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Using Diaries - A Real Challenge for the Social Scientist

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Abstract

This article is divided into two main parts and aims, on the one hand, at explaining the origins and chronology of the phenomenon called the "diary", and on the other hand, at the sociological aspects of its use and role in social research. It intends to shed a new light on the historical, methodological, epistemological and ethical challenges facing the social scientist when choosing to use diaries for qualitative knowledge of social life.

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1. Introduction

When we hear the word "diary", the thought leads us to the image of a secret notebook with colourful silk covers, on whose pages, people of the past, and nowadays write their life stories as they live them. It is often used as a notebook, restricted to the eyes of others and, therefore, covered in mystery. To read such a notebook, which does not belong to us, seems the same as spying through the keyhole of a foreign and restricted room. To submit such notebooks to detailed research does not only involve unimaginable courage, but is also a difficult and risky action. For how is it possible to obtain them? It is not ethical to obtain them by stealth and it's hard, sometimes impossible, to convince people to let us put their innermost thoughts under the microscope. In addition, are these thoughts in a diary sufficient, and particularly relevant, to a valid, pertinent scientific analysis? Is it possible to decode them? Is it possible to fill in the gaps in information and context inherent in such documents? Because the information is so personal (and yet so rich!) will it be of interest to the community or

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society and hence to Science? But what if we are particularly interested in certain angles of these notebooks, and what it is revealed through the keyhole does not fall within our visual range? Should we try to slightly push the door or ask the owners to rearrange the room so that our curiosity is satisfied?

This article is divided into two main sections aiming, on the one hand, to explain the origins and chronology of the phenomenon called a "diary" and, on the other hand, at the sociological aspects of its use and role in social research. The article allows for the critical abstract of diary use, putting forward the historical, methodological, epistemological and ethical challenges which the social scientist faces when choosing to use diaries for qualitative knowledge of social life. The study thus contributes to the literature by bringing together key references in the field, adding at the same time, a contextualization of using this research tool. By highlighting the strengths of using diaries in social sciences, by drawing attention to the shortcomings and, in particular, by proposing ways to counter the latter, the article is ultimately an invitation and a call for social scientists to regard this challenging methodological tool that is the intimate diary with more consideration and trust.

2. The diary: origins and chronology

Today, what we call a diary presents to us someone's personal writing, which, made in (quasi) clandestinity, has a certain regularity, explicitly expressed in the dates. The pages of this type of document contain descriptions and comments about events which usually occur almost simultaneously with the time of writing, but also have aspects involving behaviour, attitudes, values and feelings of the actors participating in these events, always having the author at the centre of the diary. But this is the modern sense of the word 'diary', nascent from the second-half of the Eighteenth Century.

However, the roots of the modern diary seem to expand into antiquity (Hocke, 1963; Lejeune, 2009). Lejeune believed that, although there is no information about the existence of private diaries of the Romans, some forms of diary – in the strict sense of quasi-regular notes - have existed as far back as the Roman Empire. In this regard, it reminds us of the existence of certain official, public journals, used in Roman administration and called *acta*: "*acta civilia* (civil documents), *acta forensia* (all regulations, laws, elections, etc.), *acta militaria* (the legions had their own account books and travel journals), judicial documents (court records), etc." (Lejeune, 2009: p.52), and two other types of diaries, also objective, but belonging to private individuals, usually heads of a family or household. They were the household income and expenditure account books and the so-called family chronicles (*commentaria* or *ratio*, *ephemerides*, *quotidianum diurnum*), in which various events occurring daily in the household were recorded (p. 52).

Passing to a subjective range, Lejeune (2009: p.54) also indicated the existence in antiquity of a concern for oneself, for examination of one's own consciousness, to obtain "mastery of the self". Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius* and Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* are famous in this respect. Lejeune (p. 55) believed that a diary of ideas, a widespread technique, especially in the Middle Ages, could be, however, considered a precursor to spiritual or Catholic and Protestant religious diaries, a practice which seeks written dialogue of man (of the clerics initially and, later, laymen) with God and which gains magnitude from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in England, then in Germany and, only a century later, in France. Alaszewski (2006) also places chronicles at the boundary between objective and subjective, as foregoers of the modern diaries. For example, the Anglo-Saxon chronicles kept with some regularity since the Tenth Century by monks of medieval monasteries and Japanese "diaries" from Emperor's court, appeared about the same time, but which, however, contain some subjective, personal narrations.

The diary, as a way of recording personal life, appeared in Europe gradually between the Renaissance and the Eighteenth Century, as a result of several technological and socio-economic changes (Alaszewski, 2006: p. 5; Lejeune, 2009: p. 58; Simion: 2005, p.93), of which the most relevant were considered to be:

- the transition from writing on reusable media and hence with ephemeral content (wax tablets) to writing on sustainable media, initially costly and therefore inaccessible (papyrus, parchment), then more handy (with the advent of paper and its mass production);
- writing equipment development (ink, pens, pencils, brushes);
- the spread of writing in vernacular languages; changing the measurement and perception of time (from the hourglass, used in the Fourteenth Century, to the miniaturized mechanical clock, or from the perpetual calendar, used until the mid-Seventeenth Century, to the calendar, annual almanac with white pages, for personal notes, from the cyclical representation of time to the linear, irreversible one, looking to the future);
- the birth of romantic sensibility, based on the cult of the self, along with the fragmentation of Christianity in Western Europe, the emergence of Protestantism and confession individualization.

Therefore, as a result of long and continuous changes in terms of technology, spirituality, and mentality, the modern diary appeared, by no means incidentally, around the year 1800 and spread gradually throughout Europe, so that by the end of the Nineteenth Century, it appeared as a widespread private practice among literates. Last but not least, the modern diary began to be written from the late Nineteenth Century, and will also become a focal point for social and human sciences.

3. The diary – a data source and object of study for the social sciences

During the late Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century social scientists became more and more concerned with qualitative research of an individual's inner life, thus directing their attention to novel data sources suitable for the new purpose: spontaneous personal documents (research pre-existent) or induced (made by the subjects at the specific request of the researcher). The diary falls also in class of personal documents of interest to the qualitative? (qualitative?) social scientist, along with (auto)biographies, written or oral life stories, letters, memoirs and "any self-revealing record that intentionally or unintentionally yields information regarding the structure, dynamics, and functioning of the author's mental life" (Allport, 1942: p. XII).

By the mid-Twentieth Century, Allport (1942: p.100) recorded the existence of three types of journals:

- the *intimate journal*, in fact, a modern diary itself or *unsolicited diary*, as it is known today (personal, uncensored, simultaneous report, or very close report to the time of the events narrated, with more or less discontinuous entries). The first use of this in the social sciences dates from the second decade of the Twentieth Century and was due to Thomas & Znaniecki (1918-1920);
- the *memoire* (impersonal report, possibly chronological report of events, but away from the time of their occurrence);
- the *log* or inventory (various daily or periodic inventories - income/expenses, travel, socio-cultural events, books read, suffered disease).

In addition to the types mentioned by Allport, some forms of published diaries may also be referred to (Alaszewski, 2006: p.19): the *literary diary* (written for publication); a *fictional diary* (a fiction written as a diary); a *diary bearing witness* (reports of extraordinary events, narrated by common people); a *scientific, research diary* (objective, systematic and self-reflexive report of a research or discovery labour).

A special category, perhaps the most used in social research because it enables the researcher to have some control over data collected, is that of diaries required by the social scientist for the investigation and, usually, their partial or total publication, as examples of the study results. This category contains:

- the *solicited diary*, which can be exhaustive or thematic, according to a research purpose, which is the most difficult to obtain, and has applied especially since the end of the Twentieth Century, somehow following the Polish tradition of autobiographical material collection campaigns;
- a *solicited log*, general or focused on a specific type of behaviour - the first application in the social sciences is due to Sorokin & Berger (1939), who used the technique of time budgeting, as used in Russia for social planning to record human behaviour for 24 hours during 2-4 weeks (Czarniawska, 2007);
- a *diary-interview*, which involves the development of a requested diary, doubled by applying an in-depth interview in order to clarify and deepen the problems investigated - a technique introduced by Zimmerman & Wieder (1977) to study the counter-culture in the USA;
- *Mass Observation Project directives* - originally a British initiative to regularly collect and archive answers to open-ended questionnaires on a variety of subjects, including personal issues, in order to create "a resource of qualitative longitudinal social data with an emphasis on subjectivity and self representation which will contribute to our understanding of everyday life in the late 20th and early 21st Century" (<http://www.massobs.org.uk/>).

With the change of mentality regarding the public display of private life, along with technological progress and entering into the cyberspace era, new self-narration hosting media have appeared that will raise much interest from social scientists. It is about private electronic diaries, online public or controlled-access diaries, blogs and forums, and social networking (Lejeune, 2000), in which the individual actively participates, exposing his/her life in an anonymous or personalized manner and all that it means - ideas, attitudes, behaviour, feelings, etc.

Diaries, regardless of the specific form taken, are not, however, only a valuable source of quality data about certain aspects of individuals' private life, but may be the object of research itself. Who, how, when, for how long, where, why somebody keeps or has kept a diary are questions with sociological relevance in deciphering the "diary keeping" phenomenon.

4. Usefulness and scientific limitations of a diary

Using diaries in the social sciences, following the same path as that of other types of personal documents has seen ups and downs, depending on the legitimacy conferred on qualitative research in different periods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Thus, the intimate diary was first used as a data source in American symbolic inter-actionist research in the interwar period - the boom years of qualitative sociological methodology – remaining, along with life stories and letters, in the tradition of the Chicago School of Sociology, but also of the Polish School of Sociology. This was neglected for nearly four decades because of the rise of the more scientific approach of Lazarsfeld's empiricism and Parsons's realism (Plummer, 2001: pp. 113-115), and of the proliferation of statistical methods and software that encouraged the use of quantitative methods, diaries and overall (auto) biographical methods, which resuscitated social scientists' interest from the eighth decade of the last century. Bertaux (1981) believed that the return of personal documents at the forefront of scientific research, brought an optical change and a thematic diversity not found in the interwar period - a multitude of social problems and processes would now be handled, according to various theoretical frameworks, such as symbolic interactionism, Sartrean Marxism, structuralist Marxism, cultural anthropology, historical social psychology and historical sociology, psycho-history, role theory, interpretative sociology and so on (pp. 5-6), and later, post-structuralism, postmodernism "critical humanism" (Plummer, 2001). Today, three decades after the start of the offensive of "the new wave of sociological works using personal documents" (Plummer, 2001), social scientists

seem increasingly convinced of the scientific usefulness of a diary, of the evidence being not only the growing number of studies which they are dedicated to or they include in the research methodology, but also the interest in collecting and preserving journals in order to facilitate future secondary analyzes (Cucu-Oancea, 2010a).

4.1. Scientific usefulness of the diary

One of the major advantages of using diaries in social research is epistemological and relates to facilitating access to knowledge of phenomena, processes, groups difficult or impossible to investigate, hence: “hot” interpretation and the meanings ascribed by individuals to personal, sensitive (related to love, sex, divinity, legality), difficult (illness, failures, dramas of any kind) or too ordinary, “self-evident” circumstances; inner life - emotions, feelings harboured by individuals; the multidimensional evolution course of social and personal life of individuals and procedural development and sequential drawing of interpretations that the individual attributes to certain events, relationships, phenomena during the life or a particular period of time; secret communities or groups hardly accessible for the researcher (gay, underworld, drug users, religious sects, secret societies, prisons, convents, past communities, etc.)

From the methodological point of view, due to the fact that diary entries occur at, or very close to, the time in which events or related experiences occurred, its usage as a data collection tool has the advantage, on the one hand, of counteracting or even eliminating memory errors, and on the other hand, of the increase of data accuracy and fidelity. In addition, recording "natural" social uncensored states of an individual's behaviour, the diary will provide high reliability data - real data in natural contexts (Alaszewski). Finally, the methodological usefulness of the diary lies in the contribution it can make to the achievement of the method triangulation, which can either come as complement for data collected by other (qualitative and quantitative) instruments, or serve as a foundation for other instruments such as, for example, the in-depth interview (diary-interview method).

4.2. Scientific limits of the diary

The most significant criticism of the use of diary in the social sciences is focused on its ‘scientification’ fragility and that of personal documents overall as research tools. Herbert Blumer (1939/1979) was the one who drew attention to this issue in 1939 and he was the one who, forty years later, returned to his critics and called for flexibility and adaptability in the evaluation of the ‘scientification’ criteria of personal documents. Thus, as in the use of diaries, overcoming limitations on ‘scientification’ will cover: theoretical sample (choosing subjects to fit into the research topic), rather than statistical sample, fitness for exploratory, inductive purpose of diary use, and not that of the conventional tools - identifying and measuring variables, reliability of measurement by building a global, multi-angular picture of the problem also capturing, if possible, elements of context; validity of data by choosing both subjects, and some examiners who know the problem under study in-depth.

Another impediment to using a private diary can be high cost - measured in time, effort and money - which it involves, from recruiting subjects to analysing the data collected. When using spontaneous diaries, the costs will cover: identifying a sufficient quantity of documents to fit to the topic; identifying and networking with their owners (archives or individuals); getting consent for the use of such documents, requirements and costs imposed by the holder to the researcher. Using solicited diaries will also involve a significant consumption of time and money for: obtaining acceptance for suitable subjects' participation (knowing of the problem studied, being endowed with self-reflective capabilities, the ease of written or verbal utterance), training and possible counselling of subjects during the time the diary is filled in, subject rewarding, etc. Whatever type of diary used, the less structured the documents are, the more their processing and analysis involve a higher consumption of time and money. Fortunately, the emergence of qualitative software for data processing today facilitates easier handling of information.

Social scientists might be discouraged from choosing to use diaries on account of eventual filling in errors that may occur, as in case of using other self-administered instruments, thus distorting the content of documents - essential information can be voluntarily or involuntarily omitted, information voids can be left, some aspects described can be used to "embellish", in order to make the subject appear in a better light, etc. This risk, however, can be countered by maintaining regular communication with the subject during the research, but especially by strengthening a relationship of trust between subject and researcher – a difficult, but not impossible, thing to achieve.

Last but not least, the use of diaries is hindered by the need to observe a series of ethical issues starting with explicit written consent (conditions, terms) of the subject on the participation in research, continuing with 'anonymization' of documents according to research policy, but also requirements of the subject, and also ending with the explicit and written consent of the subject regarding the archiving, publication and dissemination of materials supplied by him or her. All these requirements can be met successfully, as long as they are considered at the outset, in achieving a rigorous schedule of the whole research.

5. Conclusion - realities and perspectives.

As I mentioned on a different occasion (Cucu-Oancea, 2012a), in many countries around the world, there is currently an institutional-level concern to collect and archive the personal documents such as private diaries and autobiographies of ordinary people: in Canada-Québec, *Archives Passe-Mémoire*, founded in 2010, <http://www.archivespassememoire.org>; in France, *Association pour l'Autobiographie*, founded in 1992, <http://association.sitapa.org/accueil.php>; in Germany, *Deutsches Tagebucharchiv*, founded in 1984, <http://www.tagebucharchiv.de>; in Italy, *Archivio Diaristico Nazionale*, founded in 1984, <http://archiviodiari.wineuropa.net/file>; in Switzerland, *Association pour la conservation des Archives de la vie ordinaire*, founded in 2003, <http://www.archivesdelavieordinaire.ch>; in the U.K., *The Mass Observation Archive*, originating in the social research organisation, Mass Observation, founded in 1937, <http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>.

For the time being, in Romania, there is neither an institution dedicated to collecting and preserving the personal documents of ordinary people, nor an explicit concern on behalf of the scientific community to use such documents, as primary or secondary data sources. This state of fact might be partly due to the non-existence of a solid Romanian tradition to preserve quality data, a situation which is closely related to the place or the trajectory the Romanian sociology has had from the beginning until the present day. As it is very well known, the momentum the Sociology School of Bucharest had gained during the interwar period, when the qualitative research used to hold a special place, was suddenly interrupted shortly after the instauration of the communist regime, the study of sociology in the universities being forbidden as of 1949. Although sociology was somewhat rehabilitated after 1965, regaining also the status of study subject in the higher education institutions, the Romanian sociology study and practice would mostly be subject to ideologisation, which would jeopardise the natural development of the field. After 1990, the Romanian sociology would again gain momentum focusing however mostly on macro-social matters, dealt with, in the majority of cases, by means of the quantitative-statistical methodologies still prevailing nowadays in Romanian. Thus, the social qualitative research would continue finding itself one step behind the quantitative research. This is still visible nowadays:

- at institutional level, in the actual preoccupations of the Romanian social scientists, given the weight of the performed projects, the granted funding and the scientific publications and manifestations dedicated to the qualitative versus quantitative sociological activity;

- at educational-didactic level, through the place granted to studying the qualitative versus quantitative methodology in university textbooks and syllabuses.

In this context, there is no wonder the diary method have been and still are neglected in the Romanian academic milieu. The methodology books allocate very little space to the diary methods and generally treat them with scepticism. The autochthonous scientific literature dedicated to this topic is also extremely scant as - to my knowledge - there are no other bibliographical sources besides the naturalistic and ethnographic tomes by Rostas & Stoica (2005; 2008) and my volume of sociological analysis (Cucu-Oancea, 2006), studying the phenomenon of living the holidays by means of the diary methods - an original work for us, both due to the approached topic and to the method used.

The trust in a work method is however gradually earned by information, debates, imitation and testing. At international level, there is already an opening towards collecting qualitative data, including of those of private nature, for the performance of possible subsequent secondary analyses. This receptiveness of the scientific community was however created and developed over time, through scientific debates and disputes, within specialised conferences or within the pages of important publications, such as the Sociological Research Online. The effect of such disputes, however still non-existent on the Romanian territory, is indubitably that of progressively improving and imposing the method.

As far as I am concerned, in the past three years I have endeavoured to bring on the agenda of the Romanian scientific community the issue of diary methods, directly, through the scientific manifestations I organised of this topic (Cucu-Oancea, 2010b; Cucu-Oancea, 2010c; Cucu-Oancea, 2012b) or during which I held presentations related to the diary methods (Cucu-Oancea, 2011; Cucu-Oancea, 2012c; Cucu-Oancea, 2013), but also indirectly, through the scientific articles prepared on related topics, such as the secondary analysis of qualitative data (Cucu-Oancea, 2010a) or the study of personal documents (Cucu-Oancea, 2012a). As regards the scientific reception of the method, mention needs to be made that I am currently managing probably the first sociological project supported by CNCS Grant focused on diary methods. All of these are nevertheless but a starting point.

Consideration must also be given to the fact that the connection between the social scientists and the diary methods is closely related to the creation of a culture of sharing the qualitative data with the fellow professionals in order to improve the research results, and is not easily achievable. It implies not only being scientifically altruistic, but also having scientific conscience and skills. Thus, the data collection must be performed in the spirit „of the re-use”, respecting, at the same time, the rigours of confidentiality, contextualisation, and informed consent regarding the use and dissemination thereof (see more in Cucu-Oancea, 2010a). The social scientist's availability to perform and allow the performance of secondary analyses of the qualitative data (be they diaries, letters or others) is then closely related to building the institutional framework, therefore the archives designed to host and preserve such type of data. Until the potential creation of such a national archive, the Romanian social scientists interested in this field could however start establishing qualitative data micro-archives (including personal documents!) within the universities or the research institutes, while familiarising and involving, at the same time, the sociology students in this entire process. In the end, another way of convincing the social scientists the diary methods are worth using is also that of giving them the opportunity to have professional trainings or workshops of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti, MAXQUDA, NVivo and others). This kind of software, which we know and use to a too little extent, facilitates the management of high quantities of data, such as the qualitative ones, in general, helping the researcher during all the stages of the analysis process, preceding the proper data interpretation.

The last century gradually brought a change in mentality on privacy, women's empowerment, relaxation of morals and, as technology develops, new forms of interpersonal relationships - virtual communication – have occurred, which have encouraged the exposure of private lives in the new, virtual, computer environment. All these changes converge on the one hand, in an individual with a greater willingness to share his/her impressions

and feelings, provocatively leaving the room-notebook half-open or, more recently, room-file, and on the other hand, in a social scientist more curious and open to examining these rooms and, therefore, the use of the diary methods in research on the functioning of the internal workings of psychosocial lives of individuals. Despite the reluctance the Romanian social scientists still have in getting close to the key-holes of these notebook-rooms, despite the fact that the road to the acceptance and the establishment of this practice may be long and tortuous, I am convinced the diary methods will end up by growing roots in the field of the Romanian sociology, as well.

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