



## Process Diary as Methodological Approach in Longitudinal Phenomenological Research

by Heidi Woll

### Abstract

*This article focuses on the process diary as a qualitative instrument in phenomenological research. The first part of the article provides a brief historical review on the use of diaries in social and health research. The second part of the article presents an example of how the process diary may be used based on the profile of a participant in the study "Aging with Cerebral Palsy". The third part of the article deals with the challenges of analyzing the data provided by process diaries and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of this method. The article concludes with a brief discussion concerning the kinds of situations where the process diary is a suitable research instrument. This section of the article also touches upon the ethical challenges involved in using the process diary in longitudinal phenomenological research.*

The use of diaries in sociological research has become more widespread since the initial development of this method in the mid-twentieth century (Madge, 1953). Sociological studies in recent decades have frequently made use of unsolicited diaries and diaries specifically requested by researchers (Jones, 2000; Oppenheim, 1966). As a research tool, diaries have often been employed to provide insight into personal phenomena that are difficult to access through other methods (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). Although diaries have been used as research instruments by both researchers and informants (Burgess, 1981) this article focuses only on the use of diaries by informants.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using this instrument. In addition, the researcher's role is somewhat different in diary research than when performing interviews or engaging in other forms of data collection. This article raises a practical question concerning when the process diary method should be used.

Keeping a diary is a well-known practice that has a long history in the West. It is an activity often recommended as a way of promoting self-awareness and self-reflection. In organizational and industrial research, diaries have been used as record-keeping devices and as aids for promoting awareness and understanding of day to day work processes. Within the research context the use of diaries as research instruments can potentially complement and, in some cases, replace more traditional techniques of data collection. Interviews and observational techniques are well-known ways of gathering data, especially in in-depth qualitative phenomenological research. However, these methods are often expensive and time-consuming.

In a number of instances, ethical and practical considerations prevent researchers from undertaking observations or engaging informants in face-to-face interviews. For example, if a researcher wants to learn more about grieving processes, it would be both extremely insensitive and intrusive as well as socially

unacceptable to request access to a grieving family in order to make observations or to conduct interviews immediately after the loss of a loved one. In addition, important information often goes undetected in interviewing processes and, importantly, observational research is confined to what is visible. Frequently, the researcher is at a loss to know what questions to ask. Informants can also be poor sources of information because they may overlook or forget to tell researchers about important matters.

In such cases, a diary may furnish the researcher with an improved way of collecting important data. A diary often provides more information than an interview or an observation. A possible reason for this relates to one of the major strengths of the diary, which is that it is often much easier to write about certain things than it is to speak about them (Bedwell, McGowan, & Lavender, 2012; Corti, 1993). Additionally, in some key areas of social life, diaries have been shown to be extremely effective in providing insight into various processes, especially ones tending to develop slowly over time (Lee, 1993; Richardson, 1994), such as the unfolding of adaptation processes (Furness & Garrud, 2010).

### Experiences of using diaries in health research

Diaries are generally used in health studies to monitor the development of disease or to explore the experiences of those who are ill (Richardson, 1994). Diaries have frequently been used in health research during the course of time studies. In these studies, informants are often encouraged to make use of structured diaries to register their use of time daily, weekly, or over the course of months. Diaries have been used to gain information from informants about subjects such as their social networks, health, illnesses, use of drugs, and patterns of waking and sleeping (Furness & Garrud, 2010; Lawrence & Shank, 1995; Ross, Rideout, & Carson, 1994; Rogers, Caruso, & Aldrich, 1993; Temple, & Walkley, 2003).

A number of researchers have made use of diaries written by informants covering one to two day time spans (Ross et al., 1994). Some researchers have encouraged informants to keep diaries for longer periods ranging from several weeks (Lawrence & Shank, 1995) to more than a year (Freer, 1980; Furness & Garrud, 2010; Norman, McFarlane, Streiner, & Neale, 1982), and even long time spans such as a single case study of the meaning of living with rheumatoid arthritis based on a woman's eight-year diary (Hägström & Nilsson, 2009). A diary written each day for many months or years can furnish researchers with massive amounts of information. One problem presenting itself to researchers making use of diaries is that the large body of information yielded by diaries makes it difficult to find data of interest in the

multitude of subjects, many of which are trivial, that are touched upon by a diary keeper (Griffiths & Jordan, 1998).

Seibold (2000) conducted an interesting study based on the diary as an instrument of health research. The study focused on change of life experiences among women during menopause. In this investigation, seventeen women wrote unstructured diaries for more than one year. The contents of their diaries ranged from 2,000 to 15,000 words (Seibold, 2000). The study on Cerebral Palsy used as an example in this article drew on material from the dairies of two women. One woman was in a transitional process, beginning with her recognition of the diminishment of her own walking abilities leading to her use of a wheelchair for part of each day. During this time, which lasted nearly two years, she made entries into her diary on a regular basis. The diary eventually contained 95,000 words. The other woman produced a diary containing over 23,000 words focusing on her experiences in applying for public assistance as a handicapped person. Diary keeping was used as an additional source of information for a study conducted in Florida that focused on the consequences of a mother's experience of repeated threats of hurricane destruction while being responsible for caring for a daughter with Cerebral Palsy and several elderly family members (Green, 2006).

### Advantages and disadvantages of using diaries

This section focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of using diaries as instruments of data collection in phenomenological research. On initial inspection, the use of a diary in phenomenological research appears to be relatively problem-free. However, although capable of yielding much information, the use of the diary as a research instrument involves a number of difficulties. Central among these is the problem of gaining qualitatively good data from a diary. In one Swedish study, eight wheelchair-users, aged from 16 to 20 years, were interviewed. In addition, seven of the participants kept diaries for one week. When the researcher examined the diaries they were found to contain very little information about the thoughts and experiences of these youths (Sjöblom, 1994). On the other hand, a lot of experiences have shown that it is possible to gain qualitatively good data from diaries (Corti, 1993; Haggström & Nilsson, 2009; Roghmann & Haggerty, 1972; Seibold, 2000; Therkeson, 2010). This contrast suggests that the instructions researchers give to informants about diary use may be of crucial importance.

Diary research is also subject to what researchers refer to as the 'first day's effect'. This term describes the tendency for most relevant information to be produced

during the early period of the diary writing process (Allen, Breslov, Weissman, & Nisselson., 1954; Corti, 1993; Kemsley, 1979; Norman et al., 1982). Some researchers have chosen to deal with this problem by asking informants to keep dairies for only a few days or weeks. However, in so doing researchers face the danger of losing the kinds of deeper insights and understandings that people may experience during longitudinal processes extending over greater periods of time. Diary keeping is an arduous task for both informants and researchers, especially when informants are required to write for months or years in order to generate high quality data.

One of the advantages of the diary as a research instrument is its reliance upon short-term memory. Diaries therefore have less recall-error than other methods of data collection such as questionnaires and interviews. These latter instruments may yield data which is distorted owing to the retrospective views of informants (Carp & Carp, 1981; Richardson, 1994; Roghmann & Haggerty, 1972; Verbrugge, 1980).

### **The process diary as a possible solution**

In this section the process diary is discussed as a possible solution to problems related to diary use in longitudinal phenomenological research. One possible way of resolving some of the problems involved in diary use while retaining the advantages of the dairy as a research instrument is through the use of a process diary. These dairies are less structured than dairies for time studies and are designed to provide space for the informant's own reflections on the changes taking place in her/his life. In contrast to time study dairies, process dairies are normally written over a longer time frame. A process diary is very much like an ordinary diary that is kept for private purposes. The major difference between an ordinary diary and a process diary is that the process diary is requested by a researcher. In addition, unlike the ordinary diary, the process diary focuses upon one or more themes and the informant knows that the diary is to be used in phenomenological research and that it will therefore be read and analyzed by researchers.

### **"Ageing with Cerebral Palsy": An example of how the process diary may be used**

In the following section I wish to illustrate how the process diary instrument may be used. Informants in the study, which focused on aging with Cerebral Palsy, were in a life situation where they experienced unexpected bodily changes. The study focused on their ability to master stressful events and to retain a sense of coherence in the course of these processes. Sense of coherence, as defined by Antonovsky (1981), describes a lasting dynamic feeling of trust in the inner and externally world as predictable. This also involves

the belief that things will work out in a reasonable way. According to this conceptualization, a good sense of coherence works to strengthen an individual's health (Antonovsky, 1981).

### ***The raw experience of being confronted with the wheelchair***

A woman, 51 years of age, with Cerebral Palsy, wrote a diary for two years, beginning the month she ordered her first wheelchair. Our first meeting had an unpleasant start, despite my best intentions. In an attempt to thank her for agreeing to participate in the study, my opening line was "I see you move very smoothly in your wheelchair." This caused the woman to burst into tears and it took several minutes before she calmed down. I was shocked and very sorry about this event and thought it would be difficult for the woman to conduct the interview as scheduled. However, the opposite was the case. The interview was accomplished, and became the start of more than two years of relatively close cooperation. It emerged during the first interview that the woman had ordered her first wheelchair, but had not started using it yet. The wheelchair she was using when we met belonged to her boyfriend. She told me that her strong feelings and tears were triggered by a single thought provoked by my words. As she put it, "It is not only to sit in a chair, but by sitting in the wheelchair the muscles will perish."

In writing the diary, she created space and time for reflecting upon her situation and the changes taking place in her feelings about her new situation and how she experienced her own body. As numerous researchers have shown, body experiences are often silent and they are not always easy to word (Engelsrud, 2002). Furthermore, informants who do not feel very comfortable when writing will not readily manage the demanding task of writing about bodily changes. In this study, the informant was asked to focus upon obvious themes of concern such as her reactions to the use of a wheelchair, the reactions from family and friends as well as from others who suffer from Cerebral Palsy. She was also asked to write about her experiences with the public health and welfare system, how the wheelchair fits into her flat, her particular use of the wheelchair, and her body functions with and without her use of the wheelchair.

### ***A framework for data collection using the process diary***

#### ***Agreement between informant and researcher***

There must be a clear agreement between the informant and the researcher concerning the focus of the study, how often the informant should write in the diary, how often the informant and the researcher should maintain contact, and the form of that contact.

There must also be agreement about whether or not the informant will remain anonymous. The informant contributes a great deal personally and invests a lot of time and effort in the writing of the diary. While anonymity should not be a requirement in each and every case, the consequences of revealing the informant's name should be very carefully considered by the informant and the researcher before anything is published. In many cases, the writer of the process diary is disclosed in the research report. There are ethical and practical consequences whenever the informant's name is published or made known by other means. This needs to be taken into consideration when ethical approval for the study is obtained from national research ethics committees.

Writing a diary can be advantageous for the informant. For some people, keeping a diary has been shown to modify the behaviour being documented in positive ways (Oppenheim, 1966; Wykle & Morris, 1988; Zelditch, 1982). Writing a diary can highlight symptoms that should be brought to the attention of helping professionals. Diary writing may also develop the informant's skills of self-reflection (Griffiths & Jordan, 1998). Gibbs (1988) described a five step circular reflection process, which begins with a description of the event, then a description of the thoughts and feelings about the incident, and an evaluation of the event. This continues with analysis and conclusion, which ultimately results in a plan of action for future events of the same nature (Gibbs, 1988). Bedwell, McGowan and Lavender (2012) used diaries for data collection in a phenomenological study exploring midwives' experiences. They found that midwives followed the reflexive process described by Gibbs (1988, cited in Bedwell et al., 2012).

#### ***Providing a focus for the informant's writing***

It is important that the informant focuses upon particular themes that are relevant to the study. It is of great importance that the informant correctly writes the date for each entry made in the diary. This information is crucial to the analysing process. When diary data is open ended, one may expect coding difficulties because of the complexities of the recorded information (Allen et al., 1954; Sorensen, 1994; Verbrugge, 1980). Before starting the process of writing a diary, the informant and the researcher should clearly agree upon the type of diary to be written, as well as its themes and structure.

#### ***Coping with extraneous information***

If the informant writes for several months (as if a longitudinal study) without receiving any response, the writing process might stop. As time passes, the informant may lose focus and doubt whether or not the diary will be of any use. Commenting upon entries in the diary will help the informant continue with the writing. It could be recommended that the informant

pass over parts of the diary to the researcher periodically (for example, every third month) while the diary writing continues. It is recommended that this included in the agreement between the researcher and diary writer before the study begins. During the writing process the informant will invariably bring up additional interesting themes. These new themes might well be worthy of study in their own right, but it is unlikely that there will be time to do study these new themes. Yet, in order to maintain a good relationship to the informant, it will be important to respond to these new themes, as well as to those that are within the research focus.

New themes that emerge in the course of writing can more easily be dealt with if the researcher reads through the diary notes on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. It is important to give the informant feedback. The researcher might begin with an acknowledgement of the informant, pointing out that the new information is interesting. The informant can then be asked to keep the research theme in focus. Some of the new themes might not be of great interest to the researcher, but may be of importance to the informant. The message from the researcher might be: "I notice that your focus has changed. This new focus will not be dealt with in my research, but it gives me more insight into the totality of your situation". By responding in this way, the informant is acknowledged and reminded of the focus of the study. This contact between informant and researcher is an important ingredient in making the writing process safe for the informant and valuable for the researcher.

#### ***The closing process***

Informants invest much time and effort in writing the process diary and often reveal very sensitive information about themselves in their writing. The researcher must have this in mind when the closing process begins. The informant must feel comfortable with the final document. Sometimes quotations from the process diary are cited in the research paper. When this occurs, the informant may feel exposed. In some research papers, direct quotations are not cited. Some informants may experience the absence of direct quotation as a mark of failure. The researcher should invest the time needed to secure a shared understanding with informants as well as their agreement to the publication of the final document.

#### ***Analysis***

##### ***A way to explore the meaning***

Within the phenomenological tradition, there are several ways to find meaning in what informants express. Giorgi (1985) provided a four step procedural approach designed to retrieve meaning from data. This is a simple but thorough approach that can be useful in



many phenomenological studies. First, one must have an understanding of the raw data. Secondly, one must provide a description of the meaning of how the informant understands it, as an expression of the specific phenomenon that is the focus of the study. The third step consists of transforming the expression given by the informant, and gives it a new expression within the researcher's language. In this process, reflection on the different ways of understanding the phenomenon is of central importance. The fourth and final step is to form a synthesis. The aim is to provide a consistent description of the essential features of the specific phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985).

### ***An interactive process***

The use of a process diary follows in the tradition of phenomenological research by promoting interaction between researcher and informant (Cooley, 1909/1993). This methodological approach is in the phenomenological or hermeneutic tradition (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). The researcher's presuppositions are in play and are a necessary ingredient for the development of new understanding. In the on-going interaction between the informant and the researcher, new understandings emerge (Hellesnes, 1988). There is an ethical reason for insisting upon this interactional process. When people provide sensitive information about themselves, the researcher's presentation of data must be experienced by those same people as a true description of their information and situation.

### ***A double structure***

A process diary is an open diary. The informant is provided with a number of central themes, but is not given any direction in regards to the proportion of time spent on each theme. Unexpected situations occur in the course of everyday life and these occurrences greatly influence the writer of the diary. If the diary is written on a daily basis, for months or years, the diary might need to be structured at the beginning of the process of data analysis. It is advantageous to request the diary writer to headline each entry by noting the date and the day of the week. When the researcher begins to structure the data, she or he may want to add a title or subtitle for each entry, depending upon what theme is in focus that particular day. Sometimes, more than one theme is in focus. This can be registered by copying the date and by adding the second theme to this new headline. This procedure will facilitate making a preliminary table of contents, placed at the very beginning of the diary. The diary will then take on the appearance of an ordinary book. This will provide the researcher with a much-needed overview. Regularly addressed themes will show themselves more frequently in the preliminary table of contents, while seldom addressed ones will be noticeable by their absence. New themes or topics, not identified by

the researcher's pre-understandings and pre-suppositions, will also come to light. Themes that occur during special days, months or in the course of a particular season may appear and provide the researcher with new insights and hence a better interpretation. The overview is important for advising the informant during the continuing diary-writing process, but it is also important for the researcher in the more detailed analysis subsequent to the point in time when the diary-writing comes to an end. A software tool like the latest issue of NVivo could be applied in the analysis of the data (Therkleson, 2010).

The double structured format, connecting time and themes, will aid the researcher's data analysis. When the same theme is headlined in the preliminary table of contents, patterns of behaviour and patterns in the informant's reaction to conditions and to changes in those conditions will emerge. This double structure furnishes rich opportunities for linking theory and data as well as for generating new knowledge about changes over time.

### ***Communicating preliminary analysis to the informants***

In order to maintain a good dialogic relationship with the diary informants in the study entitled "Aging with Cerebral Palsy" the researcher provided the informants with information about the progression of the research study on a regular basis, mainly through e-mail. When the time arrived to invite informants to comment on the preliminary analysis, this was done in a five step process. Firstly, the informants were sent e-mails informing them of the preliminary analysis to be presented. They were also invited to a second meeting. The preliminary analysis was sent to the informants during the second step. In the third step the informants sent written comments to the researcher. During the fourth step the informants and the researcher met in face to face situations. During this step they engaged in a dialogue about the main interpretations and focus of the study. Misunderstandings were discussed with as much exactness as possible. This meeting also functioned as second interview, where the researcher was able to focus on issues that were unclear. The fifth step included the analysis and interpretation of the data added through the dialogue concerning the preliminary analysis and the second interview.

### ***Using the informant as dialogue partner in the analyzing process***

From the very beginning of the writing process, the informants were invited to be in a dialogue with the researcher about the understanding and interpretation of the data. The aim of this hermeneutical dialogue was not that the informants should assume responsibility for the process of analysing. Instead,

the aim was one of verification of the interpretations of the data; in other words, it focused on how the data were understood and interpreted. The informants and the researchers therefore did not have to agree on every single interpretation, but had to be in agreement about the possibility of the different viewpoints stated.

### *Dealing with the psychological needs of the informants*

The informants in this study experienced bodily changes during the two years they were involved in the research. They went through a psychologically stressful process requiring them to adjust to a new situation about which they lacked knowledge in relation to the changes taking place inside their bodies. They also had to 'fight' for more support from the health and social service delivery systems. This caused considerable stress and was often a central topic in the diaries.

One of the informants sent e-mails to the researcher concerning her experience of inner feelings of being unsafe, while both informants telephoned the researcher when they experienced their lives as especially troublesome. The researcher's background as a trained social worker seemed to provide the informants with mental support during these troubled times. This suggests that researchers conducting similar research in future need to be aware of certain issues. One of these issues relates to the informants' practical need for support, which represents an ethical challenge in this kind of research. There is no correct answer regarding how the informants' needs for support should be met during the research period. What is important, however, is that the emotional needs of the informants are met. This needs to be taken into account during the final phase.

### *A struggle for self-respect and independence*

The case study discussed in this article provides a clear example of an informant who wrote with great ease about her experiences in the transition from unaided walker to wheelchair-user. Despite this, there were themes in her diary that had to be worked on at great length. She struggled to find the right focus and the correct form of expression. The researcher also faced a demanding task in attempting to interpret the diary data and to use the interpretation for the development of deeper insights into the phenomena being studied. The informant's ambivalence about having and using a wheelchair was particularly challenging for the researcher to understand. Reading the notes, month by month, this ambivalence manifested itself in the text and became a major theme for the researcher's study. In the closing part of the diary, the informant describes her wheelchair by using the phrase 'a necessary companion'. Her choice of the

word 'companion' and her reflections regarding the many and varied situations she faced as a wheelchair-user revealed a friendly relationship to her wheelchair, a development that emerged slowly during the course of two years in which the diary was kept. The word 'necessary' indicated that the wheelchair is needed even if her dependency upon it is undesired. By following her development and her use of words over a period of two years, it is possible to gain a sense idea of the underlying psychological processes taking place. This is only one example of how the use of a diary can provide detailed information about a developmental process that takes place over a long period of time. The information provided in this way may be unavailable to an interviewer. From a phenomenological standpoint, the use of diaries may widen the possibility for the emergence of differing viewpoints and the appreciation of personal detail in the experience of another's daily life.

### *The wheelchair as a symbol of ambiguity*

In this article the process diary of a women ageing with Cerebral Palsy is used as an example. During the analysis of her process diary, six main themes occurred. The six themes were labelled as followed: 1) not being a burden to her closest family members; 2) maintaining the ability to walk; 3) body fragility and vulnerability; 4) a friend that understands; 5) the use of the wheelchair; and 6) the wheelchair as a 'necessary companion'. These themes were quite often headlined during the course of her writing. They were also the themes that I found most interesting for analysis because their focus was upon the changing process of the informant's emotional world, her self-understanding, as well as her relation to people around her and to her environment. The synthesis of these themes was found in idea of the wheelchair as a symbol of ambiguity. The informant's thoughts about getting a wheelchair, what others might think about the informant using a wheelchair, and the use of the wheelchair, showed that the wheelchair was a double-edged sword. It provided the informant with much needed freedom and a sense of independence, but at the same time it was a reminder of a body that was in a process of deterioration. This gave a deeper understanding of the ambivalence experienced by the informant from the very beginning about using the wheelchair. The informant was fighting for her own mastery of a stressful situation. She wanted to be seen as an independent person, something that is an ideal in Western culture. She struggled for mastery and independence, as well as acknowledgement in a daily life filled with unknown bodily reactions, the experience of becoming more dependent on others, and the vulnerability of having her self-respect threatened by the fear of her family and friends viewing her as weakened and dependent on others.

The synthesis of the findings gave a meta-perspective to the data. There appeared to be an understanding of the informant trying to find a sense of coherence. To the informant this was a new way of viewing her life situation. This viewpoint was acknowledged as interesting and meaningful by the informant during the discussion of the preliminary data, thus verifying the findings. Such hermeneutical interpretations gave rise to perspectives that transcended the informant's natural perspectives. There is thus a link between the informant's subjective truth and the researcher's results and conclusions.

This leads to a critical question: Could the contact between the researcher and the informant be too close, thus leading the informant to write what the researcher viewed as interesting data? There is no easy way to answer this question. It can only be firmly controlled by following the researcher's work step by step in establishing contact with the informant. This can be followed up in the interviews by reading the diary and in discussions taking place during the course of the research project.

In the example from the study entitled "Aging with Cerebral Palsy", the diarists, following the five reflexive steps as unfolded by Gibbs (1988), gave many in-depth descriptions of events involving the informants' experience of a body that did not function as expected. This was followed by their thoughts and feelings linked to the events, how they evaluated their situations and their analyses and conclusions. Finally, the informants discussed how to cope with it in the future.

The results from this study have provided greater knowledge about the phenomenological experience of bodily changes and their emotional effects. It has also provided some insight into how some persons with Cerebral Palsy react to the expectations of their families. Further, it has provided knowledge regarding how a person with Cerebral Palsy attempts to live up to the silent 'standard of normality' while maintaining a strong sense of coherence and mastery of everyday life.

## Discussion

### *The strengths and weaknesses of the method*

The experience of collecting data using the process diary in qualitative research is mainly positive. The main advantage of the method is that it allows the researcher access to detailed information about physical and mental changes taking place. It also allows the researcher to easily follow these changes for several years. The data is likely to be accurate because it was written down shortly after the situation

or feeling described had occurred. These written entries in the process diary reflect something that is lived through, while the informant is still 'in the feelings'. Accidental questions from the researcher are reduced to a minimum. The process diary also provides an overview of normal life cycles; in other words, it describes what is usually happening during a week, a weekend, or a holiday. If this type of data is considered important then the method is suitable. The method also gains access to arenas the researcher normally would not be able to enter such as bed-time or private conversations (Johnson & Bytheway, 2011; Lee, 1993). The use of the process diary also allows the informants' reflections on difficulties and inner feelings to be expressed more openly than in an interview. This method gives a different sort of validation. The findings and interpretations are validated by the acknowledgement of the informants. Working together with the informant in this way is, as demonstrated in the example described in this article, an example of a democratization process in phenomenological research. Nevertheless, experiences of some researchers with the process diary method suggest that it should not be used as the only method of data collection in research. The best validation of the data occurs when this method is part of a multi-methodological design also involving, for example, such research techniques as observations and interviews (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977).

On the negative side, it is clear that the process diary yields an immense amount of data. This means that the researcher needs to expend much time and effort on sifting through these written materials as well as classifying and analysing them. In addition, the use of the process diary requires continual contact between researchers and diary keepers, often extending up to a year or more. This represents a major contrast to other research methods involving limited temporal and spatial contacts between researchers and informants. Taken together, these characteristics make the process diary method a very demanding one. In addition, if a researcher desires information from many informants and makes use of the process diary method, this would normally entail considerable expense as well as much time and effort. In some situations, it would be much less expensive and less demanding to make use of interviews and observations as research tools. Finally, it is important to note that if the researcher does not feel capable of maintaining herself in an ethical state of readiness to support informants who might be in need of help during the writing process, the process diary should not be used.

In some instances, informants might not be able to continue the writing process (Johnson & Bytheway, 2011). When this occurs their participation on the project should be terminated in a proper way. Some informants might need to consult a doctor or a

psychologist. If they have not yet established contact with a doctor or psychologist, the researcher should give advice about different options and in some cases, the researcher may even need to consult with a professional.

## Conclusion

### *Situations in which it is advantageous to use the process diary*

The process diary is an instrument that ordinarily can be used when the informant can read and write. If the informant is severely disabled and cannot speak or write, the writing of the diary will have to be done by someone who can communicate with the informant. A general knowledge of reading and writing is not sufficient. However, a process diary can also be kept on tape with the help of an audio recorder. It is also of considerable help to the researcher if informants possess a special interest in storytelling and writing. This is because the keeping of a process diary can be experienced by many as being very demanding. Researchers should take this into consideration before deciding upon the use of a process diary. When researchers want information about various processes taking place in the lives of people who are unable to readily speak, read or write then observation may be the best way to collect data. Structuring has been introduced in the use of some diaries to compensate for the informant's poor literary skills (Corti, 1993; Richardson, 1994; Ross et al., 1994). Structured diaries, however, often fail to provide the researcher with data of the same degree of detailed complexity as the data provided by open-ended diaries.

As shown in the example of the woman with Cerebral Palsy who experienced unexpected bodily changes, the ambiguity of becoming a wheelchair user was captured in the diary. This ambiguity evolved over time and it seems unlikely that it could have been captured by researchers using questionnaires or observations. Thus, the process diary appears to possess the potential for being a highly sensitive research instrument that is well suited for registering ambiguity and ambivalence that may be experienced by informants.

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## *An ethical challenge*

Some informants write with astonishing openness about their private lives in the process diary. They often discuss matters that have no bearing upon the study being conducted. Sometimes, they expose their own needs for psychological or physiological support. The researcher in such situations is then required to deal with these matters. Some entries in the diary may be about other people and such information has no legitimate place in the research paper being written. The researcher must handle this information very carefully. A lot of data in the diary is of great interest to the researcher, but the information should not be published. The informant will not always be able to envision the consequences of exposing so much personal information. The researcher must be able to distinguish between entries that should be a source of analysis and those that should not be included in the report for ethical reasons. An inexperienced researcher should not use this instrument without the benefit of an experienced supervisor. Even researchers that are well skilled in the use of this instrument should have a partner in dialogue, a colleague willing to discuss what to include and what to exclude in the data analysis.

## *Ethical considerations in the final phase*

The experience of collecting data through process diaries shows how diary writers may have difficulty terminating the relationship with the researcher. This is a challenge when a diary is kept for a long time span, and there is established contact between the researcher and the diary writer during the process. This may happen because diary writing has become a useful tool for reflection and processing challenges associated with change processes. Thus, having contact with a researcher who reads the diary and possibly provides instructions and comments on what is written may become a valuable support for the diarist. It might mean a lot to some diarists who do not have an effective social support network (Gonzales & Lengacher, 2007). It is important to spend time on this process, by being clear in advance about when working with the researcher will be completed and how the diarist can move forward in the personal process after participating in a research study.



## About the Author



Heidi Woll has worked for many years as an interpreter for deaf and deafblind persons. She has a Master's degree in Social Work, and since 2000 has been a Lecturer in the Social Welfare Faculty of Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. Her research has been primarily concerned with the human capabilities of disabled persons. Her publications (in Norwegian) have focused on problems and programmes involved in providing equal rights and opportunities for people having hearing and sight loss, especially those with congenital deafblindness. She has also conducted research on the aging process of persons with Cerebral Palsy. Theoretically and methodologically, much of her research has been guided by a phenomenological approach emphasizing the role played by interpretations made by people with multi-faceted needs in navigating and negotiating their lives.

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