

300 Capturing the Difficult-to-Reach Voices of Displaced Academics: Methodological Benefits of Solicited Diary as a ‘Participant-Centred’ Method

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Displaced academics (DAs) face unique challenges and barriers that render their voices difficult to reach through traditional research methods. Drawing on a study on the lived experiences of 20 displaced Syrian academics (DSAs) and their potential role in reconstruction in conflict-affected countries, this paper explores the significance of solicited diary method in understanding the multifaceted dimensions of displacement, amplifying the voices of DAs, and advancing knowledge on reconstruction from the perspectives of DAs, as a marginalised and under-explored group. The paper underscores the usefulness of solicited diary method in i) capturing longitudinal data, ii) exploring dynamic and shifting experiences as a mobile method, iii) illuminating silent narratives, and iv) functioning as an epistemic and ethical tool. The paper concludes that researchers can overcome access obstacles and gain valuable insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of DAs via solicited diary, while keeping participants at the heart of concern.

Full paper

Introduction

The voices of DAs are often marginalised and underrepresented in research, limiting our understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Akkad, 2022). Traditional research methods, such as focus groups (Parkinson, 2018) or single interviews (Theo and Leung, 2022), have been utilised in researching DAs, yet they often fail to capture the nuanced aspects of their lives due to the transient and ever-evolving nature of their circumstances. Further, several studies benefited from solicited diaries in researching higher education (HE) and academic issues and experiences, including students' identity and marginalisation in HE (Mathebula and Vargas, 2021), HE students' language lives (Groves, 2021), and academics with care responsibilities (Henderson, 2021). However, researching DAs using solicited diary is scarce. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a research approach that enables DAs to share their stories. This paper explores methodological benefits involved in accessing the voices of DAs.

The study

This study explored over six months the professional and personal lived experiences of DSAs in Europe and the Middle East and their potential role in reconstruction in Syria. It utilised an interview-diary-interview design, a modified version of Zimmerman and Wieder's (1977) diary-interview, to investigate DSAs' lived experiences and positionalities so as to understand their academic identity and belonging to their host society and their potential role in reconstruction, as scholars and as displaced individuals. For this paper, the focus is on the diary part of the study.

Initial findings

Literature studies on DAs have indeed explored various aspects of their experiences, challenges, or successes in exile. While interviews have been used to explore DAs' precarity in academia (Theo and Leung, 2022), and focus groups have been used to explore life history and future aspirations of DAs (Parkinson et al., 2018), DAs' voices and extraordinary conditions are examined through ordinary methods. The findings below illustrate potential benefits of using solicited diary with DAs.

Shifting experiences of displacement- diary captures longitudinal data

The use of solicited diary method in the study for six months was useful to gain longitudinal data on the ongoing experiences of DSAs. The diary recordings showed shifting experiences across participants between the first and sixth month of the diary study, such as developing new skills, seizing academic opportunities, or undergoing painful experiences in exile.

Displaced academics on the move and knowledge in transit- diary as a mobile method

In exploring displaced academics, solicited diary was a useful mobile method to accompany participants and capture their dynamic and shifting lived experiences wherever they moved. It was more flexible and convenient for participants to record their experiences than be frequently interviewed, for example, to recount their experiences. Moreover, it was helpful to encounter the challenge of reaching out dispersed participants in different places and with different time zones.

Echoes from exile- diary illuminates silent narratives

Due to displacement experiences, DAs may find it difficult to narrate their experiences that are difficult to tell orally, for their sensitive nature. Diary recording in the study was valuable for participants to uncover micro-level and hidden experiences that shed light on their experiences and positionalities. For instance, some DSAs recorded experiences on how they navigated HE systems in their host countries, or how they struggled to integrate into academia in exile by mentioning minute details on who was involved and how they felt about such experiences.

Unveiling important knowledge – diary as an epistemic and ethical tool

By employing solicited diary method, participants could discuss their own experiences and perspectives and had the power to choose what to write about, when to write, and how to present their information, whether via a written diary or an audio diary. Solicited diary functioned as an epistemic tool for DAs in this study to contribute to valuable knowledge production about the meaning and purpose of reconstruction from their own perspectives.

Conclusion

Solicited diary has proven useful in exploring longitudinal and nuanced experiences of DAs, serving as an ethical and epistemic tool for self-expression. Nonetheless, challenges may arise in using solicited diary, including participant attrition and fatigue (Hyers, 2018). To access difficult-to-reach voices, researchers should adopt a participant-centred approach, prioritising participants' time and commitments. Strategies such as developing user-friendly diary designs and adopting effective communication are crucial for maintaining participant motivation and engagement. Overall, solicited diary offers potential as a valuable research method, necessitating careful attention to participant needs and fostering meaningful engagement.

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