

299 Using diary method to access the voices of ‘busy’ academics: methodological insights from three diary studies

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Diary method is infrequently used in research studies where academics are participants, although the method has been used to research various other ‘busy’ professionals such as nurses and NGO workers. This paper discusses methodological considerations related to researching with ‘busy’ academics, illustrated with three research studies of different groups of academics: academics with caring responsibilities, displaced academics and doctoral supervisors. The paper introduces the three projects, and sets out three assumptions of ‘busy’ professionals as derived from a literature review of diary studies of workplaces: that academics are too busy to complete a diary, that academics are slippery and likely to drop out, and that academics may struggle to take in information. The three assumptions are evaluated in relation to diary design and execution in the three studies.

Full paper

Introduction

Solicited diary method, where participants complete a diary which has been designed for a research study, is a relatively neglected method, in comparison with for instance interviews and observation (Hyers, 2018; Cao & Henderson, 2021). A subset of diary method studies across disciplines of health sciences, psychology, sociology, education studies and beyond has used diary method to research busy professionals in their workplaces. For instance, there have been studies of nurses (Waddington, 2005), NGO workers (Plowman, 2010) and street vendors (Eidse & Turner, 2014). The method is still rarely used in empirical studies where academics are participants, with some exceptions (e.g. Hyers et al., 2012; Henderson, 2021). To gain useful knowledge about the lives of busy professionals can be a challenging effort for researchers due to time and responsibility constraints that normally characterise these participants – what if busy professionals are too busy to participate in a study? This paper explores methodological challenges associated with accessing the voices of ‘busy’ higher education (HE) professionals, in particular academics.

Three diary method studies with ‘busy’ academics

The paper discusses the use of the diary method to understand the lived experiences and actions of three different groups of academics: academics with caring responsibilities, displaced academics, and doctoral supervisors during the admissions process. Study 1 was a qualitative short-term diary study exploring academics’ experiences of managing care while at conferences, kept over the duration of one conference, followed by a post-diary interview; 20 academics with caring responsibilities participated. Study 2, which aimed to explore the experiences of displaced academics and their role in reconstruction, was a qualitative longitudinal study over six months, using interview-diary-interview design, with 20 displaced Syrian academics. Study 3, which explored doctoral supervisors’ practices in relation to communications from potential applicants, was a six-week diary study with 19 supervisors. For the purpose of this paper, the authors (also researchers on these studies) developed key understandings of ‘busyness’ from the diary method literature and engaged in structured reflection to consolidate findings.

Diary method with ‘busy’ academics – findings

Literature on diary method reveals three assumptions about how the method needs to adapt to researching busy workplaces: (i) that professionals are already fully occupied at work, so diary completion will be difficult (e.g.

Waddington, 2005); (ii) that professionals are slippery and hard to get hold off, and likely to drop out of a study (e.g. Eidse & Turner, 2014); (iii) that professionals may struggle to take in information and need simple modes of recording data (e.g. Hyers et al., 2012). In the below section, we address each of these assumptions in terms of designing and executing diary studies with 'busy' academics.

(i) Academics are already fully occupied at work

Study 1 researched academics who were even busier than usual, as they were at conferences. The data collection form (Word document) was very simple to complete, taking the form of a simple table, but participants struggled to fill this in and some participants informed the researcher that they had collated their diary after returning from the conference.

(ii) Academics are slippery and likely to drop out

Study 2 was a six-month study of displaced academics, who were therefore facing two different kinds of 'busy'. In order to boost retention, the study included an option to keep an audio diary, if the written form was too burdensome. However, all participants kept written diaries and there was very little attrition from the study.

(iii) Academics struggle to take in information and need simplicity for data collection

Study 3 was a study of doctoral supervisors in relation to the emails they receive from prospective applicants, and due to the volume of these emails we anticipated that academics may easily tire of the study and perhaps lose attention on the data collection process. As such, the forms were designed to be attractive and used colour coding to ensure that the different sections were memorable. However, as anticipated, several academics forgot various instructions from one week to the next.

Conclusion

It is recognised that diary method is both a useful method to gather time-sensitive data from professionals in relation to their work practices, and at the same time that completing a diary about work can be burdensome and challenging for participants (Henderson, 2021). Choosing a convenient design for the researcher and participants alike, to obtain valuable insights into the personal and professional lives of participants, is particularly important. This paper contributes to fostering discussions around the usefulness of diary method in gaining longitudinal and micro-level details about 'busy' academics.

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