

Article

## **Recording the Personal: The Benefits in Maintaining Research Diaries for Documenting the Emotional and Practical Challenges of Fieldwork in Unfamiliar Settings**

Brendan Ciaran Browne, PhD  
School of Law  
Queen's University Belfast  
Belfast, Northern Ireland

© 2013 Browne.

---

### **Abstract**

Through an analysis of personal research diaries maintained during a prolonged period spent working in Palestine, this article analyses the importance of maintaining research diaries when on fieldwork. The evidence produced stems from a content analysis of fieldwork diaries kept while researching commemorative events in the West Bank, Palestine, during a period of global uncertainty and at a time of much change in the region. In espousing the benefits of the fieldwork diary it is shown that diaries assume a more important role than acting as a mere logging device; they have the capacity to allow for personal reflection and to help with the development of strategic responses to the inevitable challenges one would expect to face when working far from the relative comfort of home. The research diary as a cathartic tool for researchers to record fears and shortcomings in their work is discussed and personal insights into some of the challenges this researcher faced when engaged in ethnographic work in Ramallah, Palestine are provided. In summarising the benefits of maintaining research diaries, the author, lamenting the lack of transparency in the literature to date on the practicalities of fieldwork, calls for more open and honest reflection on the challenges associated with conducting fieldwork, particularly that which takes place in volatile or unstable regions.

**Keywords:** research diaries, dangerous fieldwork, reflexivity, personal experience, methodological tool

**Acknowledgements:** A special thanks is reserved for Dr. Katy Hayward, Senior Lecturer, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast, for comments and suggestions made on earlier drafts. Funding for the work is gratefully acknowledged from the Department for Employment & Learning Doctoral Scholarship, Northern Ireland. I further acknowledge financial support for this research from the Sir Robert Hart Fund, Queen's University Belfast, The Council for British Research in the Levant (Small Travel Grant), and the School of Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work Internationalisation Fund, Queen's University Belfast.

During the period of time spent gathering empirical data for presentation in my doctoral thesis (December 2010–May 2012), I meticulously maintained a number of journals documenting the many challenges faced when “in the field.” My research has as its focus the negotiated construction of important commemorative events in Belfast, Northern Ireland and Ramallah, West Bank, Occupied Palestinian Territories (hereinafter, and for the purposes of this article, Palestine). The data collection process included meeting with and interviewing senior members of the Palestinian Authority, Palestinian non-governmental organisations, former Republican combatants, and other political figures in both fields of enquiry. This interview data was supplemented with detailed observations and photographic images gathered at each of the commemorations.

In order to gather the relevant data necessary for answering the research questions, it was considered necessary to spend a significant period of time living in Palestine, based primarily in East Jerusalem for 6 months. During my time spent in Palestine a series of fieldwork diaries were regularly maintained. Initially, the diaries were kept as a means of documenting time spent in the field, to be reflected on later when I was back home in Belfast. As I became further engaged in the data collection process, however, it became apparent that the diaries were more significant than merely being a set of practical notes on meetings arranged and respondents met. These diaries were more than a logging device; they contained detailed commentaries on the political situation as it was unfolding across the region and written reflections on personal views about the research process, and they were a repository for critical reflection at a time of much personal uncertainty. As a result, the diary was a permanent travel companion wherever I ventured to and became a useful aide-mémoire when I returned to Belfast. Thinking reflexively is often portrayed as an afterthought in qualitative analysis, an exercise to conduct once the data has been collected and a task to begin when the research is being written up. Yet, in keeping these diaries it was clear that I had been actively reflecting on the data collection process as I was “in the thick of it,” engaged in ever changing ethnographic research. The diaries became an important reminder that I was deeply immersed in a politically unstable and sometimes volatile cultural environment. Although thinking reflexively at all stages of the research process, and the benefits associated therein, is actively encouraged, Engin (2011) has suggested, “there has been little examination of the role of the research diary as a learning tool in the development of research knowledge for novice researchers” (p. 297).

Through a candid and honest account of the experiences I faced, and successfully overcame, this article explores in greater detail the benefits of maintaining a research diary by presenting personal reflections on time spent in Palestine. First, I discuss what constitutes a research diary, its substance and form and the extent to which it can be considered an aid in the research process. Second, I outline how the research diary is more than a logging tool; rather, it assumes the role of a cathartic device used to assist the researcher in documenting fears or anxieties in a written format to be reflected upon at a later stage. A brief consideration of the potential for research diaries in socio-anthropological research, as being useful learning devices for the early career or novice researcher, is provided before I highlight four main themes that emerged from my own personal writing. These personal experiences are provided as an insight into some of the difficulties I faced when collecting my empirical data in Palestine. Many of these challenges will be familiar to those who have worked in similar regions or under similar challenging conditions for a sustained period of time. The personal reflections are provided to reveal some of the challenges and difficulties that any researcher hoping to conduct similar fieldwork would benefit from knowing in advance. They may perhaps serve the lofty purpose of assisting in reducing some of the fears and tempering the reluctance that arguably prevent fieldworkers from embarking on research of a similar nature. However, for the purposes of this article, the

reflections are intended to reveal the value of meticulously keeping a fieldwork diary when working in unfamiliar and potentially volatile conditions.

### **What is a Research Diary?**

In qualitative research, the research diary is a common tool used by researchers whose primary methods of data collection are, broadly speaking, ethnographic (Burgess, 1981; Silverman, 2005). Much of the literature offered on the value of keeping a research diary emanates from the pedagogical field, which emphasizes the importance of the diary as a reflexive research tool. In research methodology literature the diary is considered a way to record practical decisions taken during the data collection process, but it has also been described as a vehicle for documenting personal reflections (Gibbs, 2007; Silverman, 2005). Others have outlined the benefits in maintaining diaries as a form of logging device (Borg, 2001) for recording the important contact details of respondents met during the period of fieldwork, which in turn serve as an important resource to be referred back to at any stage. Although no definitive template exists for what amounts to a research diary, scholars (e.g., Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993; Borg, 2001; Burgess, 1981; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973) share the view that the diary should include a substantive record of the research process, including who has been interviewed and when, where these meetings took place, and who was present. In addition, the diary should record the methodological steps taken to gather the data. Expanding upon the need to record accurately these steps that were taken during the collection of data, Burgess (1981) has noted:

While it is widely acknowledged that ethnographic research involves observation and interviews there are still further questions that need to be raised. Firstly, under what circumstances were observations made? Secondly, what role was taken by the researcher? Thirdly, what informants were selected for study? Finally, how were the informants selected? (p. 77)

Other proponents of the research diary have suggested that, far from being solely a repository for thoughts and courses of action taken, the diary is an integral part of a researcher's knowledge development (Engin, 2011). Newbury (2001) has further argued, "The research diary can be seen as a melting pot for all of the different ingredients of a research project - prior experience, observations, readings, ideas - and a means of capturing the resulting interplay of elements" (p. 3). In addition, the research diary is an opportunity for researchers to be open and honest about their personal transformation during the fieldwork process, which has led some to suggest that diaries of this type amount to "heuristic and emic accounts of teaching and learning" (Bailey, 1983, p. 67). Whereas there is an appreciation concerning the importance of maintaining field work diaries and field notes in general, Burgess (1981) has highlighted the relatively limited amount of information on the actual process of maintaining such a diary: "While [researchers] indicate that part of their research activities involves writing notes and keeping diaries, they do not tell us, in any detail, about how these diaries may be established and maintained" (p. 75).

It is generally accepted that the diary should include some analytical commentary on how the research is developing. Information that may assist the researcher in making sense of the array of data that is being gathered should be recorded alongside the methodological challenges that have been faced. This should not necessarily take the form of an in-depth analytical critique; rather, the researcher records "hunches" he or she has had while reading over the material gathered and records these thoughts in the diary for later reflection. Detailing thoughts on the data collected provides an important insight into how the research questions informing the project have developed and perhaps changed over time. It is this point that has led Engin (2011), citing Gerstl-Pepin and Patrizio, to assert that, "The journal can act as a catalyst for discussion which leads to

‘epistemological awareness’ (Gerstl-Pepin & Patrizio, 2009, p. 300) as the diary writer realises how their own knowledge is created” (p. 297). Therefore, recording in the research diaries how the work has inevitably changed over time allows researchers to develop a clearer understanding of their thought processes and how these in turn have helped shape the direction of the study.

### **A Cathartic Tool and Learning Resource for Novice Researchers**

A number of scholars have suggested that the act of diary writing can be considered cathartic in so far as the deepest frustrations, fears, and anxieties of the researcher can be channelled from the internal to the external in the form of writing. Cooper (1991) has suggested:

Writing in a journal is ... a way to attend to the self, to care for and feed oneself. It can be a place to dump anger, guilt, or fear ... It can be a place to clarify what it is we feel angry or guilty about. (p. 105)

A further contention is that the research diary assists in rationalizing fieldwork anxiety, allows for the alleviation of fieldwork frustration, and helps with managing fears and anxieties when working alone. These issues are further brought into sharp focus when the fieldwork that is being carried out is set against a backdrop of potentially volatile conflict or other risk-laden environments. During time spent in the West Bank, I meticulously recorded personal anxieties with working so far from home, anger at what I perceived to be societal inequalities, and a number of other deep rooted grievances. In so doing I found the journal extremely helpful in acting as a suitable outlet for these fears and frustrations. The physical act of writing, recording, and articulating my concerns gave me the much sought after mental freedom and opportunity to rationally analyse and clarify what exactly it was that I was scared, frustrated, or angry with. But more importantly, it gave me the clarity of thought to then work out a means of overcoming these fears, managing my frustrations, and successfully completing the task that I had set out to do.

Borg (2001) referred to the psycho-emotional support the research diary provides when working in relative isolation. The research diary substituted for the role of a sympathetic fellow PhD student to whom we turn and rely on for reassurance and support when faced with seemingly unmanageable difficulties or insurmountable goals. The diary allowed him to channel fears and disappointments in a structured way, and through the process of recording these fears he was able to draw a line in the sand and carry on with the data collection process. Engin (2011), too, has drawn attention to the view that the research diary she kept gave her the opportunity to record the highs and lows of the process (p. 299). Borg (2001) has further suggested:

We rarely hear about the emotional side of doing research, and the implicit message researchers may derive from this silence is that emotions have no role to play in their work and perhaps even that these should be denied and suppressed. Emotions though are an undeniable part of the human researcher’s work, and the research journal can assist the researcher in acknowledging these emotions, expressing them, and particularly where these emotions threaten the progress of the research, analysing and reacting to them. (p. 164)

This can have a significant impact upon the future direction of any research project, but I would argue has a heightened impact when the stakes are highest, such as is the case when working in a volatile region or far from the relative comfort and safety of home. In recording emotion, and the impact of the work upon oneself, the researcher is able to rationally figure out an appropriate course of action to take when confronted with seemingly intractable challenges, an issue I return to at a later stage of this article.

The research diary is not only a useful referral device for the researcher but it can also provide important understandings as to the practicalities of conducting research; therefore, reviewing the diaries of other likeminded researchers would amount to an invaluable learning opportunity for the novice or beginning researcher. Borg (2001) has previously noted that insights into “doing” research are not readily available from any other source. Altrichter et al. (1993) have suggested that the research diary “makes visible both the successful and (apparently) unsuccessful routes of learning and discovery so that they can be revisited and subjected to analysis” (p. 12).

Notwithstanding the benefits in doing so, I maintain that writing is an inherently personal venture, and making public the honest accounts of fears and anxieties experienced while on data collection will be considered by some “a bridge too far.” After all, who wishes to have their deepest fears and anxieties accessible in the public domain to be poured over by over-zealous, early-career researchers? Yet, despite the relatively uncomfortable aspect of exposing one’s personal limitations, I maintain that making visible the invisible processes of fieldwork would undoubtedly assist inexperienced fieldworkers, especially those who are hoping to collect data in places considered unstable or insecure. It is often suggested that only by learning from mistakes made can we truly be sure we will avoid repeating them in the future. When the stakes are higher, as is the case when working in volatile or dangerous regions, there is little to be gained from putting oneself in unnecessarily dangerous positions. The early career researcher would thus benefit greatly from learning from other peoples’ mistakes, and by reviewing meticulously kept research diaries, perhaps a number of these inherent dangers could be limited.

Although the focus thus far has been on the substance and role that the research diary can assume for those working in challenging or potentially volatile regions, what follows is an inherently personal insight into the various challenges faced when engaged in data collection across the West Bank and the invaluable role that the research diary assumed throughout. I offer these insights into the challenges faced primarily as a learning tool, and to outline how the regular use of research diaries assisted in managing these difficulties effectively. Although not the focus of this article, I would echo the views of Jeffery Sluka (1990) who has espoused the benefits of making available honest accounts of the difficulties faced when conducting fieldwork in potentially volatile surroundings in order to counteract the silence that abounds within research literature.

### **Reflections From My Personal Research Diaries**

Shaffir and Stebbins (1991) have suggested, “Fieldwork must certainly rank with the more disagreeable activities that humanity has fashioned for itself. It is usually inconvenient, to say the least, sometimes physically uncomfortable, frequently embarrassing, and to a degree, always tense” (p. 1). Many of the personal experiences offered certainly match this rather ominous description and therefore may beg the question, why bother? But fieldwork is also fascinating, interesting, and immensely rewarding. The following section of the article is informed by a content analysis of over 50,000 words recorded during 8 months of data collection. In managing this voluminous body of data, I followed the example of Borg (2001) and re-read the diaries on a number of occasions, allocating codes to segments of text and finally collating these codes under four overarching themes. These four themes of particular significance are: (a) practical issues faced during data collection, (b) dangerous fieldwork, (c) methodological challenges, and (d) personal challenges. My desire to reflect critically on the time spent collecting empirical data for my thesis (especially the time I invested living in Jerusalem) is due in large measure to the fact that I had not anticipated that my research diaries would ultimately become as important to me as they are. Although I invested the same amount of time in collecting empirical data in Belfast, I choose to focus solely on my Palestinian field notes because it was this experience which I found, perhaps unsurprisingly, much more challenging. Throughout the following reflections, direct

extracts from the diaries are provided, which in turn highlight the challenges I had to negotiate on a daily basis.

### **Practical Issues Faced During Data Collection**

As any researcher whose fieldwork has involved gathering data in unfamiliar or unstable areas would confirm, there were a range of practical issues that had a bearing on my ability to effectively conduct fieldwork across the West Bank. Although they may appear to be somewhat trivial, and would be issues easily resolved had I been working in Belfast, they amounted to major concerns when based so far from support networks at home. Some of these issues included: financial concerns I had while away, data management and storage of data in a conflict zone, mistakes made in my advance preparations, and the challenges of internal travel throughout the West Bank. As I am restricted in terms of space, I cannot provide extracts to highlight each of these points but will select those which I feel could benefit like-minded researchers who plan on working in similar circumstances.

The practicalities concerning travel in the West Bank, in particular negotiating the dense security apparatus (e.g., checkpoints, “security barriers,” and a separation wall, a feature of the geographical landscape), meant that it became necessary to always be conscious of personal time management. I had to ensure that I left in good time to make meetings so that I was not late for my respondents, who had generously taken a break from their busy schedules to meet me. In organising and planning my days, I had to make sure not to schedule a meeting in Ramallah in the morning and a meeting in Jerusalem the same afternoon because there was little guarantee that I would make these meetings on time. The ad hoc nature of negotiating checkpoints, often shut with little advance warning, made time management especially challenging (although respondents with whom I met were always sympathetic to this issue when I inevitably was running behind schedule). In addition, travelling for long periods in small and cramped vehicles became more exhausting and physically draining than I had previously imagined it would be. Although I had previously stayed in Ramallah on a number of occasions, and was thus familiar with the internal transportation system, I still felt worn out and drained from the long days of travelling. Undoubtedly, the research diary served the useful purpose of acting as an invaluable scheduling device for organising meetings, among other things, but it also permitted me the opportunity to record and appreciate the additional challenges of working and living in unfamiliar and challenging surroundings. In recording my travel experiences, I was able to fully consider the limits to what I could reasonably expect to achieve in any one day, or week for that matter:

Today I spent over 2 and a half hours on the bus trying to get home from Ramallah, the travel time in rush hour and the waiting at the checkpoints made the whole experience exhausting. It is especially annoying given the fact that the distance is only some 13km from the front of the Institute to the centre of Ramallah. I noted that on this occasion I wasn't required to be off the bus when passing through the checkpoint, this is not the norm however, and I often stand in line at the checkpoint for over an hour waiting, especially should it be busy. This is something I would need to be careful about and make sure I don't schedule any more than one meeting a day or I would run the risk of being late for that meeting. (research diary, Ramallah, February 23, 2011)

The frustration of having meetings cancelled at the last minute is an issue all qualitative researchers who rely on interviews as their primary data collection method will experience regularly. Whereas this is something I experienced both in Belfast and Ramallah, the ramifications of a last minute cancellation in Ramallah, given the protracted travel times, was far greater. On a number of occasions I recorded frustration at the research process and in particular

vented feelings of anger at respondents who had consistently cancelled on me. The following extract documents these frustrations while also revealing how I managed to work through any indecision I had. The research diary in this instance records my critical reflections on the challenges associated with working in regions associated with conflict and daily disruption:

I was up early this morning making my way to Nablus to meet with (N), this involved catching the bus to Ramallah (1-2 hours) and then waiting for the bus to take me on to Nablus. In total I would be spending in excess of 6 hours travelling to and from Nablus to meet with him. As I had just pulled out of Ramallah (N) texted me to say that he could no longer make the meeting, this is the 5<sup>th</sup> time he has cancelled on me and I am beginning to doubt if this meeting will ever take place. His would be a great narrative to have and his views would be really welcome but he constantly cancels. I'm getting more and more frustrated with this and am really at odds as to whether to rearrange. (research diary, Jerusalem, February 26, 2011)

The diary on this occasion allowed me to channel feelings of frustration about the research in the appropriate manner, and not in a manner that would have been ultimately counter-productive, such as by emailing the unreliable respondent. Upon reflecting over the extract I had recorded on the day, the benefits of meeting with this specific person were rationalised, and I decided upon a suitable course of action. I persevered in securing an interview with "N" that, ultimately, turned out to be quite fruitful. Upon reflection, the diary allowed for a deeper appreciation of the difficulties that many of my respondents had to endure on a daily basis. Although initially the diary entry appears full of frustration and anger, later recordings documented a deep appreciation and gratitude for the meetings that I had managed to secure. The diary ultimately aided critical reflection on my involvement in the research process and the often ethnocentric perceptions that Western scholars bring to this process when immersed in unfamiliar cultural environments.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the relatively modest (yet very welcome) doctoral scholarship that I was living on, the financial difficulties faced when working so far from home were a constant source of worry and anxiety. It is rarely the case that we read about the financial constraints under which fieldworkers are working. On a number of occasions I made reference to my limited funds and my fear that I would not be able to finish the work if I was not successful with the many funding applications on which I was waiting. The bursary I had been awarded was far from sufficient to allow me to adequately conduct the 6 month-long fieldwork in the West Bank, and as such I made a number of applications to the university's internal funding bodies and to a number of outside groups for support towards the work. The stress of worrying about finances, and what would be a catastrophic need to depart the field should I be unsuccessful in my applications, was a recurring theme in the fieldwork diaries:

I will be absolutely skint at the end of this and don't know how I am going to last the summer. I really detest having these money worries, they really get on top of me and preoccupy my mind, in fact it is almost impossible to focus on anything but these! I know I have to settle my bill here which will be in the region of £650.00 for the month and a half that is still outstanding, not to mention my phone bill as well. This gets to me big time but it was always going to be the case that I would be massively overdrawn by the end of my time here. (research diary, Jerusalem, July 3, 2011)

One final practical difficulty I wish to highlight was the constant fear of having data confiscated at any number of checkpoints I negotiated on a daily basis, or indeed at airport security. This practical concern is documented in the literature and as a result I was aware of the potential for this to occur (Norman, 2009; Radsch, 2009; Sriram, King, Mertus, Martin-Ortega, & Herman,

2009). Yet to be forewarned on this occasion did not necessarily mean I was not apprehensive about the eventuality coming to fruition. The research diary recorded these fears and anxieties but most importantly afforded the space to compose a strategy for overcoming this logistical challenge. In taking on the views and opinions of friends and colleagues who had worked under similar circumstances, I decided that instead of carrying notebooks with important information through the many checkpoints that exist across the region I would type up any notes made and email them through to my university account wherever possible. Similarly, audio transcripts and interview data were kept safe by using online storage devices to remotely secure the information I had worked so hard to gather:

I am beginning to worry about getting all this information home. There have been horror stories of people having their images deleted from their cameras and the data that they have transcribed being lost amidst the security procedures that take place in Ben Gurion airport. Fellow researchers in the institute have had their laptops seized before and I have heard of peoples' computers being destroyed at checkpoints. The security procedures (which I am well aware of and know how draconian they can be) have been increased in recent months given all the tension in the air. I really don't want to lose any of my hard gained data when going home so I think I will be paying a fee to secure a larger [online storage] space. (research diary, Jerusalem, June 12, 2011)

The examples listed above I have shared in order to shed light on some of the logistical issues I faced while engaged in my data collection in the West Bank. These extracts are only a small sample of some of the challenges I had to overcome but are important nonetheless. It must be stressed, however, that it is only a select sample. Other issues included: mistakes made in terms of accessing respondents in advance of entering the field, administration difficulties with the University at home, and difficulties with living in shared accommodation, among others.

### **Dangerous Fieldwork**

Working in a region famed for its insecurity and volatility meant that a significant amount of writing in the diaries focussed on the many hazardous incidents which occurred during the period spent living in the area. The issue of conducting research in violent areas or places referred to as "conflict zones" is covered extensively in a range of literature (Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Nilan, 2002; Sluka, 1990; Sriram et al., 2009; Williams, Dunlap, Johnson, & Hamid, 1992). However, Sluka (1990) has suggested that research which involves working in unstable or volatile regions has been avoided in large part due to exaggeration of the dangers associated therein and a relative paucity of information available to guide those wishing to become engaged in the process. It has been further suggested that researchers are dissuaded from conducting work in unfamiliar or unstable places given the dearth of strategies available for coping with the difficulties that may arise in the field (Sluka, 1990). The argument to be made, therefore, is for a greater willingness to publish more openly information recorded in the personal research diaries of socio-anthropologists working in politically charged or potentially volatile regions, with the outcome being that novice or beginning researchers, particularly those interested in conducting similar fieldwork, would feel better equipped to deal with the challenges they may encounter. The journal articles and books I read in advance of arriving in the West Bank were unquestionably interesting and to some extent I found their accounts reassuring. Nevertheless, the majority of these reflections were linked to abstract theoretical arguments on "risk" or participant safety, on the failings of university ethics committees to appropriately assess potential or actual risk, and on the issue of participant vulnerability, with the result being that they came across as formulaic. The extracts I share in this section are selected to provide small, yet sincere, examples of some of the challenges I faced when working in the region.



My worries and apprehensions about working across the West Bank were realised on a number of separate occasions. These in turn were recorded in the diaries I kept, alongside the feelings of vulnerability and personal safety issues that were ever-present. Observation of the 2011 *Nakba* commemorations in Ramallah involved exposure to a large scale riot near the Qalandia checkpoint, the intensity of which I had never experienced despite living not far from an interface area in Belfast which has seen in recent years some of the most violent clashes between Nationalist and Loyalist youths and the security forces. In the diary, I recorded in some detail my feelings of despair and fear after having experienced first-hand the effects of Israeli Defence Force crowd dispersal techniques, including exposure to potent tear gas, “skunk” water, plastic ball-bearings, and on occasion live ammunition. Apprehension at being caught at the events as they unfolded and the potentially catastrophic ramifications of being hurt or seriously injured as a result were issues documented in great detail in the diary. Although I retained a semblance of control over participation in the commemoration, in so much as I could leave the scene at any time, I felt much more uneasy when acts of arbitrary violence occurred in Jerusalem or across the West Bank, which I could not predict or have control over. This was particularly noticeable on one occasion when a large bomb detonated outside the central bus station in West Jerusalem. The station was a place I would make regular use of and the seemingly indiscriminate nature of the attack had a significant impact on my personal feelings of safety and security. I began to question the rationale for exposing myself to what friends and family members might consider to be unnecessary risk. The extract recorded that day highlights how I attempted to rationalise feelings of fear, anxiety, and guilt following the bomb explosion in Jerusalem:

Practically speaking, how is one supposed to manage personal risk in a place like this? Today I got scared for the first time since I have been here, a bomb exploded outside the crowded central bus station, West Jerusalem, where I had bought my ticket to Eilat only a week or so earlier. There seem to be 33 people injured some seriously and it looks like a few may have died as a result of the blast. This is not a great omen and has made me think a lot about why I am here. For the first time I am thinking critically about personal safety. I am beginning to wonder what the hell is the point in getting caught up in somebody else’s problems? I am annoyed that I am thinking like this at this stage but I can’t help it. I was nervous before and am now even more nervous. But I am reminding myself that things like this do happen in Jerusalem and there’s nothing I can do to combat against this. The indiscriminate nature of the attack was hard to swallow. I was there only recently! I take buses similar to the one that was blown up, they pass me every day! Are these now off limits? (research diary, Jerusalem, March 23, 2011)

In recording these experiences and my feelings surrounding these events I felt able to relieve some of the anxiety and fear I had allowed myself to be overcome by (Cooper, 1991). The diary acted as a repository for rational thought processing and writing was a cathartic tool used to manage and overcome potentially negative feelings. Writing clarified my thought process and ensured that I was able to draw a line under what had been quite a traumatic event. My time in Jerusalem coincided with an escalation in military operations between the Israeli Defence Forces and Palestinian combatants from the Gaza Strip. This constant threat level was an issue that I learned to come to terms with over time in so much as I rather ashamedly recorded the incidents dispassionately in the diary, and such underlying threats to personal security became par for the course of working in the region:

Military operations have intensified in the Gaza Strip with Hamas (or unknown militants) and the Israeli Defence Forces exchanging tit for tat fire, but it has begun to escalate pretty badly. Recent activities such as the Itamar Massacre at the Itamar Settlement (Nablus) have put a heightened sense of tension in the air. You do sense that anything

could happen now at this stage but I guess we are well removed from anything here.  
(research diary, Ramallah, March 21, 2011)

One period of time during which I was in the field (February–August 2011) coincided with what several leading authorities refer to as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Arab Uprising, or as it is more conventionally called, the Arab Spring. The continuing instability that was sweeping across the region and the effect these revolts were having upon the Palestinian population in the West Bank were documented in the diaries. Several sections recorded the violence in Cairo, the perceived Iranian acts of aggression, and the uncertainty in Tunisia and Syria. These incidents, although not directly affecting my own personal safety, did add to already existing fears and apprehensions of working in a potentially volatile region. The following is an insight into the uncertainty I felt towards the situation as it was unfolding. The diary served as a useful practical tool in providing a chronological overview of the context in which the *Nakba* commemoration under investigation was taking place, a theme which ultimately became important during the final write up of the research:

The political situation of the day is deteriorating quite badly. Granted I can't really see its manifestation here in the Jerusalem bubble, but Egypt, Libya, Jordan and Tunisia all look to be experiencing serious violence at the moment. Iran has taken warships through the Suez Canal for the first time in 3 decades and this is viewed as hugely provocative in Israel. I am still not sure how this will affect the West Bank (or indeed if it will at all).  
(research diary, Jerusalem, February 22, 2011)

Again, as I am limited in terms of space, a number of other fears documented in the diary are worth mentioning here, including apprehension in meeting with groups such as Hamas (given their suppressed identity in the West Bank and the stigma attached therein), suspicion of being under surveillance, and worry about negotiating access at the airport upon my arrival. It should be noted that my experience with Hamas representatives, despite my apprehension, was on each and every occasion extremely positive and belies the negative stereotype presented by a range of Western media outlets.

### **Methodological Challenges**

The methodological challenges encountered while away, as documented in the fieldwork diaries, included: ethical concerns, accessing respondents, the importance of snowball sampling or chain referral methods, negotiating with gatekeepers, rapport building, among others. These methodological challenges are arguably the most useful diary entries I made, in terms of them being referred to in detail when critiquing the efficacy of my chosen methods. Burgess (1981) suggested the importance of recording methodological challenges faced while involved in any data collection lies in that it “can help the researcher to reflect on the philosophical, practical, ethical and political aspects of the research process” (p. 78). Although incorporating some of the methodological issues listed by Burgess (1981), the entries made during time spent in Palestine centred primarily on the practical methodological issues. On occasion I recorded in triumphant detail how I managed to secure access to a diverse range of respondents, espousing, in particular, the benefits of snowball sampling techniques when working in unfamiliar surroundings. The following extracts are evidence of the extent to which snowball sampling was the most effective means of securing future research participants:

A big breakthrough came after a call to (B) in BADIL resource centre for Palestinian residency and refugee rights, I have been invited to the Al Awda poster competition in Bethlehem and I must admit that it wasn't a minute too soon. It is taking place at 3pm on

Saturday and the National Committee Meeting for the Commemoration of the *Nakba* is taking place the Sunday at 11:00am. I have been invited to this too! I cannot believe this, in the space of one meeting with BADIL I have been invited to the highest organ of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in terms of organising the commemoration, The National Committee for the Commemoration of the *Nakba*. I am delighted, absolutely over the moon! (research diary, Bethlehem, March 23, 2011)

(K) has once again been inspirational in setting these meetings up. I dread to think how I would have been able to be connected with all my respondents if it had not been for his steadfast support. (research diary, Ramallah, June 21, 2011)

On a number of occasions, I made detailed notes on the interview exchange itself, noting how I found interviewing Palestinian respondents and the manner in which I had developed my interview technique. These reflections allowed for a critique of my interview technique, to acknowledge what did/did not work well and to ascertain the most appropriate spaces to organise meetings in the future. Following every interview, I recorded what went well, questions that worked, questions that were perhaps too vague, and questions that provoked a response and others that failed to, and in so doing I charted the development of my interview technique over the duration of time spent on field work. These reflections remain invaluable research tools as I have moved on in my career. A number of practical issues concerning conducting interviews were noted, including the decision to record interviews. Often the meetings I had were in one of Ramallah's bustling coffee houses, which rendered any recording obsolete. Notwithstanding the practical issues associated with recording, a number of participants felt uneasy with the audio recording and asked for the device to be switched off. Whereas recording interviews in Belfast was not problematic, in Palestine it could be argued that the opposite was true.

One final methodological challenge I choose to highlight concerns the difficulties I sometimes faced in creating a rapport with a number of respondents. On occasion I noted an unwillingness to readily answer questions and a sense of frustration at my perceived lack of empathy. In addressing this issue, I used the diaries to reflect on the highly delicate nature of the topic I was covering and to develop a more sensitive approach to the questions I was asking, given that on a number of occasions many of the questions I had asked had proved difficult for my Palestinian respondents to reflect upon. The *Nakba*, the commemoration of which informs my research at present, remains the most traumatic event in collective Palestinian history (Sadi & Abu Lughod, 2007); therefore, the reluctance and reticence of some participants to engage with an outsider on the topic was to be expected. Nevertheless, my frustration at my inability to break down this trust barrier was documented on a number of occasions, as evident in the extract listed below:

The meeting with (I) lasted a lot longer than I had thought it would (50 minutes). I really didn't seem to have her full trust or enthusiasm though. This is something I have noticed so far especially when looking at something as sensitive as the *Nakba*. The trust just isn't automatically given to you. I'm trying desperately to work on this but it is perhaps inevitable that I will face this issue as an outsider here. (research diary, Jerusalem, March 8, 2011)

The research diary allowed for a greater appreciation of the importance of gaining trust and rapport, particularly when working in challenging surroundings or when engaged in research on sensitive issues. In recording in detail the reactions I received from various respondents when we first met and also the measures I took to alleviate some of the suspicions I generated as an outsider, I was able to chart how my research technique and ability to be accepted as an outsider developed over time. This was an issue other researchers working in similar circumstances had

faced in the past (Norman, 2009; Radsch, 2009). Other methodological challenges that I experienced included: the difficulties in interviewing through an interpreter (on one occasion only) and my concerns over ethics and taking photographs at the event.

### **Personal Challenges**

The final section, in what has been a necessarily succinct overview, reflects on some of the more personal challenges I had to manage. Despite being perhaps the least important in terms of the final write up of any thesis, they are arguably the issues that are most important on an intimate level to any researcher who spends a significant period of time working far from home. These personal challenges are what will ultimately affect the ability of the researcher to carry out the fieldwork to the best of their ability. Yet, as Borg (2001) has succinctly summarised:

We rarely hear about the emotional side of doing research, and the implicit message researchers may derive from the silence is that emotions have no role to play in their work and perhaps these should be denied and suppressed. (p. 164)

This candid revelation is particularly true when the work one is engaged in takes place against the backdrop of ongoing conflict or is being carried out far from the relative comfort of the PhD office at the university. In reality, it is fear, worry, anxiety, loneliness, and apprehension that ultimately inform many of the major choices made in the field. The following extract documented my anger and frustration at allowing my feelings of isolation and loneliness affect my productivity:

The weekend was just ok. I wasn't feeling very well both physically and mentally and was pretty distracted to be honest. I ended up being quite unproductive and this was frustrating me. I needed to try and make sure that my interview schedule was solid this week and it really didn't happen, I didn't even contact (X) like I should have done. (research diary, Jerusalem, March 7, 2011)

The challenges that any researcher faces when working far from loved ones back home were issues that I often recorded in the diaries. These personal challenges included feeling guilty about being away from my wife and family for so long, suffering anxiety and stress with the work, and trying to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness. One of the earliest entries in my diary notes a decision to stay in a research institute based in East Jerusalem as opposed to living by myself in an apartment in Ramallah. Being surrounded by like-minded researchers gave me a sense of camaraderie that I realised from early on was especially important to me. In overcoming feelings of isolation and loneliness I developed an evening routine revolving around Skype, by calling friends and family and catching up on other people's lives, which is not something that is readily recorded in the literature on conducting fieldwork. Rarely, if ever, do we read about the impact of working on your own in an unfamiliar setting. The paucity of open, honest, and candid discussion on the emotional impact of being far from home and its effect on the ability to conduct research is an issue that should be addressed. Researchers intending to work in isolation, far from the comfort and support of those left behind, should be fully aware of the potential impact that such an experience can have on one's emotional and physical well-being. The image of the intrepid adventurer travelling to the great unknown to work effortlessly in challenging surroundings, when coupled with a dearth of practical literature that seeks to describe fieldwork challenges, is misleading and potentially harmful to those wishing to embark on similar projects. The extract below gives insight into the challenges I felt:

I've been working flat out the past week and the weekend has finally arrived. It makes no difference to me though because yet again everyone else in the place has left. They all have partners or families in the area who they can meet up with and the simple fact is that I don't. I would have done anything to have a chat and drink with someone this evening but instead I made do with a walk through the Old City and a DVD. I think the loneliness is getting to me a bit and I never thought it would. (research diary, Jerusalem, April 6, 2011)

When engaged in challenging fieldwork one can reasonably expect to doubt the validity and rigour of the data they are collecting and to continuously question whether enough data has been collected in order to answer the research questions. As a result, the diary includes entries on some of the doubts I was having. Often my misgivings over the work coincided with my feelings of loneliness, and I attribute this to an inability to get reassurances from like-minded colleagues at home and friends and family, who we often turn to for reassurance and to mitigate feelings of apprehension. In addition to recording these doubts, I took time to record feelings of satisfaction with the work and to document the highlights of the week that had passed. This form of self-praise gave reassurances for my presence in the field and the work I had been carrying out, while also ensuring that the diary was not solely a repository for documenting fears, frustrations, or anxieties. The following are provided as evidence of both:

Doubts over the work have made me really miss home today. I was feeling quite homesick today for the first time in a while. I get like that when I don't leave this place. I know I have interviewed some really high profile figures but I am concerned that I have not interviewed enough. There's not much I can do though to combat these worries. (research diary, Jerusalem, April 11, 2011)

My head feels good and clear. I admit that there is always more that can or could have been done at this stage, but I am feeling confident. I am learning significantly from being in the field and I could not have accessed all these groups had I been behind a desk in Belfast. Being immersed in the field for such a period of time, and during such a tumultuous period has really helped me. (research diary, Ramallah, May 24, 2011)

The extracts I have provided above are an honest and candid sample of some of the more personal challenges I faced in Palestine. I stress that the personal nature of these extracts means that it is highly unlikely that two experiences will ever be the same. Some other personal issues I had to consider included: not being at home during family difficulties, the importance of making close friends when away, exhaustion following ethnographic observations, attachment to respondents, and the difficulties encountered when leaving the field, the latter being an issue that is particularly prevalent in the existing literature on conducting ethnographic fieldwork in potentially volatile regions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This article has outlined the benefits of maintaining a research diary when working in unfamiliar or unstable research settings far from the relative comfort of home. The merits of the research diary as more than simply a useful logging device are discussed, with the conclusion being that they become useful repositories for critical reflection on the research process as it is unfolding, cathartic tools to air grievances, and important resources to rationalise decision making processes at times of great uncertainty. It would be supercilious of me to suggest that I can offer definitive advice to anyone who is hoping to carry out interviews in the West Bank, or indeed with respondents in Belfast. Rarely will any two fieldwork experiences be entirely similar. It has been

my intention to show how I maintained a research diary as an important tool to try and make sense of what is a challenging enterprise, namely conducting fieldwork in a potentially volatile or dangerous area. I further argue that by making visible and available the important notes which are documented in the research diaries of those who have conducted fieldwork of this nature, novice or experienced fieldworkers engaged in similar processes can learn that the many challenges they will face are not unique. This, I suggest, can be an immense source of comfort during a period of uncertainty and can aid in providing reassurance when at your most vulnerable.

In providing these personal reflections, I share the view of Shaffir and Stebbins (1991), who suggested that “Learning about the research experiences of others is essential for students because it enables them to anticipate more accurately the trials and rewards of their own research efforts” (p. xi). My reflections are framed in such a way as to be practically beneficial in outlining potential pitfalls and dangers while also highlighting the emotional impact of fieldwork. More often than not, the final fieldwork report that informs research projects in unstable areas fails to adequately account for the emotional and practical difficulties faced. As qualitative researchers, it is incumbent upon us to think reflexively about the challenges negotiated and overcome during the data collection process, but often these reflections are shoehorned into an already overflowing methodology section in the final thesis and rarely given the credence which I fervently maintain they deserve. As Shaffir and Stebbins (1991) again highlighted:

Researcher fieldwork accounts typically deal with such matters as how the hurdles blocking entry were overcome successfully and how the emergent relationships with subjects were cultivated and maintained during the course of the study; the emotional pains of this work rarely are mentioned. (p. 2)

Yet, though I inevitably struggled with my fieldwork at times, I documented important personal resolve, personal development, and resilience in overcoming challenges. Importantly, I wish to emphasise that I found the entire process to be extremely worthwhile and immensely rewarding. To this day I highly value the relationships I made while away and thoroughly enjoyed coming to terms with living immersed in a completely new culture. My personal reflections as recorded in these fieldwork diaries are not to be viewed as a checklist of dos or don'ts; after all, no two experiences are ever likely to be the same. Nevertheless, when I do return to work in similar conflicted environments, it will be possible to review the diary entries made during this period of time away in Palestine, including the practical steps taken and, more importantly, the mistakes I made, in order to ensure I am better prepared to manage and navigate potentially negative outcomes. For other early career researchers wishing to engage in similar research, the article highlights the merits in documenting challenges faced and overcome, the benefits in enhancing the reflective side of field research, and the positive aspects in appreciating the worthwhile nature of the work you are conducting.

In terms of being an invaluable learning tool, fieldwork diaries act as the place where personal stories of rapport building and strange encounters are recorded. They afford researchers the space to record these important interactions and how they affected them personally. Therefore, they ought to be considered an important resource, which when used appropriately, have the potential to assist those who are embarking on similar research. A failure to honestly publish the difficulties experienced when engaged in dangerous or potentially hazardous fieldwork generates a culture of silence, which is maintained and which fails to adequately consider the views held by critical sociological thinkers such as C. Wright Mills (1959), whose views appropriately conclude this article: “Only by conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual ways of working can a useful sense of method and theory be imparted to the beginning student” (p. 1).

## References

- Altrichter, H., Posch, P., & Somekh, B. (1993). *Teachers investigate their work: An introduction to the methods of action research*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Bailey, K. M. (1983). Competitiveness and anxiety in adult second language learning: Looking at and through the diary studies. In H. Seliger & M. Long (Eds.), *Classroom-oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 67–103). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Borg, S. (2001). The research journal: A tool for promoting and understanding researcher development. *Language Teaching Research*, 5(2), 156–177.
- Burgess, R. G. (1981). Keeping a research diary. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 11(1), 75–83.
- Cooper, J. E. (1991). Telling our own stories: The reading and writing of journals and diaries. In C. Witherell & N. Noddings (Eds.), *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education* (pp. 96–112). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Engin, M. (2011). Research diary: A tool for scaffolding. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(3), 296–306.
- Gerstl-Pepin, C., & Patrizio, K. (2009). Learning from Dumbledore's Pensieve: A metaphor as an aid in teaching reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 9(3), 299–308.
- Gibbs, G. (2007). *Analyzing qualitative data*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Kovats-Bernat, C. (2002). Negotiating dangerous fields: Pragmatic strategies for fieldwork amid violence and terror. *American Anthropologist*, 104(1), 208–222.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Newbury, D. (2001). Diaries and fieldnotes in the research process. *Research Issues in Art, Design, and Media*, (1).
- Nilan, P. (2002). Dangerous fieldwork re-examined: The question of researcher subject position. *Qualitative Research*, 2, 363–386.
- Norman, J. (2009). Got trust? The challenge of gaining access in conflict zones. In C. L. Sriram, J. C. King, J. A. Mertus, O. Martin-Ortega, & J. Herman (Eds.), *Surviving field research: Working in violent and difficult situations* (pp. 71–91). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Radsch, C. (2009). From cell phones to coffee: Issues of access in Egypt and Lebanon. In C. L. Sriram, J. C. King, J. A. Mertus, O. Martin-Ortega, & J. Herman (Eds.), *Surviving field research: Working in violent and difficult situations* (pp. 91–108). London, United Kingdom, Routledge.
- Sadi, A. H., & Abu Lughod, L. (2007). *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the claims of memory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

- Schatzman, L., & Strauss, A. (1973). *Field research: Strategies for a natural sociology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Shaffir, W. B., & Stebbins, R. A. (Eds.). (1991). *Experiencing fieldwork: An inside view of qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Sluka, J. A. (1990). Participant observation in violent social contexts. *Human Organisation*, 49(20), 114–126.
- Sriram, C. L., King, J. C., Mertus, J. A., Martin-Ortega, O., & Herman, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Surviving field research: Working in violent and difficult situations*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Williams, T., Dunlap, E., Johnson, B. D., & Hamid, A. (1992). Personal safety in dangerous places. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 21(3), 343–374.