

Mobile Diary Methods in Studying Daily Family Life

Kaisa Malinen

JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland

Anna Rönkä

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Eijja Sevón

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

INTRODUCTION

The mobile diary is a diary research method which utilizes mobile phones as tools for data collection. In general, diary methods are used to study the phenomena of interest over a limited period of time with repeated, intensive measurements. This can mean, for example, that the study participants report their answers to the same questions four times a day over a period of two weeks. The diary method enables study of the “real-world” in “real-time,” taking into consideration “within-person” fluctuation in the phenomena under scrutiny of interest (see Mehl & Conner, 2012). In addition to diary methods, terms such as experience sampling methods, ambulatory assessment and ecological momentary assessment (EMA) are often used to refer intensively repeated measures in the context of daily life (see Mehl & Conner, 2012 for a discussion on the similarities and differences between the terms).

OVERVIEW

Although a newcomer in the field of family research, the history the mobile diary method is rooted in the wider context of the development of methods for investigating daily life. While the diary method has a far longer history in other disciplines (see Wilhelm & Perrez, 2013), it is

nevertheless several decades since one of the first family research studies to utilize diaries was published by Thomas Wills, Robert Weiss, and Gerald Patterson (1974). These researchers asked seven married couples to monitor their marital behaviors and time use for a period of 14 days and to report back to the researchers in two daily landline phone calls. Since then, the use of the diary method in family research has grown. Pioneering experts in the history of diary methods in family research include professor Rena Repetti from the University of California, professor Reed Larson from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and professor David Almeida, the Pennsylvania State University. At the end of the 20th century Larson and Almeida (1999) proposed the emotional transmission paradigm for understanding daily paths of emotional interchange in the family context. On the methodological level, studies using this paradigm often rely on diaries.

During the last two decades, diary methods have been intensively developed (see reviews by Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Christensen, Barrett, Bliss-Moreau, Lebo, & Kaschub, 2003; Scollon, Kim-Pieto, & Diener, 2003). In particular, various new technologies have become increasingly utilized in diary studies, with different forms of electronic diaries complementing traditional paper-and-pencil diaries (Intille, 2012). The devices used in electronic diaries have become smaller and smarter; palmtops and pagers have

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8239-9.ch032

gradually been replaced by mobile phones and smartphones. At the same time as the possibilities of mobile diary methods have been noticed in the field of family research, they have also been realized in several other areas of research, such as in measuring mood (Courvoisier, Eid, Lischetzke, & Schreiber, 2010) and in alcohol research (Kuntsche & Robert, 2009). Current leading scholars in diary research in the field of family studies include Jean-Philippe Laurenceau, University of Delaware, and Niall Bolger, Columbia University, as well as Meinrad Perrez and Dominic Schöbi, the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, whose work is discussed later in the text.

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN MOBILE DIARY RESEARCH

Possibilities of Mobile Diaries in Family Research

The diary method can meet many needs when studying families. The advantages of using diary methods in the field of family research have been discussed, for example, by Jean-Philippe Laurenceau and Niall Bolger (2005). First, as these authors also note, diary methods can enable the researcher to get close to real-life situations. Diary methods also help in respecting the privacy of family life, as the family members themselves are responsible for reporting and no outside observer is needed. In addition, the mobile diary method can easily be integrated into the daily lives of family members. This is especially true when the research participants use their own mobile phones which they are accustomed to carrying with them almost always and everywhere (see also Raento, Oulasvirta, & Eagle, 2009). As Rönkä, Malinen, Kinnunen, Tolvanen and Lämsä (2010) argue, participants in a mobile diary study “are free to live as mobile a life as they usually do” (p. 16). In this way – in comparison to, for example, observations made in laboratory environments, or even studies utilizing palmtop computers that

may be less familiar to their participants – mobile phone studies can yield information that is ecologically valid.

In addition, diary methods are sensitive to the constantly changing and multivoiced nature of family life. As Larson and Almeida (1999) state, “the family is a nexus of daily interchanges” (p. 5) among family members and between these members and their external environments, such as workplaces and schools. The fluctuating nature of daily family life is also connected with daily and weekly rhythms (e.g., Almeida & McDonald, 1998; Daly, 2001; Larson & Richards, 1994). The diary method with its intensive measurements allows researchers to explore microlevel processes of family life. Diary methods have been applied in studying short-term processes and variation, such as daily fluctuation in family atmosphere and the simultaneousness of positive and negative moods and interactions between spouses, in parent-child relationships or within the family (e.g., Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). A special advantage related to the use of mobile diaries and other technical tools is that the timing of answering can be recorded. As diary data can be collected simultaneously from several members of the same family, it also allows researchers to tap into interpersonal processes in family life and capture the dynamic nature of family relationships in a way which is unreachable with many other methods. An extensive review of the research on daily family life is presented in Anna Rönkä and Pirjo Korvela (Rönkä & Korvela, 2009). A more general review on the history of research on daily life is given by Peter Wilhelm and Meinrad Perrez (Wilhelm & Perrez, 2013).

Researchers have given several other reasons for utilizing technical tools such as mobile phones to collect diary on family processes and relationships. In comparison to using paper and pencil, technical tools may be seen as more interesting by the participants. According to Rönkä and colleagues (2010) as well as Matthews, Doherty, Sharry, and Fitzpatrick (2008), the use of mobile phones in data collection can motivate the participation of people, especially adolescents and

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