

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research focuses on the study of change in individual lives and in the social worlds in which lives are lived. The basic empirical questions being addressed are: what has changed, and what has not changed. And the theoretical questions begin with plausible explanations for these developments, before moving on to the interplay between biography and history and experience and expectation.

Practically speaking, this kind of research requires the researcher to maintain contact with individual people, tracking the course of their lives over time. So diaries are an ideal instrument, providing a dated, contemporaneous record of interpretations, experiences and events. The data a diary offers the researcher can be interpreted in two ways: as the diarist's construction of personal experience and social realities, or as a source of information about unfolding sequences of events. In short, diaries offer researchers insights into occurrences and interpretations of the events of the life course, of everyday activities and of people's experience of the social worlds around them.

KEY POINTS

1. Diaries are a familiar and readily available tool, that enable the individual to construct a daily record of life as lived: appointments, events, experiences, encounters, feelings, attitudes.
2. Researchers can design diaries intended to produce data that serves specific research objectives.
3. Research subjects can be asked to keep diaries and, given appropriate guidance, many will agree to do so.
4. The advantages of diaries for QL research are that:
 - Diaries provide material for a triangulated approach; for example, by generating questions that might be asked during subsequent interviews;
 - Diaries may include accounts of sensitive or private experiences that are not easily obtained in interviews;
 - Expectations or predictions can be recorded in diaries that can be tested against the evidence of subsequent entries;
 - As a source of data, diaries do not require the researcher to be present;
 - Diarists are able to make entries 'in their own time', as and when they feel able to comment on unfolding events or experiences.
5. The disadvantages are:
 - Some participants may be put off, believing that they do not have the time or skills to keep a diary;
 - Some diarists may drop out, believing that what they are recording is not worth the effort;
 - Some diarists may produce 'sanitised' accounts of their experiences or feelings;
 - It is difficult to know how systematic diary-based information is: the occurrence of seemingly trivial or routine events for example may be omitted.

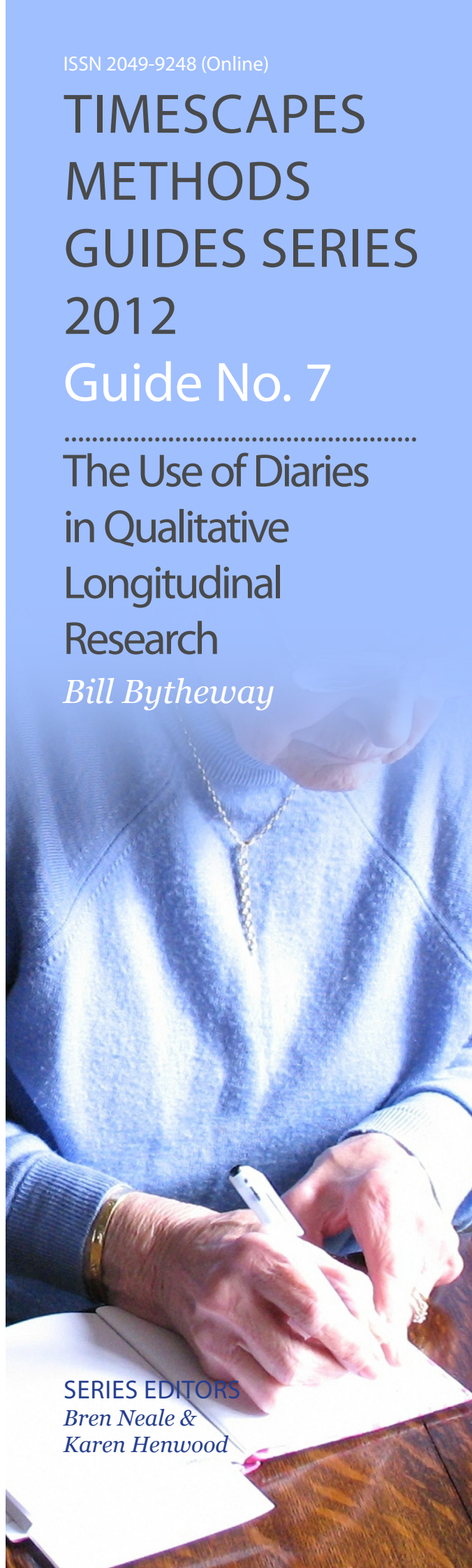
ISSN 2049-9248 (Online)

TIMESCAPES METHODS GUIDES SERIES 2012 Guide No. 7

The Use of Diaries in Qualitative Longitudinal Research

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a second page when necessary. At the end of each month, they posted the diary to the project office and another was posted out to replenish their stocks. In addition to providing data for analysis, this monthly routine enabled us to maintain close contact with the families. We sent the Recorders a shopping voucher worth £50 for each monthly diary.

Each page of the TOG diary was headed with a narrow strap line with three prompts: 'Day', 'Date' and 'Date Entered'. This was intended to identify not just the day being described but also the date the entry was made; for example: "Day: Tuesday; Date: 1st January 2008; Date Entered: 6th January". At some point, most Recorders entered the wrong date for the day of the week, and none scrupulously responded to all three prompts. Nevertheless, what we received were diaries in which entries were linked to specific dates and, through these prompts, could be read in chronological sequence.

Most Recorders complied with the monthly routine but there was some deviation. Three Recorders fairly quickly fell behind schedule and, despite their expressed intentions, stopped sending us diaries after less than twelve months. Through email however we obtained some limited information about the lives of their Seniors over the months that preceded the second interview. Two Seniors died in 2008: in one case, her son, her Recorder, made occasional entries in his diary over the six months that followed his mother's death, but in the other case the Recorder made no further entries after her father had died. Both incidentally were interviewed in 2009 in their parent's place. The remaining seven Recorders sent us at least 18 diaries

All told, we received 162 monthly diaries, of which 116 were handwritten. One Recorder submitted entries by email from the outset, and three others subsequently turned from handwriting to email. Most Recorders sent entries every day with only occasional days missed. Two provided fewer but lengthier entries, updating us more generally on the lives of their Seniors rather than reporting on the events of the day. In all the diaries, there were occasions, due to holidays for example, when a number of days were missed or entries were comparatively brief. The most profuse diarists were two men, both of the oldest generation (one the husband of the Senior and the other the Senior himself), each averaging over 4,000 words per month. In contrast there was a Recorder who never wrote more than 250 words in a month.

covering the entire fieldwork period.

Two Recorders provided diaries that, in places, were written in the 'voice' of their Seniors: in effect, they were acting as their amanuensis. The Recorder who typically visited her aunt every two weeks produced the most words per entry (averaging about 400). These were detailed accounts of her visits, and her entries contrast with other Recorders, who drew on little more than a phone call with their Senior.



In guiding Recorders over what they should write about, we emphasised that we were hoping for something resembling an 'ordinary' diary in which they described contact with the Senior and the things that were happening in their Senior's life. We elaborated by indicating that we were particularly interested in everyday life, in one-day events such as visits or celebrations, in life transitions such as moving house or going into hospital, and in a more general commentary on the Senior's social relations with the family and others.

Most of the Recorders produced diaries which covered all these areas. As a result we were able to analyse daily and weekly routines of contact making and shopping, preparations and responses to the changing seasons (and in particular the forecasted arrival of snow).

One diary described how the Senior and his wife 'house-sat' whilst their son and wife went on holiday and how they then felt abandoned when their teenage grandchildren chose to spend their time elsewhere.

Another diary covered several months of house-searching with a view to the grandparents moving nearer to their daughter, the Recorder, and her family, culminating in a decision not to move after all and a sense of relief all round.

CONCLUSION

QL research is most effective when it draws on more than one source of data. Even though different perspectives on the same phenomena may create problems of interpretation (not least that relating to the question of what constitutes 'the truth') this is not an argument for adopting a simpler strategy. The challenge is to analyse the available evidence in ways which generate a fuller understanding of the changes being uncovered. Perhaps this was most clearly demonstrated in regard to the two Seniors who died during the course of 2008. The two diaries plotted the last months in their lives and this record can be set against the interviews that were undertaken with the two Recorders, a son and two daughters respectively.

In the planning of multi-sourced QL research, serious attention should be given to the potential of diaries. Whether pre-existing or commissioned, they provide a distinctive temporal view of life as lived, enabling the researcher to follow the unfolding stories of the diarist's own life, and of those they live with.

The TOG project was distinctive in the length of the period covered. More commonly, commissioned diaries relate to just one or two weeks, sometimes a little longer. We were pleased to discover through TOG that most participants were able and willing to take on the challenge of a longer period. Looking back, we do not make any rash claims regarding the value of the diaries we are now archiving. There are many complications, and analysing them is complicated. We do not claim that the twelve families are statistically representative; from the outset we aimed at maximising diversity within what is essentially a group of volunteer participants. What we do claim however is that the diaries have uncovered aspects in the lives of the twelve Seniors that would not have been available through other methods. Not least we value highly the longitudinal data that relates to the final months in the long lives of two of our participants.

Finally it is interesting to note how researchers, particularly those engaged in qualitative research, are urged to keep 'research diaries'. There are many examples of how these have been used to good effect. By thinking of research subjects as 'co-participants' – and in our experience with TOG this is exactly how many do think of themselves – it is only a small step to ask them to keep a diary too.

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