



## When Methods Meet: Diary methods and Photovoice

Ruth Bartlett (University of Southampton) and Sarah Rhynas (University of Edinburgh) in conversation, November 2016.

This 20-minute film focuses on the potential of these two methods to facilitate the inclusion in research of groups such as people with dementia and people who have had alcohol-related harm. The two methods are not identical, but they do share several features in common, including working with research participants in a collaborative way, on terms which they can negotiate. They also share some common challenges, such as the challenge of potentially being over-intrusive, and also generating material that researchers and potentially wider audiences may find difficult in some respects. The conversation highlights that these two methods have the potential to get at aspects of people's lives that more conventional methods may not reach, including access to thoughts, feelings and places that are closed off to other methods. The analysis of the data generated by people keeping diaries and taking photographs is discussed as something that is important to be prepared for given the range of issues that can be generated, but the projects in which these methods have been used that are discussed give encouragement to others who may be considering using them as part of their research tool-kits.

### Transcript of conversation:

RB: I am very interested in older people's lives and particularly improving the lives of people with dementia. So I've used diary method with people with dementia and also researched and looked very much at how other researchers have used diary method with people who can often be forgotten about by researchers. Certainly people with dementia are sometimes excluded from research projects altogether because researchers think there is no way we can get any truths let's say from somebody with a condition like dementia. So my work has very much been focussed upon that.

SR: And I too am interested in older people and those with dementia specifically. The photovoice work that I will talk about today has actually been done with those recovering from alcohol related harm and those with alcohol related brain damage. So another type of dementia, a different type of dementia from what we would perhaps normally think of.

RB: Do you want to tell us Sarah what photovoice is?

SR: So photovoice started off as a community action approach, it was intended really to galvanise communities, to get them gathered around a particular cause and to collect evidence that would help to make the case for something. So perhaps protecting a local landmark, saving the playing fields this kind of thing with a view to coming up with a message. And I suppose we have amended it slightly for research purposes in as much as we have stuck with, a lot of it we have stuck with the photos, we are still trying to gather messages, but perhaps the idea of community has changed slightly in the research context, and we are not looking for just one message to come out of it.

We are perhaps looking a little bit more widely, so with Dr. Aisha Holloway here at the University of Edinburgh we have been gathering information from people with ARBD, alcohol related brain damage and those in recovery from alcohol related harm. And they have been able to take photographs of their life, with some guidance from us, but particularly with a rather general brief, so we have specific research questions in mind, but the brief that we've given to participants has been rather general and deliberately general so that we can take the project in our own directions and they can do their own thing with it. We have then discussed the photographs with them and we've been able to move on then into analysis.

In the second iteration of the project we did the analysis with the participants, so it was much more a co-production and that was a particularly good experience for everybody. It's been a really interesting way to learn about people and with people, and to allow them to tell their own story which has been particularly useful for us. But I think the diary method has kind of similar attributes in many ways.

RB: Yes, so I guess diary method, it seems to me the kind of poor relation of the methodological family I think. Perhaps survey methods and interviews are the kind of King and Queen if you like in that everybody defaults to using the interviews or defaults to using survey method. Whereas I think diary method is actually a super flexible tool, it can be designed into so many different kinds of studies, you can have a diary design study that is very, very structured and will give you lots of numerical information and lots of quantitative information. Or you can go across the spectrum or across the continuum and thinking more about sort of unstructured approaches. And I imagine most people their first thought is asking a participant to write in a notebook every single day or every single evening what they have done that day. It's a much more complex tool because it does allow you to get into different areas, into different places, and into different thoughts and feelings that you perhaps can't get into with interview method.

SR: So how Ruth did you interact with the participants with the diaries?

RB: I asked people with dementia who were activists and they were campaigning and speaking out about their experience of living with this condition. They had early dementia so they were still able to share their experiences and communicate. But it seemed to me they were already keeping a diary, to help them remember where they needed to go, and what they needed to do. So the method had some synergy with people's activities. So I think that is always helpful to use a method that already has some synergy with participants, so they can kind of build it into their everyday life.

SR: In our projects we use cameras but I know a lot of people doing photovoice work are using people's individual phones, people are using their own equipment, and just as you mentioned some people did incorporate it into their daily life, they really did use the camera to document what they were doing in any case. It wasn't that they took special trips, but

there were a very large number of people, across both the studies who made very special trips to take photographs, and went really out of their way to take particular images in particular creative ways.

RB: And what would you say was the main difference between photovoice and say a photo diary?

SR: We looked at whether the voice could come through in the photograph, could you be sure that this image that you were looking at really represented an individual's voice. And I am not sure you can be sure of that, they may have had all kinds of help to take the photographs, and they may have all kinds of influences on why they chose to take that particular shot. But I think it's also true of interview research, you don't know why people are telling you things, who is prompting them in the background to tell a particular story in a particular way. So I think it's common to other types of qualitative research that too.

RB: Photovoice is it always about the individual voice or is it...?

SR: The original aim was collective and I think we've started to conceptualise that collective voice slightly differently now. And I know that other photovoice researchers in the UK have found this too. That sometimes you don't have a group who are centering around a particular cause as you would if you were trying to save the local playing fields. We certainly would think of the community more of a community of interest. So the two groups that we've worked with, the first group were all collected in the room physically, but they were individuals within that room and they didn't interact very much at all, we expected them to. It was set up so that they could but they didn't chose to do so. So they were very much individuals.

And then our second group were people in recovery from alcohol related harm. They saw themselves as a group and they had a group message from the beginning. And I suppose what was interesting about them was we started with a very clear group message and we ended up with some individual stories from that too. So I think the idea of the group is particularly interesting, whether it is a collective voice or not. I suspect it doesn't have to be in that we can use photovoice in much more individual way as well.

RB: Certainly with diary method, I think there is probably three main reasons why a researcher might opt to use this particular approach and the first one is to find out about changes within a person over a period of time. For example, researchers have monitored how people cope with coaching, you know they are athletes and just how they cope with the coaching season and what changes happen over the season.

So we use diary method to explore those changes within a person. Another main reason why researchers would opt for this method is the kind of, it lets you into places that you perhaps otherwise wouldn't see which I have heard some human geographers describe as revelatory places. So places that perhaps you wouldn't see as a researcher. Say for example a girl's bedroom. So a diary can really kind of let you in and open up these spaces that you otherwise wouldn't see.

So that perhaps is the second reason for using diary method, it lets you into different places. And the third reason, particularly for using video diary and audio diaries, you get to kind of see and hear the person; you get to see and hear the body, if you like, which again can be quite absent sometimes with some methods, the text and the data ends up on a piece of paper in a very uni-dimensional kind of way. I think that highlights another reason why you might use diary method, it does give participants quite a lot of control over the time and pace of data collection and I think that's one of the main reasons I like it because it does enable

participation and also give participants quite considerable control over what they share, over how they share it, over when they share it, so it can be a method that is quite equalising if you like. So if you very much value kind of participatory approaches and participatory research, I think methods like diary method can be very modifiable and flexible.

And like photovoice which is very much about enabling voice and that kind of thing, they are favourable approaches for that reason.

SR: We are trying as well to balance that power gradient a little bit between the participants and the researchers and try and let them explore things that they wanted to explore. And I suppose one of our bugbears with some of the participatory methods in the past has been that sometimes they are far less participatory than they might actually try to be at the outset. So this does let people have a fair amount of scope.

In terms of the practical things, I think we expected and certainly we were very much warned that the cameras we would never see again and we would probably lose most of the equipment. Over the course of two projects we have lost nothing, we have had absolutely everything back. What we have learned from that is just how privileged individuals felt about the work and how they felt a responsibility to the project, and that hinted to us I suppose that the power dynamic that we were trying to get had worked, you know, that we had actually managed to balance this out a bit, people did feel really quite invested in the project, they felt that they were being given a voice, they were being allowed to participate and that they had a responsibility for this kit that they had been given.

SR: Did you have the experience of the analysis of this data Ruth, how did you find that?

RB: Perhaps one of the good things and bad things about diary method is that it can encourage disclosure, and over-disclosure. So sometimes you get data that just isn't relevant to your study and you perhaps don't need to analyse it, you don't need to store it even or manage it. But I think whenever you are doing it you need to be prepared for the complexity, the added complexity of data analysis. And also potentially the emotional impact it can have on you in terms of the data that you hear about and the images that you see.

I spoke earlier about the project where they asked younger people to keep a video diary of their asthma experiences. Well one of the participants chose to video herself having an asthma attack. Now no researcher would interview somebody during an asthma attack, nobody would, but this participant chose to collect that data as and when her asthma attack was happening. So can you imagine kind of looking at that data, analysing that data and how distressing it probably would be. So I think you need to bear in mind the added complexities and emotional impact that it could possibly have on you, actually watching somebody potentially in distress. Or hearing someone having real problems actually describing their life to you. So that definitely needs to be taken into account I think with analysing particularly diary data that is not in a written format.

SR: I don't see myself as artistic and didn't really feel qualified to analyse photos in that way, so we started to focus very clearly on analysing the discussion that came from the photos and what people told us where their reasons for taking the photos and all of that.

However I have to be upfront and say that I think we have drifted slightly into analysing the photos, perhaps slightly unintentionally. We had some very interesting photos, one of a coffee table inside somebody's house. Which an individual described as their nerve centre, and they had everything there, their medicines, their phone numbers to phone when they had got into some kind of difficulty. Their lunch, their ash tray, their cigarettes and their lighter and all the rest, everything that you need surrounding you and it just said so much

about the individual. And they had very little insight into what we could get from that photograph. So we did start to analyse photos and we didn't intend to do that. We drifted into that analysis of the image itself; it wasn't really strictly just a narrative that resulted from that.

So I think although we set out to analyse just the narrative, we have drifted into the photographs, and I think it is something that we need to think a little bit more about really, what exactly we are doing with that, because we certainly didn't intend to analyse the images themselves.

RB: Yeah, I think one of the main issues, ethical issues with diary method is privacy. So thinking about how to keep a - where to keep a diary. Certainly the educational researchers who have used video diary in schools with children. Children, one of the first things they will ask is where is the video going to be situated, I don't want my friends listening to what I am going to be saying. I don't want it to be situated next to the staff room so teachers can hear what I am going to be saying. So privacy is a really key issue.

SR: Did you analyse your data with your participants?

RB: I did for each participant create a one page summary of the data I had collected and then I gave that back to participants and said you know, do you think this is a fair summary of what you have told me, either in the interview or the diary, so that seemed to be one way of just double checking.

SR: We started off with participants who told us that their story was theirs, and we were slightly flabbergasted to start with because we thought oh dear, what does this mean, can we go any further, do we have to stop? And we ended up discussing with them quite extensively about how we were going to analyse the story. This was a group of people who had told their story in self help situations quite often, so it was quite well practiced. It was quite interesting to try and work out how we were going to negotiate that.

The positive that came out of it was that we did let them tell their story, then we went away as a research team and we did some analysis, and then we went back and we all met together as group and we presented our findings, things that we thought had come from the data and they challenged us, and we discussed it. And at the end they said that they had learned things about themselves that they hadn't realised themselves. And at that point the atmosphere in the room really changed and it stopped being just this is my story and you know, you are not really allowed to hijack it, to being much more of a shared enterprise and much more of a true co-production.

But it is a limitation therefore of what we were able to do analytically, but it was quite an interesting relationship to try and build around how far you could push that and where the limit was of what you could do with that. And I think the co-production issue is something that is really very interesting around photovoice and probably diaries as well.

RB: And I think it's important that we remember the technicalities of method. And even though they can sound quite easy, straightforward, oh yeah photovoice, diaries, you just give people a camera, give people a diary and they fill it out, and you analyse what they send back. They are actually really technical methods which you have to obviously develop skills and qualities and attributes to use them sensitively and to use them wisely with different participants.

--: Just reflecting on an experience I had many years ago running a diary, and I have to admit it was really to supplement a multi-stage panel survey with pregnant women in South West France trying to get their understanding of the whole process of services were working

around them, and whilst some people did take the diaries and fill them in quite a lot did not. And part of the reason I think as far as I could deduce was a lack of confidence in being able to express themselves, using technology as well as probably a whole spate of other reasons which we didn't really get into. I just wonder to what extent it's enabling people to participate, but not necessarily all people. And how you deal with that point? Now this is probably a problem with lots of methods, but I want to ask how in this particular case,

SR: We shouldn't assume that it will definitely engage marginalised groups this, we have kind of seen that it has the potential to engage marginalised groups, but we have found that the participants that came to the study knew that there were photos involved and that they were going to get a camera for a period of time to do it. So we didn't have people who came who didn't want to do it. But that was because of the way that we had set it up.

The first group who had alcohol related brain damage, they, it was less like that because they didn't remember that there was necessarily work involved for them when they came. So I suppose for them, we did have different levels of engagement. We had people who took more photos and some who took rather few. But they all did chose to engage. But I think it, as you say it's because of the way that we set it up, that they did engage. And I think the danger is assuming that if you do photovoice that you will always therefore be able to include people, and I don't think you can, and I think it will be selective, there will be people who will or won't be want to participate. And there maybe people who are actively put off by being put on the spot with a camera and be told to go and do something with it. I think we just have to acknowledge that that is the case with this that we can encourage people but it may or may not work.

--: I have a question also on the challenges, because we know that spoken language and everything language is very different because whenever someone is speaking we can decode what he is saying and what he wants to convey as a message. But whenever you are looking at a photo, there is no static or specific interpretation of that photo, so what do you think the challenges relating to photography as a job of research?

RB: With a photograph, it really leaves open to the interpretation of the viewer the narrative around that photo as we heard with seeing the kitchen table; the narrative of that photo was very much left to the viewer. But I guess with any data it's always open to interpretation to an extent isn't it, that's why I think it can be important to do it you know as part of a team, or with participants if that is appropriate and also bearing in mind I guess your research priorities, your disciplinary background, your interests and kind of where you are coming from as a researcher.

### Contributors

Ruth Bartlett (University of Southampton) is an Associate Professor within the Faculty of Health Sciences, programme lead for the MSc Complex Care in Older People, Co-director of the University's Doctoral Training Centre in Dementia Care and Principal Investigator of an interdisciplinary, cross-faculty research project funded by the Alzheimer's Society. Her website is <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/healthsciences/about/staff/rlb1r10.page>

Sarah Rhynas is a Teaching Fellow in Nursing Studies and researches nursing care, dementia and alcohol-related brain damage. Her website is [http://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/sarah-j-rhynas\(4f8afa94-e614-4336-9633-75aa15262ded\).html](http://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/sarah-j-rhynas(4f8afa94-e614-4336-9633-75aa15262ded).html)

References and further reading:

Bartlett, R. and Milligan, C. (2015) *What is Diary Method?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

A short film by Ruth Bartlett on diary method presented at the 2016 Research Methods Festival can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuQpsJpJOaY>

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Suggested questions for seminar discussion:

What sorts of material can diaries and photographs be used to capture?

In what ways do these methods help to give people a 'voice'?

Do diaries and photographs have the potential to get at things that surveys and interviews typically do not?

How important is rapport between researchers and research participants in research using these methods?

Which challenges might be thrown up by adopting a participatory approach to using these methods?