

Narrating Oneself: Reflections on the Use of Solicited Diaries with Diary Interviews

Charlotte Kenten

Key words:

solicited diaries;
diary interviews;
lesbians; gay men;
heterosexism;
qualitative; UK

Abstract: In using the solicited diaries to access the everyday ways in which self-identified lesbians and gay men are made aware of their sexuality, this paper considers the role of solicited diaries combined with diary interviews. Furthermore it draws on empirical evidence to argue that a diary interview provides a richer, deeper and contextual understanding of the documented experiences. The paper reflects on the participants' experiences of keeping the solicited diary, the narratives produced through the solicited diaries and heterosexism as one the main themes to emerge from the solicited diaries and diary interview analysis.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Diaries: Capturing the Everyday](#)
- [3. Research Outline](#)
- [4. Diary Keeping](#)
- [5. Diary Narratives](#)
- [6. Everyday Heterosexism](#)
- [7. Concluding Thoughts](#)
- [Acknowledgements](#)
- [Appendix 1: Interview Themes](#)
- [Appendix 2: Diary](#)
- [Appendix 3: Diary Based Interview Questions](#)
- [References](#)
- [Author](#)
- [Citation](#)

1. Introduction

This paper reflects on the use of solicited diaries with diary interviews as a way of accessing the everyday ways in which lesbians and gay men (are made to) become aware of their sexuality in both positive and not so positive ways. The paper begins by considering the use of solicited diaries as a research method and argues that a diary interview should be regarded as an integral part of using a solicited diary as a research method. In the next section, the research on which this paper is based is described in greater detail as well as the approach taken to analyse the solicited diaries and diary interviews. The paper then moves on to firstly reflect on the participants' experiences of keeping the solicited diary; secondly, the narratives produced through the solicited diaries and; thirdly, heterosexism, one of the main themes to emerge from the analysis. [1]

2. Diaries: Capturing the Everyday

"For Gordon Allport (1943, p.95), the diary is the document *par excellence*, chronicling as it does the immediately contemporaneous flow of public and private events that are significant to the diarist. The word 'contemporary' is very crucial here, for each diary entry—unlike life histories—is sedimented into a particular moment in time: they do not emerge 'all at once' as reflections on the past, but day by day strive to record an ever-changing present" (PLUMMER, 2001, p.48; original emphasis).

Diaries are acknowledged to be an underused method in social science research, they are more commonly associated with historical, anthropological and developmental psychological research which draw upon personal diaries as "documents of life" (ALLPORT, 1942, p.xii). Individuals document their daily lives and experiences for personal recollection rather than for the consumption of an audience, except, of course, those who later decide to publish their diaries. Whilst for some the keeping of a diary is something very personal, for others it is much more of a public practice with life writing or (auto) biographical writing becoming increasingly visible through the Internet via applications such as *Facebook* or blogs. In whatever form, the notion of a diary is an increasingly relevant way to capture the practices and experiences of everyday life. The varying incarnations of diaries and their development over time has been summarised and reflected upon by ALASZEWSKI (2006), who has successfully drawn together not only the use of diaries (whether pre-existing or solicited) but also the analysis of the diary content. [2]

Researcher-driven diaries (ELLIOTT, 1997, p.22) or solicited diaries are a form of diary that individuals are requested to complete, often for research purposes which may be tailored to elicit specific information. The solicited diary can collect data for quantitative or qualitative analysis. CORTI (1993) highlights the use of quantitative diaries often using record sheets in research associated with social networks, health, illness, diet, social work, alcohol and drug consumption, sexual behaviour and household studies. Likewise, diaries kept for health research often employ check-lists and fixed formats (see ROOK, 2001), which might appear to resemble an ongoing survey. Solicited diaries which often provide a structure for participants have also been employed to collect data on a variety of aspects of daily life including daily spending (SILBERSTEIN & SCOTT, 1991) or time use (GERSHUNY, 2002). Diaries have been used in a variety of formats in health research to collect data on a range of experiences, such as health behaviours (ELLIOTT, 1997; JOHNSON & BYTHEWAY, 2001), gay men's sexual encounters (COXON, 1988), experiences of care giving (VALIMAKI, VEHVILAINEN-JULKUNEN & PIETILA, 2007) and drug-users' risk behaviours (STOPKA, SPRINGER, KHOSHNOOD, SHAW & SINGER, 2004). The strong health research bias in the use of diaries provides an opportunity to further develop diaries as a method through which to investigate a wider range of experiences. [3]

Whilst structured diaries may lean towards quantifiable data, less structured or open solicited diaries can provide rich qualitative data (ELLIOTT, 1997; MILLIGAN, 2001) and are defined by BELL (1998, p.72) as "an account produced

specifically at the researcher's request, by an informant or informants". They allow "informants [a] different media within which to express themselves" (ELLIOTT, 1997, p.5) and have been argued to be an empowering method (METH, 2003), where the participant is both an observer and an informant (ZIMMERMAN & WEIDER, 1977). These are written for an audience to read and raise issues of self-censorship on the part of the author, but this is not necessarily different to the self-censorship participants may employ during an interview, focus group or other data collection methods. As with all data, the data produced will only ever be partial, although the contemporaneous nature of diary entries may result in less self-censorship than a recounted interview narrative with less time to reflect on the event prior to committing this to paper (or electronic form). It is also important to recognise that solicited diaries are not solely the product of the participant rather they are constructed by the author *and* by the researcher through their design, content and analysis (BELL, 1998; ELLIOTT, 1997). [4]

Diaries exist as a common social language as people are familiar with the concept of a diary and the content is written in a natural language (COXON, 1988, 1996). Diaries (in whatever form) are argued to capture an "ever changing present" (ELLIOTT, 1997, p.3; PLUMMER, 2001, p.48) and when these diaries are solicited for research purposes, participants' contemporaneous records of their activities, behaviours, thoughts or feelings close to the time that they happened overcome the vagaries of time on memory and minimise recall or memory errors (COXON, 1988, 1996; VERBRUGGE, 1980). Whilst diaries may alleviate some of the problems with recall, even over a short time span small details may be lost or wrapped up within a larger story (DAVIES & COXON, 1990). The diary allows researchers an insight into the participants' lives, an understanding about how they perceive or understand the events that surround them and provide a link between the public and the private (PLUMMER, 2001). [5]

The temporal aspect offered by a diary, whether recording events over a few days or longer, highlight issues important to the participant or directed and co-produced by the researcher requesting participants to focus on specific aspects of their lives e.g. as a care giver (VALIMAKI et al., 2007) or women's support networks and childcare (BELL, 1998). The individual entries might form a continuous narrative or provide accounts of discontinuous events, all of which were, at the time and possibly after, significant enough for the participant to record. As well as recording events, solicited diaries can also increase the visibility and significance of routine or everyday processes which might be regarded as mundane aspects of everyday life. They can easily be used in conjunction with other methods and are also an appropriate way to capture sensitive data that might be difficult to encapsulate with other methods. METH (2003), used diaries to explore women's fear of violence in violent contexts in Durban, South Africa and found that diaries provided participants with a space for reflection as a way to present their own experiences. Likewise, THOMAS (2006) used solicited text and photo diaries to gain a deeper insight into the emotions of people living with AIDS related illnesses in the Caprivi region of Namibia. [6]

Diaries, like all methods, are not without their limitations. Keeping a diary requires a time commitment on the part of the participants and a willingness to regularly complete the diary and follow any guidelines. There is an assumption that participants have the skills necessary to complete the method (i.e. literacy) and can overcome illiteracy via another person writing the entries, but the diary as a personal and private space can be challenged (METH, 2003; MILLIGAN, BINGLEY & GATRELL, 2005). DAVIES and COXON (1990, p.63) appreciate that a lack of literacy is difficult to overcome, but for their research, focusing on the sexual practices of gay men, argue that "unless there is evidence that ability to work this way [keeping a written diary] influences the type of sex a person has, it is a relatively unimportant problem". Literacy problems can be overcome via audio or visual diaries. Although not limited to diaries, the validity of the entries and the impact of knowing that the diary will be read by an audience is an issue as well as the presence or the absence of content, which can be remedied by a diary interview. [7]

Whilst solicited diaries can be used as a stand-alone method (MILLIGAN et al., 2005), a greater depth of understanding can be gained from a diary interview: "The diary diary-interview method where the diary keeping period is followed by an interview asking detailed questions about the diary entries is considered to be one of the most reliable methods of obtaining information" (CORTI, 1993, p.1). ZIMMERMAN and WEIDER (1977) employed this approach in their research on Californian counter culture and found that the diary diary-interview offered a greater depth and insight into each respondent's life. It was difficult to observe the daily activities of their participants, so they employed the use of a diary which participants kept for seven days and in return received US \$10. The diary requested details of the activities that their participants were involved in, asking: who, what, when, where and how. Each participant was then interviewed about his or her diary entries. The use of a diary interview allows for contemporaneously made entries to be explored in depth with the authors and provides them with the opportunity to clarify, expand and reflect on their actions, entries and connections, for example, similar or contrasting experiences or the regularity of the same experience. The context for the entries can be established and explored which assists with the analysis of the diary content. All of these aspects add to the value and the richness of the data produced via the diary interview. It also reduces the potential for analytical misinterpretation and, for those participants who were not comfortable writing in the style of a diary, the diary interview is an opportunity to ensure that the experiences they may have had difficulty conveying through the written word are included. Diaries, as well as other primary and secondary data sources can provide decontextualised material (METH, 2003), so it is important to situate the produced narratives within the intersecting contexts of space and time as well as broader socio-economic and political contexts from the local to the global. A diary interview is key to providing contextual information for the entries, even more so where an entry might be too concise or ambiguous. In these circumstances the diary interview provides a context as well as a deeper understanding about its significance for the individual. The use of solicited diaries with diary interviews is considered within the context of a specific study, which is outlined below. [8]

3. Research Outline

The paper draws on diary and diary interview data gathered for a research project looking at the experiences of lesbians and gay men living in a non-metropolitan area in the UK. The research location encompasses a range of non-metropolitan spaces (urban, suburban and rural) and has limited commercial, support or social spaces for lesbians and/or gay men. It has a sparsely dispersed population with 35% of the population living in urban areas. The area as a whole is described and often thought of as "rural" although this is recognised as problematic; it is acknowledged as a cultural construction with multiple ruralities which include multiple social spaces (MORMONT, 1990). As agreed with the research participants, the specific location will remain anonymous. [9]

Significantly, this research contrasts spatially with data focusing on lesbians and gay men's lives in metropolitan or cosmopolitan spaces with relatively large and visible lesbian and gay populations, for example London, Manchester or Brighton (MORAN & SKEGGS, 2004). Whilst this highly urban research has been valuable in highlighting a range of practices and experiences of lesbians and gay men, it has also limited the academic representations of what it means to be a lesbian or a gay man and unintentionally provided an academic characterisation of lesbians and gay men in the UK. Alongside this research is the contextualisation and construction via legal, media and other sources of the risk attached to (visible) lesbian or gay identities e.g. the risk of being a victim of violence (MORAN & SKEGGS, 2004). This has overlooked much smaller, but no less significant, ways in which lesbians and gay men might experience their sexual identity. It was this recurring aspect of the daily experiences of lesbians and gay men that the research aimed to access through a solicited diary. The majority of the participants had not kept and did not keep a personal diary. Participants were asked to record daily, over a two-week period, when they became aware of their sexuality. It was hoped that a range of experiences would be captured that might otherwise be overlooked to show the different ways in which the participants became aware of their sexuality in both positive and less positive ways e.g. seeing another man or woman who they regard as attractive or hearing a comment that makes them feel out of place. Such details are much harder to access in an interview or focus group situation, often because these experiences are a part of day to day life rendering them indistinguishable and harder to recall on the spur of the moment. [10]

Self-identified lesbians and gay men were recruited through a number of contact points used to publicise the research including two educational based lesbian, gay and bisexual groups, a lesbian social and support group, a group for lesbians and gay men who are professionals and a gay pub and club. Participants were self-selected and in total twenty-three people participated in the research: fifteen were women identifying as lesbians or gay aged between 18 and 47 years old; eight were men identifying as gay aged between 21 and 57 years old. The extent to which participants were open or "out" about their sexuality varied. One lesbian described herself as Chinese and one gay man described himself as mixed race Afro-Caribbean, the remaining interviewees were white British. [11]

All twenty-three participants took part in an initial semi-structured in-depth interview (see [Appendix 1](#) for the topic guide) asking about their general experiences in the research location across a range of spaces as well as the extent to which they felt at risk in the context of their sexual identity (this aspect of the study is not discussed in this paper). At the end of the interview, having been informed about the diary method at the recruitment stage, participants were asked if they would be willing to keep a solicited diary which would then be followed-up with a diary interview at a later date. Those who were willing to keep the diary were verbally taken through the diary layout (see [Appendix 2](#) for the diary layout) and what they were being asked to complete. Initially, participants were hesitant that they would not have much to write about on a daily basis in relation to when they became aware of their sexuality, but they were willing to try to keep the diary. As it turned out, the participants found that there was much more in their daily lives. Fourteen out of the twenty-three participants (ten women and four men) agreed to keep a diary of which twelve were completed and follow-up interviews conducted (nine women and three men). Two solicited diaries were not kept due to participants' time and other commitments. [12]

The design of the diary in this study aimed to be simple and easy to understand to aid daily completion. The diary was an A4 paper diary with the front page deliberately printed on bright coloured paper to make it distinguishable. The second page included a brief summary of the research, a list of cues for the participants plus the researcher's contact details. The following fourteen pages were for daily entries. One A4 page was given to each day, to allow participants space to write and so that it was not too daunting to be faced with a blank page. Often the desired diary does not materialise, as the participants' entries vary, so too the consistency. To limit this, and to ensure that the participants' focus was on the topic of interest, prompts or questions were used, a strategy also advocated by ELLIOTT (1997). At the top of each page there was a space for the date and several prompts were written to act as cues for the entries and to encourage the participants to reflect on their day. These were: "what happened to make you aware of your sexuality?"; "where were you?"; "who else was involved?"; "how did it make you feel?"; "how did it make you feel about where you were?"; "did you mention this to anyone else, how did they react?" Although ELLIOTT (1997) suggests using a sample entry to show participants what the researcher expects, it was decided against for this study to avoid participants copying the style of the sample entry. [13]

The solicited diaries had different levels of daily completion; most participants filled the page. Eleven solicited diaries were completed or at least gave the impression of being completed on a daily basis, one of which was completed by Karl, a 25 year old graphic designer who wrote brief sentences for each day referring to what he had done on those days and whether or not there was anything that made him aware of his sexuality. The twelfth diary, kept by 27 year old Elizabeth, a shop assistant, was a summary of her week rather than a daily diary, following the guidelines provided at the top of each page. For both these participants, the way that they wrote their entries reflected their preferred writing style and this is one way that demonstrates the significance of the diary

interviews to explore their entries. At the end of the diary, two further pages were added for participants to write about any other events that they felt were relevant. Only two participants made use of this space, one finished a narrative that ran through his diary about his involvement in a Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Society (LGB) campaign at University and another wrote a brief reflective conclusion to her diary in which she recognised the significance of family and home. Upon reflection, placing these pages at the front of the diary to allow participants to write something as a starting point would have been helpful as a couple of participants spoke of difficulty in writing their initial entries. The entries varied in length depending on what they had done or experienced that day and the extent to which they felt comfortable with the format and the style of writing. The completion reflected the order in which the participants were recruited to take part in the study, rather than all the participants keeping the diary for the same two week period. The solicited diaries provided insights into a range of experiences, which were not necessarily covered in the initial interview and provided plenty of scope for the diary interviews which provided a narrative beyond the written page. [14]

In order to manage and analyse the data, each diary was typed into a word document and the diary interviews were transcribed verbatim (see [Appendix 3](#) for the diary interview schedule). The diary interviews asked a number of questions about the experience of keeping the diary. Further questions reflected the individual content of the participant's entries. These were read through several times, initially each diary and diary interview were analysed in tandem to consider the participants' narrative(s) across the two methods. This provided continuity between the two methods as well as contextualisation for the diary entries from the diary interview, especially where the participants' written entries were not particularly clear. Had the diary interviews not taken place, there was the potential to misunderstand some of the diary entries. Whilst this may appear to make the diary interviews a back-up to the solicited diaries, this is only one aspect of the value added by the diary interviews. The solicited diaries were also read together to consider the type of content and to identify the broad topics that the participants had written their entries about, for example, the media or family were common reference points. A thematic approach using inductive coding was used to ensure that the analysis included all of the data (see BRAUN & CLARKE, 2006), this was particularly important given the degree of diversity and perspectives towards the experiences of the participants. The solicited diaries and diary-interviews were coded using *in vivo* codes which were recursively developed into constructed codes to identify particular themes from the solicited diaries and diary-interviews and whether these had arisen in the initial interview. As might be expected, references to everyday life and the mundane and repetitive aspects of daily life appeared in the solicited diaries, rather than recording an "ever changing present" (PLUMMER, 2001, p.48) the diaries recorded aspects of an everyday *repetitive present*. [15]

The following sections reflect on three aspects associated with the diaries and diary interviews. The first aspect draws on the diary interview to consider participants' experience of keeping a solicited diary, linkages or contradictions between the methods used in the study to contextualise the entries. The second

aspect connects to the narrative styles of the diaries, in particular narratives of identity and the emergence of narrative through a diary and the value of the diary interview to update or conclude a narrative. The third aspect reflects on one of the dominant themes, heterosexism, from the analysis of the diary entries. [16]

4. Diary Keeping

As a requested rather than a personal diary is intended for the consumption of an audience, which may result in the author's writing style to reflect the way they feel a diary *should* be written. This is where a diary interview can contextualise the content and mitigate any attempts that have been taken write a diary in what might be perceived as a "diary style". At the beginning of the diary interview all the participants were asked a series of questions about keeping the diary: how did they find keeping the diary, were there any problems with the layout of the diary, did they normally keep a diary, did they find it intrusive; did knowing it would be read affect the content and was there anything that they did not include. These questions were asked to provide an insight into keeping the diary and highlight any significant issues (for this project or about diaries more generally). The responses were generally positive, although the presence of the researcher may have limited criticism! The prompts were generally liked as they acted as reminders for the participants, although these were not necessarily used to structure the entries. [17]

The participants reflected on their experiences of keeping the diary and reported having enjoyed the experience, although some found that it had been harder than they had anticipated, either because they had to remember to write the diary or writing an initial entry was difficult, because they were unsure how to convey their experiences. [18]

Most of the participants were open about their sexuality to family, friends and colleagues, however, several of the participants commented on "hiding" their diary, for example, when other (heterosexual) people came to their house. For one participant who decided to type her diary this meant keeping the file password protected on her PC to prevent anyone else reading it. Another kept her diary in the sitting room, but when her partner's parents visited this was moved to their bedroom. When asked about hiding their diaries, the participants did not want anyone to read their entries as they were conscious of the subject matter of the diary, suggesting that had the subject been more innocuous or (ironically) more of an everyday topic, they would have been less likely to employ this form of self-surveillance. There also appeared to be a need for the participants to get into a routine to keep the diary as for most it was an unfamiliar practice. One participant, admitted "cheating" and completing an entry the day after and another was initially concerned that there would not be enough to write about in the diary, but soon found that this was not the case:

"... to start with I thought oh there's not going to be enough things, but once you start thinking about it, it's sort of all the timeish but not, but not in a, sometimes it's quite implicit not really an obvious thing, but it's amazing how many [heterosexual] family

things that you hear or see or do make you think about your sexuality, definitely yeah very good" (Louise, 33 years old, diary interview). [19]

The diary and its focus led some participants to become reflective about their day and think more about the everyday as well as increasing their awareness of the small reminders (both positive and negative) about their sexuality:

"Well, you know, I suppose you know, a lot of it was kind of weird, er you don't usually break things down that much. I mean, er especially what happened to me. I guess I wouldn't talk to [name of partner] about, I guess I'd talk more about some of the stuff, er it wasn't intrusive, but, er maybe it made me be more open but I don't know, er, it made me think more about what was happening" (Rebecca, 32 years old, diary interview). [20]

The participants produced diary entries that reflected their day-to-day lives in relation to when they became aware of their sexuality in both positive and negative ways. Although the findings from the initial interviews are not discussed here, the solicited diaries tended to support the first interview material, but also raised disparities *within* interviewees' narratives. A disparity was noticeable between William's first interview and his diary. William, a 26 year old graduate student, said that he had been to some LGB Society events at University, but tended not to go as he was not interested in these and argued that he did not feel the need for the LGB society or gay scene to validate his sexuality. In the diary, William referred back to this and admits:

"I am scared to go, frightened that I'll be out of place, say the wrong thing etc. and that people there won't be able to get past my disability" (William, 26 years old, diary). [21]

The diary interview allowed this inconsistency between William's narratives in his first interview and diary to be explored. In his diary interview, William talked about the ableism (i.e. lack of recognition for those who are not able-bodied) that, in his view, surrounds gay culture through the gay media as well as the ableism he felt underpinned the gay community. William also felt that his impairment meant that he was constructed by others as non-sexual. The use of the three methods: first interview, the diary and the diary-interview had explored, in different ways, the intersections and experiences between two of William's identities, "disabled" and "gay" and in so doing had achieved a greater depth and complexity of these identities than the individual methods. As William's example suggests, solicited diaries can produce a contrasting and perhaps at times a more honest narrative. This is not to suggest that solicited diaries should be used to "check-up" on narratives, although JANESICK (1999) suggests journal writing can contribute to data triangulation, rather that they may elicit an alternative perspective. In the diary interviews, most of the participants demonstrated a degree of reflexivity about their entries and reflected on the events that they had documented. This reflexivity led several to move from thinking about their everyday experiences to thinking about their sexuality as fluid which changes temporally and spatially. One participant likened this fluidity to a volume control easily able to turn it up or down

and was a skill that many "everyday" lesbians and gay men master, but in doing so tend not to disrupt the heterosexism that surrounds their everyday lives. [22]

5. Diary Narratives

Depending on the aims and objectives of the research, a diary can be designed in many different ways to obtain data from participants, but the ways participants respond to these styles will vary. As the solicited diaries provided a number of prompts to help the participants focus, the content was to an extent guided. The completed solicited diaries varied in the style of the writing, but most entries were written as short narratives about the day and it was clear from the analysis that the participants were "being located or locating [them]selves (usually) unconsciously in social narratives rarely of [their] own making" (SOMERS, 1994, p.606). Several of the solicited diaries had entries that formed an ongoing narrative over the length of the diary. These narratives took two main forms: the first were narratives about the participant, and how their sexual identity intersected with other aspects of their identities. An example of this came from three of the participants all of whom were mothers. In their solicited diaries they reflected on being lesbians and mothers and how these identities are rarely recognised together. In the diary interviews, they reflected on the ways that when these two identities are put together invariably from their everyday experience and more broadly in the media they are constructed as lesbian mothers; their sexuality preceding their identity as a mother and distinguishing them from (heterosexual) mothers. One of the participants in her diary wrote about having to explain to a health visitor about her and her partner's relationship as they are often viewed by unknowing others as friends. Exploring this further in the diary interview, they regularly need to explain to others their relationship to each other and to their children. This was important to them as it ensured that they were located within the appropriate social narrative and more significantly to them that they were recognised as a couple and as the parents of their children. [23]

In a similar vein, several participants when asked about their diary entries spoke of being located in social narratives about lesbians or gay men that did not reflect them or how they lived in the context of their sexual identity. Conforming to type was another way that lesbians and gay men were not located in narratives of their own making (SOMERS, 1994). An example of this was the ways in which participants felt that other people expected them to act because of their sexuality:

"There was a special night at [gay pub] and I got slightly annoyed that everyone assumed that I would be going, merely because it's a gay pub + I'm gay, therefore I must be going! I actually went to the cinema with my straight friends and everyone seemed to think it was an anomaly that I was having a social life that was not defined by my sexuality" (Jack, 20 years old, diary). [24]

When Jack, a student, reflected back on his diary entry, he came to the conclusion that being located by others within a very public and visual representation of what it means to be a gay man meant to be part of the "gay scene", which he felt was how others understood gay sexuality rather than

understanding him and that he was being defined by his sexuality. These two narratives of identity demonstrate what appears to be a primacy attached to a sexual identity and the participants "labelled" by their sexual identity before any other identity and this being used to code or explain other identities, for example, "lesbian mother" or the social activities of a gay man. [25]

The narratives produced by the participants in their solicited diaries create access points into their everyday lives. The participants' contemporaneous reflections about their experiences of their sexual identity which are associated with or run through their entries reflect either their location in public narratives not of their own making (SOMERS, 1994) or trying to locate themselves away from the dominant public narratives of what it means to be a lesbian or a gay man. The diary interview offered the opportunity to explore these further and provided an insight into the everyday lives for those who identify themselves as lesbians or gay men and the ways in which they become aware of their sexuality, specifically how heterosexism can shape their lives and the extent to which their non-heterosexual identities are either included or excluded from public narratives. The diaries enabled a focus on the lives of the individual participants and aspects that shape their lives rather than the more visible and publicised examples of prejudice or discrimination relating to sexual identity. Whilst the participants fully acknowledged that in their lifetimes they had witnessed improvements, with increased and favourable recognition of non-heterosexual identities, they felt that these inclusions were for the most part planned, rather than as one participant described it as being a "natural and not thought about inclusion". The writing of a diary also appears to (unintentionally) produce a narrative either in the background or foreground of everyday lives, providing a glimpse or a snapshot into this. The diary interview is an opportunity to delve deeper into the entries, but also to "catch-up" with the narrative. The solicited diary with its content guidelines meant that the researcher and participants co-constructed the content, as well as the absences, which were explored in the diary interview. Participants were asked if there was anything they had not included in the diary — sex, was the most common answer — like other methods the partiality of solicited diaries and diary interviews should always be recognised. [26]

6. Everyday Heterosexism

"Sorry, nothing much happened today!" (Eve, 36 years old, diary)

Entries such as the above reflect the mundane aspects of the participants' everyday lives but also imply that the entries were representative. As the participants continued to keep their solicited diaries and as the diary interviews later supported, they found that there was much more in their mundane everyday lives, when they were asked to view this through the ways in which their consciousness about their sexuality was raised. [27]

Many of the participants' entries referring to less than positive events associated with their sexuality represented what PEEL (2001, p.541) describes as "mundane heterosexism", the taken-for-grantedness of heterosexuality and heterocentric

assumptions which form an accepted part of day-to-day life that are often unnoticed and therefore go unchallenged. These are not easily identifiable examples of heterosexist violence such as physical assault or verbal abuse, which some may describe as homophobic. Whilst this term is used in the discourse of daily life, it is recognised from an academic perspective as problematic (KITZINGER, 1987). Heterosexism "shifts the emphasis from only individuals' attitudes, to include social customs and institutions as part of the problem" (PEEL, 2001, p.544). As such it is embedded in daily life and interactions that it forms a norm which tends to be accepted by lesbians and gay men as well as heterosexuals as part of the everyday. PEEL (2001) demonstrates the ways in which heterosexism is constructed in lesbian and gay awareness training sessions which were meant to increase the awareness of heterosexism and inform people about lesbians and gay men. The solicited diaries completed by the participants in this research showed how heterosexism is a manifest part of daily life and that lesbian and gay identities are, for the most part, not included (rather than excluded) from daily discourses. [28]

The documenting of everyday heterosexism in the solicited diaries showed its presence in a number of guises, for example, a chat with a colleague at work, who assumed one of the participants was heterosexual:

"At work I was having a casual conversation with somebody I don't know very well, and he asked me if I had a girlfriend, and so I told him that I'm gay, and he was slightly uncomfortable after that" (Jack, 20 years old, diary). [29]

For some participants the time and the space is appropriate to ensure that heterosexual assumptions are corrected. For those who are less comfortable or less confident in telling others of their sexuality, they police their behaviour to suit the space and others in those spaces, in particular in front of members of their or their partner's family:

"Also, went for weekend at partners, would have/wanted to greet her much more 'warmly' than I did, as she looked beautiful, and it has been a long week—except that her mum was in the room" (Jane, 42 years old, diary).

"Once again this isn't 'out + about' stuff, but more family/immediate circle. My partner's mother has come to stay with us for a few days and this always makes me aware of our relationship as a lesbian relationship. Though we are both out to our families & in our lives there is still an awkwardness that you have to think about, say, how physically intimate it is appropriate to be in front of them" (Eve, 36 years old, diary). [30]

In their diary entries, Eve and Jane reflected on their entries, talking about how they enact self-surveillance with their or their partner's (biological) families. When questioned about this in the diary interviews, Eve felt that it was something she nearly always enacted with heterosexual people, whereas Jane described it as a habit that developed over time. [31]

These few examples show the ways in which heterosexism not only structures the everyday discourses of conversation but also the ways the participants act and how heterosexism pervades spaces and the expectations of people within those spaces to conform to be "accepted" (i.e. heterosexist behaviours). The solicited diary produced data that would have been harder to access via conventional interviews or focus groups and when the specificity of the diary data was combined with the diary interviews these experiences were talked about in greater depth. Few of the participants reported directly challenging the heterosexism which they documented in their solicited diaries, beyond examples similar to Jack's, where he corrects rather than challenges an assumption. Nearly all of the participants' recognised the fact that heterosexism or heterosexist assumptions shaped or framed some aspect of their daily lives. This recognition was noted in several ways, for example, the non-inclusion of same-sex partners but the inclusion of opposite sex partners on a human resources section of a job application or the reference to having a partner in general conversation nearly always assumed an opposite sex partner. Although participants felt that they should challenge heterosexism when they recognised it, in many cases the diary made them realise that they contribute to this by not recognising or challenging this. There was also a sense that challenging a comment would achieve little and that such comments, actions or assumptions were just how things were and therefore accepted. As the participants tended not to respond to the heterosexist inequalities they experienced or witnessed they could be argued to become "tacit accomplices" (HASLETT & LIPMAN, 1997, p.51), but equally within the context of their everyday lives it was easier for them not to "rock the boat" as one participant put it for two reasons. Firstly, there was concern for the implications of challenging heterosexism which implies a risk is attached to such actions and secondly and secondly the individual concerned did not want to be seen as, "going on about being gay". [32]

The solicited diaries also revealed many mundane positive aspects, for example one entry read:

"Not a lot today! Except, seeing some rather attractive women throughout the day, here and there, and thinking 'phwoor' etc! 'Fraid so!" (Jane, 42 years old, diary) [33]

Another participant wrote about the positive aspects of her sexuality and the connections she experienced with other lesbians. In particular, she commented on the shared experience of being a lesbian:

"Later on a lesbian friend came to visit + I'm reminded just how important those connections are" (Eve, 36 years old, diary). [34]

These connections that Eve refers to were followed up in the diary interview and were explained as:

"Connections ... connections in the sense that you don't have to explain how things are, you already know, you don't have to explain what it's like [to be a lesbian], that common frame of reference is already in place, you don't have to explain what things

look like from your side as the other person already knows, you know, however close I am to my straight friends it is never the same, those connections make such a difference" (Eve, 36 years old, diary interview). [35]

Connections of a different sort were talked about by Jack in the context of organising a student lesbian, gay and bisexual group to attend *Pride*, a predominantly lesbian and gay event in London. Whilst this was not an everyday experience, the connections that Jack referred to went beyond attending *Pride*, it was rather connections between sexual minorities in the face of shared experiences of inequalities, prejudice and discrimination. In his diary interview, Jack contextualised this by talking about connections between lesbians and gay men at the local, national and global level to demonstrate a combined strength and how these interactions need to be reaffirmed on a daily basis to achieve equality for all lesbians and gay men, wherever they were. [36]

Through the solicited diaries the everyday has been shown to be anything but mundane; the participants in the diary interviews reflected on their surprise at being able to fill their solicited diaries relatively easily as well as the extent of the everyday heterosexism surrounding them. The dominance of heterosexism as a major theme across the solicited diaries demonstrates the way that heteronormativity pervades society and as a public narrative shapes society; it goes beyond the individual as it is also cultural and institutional in its form (SOMERS, 1994). [37]

7. Concluding Thoughts

At the beginning of this paper, a quote from ALLPORT (1942, p.95) was used to highlight the significance of diaries, and one line stood out: that diarists "day by day strive to record an ever changing present". The present, however, remains relatively stable over time providing a framework in which the diary narratives are located, constructed and understood. As noted in this paper the public narrative of heterosexuality is a framework and therefore it is unsurprising that heterosexism was a key theme to emerge from the diary entries. Its presence raised the consciousness of the participants that their sexual identity was either not included, excluded or denigrated in some way as they reflected back on their day in their diary and later during the diary interview. Whilst this paper does not argue against solicited diaries being used as a standalone method, it does argue that diary interviews offer an opportunity to explore (further) and contextualise the entries as well as providing the opportunity to discuss a narrative and see how this has developed or concluded since the solicited diary was completed. The diaries are written from the viewpoint of the participants and provide positive and less positive autobiographical reflections about their life worlds. [38]

On a more practical note, the paper has demonstrated some of the ways the diaries access how lesbians and gay men's awareness of their sexuality in both positive and not so positive ways occurs during their everyday lives. Whilst lesbians and gay men might be located publicly as victims or survivors of homophobic incidents, the smaller everyday heterosexist comments or

conversations (re)produced are less visible and often unchallenged. Those who completed the solicited diaries experienced an increased awareness of their sexuality through a range of incidents by keeping the diary; it raised their consciousness of these incidents and their everyday surroundings and interactions. It is through this that diaries can tap into this information about sexual identities that might be disregarded by the participants. [39]

Solicited diaries need to be bespoke and tailored to elicit the required information as well as be appropriate for the research participants to use with clear and concise prompts or guidelines and ideally the researcher should talk through the diary with the participant to explain the process, to get the commitment from the participant and to answer any questions. [40]

Where do solicited diaries go from here? In the context of further research solicited diaries and accompanying diary interviews offer an insight and a depth that other methods may not produce, and the written solicited diary is relatively unobtrusive. It provides a space through which intersections between identities can be explored as well as more specific experiences, for example, focusing on emotions or a specific aspect of everyday life and spaces, such as work or family. Participants can also be directed to reflect on particular events close to the time that they occur. The form of a diary can be experimented with, with options to move beyond the hand-written page to electronic blog-style diaries or visual or audio diaries. Alongside this, the topics that solicited diaries cover should move beyond health or indeed time or food studies as noted earlier in this paper to offer an alternative insight into a wider variety of experiences as well as experimenting with the length of time a diary is kept for as well as the frequency of the entries and in combination with other methods. [41]

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the participants who gave their time to take part in this research and particularly those who kept diaries. The research was funded by the ESRC (R42200134280). My thanks go to Peter JACKSON for comments on an earlier version of the material presented here; and to Rebecca MALLETT and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on this paper.

Appendix 1: Interview Themes

- *Coming out*: when they first realised their lesbian or gay sexuality, when they first came out, to whom and their reaction, how do they decide whether or not to come out, what factors influence this decision, other positive and negative experiences of coming out, spaces where they are out, the relationship with their family or origin?
- *Life in the research location*: how long had they lived there, where they lived, whether they liked this, why they had chosen to live there, the length of time they thought that they would stay, movement within the research location or

away from here, how they feel in different spaces and between different spaces across the research location, personal safety?

- *Other places where the interviewee had lived*: where these places were, how did they compare to the research location, what aspects of their lives were similar or different compared to now, to what extent does location effect the degree to which they are out?
- *Relationships*: how they feel about being with their partner in different spaces, the degree of visibility with their partner, what affects the visibility with their partner, how this changes over time and over space, differences between different partners?
- *Everyday spaces*: home, work, the street, social spaces—how they feel about these spaces, the degree to which they are out in these spaces, how is this enacted (e.g. in speech or visually); whether their use or interactions in these everyday spaces vary across different types of space e.g. urban or rural, what things make the individual aware of their sexuality?
- *Gay spaces*: which gay spaces they know about locally, their use (or not) of these spaces, how they feel in these spaces, what affects how they feel in these spaces, use of gay spaces in the past, use of gay spaces beyond the research location?
- *Gay "community"*: did they feel that one existed locally, did they feel part of this or not and why, how did this compare to other places where they had lived, use or participation in lesbian or gay support or social groups?
- *Religion*: whether interviewees had any religious affiliation—past or present, the intersections of this with their sexuality, how they feel about this, reactions from their churches, integration or sexual and religious identities?
- *Safety*: issues of safety in the research location, experiences of anti-gay practices in the research location, what the practices were, the effect these have had on the individual, experiences with the local police, and awareness of Gay Liaison Officers¹ in the local police force, if the need arose would they involve the police over a matter connected to their sexuality?

Appendix 2: Diary

Date of first diary entry

If you have any questions about your diary, contact [name of researcher]

Guidelines for diary completion

Thank you for agreeing to keep a diary. This two-week diary is specifically interested in *your* day-to-day experiences of *your* sexuality.

Please try to fill in the diary every evening, by looking back over the day and thinking of times, places or events where you became aware of your sexuality, in

¹ In the UK, gay liaison officers are members of the police who have received training on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues. They work with local groups to build trust and encourage those who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender to report issues of concern or crimes to the police.

either a positive or a negative way. This may have arisen through comments said to you, something you hear or see, a look from someone, your reaction to a news story, a song or an image.

In completing your diary, please try to include the following:

- the date
- what happened to make you aware of your sexuality?
- where you were?
- who else was involved?
- how did it make you feel?
- how did it make you feel about where you were?
- did you mention this to anyone else, who, how did they react?

If there are any other experiences that you would like to write about, but that didn't happen within the two weeks, please add these, following the outline above.

Please don't worry about grammar, spelling or handwriting.

You and your diary entries will remain anonymous

If you know of anyone else who may be interested in taking part in the research, please pass on my contact details.

Thank you for your participation.

Date

Guidelines for diary completion

What happened to make you aware of your sexuality; where were you; who else was involved; how did it make you feel; how did it make you feel about where you were; did you mention this to anyone else, how did they react?

[14 pages followed this format]

Approximate Date

Please add anything else you have remembered or thought about in the space below, but that did not happen during the time that you kept the diary.

[Three pages followed this format]

End page

Thank you for completing the diary.

Please return this to [name of researcher] in the envelope provided or e-mail to [e-mail address]

Appendix 3: Diary Based Interview Questions

- How did you find keeping the diary?
- Were there any problems with the diary (prompts: keeping it, structure, layout, presentation)?
- Do you normally keep a diary?
- Did you find the diary intrusive?
- Did knowing that I'd be reading it affect the content?
- Is there anything you didn't include?

Subsequent questions related specifically to the individual diary entries.

References

- Alaszewski, Andy (2006). Using diaries for social research. London: Sage.
- Allport, Gordon (1942). *The use of personal documents in psychological science*. New York: Social Science Research Council.
- Bell, Linda (1998). Public and private meanings in diaries: Researching family and childcare. In Jane Ribbens & Rosalind Edwards (Eds.), *Feminist dilemmas in qualitative research: Public knowledge and private lives* (pp.72-82). London: Sage.
- Braun, Virginia & Clarke, Victoria (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Corti, Louise (1993). Using diaries in social research, <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU2.html> [accessed 8th August 2008].
- Coxon, Antony P.M. (1996). *Between the sheets: Sexual diaries of gay men's sex in the era of AIDS*. London: Cassell.
- Coxon, Tony (1988). Something sensational ...: The sexual diary as a tool for mapping detailed sexual behaviour. *Sociological Review*, 36(2), 353-367.
- Davies, Peter & Coxon, Tony (1990). Patterns in homosexual relations: The use of the diary method. In Michel Hubery (Ed.), *Sexual behaviour and risks of HIV infection: Proceedings of an international workshop supported by the European Communities* (pp.59-78). Brussels: Publications des Facultes Universitaires Saint-Louis.
- Elliott, Heather (1997). The use of diaries in sociological research on health experience. *Sociological Research Online*, <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/2/2/7.html> [accessed 8th August 2008].
- Gershuny, Jonathan (2002). Mass media, leisure and home IT: A panel time diary approach. *IT and Society*, 1(2), 53-66.
- Haslett, Beth Boniwell & Lipman, Susan. (1997). Micro inequalities: Up close and personal. In Nijole V. Benokraitis (Ed.), *Subtle sexism: Current practice and prospects for change* (pp.34-51). California: Sage Thousand Oaks.
- Janesick, Valerie (1999). A journal about journal writing as a qualitative research technique: History, issues and reflections. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(4), 505-524.
- Johnson, Julia & Bytheway, Bill (2001). An evaluation of the use of diaries in a study of medication and later life. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 4(3), 183-204.
- Kitzinger, Celia (1987). *The social construction of lesbianism*. London: Sage.
- Meth, Paula (2003). Entries and omissions: Using solicited diaries in geographical research. *Area*, 35(2), 195-205.
- Milligan, Christine (2001). *Geographies of care: Space, place and the voluntary sector*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Milligan, Christine; Bingley, Amanda & Gatrell, Antony (2005). Digging deep: Using diary techniques to explore the place of health and well-being amongst older people. *Social Science and Medicine*, 61(9), 1882-1892.

Moran, Leslie & Skeggs, Beverley (2004). *Sexuality and the politics of violence and safety*. London: Routledge.

Mormont, Marc (1990). Who is rural? Or how to be rural: Towards a sociology of the rural. In Terry Marsden, Philip Lowe & Sarah Whatmore (Eds.), *Rural restructuring: Global process and their responses* (pp.21-44). London: David Fulton Publishers.

Peel, Elizabeth (2001). Mundane heterosexism: Understanding incidents of the everyday. *Women Studies International Forum*, 24(4), 541-554.

Plummer, Ken (2001). *Documents of life 2: An invitation to critical humanism*. London: Sage.

Rook, Karen S (2001). Emotional health and positive versus negative social exchanges: A daily diary analysis. *Applied Developmental Science*, 5(2), 86-97.

Silberstein, Adriana R. & Scott, Stuart (1991). Expenditure diary surveys and their associated errors. In Paul Biemer, Robert M. Groves, Lars E. Lyberg, Nancy Mathiowetz & Seymour Sudman (Eds.), *Measurement errors in survey* (pp. 303-326). New York: Wiley.

Somers, Margaret (1994). The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*, 23(5), 605-649.

Stopka, Thomas J.; Springer, Kristen W.; Khoshnood, Kaveh; Shaw, Susan & Singer, Merrill (2004). Writing about risk: Use of daily diaries in understanding drug-user risk behaviors, *AIDS and Behavior*, 8(1), 73-85.

Thomas, Felicity (2006). Eliciting emotions in HIV/AIDS research: A diary-based approach. *Area*, 39(1), 74-82.

Valimaki, Tarja; Vehvilainen-Julkunen, Katri & Pietila, Anna-Maija (2007). Diaries as research data in a study of daily caregivers of people with Alzheimer's disease: methodological issues. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 59(1), 68-75.

Verbrugge, Lois M. (1980). Health diaries. *Medical Care*, 28(1), 271-276.

Zimmerman, Don A. & Weider, D. Laurence (1977). The diary: Diary-interview method. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 5(4), 479-99.

Author

Charlotte KENTEN is a Research Fellow at King's College London in the Department of Primary Care and Public Health Sciences. Her research interests are around social identities, equality and diversity, organ donation and transplantation and qualitative methods.

Contact:

Dr Charlotte Kenten

King's College London

Department of Primary Care and Public Health Sciences

7th Floor Capital House, 42 Weston Street,
London, SE1 3QD
UK

E-mail: charlotte.kenten@kcl.ac.uk

Citation

Kenten, Charlotte (2010). Narrating Oneself: Reflections on the Use of Solicited Diaries with Diary Interviews [41 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(2), Art. 16, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1002160>.