

Research with residential childcare practitioners: Early reflections of managing harm in a qualitative diary study

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Abstract

Qualitative audio diary methods are an effective tool to explore emotions in social research as the method helps to elucidate diverse and sequential emotional experiences. Diary methods provide opportunities for research to be conducted over time in hard-to-reach settings, with hard-to-reach groups, producing rich data on sensitive topics. However, diary methods also provide ethical challenges, especially for novice researchers. Residential childcare practitioners are an important workforce that support looked after children and young people in residential children's homes, and this article reflects on the initial ethical challenges of using an audio diary method to study their emotional experiences. By exploring the ethical processes of minimising harm in a diary study with practitioners this article informs future diary research and highlights the potential use of audio diaries in future residential childcare practice.

Keywords

Diary methods, residential childcare practitioners, group care, reflective practice, ethics, managing harm

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Introduction

Residential childcare practitioners (RCPs) are an important workforce who provide care to looked-after children and young people in residential children's homes. The therapeutic relationships RCPs have with looked-after children and young people in residential care are paramount to positive outcomes and development, impacting on the therapeutic milieu in the residential homes (Care Inquiry, 2013; Garfat and Gharabaghi, 2019; Munro, 2011; Parry et al., 2021b; Robinson et al., 2017). RCPs' relational work with a vulnerable and at times volatile population is intrinsically emotional and complex (Burbidge et al., 2020; Cameron and Das, 2019; Seti, 2008). There is a paucity of research that conceptually considers residential childcare practitioners' everyday emotional experiences; this study addresses this gap using diary methods.

Diary methods

In this study an audio diary was utilised to answer the research questions, defined as: 'audio recordings of participants' responses and reflections over a period of time.' (Crozier & Cassell, 2016, p. 399)

This was implemented by participants recording their emotional reflections about work on a weekly basis on their mobile phones. Participants were prompted by the lead researcher on a weekly basis via messenger to record their audio diaries. Qualitative audio diaries enable researchers to explore topics in rich detail and complexity, including how they evolve over time. Diaries provide opportunities for research within hard-to-reach settings, with hard-to-reach groups, and produce ethical yet raw data on sensitive topics (Cucu-Oancea, 2013; Kenten, 2010). Residential children's homes are complex, sensitive, and private settings (Berridge et al., 2012) and RCPs are a hard-to-reach, practitioner population, working long and unsociable shifts (Colton and Roberts, 2007). Although novel, this method is longitudinal and widely considered burdensome for participant and researcher (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015; Bolger et al., 2003).

Ethical challenges with diary methods

Ethics are integral to all research and require careful consideration. Implementing diary methods to explore practitioner emotion in residential childcare could be harmful as participants are asked to continually reflect and ruminate on sensitive topics around working with vulnerable, looked-after children and young people (Cucu-Oancea, 2013). Research must be honest, transparent, caring, respectful, and enact rigor and accountability (Universities UK, 2019). To ensure this research was committed to the highest ethical standards of integrity, careful planning and ethical provision was paramount (ESRC, 2015). This article reflects on this planning and provision, purposed to minimise participant and researcher harm in a diary study with RCPs. The wider implications and potential opportunities audio diaries hold for residential childcare practice are also considered.

Harm to the participant: Managing the burden of diary methods

Diary methods have been identified as having therapeutic benefits for participants and providing a space for reflective outlet (Ryan, 2006). Reflective practice is a key facet of care work, yet RCPs are often subsumed with administrative demands such as daily logs and risk assessments, like other practitioners employed in allied health and social care settings (Mack, 2022). Thus, diaries present an opportunity for practitioners to refine their reflective practice through diary research, along with the added potential for cathartic release and therapeutic outcomes (Howard, 2012). This indicates that diaries may be successful as an employee support mechanism in residential childcare, offering an alternate means of therapeutic provision for staff to deal with the emotional impact of their work. This is important as working with trauma in residential care has been found to impact staff wellbeing (Burbidge et al., 2020). Therefore, diaries could be a tool for practitioners to reflect on and comprehend the emotional impact of their work, alongside having the potential to reveal prevailing emotional themes that can be brought to staff supervision.

Despite the participatory benefits of diary methods in research, engaging participants in self-reflection which is associated with emotional intelligence and

competency (Gill, 2014), they are considered burdensome, which may render participating RCPs vulnerable to harm through overwhelming data collection responsibilities. Like other longitudinal qualitative methods, diary methods collect data over a longer period and in regular intervals, in comparison to one-off qualitative interviews, therefore nurturing higher levels of participant attrition, fatigue, and data omissions (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015; Cottingham & Erickson, 2020). To reduce this burden and minimise the risk of harm, provisions were put in place to make the diary method less onerous for participants. For example, the duration of RCPs' diaries and the time intervals between each entry were carefully selected as an eight-week, weekly diary. These provisions were chosen in comparison to more frequent provisions, like twice a week entries or daily diary entries, to maintain the sequential and temporal benefits of frequent emotional recall whilst reducing the regularity of everyday diarising, providing participants with longer intervals away from data collection (Bernays et al., 2014; Herron et al., 2019).

Literature has also emphasised that qualitative diary methods should take suitable formats that reduce the potential burden to participants, and subsequent harm in research (Waddington, 2005). Consequentially, an audio diary, on a mobile application, was nominated, whereby RCPs dictated their emotional reflections from the foregoing week at work. Data collection took place during 2021-2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is considered more streamlined and quicker, in comparison to written qualitative diaries, minimising risk of harm with a less burdensome diarising process (Bartlett, 2012; Brandt et al., 2007; Crozier & Cassell, 2016). Although data was collected on a personal device, it was managed confidentially, upholding code 2.3 of the SSSC's (2016) code of practice and were recorded, and stored on a GDPR compliant mobile application software, with end-to-end encryption. Once uploaded, audio recorded data was also transferred to a secure research server and subsequently destroyed following transcription. Consent from organisations was granted, but this study did not require children or young people's consent as they were not participating and were unidentifiable to the researcher as no personal details were included. In addition, guidance was offered to participants in the form of documentation, initial meetings with the researcher, which

included a run through of recording diary entries, and through established lines of communication for queries. Participants were encouraged to use autonomy regarding the emotional content and duration of the diary entries.

It has been acknowledged that using mobile application software for research poses ethical dilemmas with respect to data management and protection (Mazzetti & Blenkinsopp, 2012). However, in this study, the benefit of audio diary methods reducing the burden of written diary methods was emphasised due to the large written and administrative workload across the residential childcare sector, arising from the bureaucratic demands of continually recording care, incidents, risk, and so forth (McMillan, 2020). Therefore, within the context of conducting research with RCPs, an audio diary method was considered the best fit. RCPs were encouraged to take control of their reflections, producing authentic, multivocal and rich diary entries whilst narrowing the potential burden, using technology and carefully selected diary intervals. In doing so, participants exercised agency and autonomy in each individual diary entry, choosing the length of entry, the content, and whether negative or positive emotions were discussed. By implementing qualitative longitudinal methods in this way, both previous evidence and the occupational demands of RCPs are recognised (Janssens et al., 2018). This also suggests that if audio diaries were to be employed as an emotional support mechanism for RCPs in practice, similar formatting and provisions may need to be considered to make the programme both suitable and ethical.

Non-maleficence and right to privacy: An ethical conflict

As with alternative qualitative methods, ethical tensions around confidentiality were present, with the research adopting a protective approach. A protective approach to confidentiality, to minimise harm to participants and ensure practitioners were unidentifiable, involves extensive anonymisation of results, thereby preserving participant trust and reducing harm (Surmiak, 2016). This approach, whilst minimising harm for all, is argued to compromise data integrity (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). However, with research on RCPs' emotions, supporting vulnerable looked-after children and young people who have often

experienced complex trauma, a multitude of adverse childhood experiences, and/or possible placement breakdowns in previous social care settings (Berridge et al., 2012), a protective approach to confidentiality provision is paramount. Ergo, all entries were anonymised with pseudonyms and detailed reflections diluted when participants' identifiable details were provided. Omission of data during anonymisation was chosen carefully, to assure context was not lost, whilst minimising risk of harm to participants.

If a safeguarding concern was raised whereby the researcher felt, through participants' emotional reflections, that someone was at risk of harm, or going to be, protection of the public and others took precedence and confidentiality would have to be broken (Cowburn, 2005). Therefore, in qualitative diary methods with RCPs the researcher continually manages the ethical boundaries between participant confidentiality and public protection to minimise harm, following each individual diary entry, week-by-week. Ethical research respects an individual's right to privacy (NIHR, 2020). Confidentiality breaches overturn participants' rights to privacy and create an ethical conundrum. The study is endorsing RCPs' freeform and authentic emotional expression, but with the capacity to invade participants' privacy, revealing their emotional expressions to others and producing significant moral contention. As with all research methods, this conundrum can be resolved by observing ethical principles on a spectrum or hierarchy. By measuring participants' right to privacy in relative importance to the principle of non-maleficence, breaches of confidentiality are justifiable for the majority (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Page, 2012). It is essential to safeguard and protect looked after children and young people, ahead of maintaining participating RCPs' confidentiality in residential childcare research. Therefore, for the greater good, breaches of confidentiality are justified.

Harm to the researcher: Managing the researcher-participant relationship

Diary research with RCPs constructs knowledge with practitioners, fostering equitable relationships as participants, as opposed to the researcher, are in control of every diary entry, and therefore the data (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015, p.

70; Roberts, 2011). However, the relationship between researcher and participant required to support participants in revealing honest and complex emotional expression in diaries uncovers ethical questions. Although the researcher-participant relationship is more equitable and shared as participants are controlling data collection, there is the possibility of researcher harm (Williamson et al., 2020). Along with many other qualitative methods, transcription of diary data is cited as time-consuming and resource intensive for researchers (Williamson et al., 2015). Diary entries ranged anywhere from 5 minutes to 30 minutes and were emotive; recalling trauma, assault, and prevention of suicidal behaviour, to name a few (Coles & Mudlay, 2010; Cottingham & Erikson, 2020). Therefore, there was a significant chance of the researcher suffering from secondary traumatic stress (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016; Nikischer, 2019). The potential for harm during transcription was identified and frequently discussed and planned for in doctoral supervision (Kendall & Halliday, 2014; Petillion et al., 2017). Suitable support networks for the researcher were established during the research proposal stages to create robust procedures minimising researcher harm. The researcher also approached the study 'at the hyphen' of the insider-outsider debate (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). This fashioned an ethical layer protecting the researcher by reducing harm through active researcher reflexivity and an understanding of their similarities to and differences from diary participants. Managing harm to the researcher through diary methods in residential childcare is like managing harm when using other qualitative methods, emphasising the need for reflexivity and support.

As diary methods have therapeutic elements, the researcher continually and sensitively established boundaries and reaffirmed roles during data collection and debrief, reminding participants of their role as a researcher, following suggestions from previous literature indicating qualitative longitudinal research can blur boundaries in the researcher-participant relationship (Day & Thatcher, 2009; Duncombe & Jessop, 2002; Kendall & Halliday, 2014; Treanor et al., 2021). Relational boundaries suggest a power imbalance, with the researcher constructing rules for participants to follow (de Smet et al., 2020). This created another ethical dilemma as diary methods were intended to yield equal relations, yet due to ethical provision and role affirmation a power imbalance is

perpetuated by the researcher (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Therefore, managing boundaries in the researcher-participant dyad is time-consuming and complex. To overcome pressures and burdens, previous literature has called for more in-depth reflexivity and participant-focused approaches (Attuyer et al., 2018). As diary methods facilitate participant control over data collection it is argued to be a participatory methodological approach. Additionally, in-depth reflexivity was enabled in this study through the researcher's own reflective diary. The researcher has previous work experience as an RCP in independent children's homes, and therefore the impact of their previous work experience and subsequent preconceptions were continually acknowledged. The researcher's previous work experiences also counteracted possible power imbalances, situating the researcher 'at the hyphen', with similar workplace experiences to those of participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60; Thurairajah, 2019).

Conclusion

This diary study was part of a larger doctoral study exploring residential childcare practitioners' emotion management. Diary methods can reveal rich data on sensitive and important matters like practitioners' emotions in residential children's homes. Diary methods also raise ethical challenges for the researcher to manage. Like all research, minimising harm is critical to ensuring integrity (ESRC, 2015; Universities UK, 2019). This article reflected on the ethical procedures conducted to safeguard individuals and minimise harm, emphasising the importance of researcher reflexivity and appropriate management of the researcher-participant relationship by drawing on the experience of studying RCPs with qualitative research methods. Using diary methods for emotion research with RCPs has indicated an opportunity for the therapeutic use of diaries in residential childcare practice. Whether used for staff supervision or for therapeutic practice with children and young people, diaries used in practice may be most suited to an audio format for ethical and streamlined dictated reflection. Therefore, this research informs future diary methods in social research with RCPs and future use of audio diaries as a potential support mechanism in residential childcare practice.

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