our diary data being used longitudinally due to the amount that's there and being able to look at trends over time, but generally our day diaries are also used much more in a mixed methods approach, so people will use the day diaries alongside other submissions that we receive to Mass Observation through our open questionnaires. But they also might use Mass Observation as a source of data prompts to then use for focus groups and interviews. And with the day diaries I think we've emphasised and highlighted through this the value in that moment by moment, that it is timely, and that's rung true for us where we've been in a position on 12th May to capture moments in time, such as the pandemic, Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 when everyone was in lockdown, but also when we first started this in 2010, it was the first day of the coalition government. So, you have those ordinary days and then you have those extraordinary ones.

Emma Wincup: So, just to end then, hopefully it's come through that we feel there's a great deal of value in using diaries in social research. We're trying to summarise this into three broad headings and weren't going to repeat that now, but I think for us it's that distinctive nature of the data that's really important. I think you reach different types of data, you collect different types of data through diaries that compared with different types of qualitative methods, particularly getting that small detail that people don't recall through other methods, when they're asked a question in a focus group or an interview. The flexibility is really important. And connected with that then, the inclusivity, the fact that people are able, putting those two things together to share their experiences in ways that work for them, at a time that works for them, and allows them to negotiate some of the practical challenges they may face in life around caring commitments, for example, as well as other ones about perhaps English isn't a first language or they may have special educational needs is really important then in terms of being a method then that really speaks to wanting to do inclusive research that reaches out to the widest group of people possible.

Kirsty Pattrick: So, thank you for your time. We hope that we've shown and highlighted enough our enthusiasm for diary work and some of the practicalities, some of the challenges. You can find out more information about both of our organisations from our websites detailed here, and there is also further information on the NCRM website. So, best of luck, and thank you for your time.

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