Entries and omissions: using solicited diaries in geographical research

Paula Meth
School of Environment and Development, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield S1 1WB
Email: P.J.Meth@shu.ac.uk

Revised manuscript received 24 February 2003

This paper explores the use of personal solicited diaries as a qualitative research tool within social geography. Diaries were used with women from South Africa who recorded their experiences of violence over a period of one month. The paper analyses diaries in terms of their longitudinal benefits, their socially constituted nature, their use in conjunction with interviews and finally their potential for empowerment. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the diary as a methodological tool.

Key words: South Africa, feminist methodologies, diaries, gender, violence

Introduction

This paper examines the use of solicited personal diaries as a qualitative research method within the discipline of human geography. It is argued, using a recent example, that solicited diaries can promote participation and engagement by respondents in the research process. Hence, the paper suggests the use of personal diaries can contribute towards a feminist analysis of social processes.

The paper draws extensively on a recent research project carried out in Durban, South Africa, between November 2001 and January 2002. The focus of the research was an analysis of women’s fear of violence in violent contexts. The research project made use of a range of research methods, namely open ended questionnaires, focus group interviews and the use of solicited personal diaries. This paper is concerned only with the latter since, as I argue below, this method has received little attention in the academic geography literature. A detailed discussion of the research project and the manner in which diaries were used is presented below.

A number of themes are raised in relation to the use of solicited diaries as a research method or tool. Firstly, I consider the benefits of the longitudinal insight of individual lives afforded by soliciting and analysing diary contributions. I then examine the individualistic nature of diary completion and discuss the risk of diary writing as a decontextualized process. Following this, I discuss the benefits of combining the diary method with the focus group technique, and thereafter I assess the potential for diary writing to form a component of empowering research. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the use of diaries. Throughout the paper I make use of quotations from diary entries written by participants. However, because this paper is not an analysis of the content of these diaries (for example, the theme of violence) these excerpts are limited.

The use of personal diaries as a research methods tool

An analysis of recent geography methodology texts (Hoggart et al. 2002; Limb and Dwyer 2001; Kitchin and Tate 2000) reveals fairly brief discussions of the use of solicited diaries as an appropriate and useful research method within the discipline of geography. This is not surprising, given that using solicited...
diaries is not common within human geography research. Much of the discussion of diaries in these texts (and others) refers to the use of diaries written for personal purposes and which are usually of an historical nature (Hoggart et al. 2002, 120, 125; Kitchen and Tate 2000, 226). Thus it is primarily within historical geography that diaries have been used (see Blunt 2000; Royle 1998; McEwan 1996). Hoggart et al. do, however, point to the use of solicited diaries in their text by providing examples of using diaries to understand shopping activities (2002, 45) and commissioned BBC listener research (2002, 127). Punch also discusses the use of solicited diaries in relation to children’s everyday activities in Bolivia (Punch 2001, 172 and 2002, 20).

Solicited diaries then are a seldom-used method (or at least a seldom written about method) within geography, and are more common within health related research. Solicited diaries are quite distinct in nature from personal private diaries. Bell defines solicited diaries as ‘an account produced specifically at the researcher’s request, by an informant or informants’ (Bell 1998, 72). Solicited diaries then are written with the full knowledge that the writing process is for external consumption. This contrasts strongly with private diaries that may have been written for private purposes, raising ethical questions about researchers making use of such resources. Solicited diaries, on the other hand, are negotiated between researcher and researched and it is likely that the text reflects an awareness of what the researcher wants to read. In this regard the writing process embodies subjectivities informed by the researcher–researched relationship. Following these issues, the paper now considers the ‘solicited diary’ as a feminist research method.

**Feminist research methods**

Defining ‘feminist research methods’ is problematic. As McDowell explains:

> there is broad agreement that feminists . . . are searching for methods consonant with their values and aims . . . However, beyond this broad axiomatic statement of aims, there is less agreement about whether there are particular methods that are peculiarly suited to feminist investigations . . . (McDowell 1997, 106)

Several principles or ideals of feminist research can, however, be identified. Renzetti (1997) outlines five principles of feminist methodologies which offer a useful starting point:

1. a focus on gender inequality and a commitment to changing this;
2. give voice to everyday experiences, particularly of the marginalized;
3. be committed to social action;
4. build in reflexivity to the research process;
5. aim for a more empowering relationship between the researched and the researcher. (Renzetti 1997, 133 after Cancian 1992)

These principles are by no means shared, easily attainable or without significant problems of their own (see McDowell 1997, 107–112). However, they do provide a structure for the analysis of the use of diaries within geography.

The use of diaries in primary research does not necessarily satisfy feminist research principles. Indeed, Bell explains ‘fundamentally differing methodological approaches can underlie what are seen and glossed over as “diary methods” in social research’ (Bell 1998, 74). She goes on to argue that:

> In understanding how diary accounts have been used in research, it is therefore crucial to acknowledge any shifting approaches to private and public construction of accounts within research projects. Furthermore, diaries need to be acknowledged as constructed by both the writer and, through research and analysis, by the soliciting researcher. (Bell 1998, 75)

However, as a distinctly qualitative method solicited personal diaries complement research approaches that are critical and subjective. I argue here that the use of solicited diaries can contribute to the fulfilment of the second and fifth principles of feminist methodologies outlined by Renzetti above.

The twin principles of giving voice and empowerment are well served by using solicited diaries. Diaries offer the opportunity for respondents to define the boundaries of their shared knowledge, within, of course, the restrictive context established by the guidelines given on what is desired by the researcher. This characteristic of diaries illustrates, in part, the collaborative nature of much feminist research. Elliott explains how diary writing allows a researcher to understand the informants’ priorities. She argues:

> The open diary gave a feel for the meaning and the weight attached to different health problems and how they interacted together to shape helpseeking – priorities which would have been less likely to emerge in a more structured diary. (Elliott 1997, 8)
This may be empowering for the respondents in that it offers them the opportunity to identify what is and what is not their primary concern, it also allows them to construct these concerns in a way which clarifies for the researcher their own particular priorities. ‘Thus diaries form part of a research process, in which informants actively participate in both recording and reflecting upon their own behaviour’ (Elliott 1997, 4). Indeed, ‘They were collaborators in the construction of the account and had a stake in the research process’ (Elliott 1997, 12–13).

Later, however, Elliott reminds us that it would be:

misleading to suggest that the diaries used in this study were written within informants’ own frame of reference. Diaries commissioned specifically for research are not private documents. From the outset, they are written with a particular reader and their agenda in mind . . . (Elliott 1997, 9)

This raises the issue of ownership and the politics of knowledge, and it is important to stress that the process of knowledge production is an unequal and complex one. Decisions about authorship and the very process of selecting what is to be shared and what is to be omitted in a research project are political in themselves.

The Durban case study

Between November 2001 and January 2002, primary research was conducted in Durban, South Africa, making use of a Nuffield Foundation grant. The research trip followed a pilot study carried out in July and August 2000. The research exercise was aimed at establishing an understanding of women’s fear and experiences of crime and violence (particularly within violent contexts), the nature and location of these fears and experiences and the ways in which women managed these. In this regard, the research investigated both domestic and public violence. The research focused on women who were largely poor, all black African, and resided in three different geographical locations. These were the formal township of KwaMashu, the shack settlement of Cato Manor, and an inner city trading site, Warwick Junction.

The women were recruited firstly for participation in focus group interviews. These consisted of five women per group and three groups per geographical area. Women were recruited in a variety of ways, but largely through the use of local facilitators who acted as recruiters. The facilitators were found through local research contacts, and they tended to recruit women from their immediate local area or from local organizations, such as a church. At the end of each focus group session, myself and one of my research assistants (namely Ms Khethiwe Malaza and Ms Sibongile Maimane) raised the issue of diary writing with the women. We explained the purpose of the diary, and the length of time we wanted the diaries to be written over. We also explained that we would pay R100² (approximately £6.60) per completed diary. All the women at all the focus groups agreed to take home a blank diary, and we provided them with pens. All the diaries were simple A5 sized stapled lined booklets which had a page of guidelines pasted into the front cover. The women were asked to write their entries in Zulu and we explained that these would later be translated into English (see Appendix 1 for an English version of the guidelines).

We used the focus group session to provide an opportunity for the women to ask questions about filling in the diaries and to clarify our expectations and needs. We also used the sessions to discuss where and when diaries would be collected (normally 4–5 weeks after the focus group session). The kinds of concerns women had were regarding the Christmas period when they were ‘going home’ to rural areas and whether they could take the diary with them. Other concerns were about running out of pages, not being able to return the diary on the specified date and not knowing what to write. A number of women also explained that they were unable to write (in Zulu) and we suggested that they used a school-going child (or someone that they felt close to) to assist them. This issue of literacy is discussed later in the paper.

Thirty-nine out of 40 diaries were returned. The diaries were varied in their length. Some women had written cover to cover, others wrote about ten pages in total. Overall we were impressed by the amount women had written and shared with us. In addition, although not originally budgeted for, a single ‘post-project’ evaluation of one woman’s experience of diary keeping was carried out in the form of a semi-structured interview. Researcher Khethiwe Malaza carried out this interview with interviewee and diary keeper Mrs F from the Jamaica Settlement of Cato Manor. This interview is obviously not representative, but it does offer very useful insights from one person’s perspective.

The paper will now go on to analyse four key themes in relation to the use of personal diaries as a research tool.
Longitudinal insight versus snapshot views

A primary and significant benefit of personal diaries is the temporal nature of the insight they offer. Many methods (interviews, questionnaires, focus groups etc.) take place as one-off events attempting to provide a crucial insight into what is often an extensive and complex set of experiences. This is problematic as insights often only emerge through repeated investigation. There are two issues I would like to explore here. The first considers the specific benefits provided by longitudinal research, and the second, based on the diary accounts provided for this research, challenges the issue of diary keeping as an act of current sequential record keeping.

In terms of the benefits of longitudinal research, Elliott explains that diaries ‘are written discontinuously, either daily or over longer intervals of time’ (1997, 3 after Allport 1943). This longitudinal approach allows for flexibility and variation in the stories and narratives presented. In using questionnaires and interviews, a particular angle or line of response can be adopted by both respondent and interviewer, often early on. This can be limiting or restrictive. At the start of one of the focus group interviews, in response to a general question about how the participants viewed themselves, an anti-male theme was established. ‘I am taking care of my two grandchildren whose fathers don’t support them at all’ and ‘At our area most of the married men are drunkards’ (Cato Manor Focus Group 3). Much of the subsequent discussion revolved around this theme. This anti-male theme shaped many of the answers provided later in the interview. It is often only in follow-up interviews that alternative accounts are provided or different themes pursued. However, diary writing, as a discontinuous process, can change with each entry. Its temporal nature allows for a break in logic between entries. This perhaps reflects more accurately the diverse range of thoughts and feelings that make up human consciousness. In this particular project, diaries were written over a 4–6 week period, which is longitudinal but not extensively so. A more extensive period of time or repeated diary writing at a later interval is likely to benefit the research process.

Elliott (1997) also points to the issue and problems of retrospective censorship in relation to other methods and argues that because diaries are often written in the present, problems with remembering are less likely. Below are some expressions of events proceeding as the diary is being written:

On 12-1-2002 at about 9:h30 in the evening, a young girl was raped. She was sent to the shop to buy some alcohol. As I speak she is at the hospital. We are told that she passes out quite often. Respondent 14

He is in prison as I talk. Respondent 19

This benefit, which is arguably of huge significance because diaries can represent very recent accounts of individual’s experiences, was tempered in this research. This was because some participants recorded experiences that happened a long time ago. The potential for ‘retrospective censorship’ thus existed in this research project.

This process of recording ‘historical’ events in diaries relates to the inclusion by 18 out of 39 respondents of past events in their daily diary recording. By this I am not referring to occasional references to previous experiences recorded as part of a discussion of a current event, rather I am referring to the explicit structuring or writing of the diary around and on past events, even using ‘historical’ dates as headings. Below is an example from Respondent 19. What is interesting here is not only the retrospective reflection, but also the temporal leaps in recording these, in other words the entries are not ordered in terms of sequential time. I have structured her diary entries in the order in which she wrote them. This account reflects the ‘time’ issue very succinctly. I am only repeating here the initial reference she makes to the timing of the event and not the full narrative:

In July 1997 a person harassed my neighbour’s child . . .

Where we stay at the muti market there is a man who always beats his wife. This happens everyday at 21h00 . . .

On the 29th January a certain man that buy muti here at my neighbour told us that he was going to the public toilets in town and find people shooting each other. . . .

In 1981 unknown criminals shot my neighbour. The kids were orphaned that day as both parents were killed . . .

In 1971 there was a battle/fight between two regions in our area . . .

Another lady at the muti market poured water on my muti the other day . . .

At night on the 17th February 2002 criminals stole my goats . . . [followed by four accounts around that time]

In 1986 my neighbour’s house was set alight. The criminals used petrol to burn the house . . .
On Friday the 5th of August a certain guy I know was followed by other men who were driving a white car . . .

. . . A girl was raped at 12noon on the 18th of February . . .

This act of historical recording raises a number of issues about the task of diary writing. Firstly, it challenges the clarity of the instructions that I provided for the participants. Second, it throws into question the very notion or process of keeping a daily diary, in the present, and it raises the possibility that this process is embedded perhaps in Western or at least northern histories. This experience suggests that I have made assumptions about diary keeping as a universalistic process, one that we share a common understanding about. The historical accounts entered into these diaries are actually very useful for research purposes (I wonder why I did not think of it myself!). They reinforce topics raised in focus groups and often elaborate on these insights.

These historical accounts also reflect the respondent actively choosing which events, either in their past or present, they wish to share, reveal and discuss. As I explain later, in relation to ideas of empowerment, I encouraged women to write about what they wanted to in relation to fear, crime and violence. If this then meant ‘deviating’ from an assumed universal model of current daily record keeping, then so be it. ‘Diaries’ as a qualitative research method do not have to conform to daily sequential record keeping, but can also be written as essays about people’s lives or as respondent 21, Thandi, describes it, ‘A research on my life’. The notions of diaries fulfilling Elliott’s (1997) ideas of ‘discontinuous daily writing’ and reducing ‘retrospective censorship’ are not borne out in this research experience. However, diaries, in this context, provide women with spaces for writing and reflecting over an undetermined period of time.

The risk of the individualistic nature of diary writing: the case for the diary as a ‘socially constituted technique’

Feminist approaches applaud methods of research which recognise and engage with the fact that research occurs within a social context, but also that the very process of research produces particular social relations. Much primary and secondary research runs the risk of being decontextualized in that the social context in which individuals exist is neglected in the research process. To counter this issue, Wilkinson presents focus groups as a ‘contextual method’ in that:

[a] focus group participant is not an individual acting in isolation. Rather, participants are members of a social group, all of whom interact with each other . . . the focus group is itself a social context. (Wilkinson 1999, 67)

The personal diary runs the risk of providing decontextualized and individualistic material. This is because diary writing can be carried out in isolation from other individuals and hence may represent a very singular interpretation of events. There are ways in which this risk is countered. These are largely to acknowledge the contextual nature of daily events. This was achieved, in this case study, by encouraging a recognition of the role played by broader contextual events, such as, the role other individuals play in the promotion and management of fear. In the post-diary completion evaluation interview with Mrs F from Cato Manor, the contextual nature of her diary writing was explored. She explained to Khethiwe:

Yes we [herself and the other focus group participants] had time to talk about the diaries . . . We also discussed what sort of issues to write about . . . We also spoke about the way each one of us felt the diary writing was doing to her. Sometimes I forgot people’s names and places that I would like to include in the diary and I asked them [her children and younger sister] to remind me. The diary helped me to be open to them. As from now I think I’m able to talk to my children things that I couldn’t talk about before. (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002)

The risks of producing ‘decontextualized’ material depends then on the activities of the participants and the ways in which they choose to manage the research process as well as the ability of the researcher to highlight the social nature of research.

Decontextualization could also refer to research production outside of normal social contexts, and I would argue that diary writing often takes place at the ‘heart of social contexts’, such as the home. Personal diary writing can be compared to interview participation. In many cases, but not always, interviews are carried out in an interview room (often away from the individual’s home spaces or other daily spaces) and so can be decontextualized. Furthermore, interviews and focus groups can be seen as artificial social constructs. In comparison, diary writing in one’s home or where one sleeps at least offers the possibility of a contextualized
engagement that takes place within ongoing social realities.

I would argue further that diary writing could also be seen to be highly contextualized, particularly if women are writing about accounts of domestic violence. One woman explained to Khethiwe when returning her diary that her husband had nearly caught her writing it and had demanded to see what she was writing. She had managed to play it down and had successfully hidden the diary from him. Thus the very process of diary writing structures a context of violence and intimidation (the ethical issues of diary writing as a source of distress are considered later in the paper). Furthermore, much of the violence women were experiencing was in or around the home environment. Descriptions of fear or criminal acts within diaries were then often written within the context (both social and spatial) of these events. Diaries then offer the opportunity for the recording of events and emotions in their social context. A particular benefit of this method is that these social contexts are often not accessible to researchers. As Elliott explains:

the potential to use diaries as a vehicle for research informants to observe situations which researchers cannot access has been explicitly drawn out within the context of ethnographic research. (Elliott 1997, 4 after Zimmerman and Wieder 1977)

The diary and the focus group interview: a productive combination?

Elliott (1997) makes use of diaries in a study on health experiences. As a research method she identifies diaries as key in offering ‘informants different media within which to express themselves’ (Elliott 1997, 7). She argues that the combination of the interview approach and the diary method ‘accommodates different response modes’ on the part of the respondents. As such, different respondents will engage more fully (for a range of reasons) with different research methods than others.

The benefits of combining diary writing and interviews were established in this research. Interviewees discussed a range of issues about fear and violence in the context of focus group interviews. Individual responses were often quite detailed within this context. However, on the whole the nature of the diary entries was far more detailed, personal and insightful. In one particular case, during a focus group, a mother alluded to the fact that her husband was violent towards her daughter. Later in the focus group, in response to the question, ‘I am sorry to ask you this question, but I will ask, your husband wants to have sex with your daughter?’ she replied ‘yes’. In her diary, however, she revealed that her husband had already raped her daughter and she outlined in detail her feelings about this. The two differing discussions of this event are repeated below so that the differences and similarities between accounts (using different methods) can be observed:

Focus Group 19 December 2001:
I am a victim of violence because I had children prior to marriage. I didn’t realize that such children could become my husband’s enemy. As a result, I can’t even go to town fearing that my child will be left at an unsafe environment. In case one discovers the ongoing feud and violence in the family, the husband wishes that either the child or the mother should die.

Personal solicited diary (written between December 2001 and January 2002):
I was supposed to die on the 14th August 1997 when something that traumatized me happened. I caught my husband red-handed making love to my 12 year old daughter. When I asked what was happening he ran to our bedroom. I asked the child she cried and told me that she don’t know what her stepfather was doing. I inserted my finger into her vagina and discovered that it was full of semen. I sat down because I was about to fall, I was sweating I tried to drink water but I couldn’t. I was very frightened of the man that I call my husband but I felt very angry and I went to him. I asked him what he was doing to the child, he said he don’t want that child in his house so that was a strategy to alert me that I should not stay with that child otherwise we are both going to be his wives.

The diary then offers the space for a more intimate (and upsetting) discussion of events that could not be fully outlined in group interviews. As such the benefits of mixed methods as a form of corroboration and thematic development are evident. This example raises also the question of privacy and the appropriateness of different methodological tools for different types of questions and responses. Mrs F from Cato Manor explained that diary writing was, at times, a better avenue for her to express her views in comparison to focus group interviews.

I found it better to write the diary than talking during the group interview because I wrote at my own pace. There was no rush. I had time to memorize. There are some secrets I wrote about, things that I couldn’t disclose to any person. I never felt guilty when I did that but I tried
to avoid people’s names when writing about them so that I don’t find myself in trouble in future. The feeling that these things should be known drove me. It helps to have all the things you cannot talk about written down. (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002)

The diary as an empowering method

Empowerment, namely, the ability to effect ‘progressive’ social change through the research process, is a significant feminist objective (see earlier discussion of Renzetti’s (1997) five principles). Feminist research actively encourages methodology that promotes action and change. However, there are many complexities associated with playing the role of one ‘who empowers’, such as the lack of social and psychological training that researchers have and the responsibilities attached to encouraging social change, particularly the questioning of gendered power relations. McDowell asks, ‘Is it a realistic aim to endeavour to empower the subjects of our research or does this in itself reveal contestable notions of domination’ (McDowell 1997, 110). Ansell questions the appropriateness of social change as a research goal and raises useful broader questions about a feminist political project. She questions the universalistic notions embedded within Western feminism regarding emancipation and consciousness raising. She argues that ‘some researchers advocate contributing to a modification of the power relations through which the researched are subordinated’ (Ansell 2001, 103).

I did not embark on the diary-keeping method as a strategic form of consciousness raising. At best, I hoped that it would offer some women an easier or different route through which they could express their emotions. My decisions to make use of the method were more to do with my interest in the value of the method as a form of generating research rather than as an empowering tool. However, the diary is capable of forming a key tool for empowerment in terms of its ability to offer longitudinal personal insight into day to day (and historical) processes that may lose significance after time. The diary also provides the capacity to offer reflection on events that shape one’s perceptions of safety and vulnerability.

Diaries can also provide participants a different (perhaps more comfortable) space or platform from which to reveal particular stories about their everyday lives. In two cases, diary participants explicitly commented that they were telling particular stories for the first time. Respondent 34 commented: ‘I couldn’t talk about this problem to my family; I kept it within me. I’m the only one that knows about it’, and Respondent 11 explained ‘I never told anyone . . . this is the first time I’m talking about it’. In these cases, the diary has provided a particular space for the expression of particular feelings.

Although only given a brief mention, Bell citing Burt (1994) explains that much diary keeping can be seen as a ‘kind of coping behaviour, more prevalent amongst females’ (Bell 1998, 73). At the start of the fieldtrip, I started keeping my own personal diary. I have found this process personally therapeutic, as a cheap and immediate form of stress relief. As only one post-diary completion evaluation interview was carried out with Mrs F, obviously her responses are in no way representative of all 39 women who completed the diaries. However, her responses do indicate that the diary writing process was both therapeutic and empowering for her:

In my heart I felt that in our suffering we were given an opportunity to talk about our feelings and how we would tell the world how ‘stormy’ are our lives. Writing the diary was a task I liked to do. . . . I also felt relieved. It was like a big luggage has been removed from my shoulders.

Writing the diary made me feel good because I had an opportunity to revise and cough out everything that was haunting me all my life. I felt really good; in some instances I even laughed. There is somewhere in the diary where I write about employment issues. That thing was really eating me inside but I couldn’t talk about it to anyone . . . but it having written about them is like telling the world about these things and it makes me feel better. (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002)

Mrs F also reported on the feelings of a friend of hers who also participated in the diary writing process for me.

If you still remember mom R. She was here with us [i.e. the focus group interview]. The one that beats her husband . . . She told me that she had been stressed for a very long time but after writing the diary and speak about all the things that she couldn’t disclose to anyone, she feels that the stress is gone. I also felt relieved. (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002)

The unburdening of emotional ‘luggage’ is a two-way process and it could also prove to be destabilizing and upsetting for participants. Below are a number of quotations from women's diaries detailing some of their expressions of emotions. The very act of
committing these thoughts to paper must cause stress and anxiety and a degree of reliving traumatic events.

My body shivers even today when I try to narrate this. I was going to church the other day at 10h45 when I came across a pool of blood, so much blood that one could think that maybe a cattle was slaughtered. It was human blood. Respondent 5

There is something that hurt my soul very badly. It is rape. . . . Respondent 19

It’s true that I was a child at that time but this hurts me even today when I try to understand why I killed the cat. Respondent 34

I think I made a mistake, I was supposed to tell her not to wear her necklace and ring and to switch her phone off. I knew she was supposed to do things that way . . . I didn’t know criminals were attacking people in the morning . . . Two months later her conditions deteriorated and she passed away. This left a mark in my life. I felt responsible for her death because she was my guest. Respondent 9

Bearing in mind the very stressful impact reflection on past events must have had on the diary writers, the process of reading and analysing women’s diaries was also deeply stressful for myself and Khethiwe. Elsewhere (Meth with Malaza 2003) I explore this issue in substantial depth in relation to research and emotions, but it was interesting to note that Mrs F from Cato Manor commented

. . . I never felt guilty about writing them [secrets – usually bad] because they are true. Instead, I was feeling sorry for you two [myself and Khethiwe] that you are very young to listen to all the things we were telling you. I thought it would affect you in a way. (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002)

The limitations of the use of personal diaries as a methodological tool

The use of personal diaries had some drawbacks. Three in particular are discussed here.

The act or process of written records assumes a range of skills many interviewees do not possess. The most obvious of these is literacy, which is variable in South Africa and is gendered. On the whole, women who reside in the inner city of Durban and engage in employment (formal or informal) have a basic grasp of written Zulu, the local language spoken in this particular region of South Africa. However, literacy was obviously a barrier to the selection of participants for this research exercise and in doing so particular individuals may have been excluded from the process, although this was not at all evident.

Several women indicated that they were unable to write in Zulu, and so would not be able to participate. This became a complex issue, as we had already indicated that we would pay R100 per diary before women were asked if they could indeed write in Zulu. Those who were unable were then anxious about being excluded from this opportunity, so we suggested that they arranged for a child or someone else residing with them to write on their behalf; this seemed to be an arrangement with which they were comfortable. In one case, a woman from Warwick Junction explained that she had problems with her eyesight and that she would not be able to write on a sustained basis. She too agreed that her daughter would write the remainder of the diary for her. There are obvious issues and problems associated with this. Diaries are meant to be personal and private in nature. Ideally, diaries should provide a space where a person reveals thoughts and issues they may not communicate in other ways. If these thoughts are then being mediated and re-presented through other people, the content and style of the thoughts are open to reinterpretation, silence and transformation. This was a risk we had to take, since I was uncomfortable about not offering all the women the same amount of money. They were all poverty-stricken and to exclude some after they had been through the focus group interview was felt to be unethical.

This raises the issue of the legitimacy of claims made regarding women’s fear of violence. However, this is often a concern for qualitative researchers who aim at intensive in-depth analysis rather than extensive broad analysis. The research can equally be queried on the grounds of the exclusion of other social categories (such as disability, other race groups, geography and class) and, indeed, its gendered focus on women and not men.

A second drawback in the usage of personal diaries is the obvious selectivity the respondents maintain in the process of completing diaries. This concern raises questions about validity and the ‘truthfulness’ of diary entries. As in any research tool, what is omitted and overlooked is often as interesting as what is recorded and discussed. Respondents make choices about which events they might wish to make note of and which they deem irrelevant or perhaps too personal to record. In the field of the
analysis of fear of violence, the omission of domestic violence is commonly identified as a strategy (by respondents) to maintain personal respect, overcome shame and hide deep and personal trauma. This drawback is extremely difficult to assess and to overcome, and the criteria with which I could make judgements about what has been omitted on the basis of what was presented are at best vague. On the whole, I found nearly every diary to contain deeply personal descriptions of horrific experiences such as rape, abuse, witnessing child abuse and the emotional costs of criminal acts. As outlined above, two participants wrote that the diary was the first time and place where they were revealing a very traumatic experience. This suggests the act of diary writing does not necessarily exclude particular stories, simply because they are traumatic and personal.

A final drawback in the use of diaries is the effort and time diary keeping demands of its respondents. Keeping a diary can be time consuming, frustrating and perceived as time-wasting. This is where the issue of payment became significant. All of the women were actively engaged in survival strategies to sustain themselves financially. Diary writing draws women away from both their unpaid domestic labour and any paid formal and informal labour they may be involved in. Mrs F reflects on this ‘economic’ dimension in her post-diary completion interview:

I was always looking forward to write the diary. It was like a job to be done to me because when I’m free [not even writing the diary] I use to memorize all the things I would like to write about the next time I write on my diary.

She also commented in relation to a question about payment for diary completion:

I felt good and encouraged. I did a research after yours, I was not given even a cent for transport. It is very bad and it shows that people are not considerate of their interviewees. They need the information and nothing else. (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002)

In Mrs F’s case payment seems to have been very appropriate, and the task of diary writing not as onerous as I might have thought. Issues of payment are, however, fiercely debated within social research and obviously her experiences are not reflective of the other participants.

Conclusion
This paper has introduced and examined the use of diaries as a qualitative research method. The paper argues that solicited diary writing fulfils certain criteria of feminist methodologies, in particular allowing the voices and descriptions of daily lives to be heard. As a tool that is embedded in a social context, I would argue that diaries are very useful methodological tools within Geography. As a potential source of empowerment, the comments about diaries made by Mrs F are very insightful, however conclusive comments require extensive evaluation of a broader sample of participants. There was some evidence in this research to suggest that diary writing proved supportive for some women, or at least provided them with a space to reveal particular stories. Whether or not this process was ‘empowering’ or without emotional costs is unclear.

Using diaries as part of a multiple method approach within a social research project is strongly recommended. It provides the subjects of research substantial scope for reflection and self-determined knowledge presentation, it provides the researcher with extensive amounts of intensive material and it reinforces analyses of data gleaned from other methodological sources.

Acknowledgements
This paper is based on primary research conducted in South Africa, which was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, UK. Their financial support for this project is greatly appreciated. I would like to thank Emma Mawdsley, Katy Bennett, Graham Drake, Glyn Williams and two anonymous referees for their very honest and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

Notes
1 The third and final focus group at KwaMashu did not take place and the tapes and notes from the second focus group conducted in KwaMashu were stolen from me in an attempted hijacking incident in KwaMashu. However, the diaries that I handed out at both the first and second focus group interviews were collected. Obviously, I could not hand out diaries to the third KwaMashu focus group as the meeting did not take place. Also, one diarist from KwaMashu did not return her diary, hence diaries were received from 39 women, not 45.
2 Street traders at Warwick Junction earn a maximum of R800 per month and usually less. Thus R100 represents half a week’s earnings at the very least.
3 See the sequence of entries provided as evidence of historical recording later in the paper. I believe this also provides good evidence of discontinuous thinking.

4 The frankness of this account is in no way atypical of the nature of accounts given by most of the diary writers. Many of the stories of rape and child abuse written about in the diaries were graphic, detailed and very revealing. This level of detail was not gained during focus group interviews. In this regard expressions of emotions delivered through diary writing are unique. I have struggled over whether or not to include this quotation. As Cloke et al. explain ‘. . . choices of what parts of transcripts to use in publications, are also key in maintaining ethics of privacy’ (2000, 145). I am unable to deduce whether or not this participant would have written this particular entry if she did not want it revealed to anyone. Indeed, later in Cloke et al.’s paper, they suggest that ‘[n]ot using [stories of the marginalized], in effect, represents a silencing of these voices . . ’ (Cloke et al. 2000, 149).

5 Aside from the feedback from Mrs F, the other tangible feedback I was given in relation to the diary exercise was from a group of women from the Jamaica settlement in Cato Manor. On the day they returned the diaries to me, they gathered around and presented me with a beaded necklace and bracelet, which they themselves had made over the weeks since I had previously seen them. This was an incredibly moving moment in my research: I felt utter gratitude at their generosity and thoughtfulness. This was obviously only one particular response from one group of women, but it felt hugely significant and indicative of the value of the process I had placed people in.

6 ‘Robots’ are a South African term for traffic lights.

References

Allport G 1943 The use of personal documents in psychological science Social Science Research Council, New York

Ansell N 2001 Producing knowledge about ‘Third World women’: the politics of fieldwork in a Zimbabwean secondary school Ethics, Place and Environment 4 101–16

Bell L 1998 Public and private meanings in diaries: researching family and childcare in Ribbens J and Edwards R eds Feminist dilemmas in qualitative research: public knowledge and private lives Sage, London 72–86

Blunt A 2000 Spatial stories under siege: British women writing from Lucknow in 1857 Gender, Place and Culture 7 229–46


Cancian F M 1992 Feminist science: methodologies that challenge inequality Gender and Society 6 623–42

Cloke P, Cooke P, Cursons J, Milbourne P and Widdowfield R 2000 Ethics, reflexivity and research: encounters with homeless people Ethics, Place and Environment 3 133–54


Kitchin R and Tate N 2000 Conducting research into human geography: theory, methodology and practice Prentice Hall, Harlow

Limb M and Dwyer C eds 2001 Qualitative methodologies for geographers: issues and debates Arnold, London


McEwan C 1996 Paradise or pandemonium? West African landscapes in the travel accounts of Victorian women Journal of Historical Geography 22 68–83

Meth P with Malaza K 2003 Violent research: the ethics and emotions of doing research with women in South Africa Ethics, Place and Environment forthcoming

Punch S 2001 Multiple methods and research relations with children in rural Bolivia in Limb M and Dwyer C eds 2001 Qualitative methodologies for geographers: issues and debates Arnold, London 165–80

Punch S 2002 Research with children: the same or different from research with adults? Childhood 9 321–43


Royle S 1998 St Helena as a Boer prisoner of war camp, 1900–1902: information from the Alice Stopford Green Papers Journal of Historical Geography 24 53–68

Wilkinson S 1999 How useful are focus groups in feminist research? in Barbour R and Kitzinger J eds Developing focus group research: politics, theory and practice Sage, London 64–78

Solicited diaries in geographical research

APPENDIX 1 English version of diary instructions

Help on writing your diary

Dear diary-writer,

Thank you for agreeing to write this diary for my research. This is an unusual method of research but it is used because interviews only tell you about what a person is thinking on one day, not many days.

I would like you to feel free about what you write in this diary. I will keep your names secret, for example if your name is Mrs Dlamini, I will call you Mrs D when I am writing up my research reports, unless you specifically say that I can use your name. Writing a diary takes time and effort, and I do not expect you to write in it every day. Some days you might write a lot and other days you might just write a few words or nothing at all, that is fine.

You can write whatever you want in the diary, but what I am specifically interested in is a record of your day to day experiences of fear of violence and crime. Everytime you feel even slightly scared, concerned, worried about your safety, or your children or friends’ safety please write something about this. For example you might be scared in the taxi because someone might steal your money, or you might be scared at night because you can hear people shouting in the streets or you might be scared of someone at home. I am interested in any fear you might have, it doesn’t matter how small it is. Please can you try and fill in the following details about each description (if possible):

1 WHEN was it? (date/time)
2 WHO were you scared of? (people/family/children/boyfriend)
3 WHAT happened? (describe the event)
4 HOW did you deal with it? (run away, hide, ignore it, pray, find your friends, avoid walking down a street for example?)

Even though I want you to include something about the above 4 points, please write in sentences if possible, and if there is anything else you want to say or elaborate on that is fine too.

Please keep a record for a month and then return the diaries as arranged. You will be paid for filling in the diary and returning it, as writing a diary takes up time.

thank you.

MY DIARY: An example of my fear of violence/crime over 2 days

Mon 19th Nov, 11.30 am (WHEN), I was walking on campus at the Univ. of Natal from the main campus down to the science block. I wanted to use the short cut route around the back of a water reservoir which is quite hidden and has lots of trees, but I had been told that several women had been attacked and raped on this path in the past. I felt too scared to take this path even though it would have been a lot quicker. So I walked along the road where there are lots of cars and people (HOW).

Tuesday 20th Nov, 6.45 am, I was driving to the beachfront in my father’s car, 4 taxis (WHO) pulled out in front and behind me, keeping very close to my car, I felt scared that I might be car jacked at the robots (WHAT). I closed my windows, and stared straight ahead and when the lights changed I drove off fast (HOW), I was probably over-reacting but I was a bit scared at the time.