

# 3 Self-indulgence or an Essential Tool? The Use of a Field Diary in Biographical Research and Narrative Analysis

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## Abstract

A 'field diary' has long been regarded as an essential research tool for many researchers in the social sciences. I used such a diary in a qualitative study which employed a feminist, biographical approach to investigate the experience of later life widowhood, to meticulously record how I managed the process of the research, and the feelings which accompanied it. In this article I provide examples of the way in which the use of a field diary subsequently had an impact on both the process and the content of the research. Firstly it enabled me to reflect on my own role and thus build into each stage of the research a reflexive analysis, which then informed subsequent stages. Secondly, the diary itself became a further source of data, which situated me clearly within the research process as both participant and researcher and was subject to analysis. Throughout the paper I critically evaluate the use of a field diary as a tool for both the novice and the more experienced biographical researcher and pose the question: is the use of a field diary in biographical research and narrative analysis sheer self-indulgence OR an essential tool?

## Introduction

A field diary has long been regarded as an essential tool for many researchers in the social sciences. In his glossary of research terms, Bryman (2001:503) defines field notes as: "a detailed chronicle by an ethnographer of events, conversations and behaviour, and the researcher's initial reflections on them". My aim in this article is to explore the case for the use of field notes, or more specifically, a field diary, in biographical and narrative research, which may or may not claim to be ethnographic, as another tool in the armoury of the biographical researcher. In this paper, I draw on a feminist biographical research project with a group of older widows, a project which sought to better understand identity and experience in later life widowhood (Chambers 2000;

Chambers 2002a; Chambers 2002b). I provide examples of the way in which the use of a field diary subsequently had an impact on both the process and the content of the research. Firstly it enabled ongoing reflection on my own role and thus built into each stage of the research a reflexive analysis, which then informed subsequent stages. Secondly, the diary itself became a further source of data, which situated me clearly within the research process as participant and researcher, and was subjected to analysis. Throughout the paper I critically evaluate the use of a field diary as a tool for both the novice and the more experienced biographical researcher and pose the question: is the use of a field diary in biographical research and narrative analysis sheer self-indulgence OR is it an essential tool?

### **Reflecting on my Own Role**

According to Sparkes (2002), 'self-indulgence' is a charge often hurled at those who seek to bring their own voices into the research project. He cites Charnaz and Mitchell who argue that 'scholarly' writers are expected to be silent spectators, emulating Victorian children: "to be seen (in the credits) but not heard (in the text)", (1997, cited in Sparkes, 2002:213). Implicit in this argument, and one which all three authors seek to challenge, is that those writers whose voices are heard as well as seen are somehow 'less scholarly'.

Underpinning the current study was a theoretical perspective rooted in feminist critical gerontology (Bornat, 1993; Bernard et al., 2000) and feminist research practice (Oakley, 1981; Miller, 2000; Kelly et al., 1994; Standing, 1998): one of the hallmarks of such a perspective is that of researcher visibility. My intention was certainly not to make my writing liable to the criticism of 'self-indulgence', or for it to be thought 'unscholarly' but rather to the contrary, to render it: "self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous" (Sparkes 2002: 214).

My commitment to feminist research ethics, collaborative research and, more specifically, to my active participation and visibility in the project, entailed connection with the 'process' of my research project, as much as with the 'content' (see Leane et al., 2002, for a further discussion of 'process'). How then was I to facilitate that connection, to engage in ongoing reflection on my own role within that process and indeed how was it possible to be both 'in' AND 'out' of the research?

Firstly, all the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and of course my voice was heard alongside the voices of the other women. However, the tapes and the subsequent transcriptions presented only a partial 'reality' of the process. They evoked, but did not accurately record environmental factors, ongoing observations, learning needs, missed opportunities and so on, all of which were necessary to reflect on my own role and to incorporate reflexivity.

Furthermore, at the outset I anticipated that because of the potentially very intimate nature of the research relationships, and a sensitive subject matter, I would be ‘more or less’ affected by what I was hearing and sharing. And, that this would influence the course of the interview and impact on the way in which the stories were constructed. I needed a site for my feelings and a way of subjecting those feelings to analysis.

Finally, having committed myself to feminist research practice, it was essential, that at each stage in the process I communicated to each of the women that:

- You have something to say that I think is important
- I listen and accept that your version of your biography is true for you
- I seek to understand rather than to judge
- I want to be an active participant in the creation of your story

I thus needed to ascertain if I was achieving those goals?

Therefore, from the very beginning of the project, I took the decision to meticulously record, in a notebook, an ongoing personal account of how I managed the research experience. It was also a site for my feelings: for my excitement, for disappointments, a place where I could feel sorry for myself, a place to sometimes ‘off load’. It allowed me space to ask myself questions, in effect to conduct a dialogue with myself. Environmental or situational factors, which had the potential to influence both the course and content of interaction, were always noted and were to be read alongside the final transcriptions. The diary entry was completed retrospectively, immediately after each interview when I was alone, usually in my car before returning home. This meticulous process enabled ongoing reflection and evaluation, and thereby built in the potential for learning and change. It also situated me clearly within the research process as both participant and researcher (‘in’ and ‘out’). This built a critical reflexivity into each stage of the research, which then informed subsequent stages.

The field diary thus provided an ongoing, personal record of my research practice, and situated each interview within a context of developing skills. Having recognised from the very beginning that I was integral to the generation of data, I had to be sensitive to my practice and learn from each interview. For example, after my first pilot interview I noted:

I tried so hard to listen but sometimes intervened inappropriately. I feel that I am not always picking up leads. I need to slow down, risk silences and stay with the story which I am being told. Perhaps I’ll get better at this?

Some interviews were more difficult than others and my field diary reflects this. For example, I had met Elizabeth on several occasions previously, with her daughter who is a friend of mine, but I did not really know her well:

Knowing E 'a little' already wasn't necessarily helpful. All very stilted at first whilst we negotiated roles - was I here for a chat as a friend of L (daughter) or as a researcher? ... Worked hard to demonstrate my interest and focused on E rather than our different but mutual relationship with L. Used 'active listening' skills and made sure the interview went at E's pace, and was led by E. As her story unfolded it became easier and we were able to relate to each other as two women who were constructing a story together rather than two women brought together by a third person.

As the field diary records, I needed to learn not to go into '*passive researcher*' mode but, on the other hand, I wanted the interview to be more than a *friendly chat*. I knew that I must both gain the confidence of individual women but also focus on collecting data and at times seemed like an impossible task. What is apparent from this analysis is that the struggle (the process) was part of the data: the field diary renders this visible to the reader.

On several occasions in my field diary, I made reference to 'external factors' which I felt had influenced both my practice and, potentially, the story which was being told. I visited Edith for the second time and she was very agitated as a result of a recent burglary. My field diary records this:

Edith was burgled last week and was cross that this had undermined her confidence. At first this felt difficult, she was very preoccupied with what she had been through but was insistent that she wanted to carry on with the interview and follow up our last conversation. She needed to talk about her feelings first so I took my time and spent quite a lot of time listening to her anger. She didn't want the tape recorder on at this point, but wanted reassurance that most people would feel as she does and it wasn't just because she was a widow. When she was ready I switched the tape recorder on. My role then? Prompting, encouraging, more directive this time? Referred back to what she had said last time, referring back was necessary to focus the interview and to develop the closeness of the first interview. Very active listening and exploring. Hard work but paid off; she began to relax and talk about her life 'now', her new interests in music, crafts, amateur dramatics ... Said she was pleased to do the interview, she liked talking about her life now, felt she had 'grown' in widowhood and was determined not to let the burglary get her down.

As the field diary recorded, I needed to take my time, be prepared to follow Edith's immediate agenda rather than mine for a while and actively demonstrate my empathy, share her crossness and listen. Having ascertained that she wanted to carry on with the interview, I then had to have the sensitivity to know when it was appropriate to shift the focus of our discussion back to our first meeting, and then adopt a strategy to maintain this. Flexibility was required, but so too was an understanding of both her strength of feeling and her need for reassurance.

The diary was thus a tool, which enabled me to better critically interrogate the data located in the tapes and the transcripts. However, the diary itself also subsequently became a further source of data, which I retrospectively subjected to a thematic analysis.

### **The Diary as a Source of Data**

I now present below examples from that retrospective analysis in order to demonstrate the way in which my field diary, an essential tool in my developing my biographical research, itself became a source of data, provided context and thus further assisted my understanding of widowhood and identity. The following themes are explored: feelings; power; collaboration; and ethics.

#### *Feelings*

So much of what I was listening to as the women told me their stories was emotionally charged, particularly as each woman recalled how she had felt around the time of her husband's death. My field diary reported these emotions. For example:

A woman for whom life fell apart and who had 'rebuilt'. Desperate to tell me her story, became very tearful when remembering but was so positive about 'now' ... How did I feel? Very sad at her tears, enjoyed sharing her excitement of 'now' ... was clearly very pleased to tell her story to an interested listener but still a tremendous tug at my emotions. Came away feeling exhausted and wondering if I can really manage this. Glad to write my feelings down.

I felt privileged that these women should share their personal stories with me but there were continual reminders in my diary of the responsibility that incurred. Sharing those feelings with them was clearly an important part of the research process and one which I was extremely careful not to abuse. Moreover, it was fundamental to understanding the multiple narratives which emerged and the way in which each woman constructed her autobiographical identity (see Chambers 2002a and 2002b for a discussion of 'multiple narratives' and sub-plots of later life widowhood). On more than one occasion my diary records that I openly cried with the woman as her biography connected with mine. For example:

Eunice talked about the untimely death of her daughter, which prompted painful memories of the untimely death of my mum at a young age; we both cried together and shared our feelings with each other. We were then able to go on to talk about 'timely' deaths and how different they are. This felt more like two people sharing painful feelings than 'research' - I hadn't expected to feel like this at this point in

the research but I guess it means that I am still very sensitive to the powerful emotions which are being generated and this means that Eunice was able to share her story with me in a way that she might not otherwise have done.

What emerges from the analysis of the diary is the importance of being sensitive to, and sharing emotions; indeed the acknowledgement of emotion as data. This enabled me to enter into the story which was being told and there is no doubt in my mind that without that empathy, many previously untold stories and thoughts would not have been shared.

### *Power*

My commitment to feminist research practice and my personal value base required me to be sensitive to power issues, and thus record accurately what I observed and experienced during the interviews. Pragmatically, I anticipated that adverse power relations would impact on the telling of the story and thus the generation of data.

Analysis revealed that so many of the women demonstrated both their anticipation and sense of occasion at participating in the research, through discussions with family, by 'dressing-up' for the interview and by preparing refreshments. However, what also emerges is the way in which I was sometimes left with mixed feelings about why this was happening. Further analysis suggested a number of possible explanations to my uncertainties. Narratives of both gender and generation were being played out in the form of hospitality to be offered by one woman to another, an 'important' visitor who had entered the private domestic world, and to 'dress up' for the occasion and offer refreshments was entirely appropriate behaviour for those narratives. In addition, as the stories were shared with me, the 'private' was becoming 'public'; these social ceremonies seemed to be crucial in enabling that process to happen, and indeed be celebrated. These were clearly 'special occasions' and I needed to relax and enjoy them.

Thus, the notes and jottings in my diary, as well as enabling me to manage ongoing fears and anxieties which then had to be addressed, also retrospectively enabled me to analyse my actual interaction with issues relating to power. For example, there were numerous examples of my sensitivity to my environment. I was in a woman's home and therefore I was on **her** territory: she had chosen where the interview would take place, she was on home ground and I was the visitor. This was an important consideration and one which I needed to ensure I respected. It was reassuring to note, in the following example, that I didn't however inadvertently, contravene 'house rules':

It was sometimes difficult to make eye contact because of the way K had positioned the chairs and because the TV remained on during the interview,

thankfully with the sound turned off. K wanted to keep an eye on her TV screen which was screening pictures from the CCTV camera outside the apartments. I found it very distracting and I ended up sitting sideways to try to maintain eye contact, which was so uncomfortable! K said she always kept the CCTV camera on her TV if she wasn't watching a programme. It helped her to know who was coming and going.

Katherine made it very clear that the television always stayed on when she had visitors and I was to be no exception; she was very practised at maintaining a conversation whilst keeping one eye on the television screen and I just had to adapt.

My diary recorded how I paid attention to issues of difference (age, race, disability, class) but analysis revealed the complexities therein. In my meetings with Farzana, an older Pakistani woman whose first language is Urdu, my use of an interpreter and subsequent preparatory work were an acknowledgement of her wish to tell her story in her own language. However, although the participation of the interpreter was a positive choice, it did rather change the structure of the interview. It meant that the telling of the life story was a more 'public' event and felt less like the private 'conversation with a purpose' of the other interviews. My discomfort is revealed:

I felt very uncomfortable during this interview. Why? F. was very nervous, polite and offered to tell me her story but my lack of experience of using an interpreter, and M (the interpreter) going beyond the scope of her role, meant that the interview was very stilted and at times I felt 'outside' the conversation. There were long gaps, and I struggled to ask follow-up questions. Was this because I felt less powerful? I am sure that when I listen to the tape I will hear myself getting more nervous as the interview progressed. It certainly felt that way during the interview. When we turned off the tape and F's daughter brought us some tea and snacks, F started to talk to me directly about her life as a widow, although she is not very confident at using English. This felt much better (for me?) but we were limited by the lack of a common language. There might also be issues here, despite/in addition to the role of the intermediary, about a younger white woman interviewing an older black woman and assumptions that we were both (consciously or unconsciously/ correctly or incorrectly) making.

In my diary, I continually asked myself how successful were my attempts to address inherent power differentials? Subsequent analysis demonstrates that my attempts had a differential impact depending on a number of factors: how each woman perceived me; how she perceived herself; our degree of difference; and the interpersonal relationship which we developed together. Indeed, there were a number of occasions when I certainly felt the least powerful partner in the research relationship. For example:

V seems to have an overwhelming feeling of 'resignation' to her lot but also very controlled about this, very self-aware. Came away feeling quite powerless-felt I wanted to offer her something but didn't know what. This is the first interview where I have felt at such a loss.

Although this was a specific feeling of 'powerlessness' on my part, it nonetheless reflects the dynamics of the interactions which were taking place, and that what I had anticipated would be an inherent power imbalance in my favour was not always the case.

As for the impact of 'power' on the stories which were unfolding, I have to acknowledge that this again will have been differential, but it will have been one factor amongst many. I would argue that the stories, and the multiple narratives and sub-plots which emerged from those stories, were ones which may not have emerged had I not paid attention to power issues and had I not been both sensitive to, and pro-active about, the potential barriers of power differentials. This would have been much more difficult to achieve without the meticulous note-taking, subsequent ongoing critical reflexivity, and analysis, which the use of a field diary permitted.

#### *Collaboration and Reciprocity*

My commitment to feminist research practice, as well as my own ethical stance, demanded collaboration. I therefore needed ensure that this was the case and critically reviewed my progress at the end of each interview. Retrospectively I have evidence from my diary of the way in which Farzana and I 'swapped' photographs of children and husbands. My analysis revealed that in sharing these details of our respective family lives we were exploring our commonalities; we were both aware of our differences of age, generation, ethnicity, religion and culture, but we had shared roles of wife and mother which on this occasion seemed to offer us a 'common' language. There were many other such instances, too numerous to detail here. These commonalities did not negate our very real differences but, alongside my explicit willingness to be a co-participant, enabled a collaboration to develop which perhaps otherwise might not have done.

However my active participation did not mean that the interviews were all automatically harmonious. Occasionally a woman made a judgemental remark, about gender or class, and invited me to share her feelings and opinions. I felt personally challenged by each situation and whilst I did not agree with the values expressed, I have to acknowledge they are the values of the person being interviewed. If asked a direct question, however, or invited to agree with an opinion with which I differed, I expressed my own views.

### *Ethics*

I also needed to ensure that in seeking collaboration, I was not being overly intrusive in the lives of my co-participants. I tried throughout to be extremely ethical in my work and adhere to both feminist and British Sociological Association codes of ethics. My field diary enabled me to ascertain the extent to which I was able to achieve this. Analysis of the field diary demonstrated that the very intimacy and collaboration I sought from the life story interview relationship had the potential to make the interviewee more open and self-revealing than she might have been in a more formal relationship. As I have discussed earlier, the very nature of the subject matter generated often 'emotional' discussion. For example, my diary records that one woman, in the middle of her story, took the decision to confide in me. She asked for the tape recorder to be switched off whilst she shared a secret with me; she did not want it to be part of the data but she wanted me to understand some of her unresolved feelings about her husband, the impact this had on her identity as a wife and her consequent feelings after his death. My field diary records my dilemma: *D. told me a 'secret' which I promised I would not 'tell' when I write up. But I can't 'un-know' that information, it is part of her story and 'who' she is. So how do I manage my 'knowing'? I need to acknowledge that there IS a 'secret' without saying what it is.* In my subsequent analysis of her story, and the way in which we had constructed her story together, I therefore had to take account of her 'secret' whilst ensuring that I did not divulge it.

Feminist research literature recommends caution about encouraging intimacy and urges us to make sure we do not misuse it (see for example Stacey, 1991). On each occasion, having taken great care to seek informed consent, set boundaries and clarify my role, I used my field diary to reflect on how successful or otherwise I had been. Being able to write down such ethical dilemmas, as they arose, enabled me to constantly question my practice to ascertain that it was ethical and to be prepared to justify it. My subsequent analysis of that data has both given voice to those struggles, and confirmed the complexities and difficulties of practising ethical research within the uncertainties of research relationships.

### **Essential Tool or Self-Indulgence?**

As a novice researcher, I had previously used the tool of a field diary to record the process of my research in order to engage in some reflection on my role, my feelings and my impact on the research process and to subsequently discuss that process with my supervisor. That in itself is certainly useful and enables the researcher to challenge some of her, own assumptions and actions, which will of course have some impact on the writing up of the project. Indeed, it can

be argued that every novice researcher, certainly those who are carrying out biographical research, ought to make notes on the process of the research and the feelings they experience in order to subsequently engage in critical learning. The diary however in this instance is rather 'separate' from the research.

In the project discussed here, the field diary was clearly integral to the whole enterprise. I refined its use as a tool firstly to incorporate critical engagement with my ongoing role in data production, and secondly to become part of the data: reflexivity and analysis. In addition to providing a valuable source of information from which to learn from and thus develop my research practice, the diary provided an avenue for analysing my voice: that is 'me the researcher' as participant. As I described earlier, I have been able to explore the impact of powerful emotions within the research relationship and I would argue that without the critical self-reflection which I underwent, I would not have the courage or indeed the skills, to 'enter' the stories which were being told. I would not have engaged with the multiple narratives underpinning those stories and previously 'untold' stories would have remained so. Furthermore, my analysis of the notes concerning the operation of power relationships, and the ethical dilemmas therein, retrospectively provided valuable insight into the complexities of such relationships as they were played out in each research encounter. Being able to analyse my self-reflection, has provided insight and understanding of how that occurred as well as adding my voice to the final analysis and discussion.

## **Conclusion**

Critical reflexivity is integral to feminist biographical research and a field diary is a useful tool with which to begin that reflexivity. However, I would now argue for the use of a field diary in any biographical research which engages in narrative analysis. Biographical research, as Bornat (1993) reminds us, is an interaction of two people who come together for the purpose of the research, both with their own agendas whether conscious or unconscious. In researching biography and narrative, we must, to a greater or lesser extent (depending on our research aims and theoretical frameworks), interrogate the process as well as the data, and in doing so critically reflect on and engage with the role and the voice of the researcher. Otherwise, how can we make claims to validity? Without a meticulous record of that process, we cannot realistically begin to do so. If as part of that process we occasionally allow ourselves the self-indulgence of metaphorically 'weeping' into our field diary, so be it: we need to recognise it, acknowledge it but not apologise for it. As site for feelings, for continually reflecting on practice and as a source of data in its own right, the field diary is an essential tool for novice and experienced researchers alike.

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