

Chapter 23

Dear (Digital) Diary: Evaluating the Audio Diary Technique as a Research Method

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates how individuals interpreted and considered the audio-diary technique, understanding the interaction between the subject and the medium and the potential of new technological tools (e.g., smartphone, social network) in producing data. The research is based on a previous study conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy, more specifically, the transition from phase 1 to phase 2. Each participant—11 female and 6 male, between 28 and 45 years old, and living in the northern part of Italy—was asked to register one audio per day for a week (7-13 May). After this period, the author undertook a final follow-up semi-structured interview to evaluate how much the audio-diary had an impact both on people's daily lives and on their way of expressing information. The data collected suggest a number of advantages and disadvantages to the use of audio-diary to collect individuals' experience. The author will briefly describe the steps of AD technique by using the collected material (interviews) and what has emerged from the analysis of qualitative data.

INTRODUCTION: DIARIES AS A SOCIAL PRODUCT

The use of a diary as a form of personal tale comes largely from literary narratives, in which collections of thoughts support the description of historical or social contexts, such as in the *Anne Frank Diary* – one of the most well-known memoirs, describing a young woman's life in hiding during World War II. Gogol, a Russian writer, also used this form in his *Diary of a Madman*, which chronicled the increasing delusions of the main character. In sociology, diaries can be a valuable research instrument, since participants can accurately describe their relational and social circumstances in the first person. This was the case in Jack Womack's *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*, in which, using vivid, cyberpunk prose, Lola – a teenager from a comfortable family, attending an exclusive private school – described

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8473-6.ch023

through her diary how she was suddenly forced to move to the deprived area of Harlem with her family. By reading Lola's diary, it is possible to observe how sociocultural factors (income and urban context) can influence an individual's life trajectory. The writing style, initially fluid and grammatically correct, progressively deteriorates through exposure to a poor and deprived neighbourhood.

Based on such precedents, diaries constitute a fruitful object of investigation for social scientists since they "have the potential to yield rich qualitative data and, unlike methods which rely on retrospection, offer the potential to ensure that accounts are sequentially ordered and reduce the likelihood of feelings or events being forgotten" (Williamson *et al.*, 2015, p. 2).

Social research has used diaries in different contexts. In ethnographic research, field notes can provide important insights into how individuals and communities develop relationships and live in 'their' world. In clinical research, diaries can help to enhance memory or recall problems. Merton and colleagues (1957) showed in their book *The Student-Physician: Introductory Studies in the Sociology of Medical Education* that diaries can be a powerful tool for the education and socialisation of medical students. Through excerpts from written texts, the authors examined how students perceived and evaluated their situation, presenting the same event (such as an exam or an interaction with a patient) differently. Another study conducted by Elliot (1997) illustrated the role of the diary-interview method to investigate the demand for formal and informal primary care. According to the author, using diaries offered a means to capture behaviour that was inaccessible through participant observation.

What is the potential of diaries within social research? Latham highlighted that a "diary becomes a kind of performance ... the methodological focus shifts to plugging into (and enabling) respondents' existing narrative resources" (2003, p. 2002). The narratives in diaries, unlike interviews and focus groups, do not consider the physical and temporal spaces shared with the researcher. The diary creates a dimension in which the person can be alone and his/her influence affects the entire collection of data.

Alaszewski (2006, p. 2) emphasised four main characteristics of diaries. Firstly, a diary must present *regularity* since it is organised around a sequence of regular and dated entries over a certain period. Secondly, a diary is *personal* because the entries are made by an identifiable individual who controls access to the diary while he/she records it. Thirdly, diaries are usually *contemporaneous* since the entries are made at the time, or close enough to the time, when events or activities occurred. This is particularly useful for avoiding problems of recall. Finally, all diaries present a *record* of the entries that are considered relevant and important by the person who is writing. These entries may include events, activities, interactions, impressions, and feelings. The records can be presented in different forms: written documents or, with the development of technology, audio or audio-visual recordings.

Nowadays, technology offers new opportunities for diary keeping. Diaries can therefore be created in a different manner, as paper diaries, audio diaries, or e-diaries; for instance, various blogs and weblogs provide access to personal diaries, as the website <https://blogs.warwick.ac.uk> exemplifies (Alaszewski, 2006). The ability to generate audio diaries is also facilitated by the widespread use of new digital devices (including smartphones), which simplify the collection and recording of impressions. Among the main studies that have used the audio-diary technique, Bernays and colleagues (2014) analysed how hope was built and maintained by 20 people living with HIV in Serbia. The authors illustrated the methodological contribution that audio diaries made to understanding the complexity of experiences of chronic illness over time. Another study (Worth, 2009) employed audio diaries to report how visually impaired young people in Great Britain approached adulthood. Analysing passages from a set of 22 audio diaries, Worth examined three key issues relating to the technique: how audio diaries can capture narrative in unique ways, how the method can be employed within a participatory framework, and how audio diaries ad-

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