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## AN INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE DIARY METHODS

This introductory chapter will provide a broad initial overview of qualitative diary methods, including what they are, how they have been used previously, and why their use in research is rapidly increasing. We will also cover motivations for using qualitative diary methods, why they are important, and when and why researchers might use them. This chapter also incorporates a checklist exercise to help you decide on, and be able to justify, the use of qualitative diary methods in your own research projects. By the end of this chapter, you should have a good understanding of what constitutes a qualitative diary and when and why you might use qualitative diary methods in your own research.

### WHAT ARE QDMs?

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When people think of qualitative diaries, they often initially think of a written, usually pen-and-paper, diary. However, qualitative diary methods (QDMs hereinafter), also known as solicited diaries (i.e., diaries that are written for a specific research purpose), are much more than this. In fact, QDMs are a versatile range of multimodal data collection methods that involve participants recording or capturing events and experiences, as well as associated emotions and reflections, “in the moment” (or closer to the moment than would otherwise be possible), on multiple occasions and over a particular time period.

This might indeed include the traditional, physical pen-and-paper diary, as well as other electronic modes of text-based diary keeping, such as word-processed and email diaries or, more recently, diaries shared via written blogs or text messages. Beyond this, however, they also include visual and multimodal ways in which we might seek participants to capture experiences in the moment and over time, such as photo-, video-, or even app-based diaries that allow for a range of modalities. Over the course of this book, we will cover the diversity of QDM options available to researchers, but first, within this initial

chapter, we aim to provide an overview of QDM research, including how their use has evolved, and consider when and why you might seek to use QDMs within your own research projects.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF QDMs

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Everyone is familiar with the concept of a diary, whether it is those we use to plan our time, recording daily meetings and to-do lists, or more extensive journals that we maintain to record our personal journeys, important life events, and associated reflections and emotions. As a student or educator, you may have experience completing and/or requesting diary or journal-based assignments, ever popular across education programs due to the acknowledgment that such reflective journals, “logs,” or “personal development plans” encourage reflexivity, which has long been considered a vital component of student learning and development (e.g., Vinjamuri et al., 2017; Wallin & Adawi, 2018).

In research contexts, qualitative researchers themselves are likely to be highly accustomed to keeping research journals, with methodological guidance often suggesting that diary keeping by the researcher is an integral part of the qualitative research process. Diaries maintained by researchers similarly aim to encourage reflexivity, a topic that has been written about extensively in the qualitative methodological literature (e.g., Harvey, 2011; Nadin & Cassell, 2006), considered essential in enabling a greater critical awareness of researchers’ own impact on the research process, therefore enhancing the quality of qualitative research (Johnson & Duberley, 2003; Nadin & Cassell, 2006). There is therefore a substantial body of research highlighting qualitative diaries as a useful and often important way to record and subsequently reflect on our own personal experiences, thus enabling us to learn more about ourselves, our experiences, our skills, knowledge, and ambitions, as well as our feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and decision-making processes. When we consider such well-researched benefits of, and outcomes associated with, the practice of journaling or keep a daily diary, it is fairly easy to consider how diaries completed by participants might have the potential to enable particularly insightful research.

However, when considering QDMs within the broader landscape of qualitative research methods, other key approaches have traditionally been more widely recognized, taught, and employed, each offering unique strengths and chosen based on the research question, context, and objectives. For instance, interviews

are arguably the most commonly used qualitative method, enabling in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perspectives on a given topic (Cassell, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), alongside focus groups, which facilitate group discussions that can reveal collective views and the dynamics of interaction within a group (Morgan, 1996). Case studies are another popular approach, within which multiple qualitative methods may be employed, with a focus on a detailed examination of a single instance or a small number of instances, offering deep insights into complex phenomena (Yin, 2018). Ethnography similarly often involves multiple methods but with a predominant focus on immersive observation, which is traditionally conducted by the researcher, within a specific community or context, aiming to provide a detailed, holistic understanding of social practices and cultures (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Madden, 2022). Interestingly, QDMs have been suggested to be particularly useful as part of a broader ethnographic approach (e.g., Zimmerman & Wieder, 1997), as we discuss later in this chapter.

QDMs thus occupy a unique position within this broader qualitative landscape. Unlike interviews or focus groups, which capture participants' reflections at specific points in time, QDMs provide continuous, real-time insights into participants' daily lives and experiences. This temporal dimension makes QDMs particularly valuable for understanding processes and changes over time, often offering a richer, more nuanced picture of the phenomena under study. Furthermore, diaries have been suggested to be less intrusive than traditional ethnographic observation (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977), permitting participants themselves to document their own experiences, within their own time and space, potentially leading to more authentic data (Bolger et al., 2003) and a more participant-led design (e.g., O'Reilly et al., 2022). In fact, QDMs have also found a valuable place as part of participatory research designs, which emphasize collaboration and active involvement of participants in the research process (Hacker, 2013), as we discuss throughout this book.

Despite being less prominent across qualitative methods textbooks and course designs, diaries as a research method have been used since the very beginning of social science research and are, therefore, not a "new" method as such. Biographers and historians, for instance, have long judged diary documents (or "unsolicited diaries") to be of great importance for our historical understanding of social reality from the perspective of different actors (Corti, 1993). For example, the sociologist Frédéric Le Play (1806–1882) famously used diaries to collect information about family budgets, capturing earnings and expenditures, aiming to express the family's life in figures (Gobo & Mauceri, 2014). Relatedly,

time-diary studies appear to date back to before 1900, with such early work focusing on describing social conditions and economic productivity (Bauman et al., 2019). Indeed, it has been reported that solicited diaries have been used in health care research as early as the 1930/1940s, proliferating in this field from the 1970s onward (e.g., Banks et al., 1975; Finkelstein et al., 1986; Follick et al., 1984; Lawson et al., 1985). Evidently, there has been a degree of sustained interest in capturing data via diaries completed by participants, or actors involved in the phenomena researchers are seeking to study, since the very beginnings of social science research.

In more recent social science history, interest in qualitative diary methods has stemmed from ethnographic approaches, in which participant observation is deemed integral to generate a thick description of ongoing social activities in their natural setting, as they occur (e.g., Moeran, 2009). Such detailed and ongoing observation, however, was recognized as highly demanding on the researcher and not always possible depending on the subject of focus (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). For instance, while particular organizational settings, such as the 9-to-5 workplace, may lend themselves to regular observation, regular and ongoing observation of a more dispersed group of actors within multiple personal settings (e.g., families) may prove more problematic. Further, the physical presence of the researcher has also been recognized by some as likely to have the potential to play a more disruptive role in terms of the capacity to significantly alter the behavior of the observed within research circumstances or settings in which their presence would be rendered particularly visible and intrusive (again, such as the home domain) (Becker, 1970; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). For instance, Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) draw upon an example from Skolnick (1967) to argue that, while the police are unlikely to be free to alter their daily behavior in the presence of a researcher, for example, when kicking in a door in a narcotics raid, an alternative project focused on the housewife enacting her daily work within the home may pose more challenges. Here, they suggest that the housewife (or househusband, or stay-at-home mum/dad to use more modern terminology), who may be frequently alone with their children, is likely to be particularly impacted by the presence of the researcher, which may lead to fairly extensive changes in behaviors. While such behavior change may be interesting to observe, if the focus of the study was on observing usual, mundane, daily practice, this is likely to become more challenging. Ethnographic researchers such as Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) therefore drew upon qualitative diary methods (e.g., the diary-interview approach, which will be discussed later in this book) to emulate close observation within settings in which this was challenging

or not feasible. Here, we can again see why, in more recent social science research history, QDMs have also increasingly become invaluable as part of participatory research designs due to their potential to empower participants by allowing them to document their daily lives and experiences in their own words (e.g., Bartlett, 2012). This is evidently well aligned with the principles of participatory research, which aim to democratize the research process and reduce power imbalances between researchers and participants (Hacker, 2013). However, as we will also consider later in the book, the use of QDMs in which we are, in a sense, asking participants to become researchers themselves entails both benefits and challenges.

Despite this fairly long history of qualitative diary-based research, arguably, until recently, the popularity of QDMs has been fairly limited (Hilario & Augusto, 2023; Radcliffe, 2013, 2018), particularly when we consider this in comparison to other methods of collecting data that are frequently drawn upon as part of the qualitative researchers' toolkits, which, as discussed earlier, tend to include methods such as interviews, observation, and focus groups. This can be gleaned from a simple glance at the tables of contents of core research methods textbooks across the social sciences (e.g., Flick, 2022a; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017) or a standard qualitative research methods course syllabus. This lack of training, instruction, or supportive guidance in the use of the broad range of data collection tools that constitute QDMs not only narrows the researcher's toolkit but also limits a more complex understanding of important topics across the social sciences. For instance, Rauch and Ansari (2022) recently highlighted the potential of QDMs for advancing scholarship around societal grand challenges, here focusing on their capacity to illuminate the innermost thoughts and feelings of people at the forefront of grand challenges and in extreme contexts, and to explore the lived daily realities and practicalities engendered within such contexts. Such research is arguably essential if we are to begin unraveling the complexities of sustained habitual practices that contribute in nuanced ways to the multiple, pressing grand challenges we face as a society today. Further, where researchers may come across QDMs themselves, in search of a data collection method more aligned with the aims of a particular research project, without clear guidance, this can be an extremely challenging undertaking with multiple questions, challenges, and complex ethical considerations along the way. In this book, we hope to go some way to addressing this gap, providing researchers with a practical guidebook for the design of their own QDM studies, as well as resources that researchers can use themselves to support this process but that

could also be used by those leading postgraduate research training programs to enable better integration of QDMs into such programs.

Despite the apparent neglect of QDMs, there is evidence that they have also begun to rise in popularity. Initially, this was likely due to similar intensifying requirements for more innovative and temporally sensitive research designs across the social sciences (e.g., Radcliffe, 2018; Vantilborgh et al., 2018). As a result, in recent years, QDMs have been used to explore a variety of topics across the social sciences, from stress at work (Crozier & Cassell, 2015; Travers, 2011), helping at work (Fisher et al., 2018), and the interface of work and family (Lowson & Arber, 2014; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015), to the lived experiences of female refugees (Linn, 2021) and homelessness (Karadzov, 2021). They have been used to capture disabled young people's experiences of educational institutions (Gregorius, 2016), the educational decision-making (Baker, 2023) and employability practices of students (Cao & Henderson, 2021), and a variety of health behaviors and experiences (e.g., McClinchy et al., 2023; Mupambirey & Bernays, 2019).

Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic and sudden requirement for social distancing in many countries around the world (and thus, for researchers, viable remote research methods) has seemingly led to a further increase in the use of QDMs (e.g., Ashman et al., 2022; Bandini et al., 2021; Hennekam et al., 2021; Rudrum et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2021). As Soronen and Koivunen (2022) noted when conducting research during this time, their QDM data collection remained unaffected by the pandemic, whereas the interview elements of their project required revision in order to ensure they could be moved entirely online. The pandemic-friendly nature of QDMs led to a proliferation of such studies during this time, across diverse social science disciplines, from King and Dickinson (2023), who used mobile instant messaging diaries (see also Chapter 5) to examine the lived experiences of leisure practices during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, to Scott et al. (2021), who used QDMs to investigate the impacts upon young people's mental health and emotional well-being during compulsory lockdowns.

It is therefore evident that, for a variety of reasons, the utility of QDMs is increasingly recognized, and while they have a long history in one form or another, their use in research projects across the social sciences is now on a rapid upward trajectory. With this in mind, alongside the rather limited practical guidance available for researchers who are interested in using QDMs, we now begin addressing this scarcity by next turning to a discussion and consideration of when and why you might use QDMs in your own research projects.

## WHEN AND WHY SHOULD I USE QDMs?

As should now be evident, there are a wide variety of ways in which QDMs can be, and have been, used across a broad variety of disciplines and research areas. However, while they have become increasingly popular, and we are clearly advocates for their use owing to the rich, varied, insightful, and unique data they enable you to collect, it is important to keep in mind that QDMs are time-intensive methods of data collection. Therefore, as with any method, there should be a clear justification for their use. Indeed, as is always the case, the method(s) of data collection chosen for any research project should be led by your research question(s). So, in this case, how might you decide whether QDMs are relevant and useful for your own research study?

We will move on to discuss the many benefits of using QDMs, but when deciding whether QDMs are an appropriate data collection method for a particular research project, we suggest that you ask yourself the following two questions:

1. *To answer my research questions, is it important that I capture details of events/experiences/thoughts/emotions “in the moment”?*

One of the most frequently discussed benefits of using QDMs is that they enable participants to record the details and intricacies of their experiences and associated meaning-making “in the moment.” Again, it is important to note that while researchers often refer to “in the moment” data capturing as a key benefit of QDMs, in practice, what this actually means is data captured temporally closer to the experience itself when compared with other popular data collection methods (Iida et al., 2012). For example, while interviews enable the collection of rich data and insightful retrospective reflections, and certainly remain a method that we frequently use ourselves (and often in conjunction with QDMs—see Chapter 2), existing research highlights that such retrospective approaches often lead to specific details being easily forgotten. An increasing body of literature from the cognitive sciences draws attention to the complexity of the recall process required when participants are asked to respond to retrospective questions (e.g., Schwarz & Oyserman, 2001). Retrospection can lead to lapses in memory around the specific details of experiences, thoughts, and feelings, which can be especially problematic for studies where the specific details surrounding particular experiences or events are important in answering research questions. In such cases, little useful or relevant information may be available to participants attempting to construct a response to such questions

in retrospect. This may lead individuals to draw on personal theories or ideas regarding what they believe is likely to be the case (Christensen et al., 2003). Other research also suggests that there may be a propensity for state-congruent recall (e.g., Bower, 1981), where the participant's present mood can lead them to recollect particularly negative or positive instances. This might risk concealing other experiences that may be important or relevant to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic under study.

Similarly, it is often the case that, during interviews, more extreme examples of a particular phenomenon will be recalled, rather than those that are more representative of typical day-to-day experiences. For example, within Laura's own research, which focuses predominantly on the work–life interface and the impact of daily work–life experiences on (in)equalities in the workplace, she is more frequently interested in everyday work–life experiences, events, challenges, decisions, and emotions. Therefore, while she may sometimes be interested in the more exceptional events (e.g., what happens when we enter a government-enforced lockdown due to a pandemic), she is more often interested in understanding everyday family negotiations and occurrences. This might include instances as “mundane” as trying to leave work on time to collect children from childcare or deciding who takes a child's PE kit to school if they have forgotten it that day, particularly the thought processes, concerns, and challenges associated with these events. Of course, Laura can, and still does, ask about such topics during interviews but consistently finds a strong discrepancy in the level of detail participants are able to provide on such experiences during interviews as opposed to that which can be captured using QDMs. While participants might comment more generally in interviews that they do sometimes struggle to leave work on time to collect their children from childcare, using QDMs, we are much more likely to capture the complex decision-making process and associated internal (and external) negotiations and emotions that regularly accompany such a daily experience. QDMs, therefore, enable richer insight into momentary occurrences and the daily impact they have on participants' lives.

During retrospective data collection, the recall of past events may also be distorted based on knowledge of subsequent events and their outcomes (Robinson & Clore, 2002). For instance, in the moment, you might have considered something to be a bad idea, experiencing strong concerns, worries, and anxieties, as well as exploring other options. However, if this actually all worked out quite well in the end, you might later forget or play down earlier concerns and report the experience as more generally positive, without an appreciation for the more complex journey that was involved in realizing that idea.



Of course, how people reconstruct their versions of reality after the event is often useful and interesting in itself, and where this is the particular focus of your project, interviews are a particularly useful approach. Similarly, where the focus is on reflecting back on larger scale or particularly pertinent prior events or occurrences that do not occur on a daily basis or are no longer occurring, employing QDMs is unlikely to be the most useful approach for your study. However, where the phenomena of interest are ongoing, occurring regularly, and perhaps more mundane, qualitative diary data provide us with a different and additionally insightful kind of data, where in the moment, recall reduces the degree to which participants are able to construct a cohesive narrative. For instance, in Laura's research investigating work–family decision-making in heterosexual dual-earner parents, couples often reported during interviews that they made work–family decisions just because it was what they both wanted. They might even suggest that this simply “just happened,” with little decision-making involved, and they also quite frequently suggest that they share work and care rather equally. However, when data are collected on this topic using QDMs, it becomes clear that narratives provided within interviews are often much neater, post-hoc rationalizations of experiences and interpretations that were actually much more complex and nuanced in daily practice. For example, when work–family decision-making is examined using QDMs, we tend to find that couples rarely share care-related tasks equally despite good intentions and that daily work–family decisions are much more complex and emotion-laden than suggested in interviews and often heavily constrained by external challenges (e.g., mothers feeling more able to access flexible working arrangements than fathers; mothers struggle with perceived judgments of other mothers if they are not the ones more actively engaged in daily childcare). Using QDMs has, therefore, enabled us to attain a more complex understanding of how daily work–family events are experienced and navigated in the moment—for instance, gaining novel insights into the role that prior decision-making has on subsequent decision-making and the complex emotions and circumstances involved in deciding how to respond to particular daily challenges (e.g., Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014, 2015; Radcliffe et al., 2023).

In this sense, QDMs lend themselves to capturing the more specific and fine-grained details of daily experiences closer to the experience itself. They enable the collection of more detailed descriptions of the discrete and fleeting moments of everyday life and thereby how different thoughts, possibilities, and emotions interact in that moment, the details of which could easily be forgotten later. QDMs therefore offer real potential in terms of their ability to capture

novel insights into often taken for granted, yet meaningful, daily practices, activities, and experiences in their local and temporal context.

2. *To answer my research questions, is it important that I capture how experiences/thoughts/emotions/interpretations change (or sometimes remain stable) over time?*

In addition to the abovementioned, most frequently cited benefit of QDMs in reducing retrospection, another core benefit of QDMs is their ability to capture change (or stability) over time. Not only are they able to capture change over time in terms of observing fluctuations in specific variables, as is the case when researchers employ quantitative diary methods (e.g., Beattie & Griffin, 2014; Hoprekstad et al., 2019), qualitative diary methods are also able to capture contextual and relational details of unfolding processes that provide insight into how one event or experience may influence subsequent events and experiences (Herschovis & Reich, 2013; Spencer et al., 2021).

Such longitudinal or “shortitudinal” data collection tied to QDMs also lends itself to additional comparative approaches. First, QDMs readily permit within-person comparison over time, enabling insights into how, when, and why participants may experience similar events in different ways on different occasions and why this might be the case. Research demonstrates that there is substantial variation in people’s daily experiences, including their moods, emotions, experiences, and interactions with others (e.g., Bolger et al., 1989; Eckenrode, 1984; van Eerde et al., 2005). Rather than collecting data at one specific point in time, QDMs therefore enable us to examine unfolding processes and within-person variations. In this way, QDMs allow us to capture the influence of temporal context on within-person changes over time by, for instance, demonstrating the impact of past experiences on subsequent experiences.

For example, in the context of Laura’s research, previous literature has highlighted somewhat contradictory results regarding the benefits of organizational flexible working policies and practices, with some studies reporting that flexible working arrangements actually increase, rather than alleviate, conflicts between family and work (Hammer et al., 2005; Lapierre & Allen, 2006). Employing qualitative diaries, Laura also found that those who used flexible working experienced more frequent work–family conflicts (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015). However, what previous studies had not shown was the longer-term daily impact on the employees themselves and subsequently the organization of these conflicts. Laura’s research demonstrated how a lack of flexibility continued to

negatively impact participants some time after the conflict event due to the constraints this put on subsequent daily decision-making. Although a lack of flexibility at work often meant that participants were more likely to take part in the work event at the expense of family responsibilities, when faced with a work–family conflict, the “shortitudinal” nature of QDMs enabled Laura to show how such constrained decision-making often led to further challenges on subsequent days. For example, one participant reported experiencing constraints placed upon her decision-making by an inflexible work context that prevented her from being able to start work at 10 a.m. rather than 9 a.m. on an occasion when she was required to work away from home. Her concern about this situation continued to impact her both at work and in her personal life over subsequent diary days. Laura was therefore able to demonstrate the impact that imposing such constraints on decision-making can have over time. Beyond this, the necessity to continuously make decisions under such constraints was shown to lead to individuals leaving their organization or intending to do so (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015). In this way, capturing immediate, and not so immediate, outcomes are important in terms of understanding the bigger picture. A within-person analysis enables the exploration of both practical and emotional outcomes over numerous days, often leading to deeper insights, here in terms of emotions and the impact that these emotions have on a person over time. The more in-depth recall of specific events and related feelings enabled by the use of QDMs permits the mapping of the impact of such emotions on events occurring on subsequent days. In this way, QDMs particularly lend themselves to examining within-person change over time, providing insights into the ways in which specific events and experiences are inextricably linked to previous and subsequent events, providing an opportunity to capture and explore these links in a way that many other methods are not able to.

Second, QDMs further enable a temporally sensitive and process-orientated, between-person comparison in terms of permitting an examination of how and why processes might proceed or evolve in similar or different ways for different people over time. This, therefore, enables exploration of these multifaceted links in a way that is often limited using other methods. For example, in Leighann’s research exploring how experiences of mistreatment at work emerge and evolve over time, QDMs were particularly useful in enabling her to understand the day-to-day experiences of mistreatment, which in turn led to the identification of short-term “rhythms of mistreatment” at work. For example, over the short term, some participants’ diaries reported “step-like” patterns that reflected gradual deterioration or improvement of the mistreatment, compared to participants

who recorded “zigzag” rhythms, reflecting more frequent daily variations in their experiences, permitting a novel understanding of the impact of these different patterns of experience (see Spencer et al., 2021).

QDMs therefore harness the depth and richness of qualitative data captured in the moment, alongside the “breadth” afforded by adopting a longitudinal approach, which allows a detailed exploration of how (and why) things change over time. We refer to this as the capacity of QDMs to collect rich qualitative data that enable us to capture both the “down” (i.e., in-depth reflections in the moment) and “across” (i.e., change over time) of participants’ experiences. Therefore, reflecting on these two questions should enable you to consider the extent to which QDMs are suited to your research project. It may be that capturing experiences in the moment, or temporally closer to an experience or event (i.e., the “down” of QDMs), is essential to be able to provide in-depth answers to your research questions. However, change over time (i.e., the “across” of QDMs) might not be particularly pertinent. Alternatively, you may find that change over time is especially relevant to your research questions or, as may often be the case, that both elements are useful and relevant for your study. Either way, it is important to remember why you made the decision to use QDMs in the first place (i.e., whether this was to capitalize on the “down” and/or the “across” affordances of QDMs), as this will (or should) influence the way in which you analyze your qualitative diary data, as we will go on to discuss in Chapter 7.

While these two benefits of QDMs are arguably the most well known and frequently discussed and are particularly important in deciding whether to use QDMs in your own projects, there are further important benefits of QDMs also worth considering:

## **QDMs as a Participant-Led Approach**

First, since researchers are usually not present during the data collection process, QDMs are argued to be a participant-led approach (e.g., Bartlett, 2012; Hayes et al., 2024; O’Reilly et al., 2022), thereby well aligned with participatory research (Hacker, 2013), empowering participants by giving them control over the research process with the potential to overcome, at least to some extent, researcher/researched power relations (Hayes et al., 2024). In using QDMs to record their experiences without the presence of the researcher, the power to decide what to include lies with the participant and not with the researcher. Further, it removes the pressure that might be experienced by participants from the physical presence of the researcher during other data collection methods,

such as interviews, and related demands of maintaining a particular flow of conversation (Monrouxe, 2009). While this also leads to some particular challenges, as we will discuss in Chapter 2, research suggests that participants feel empowered to share thoughts, ideas, and challenges that might often not be shared so readily within other research contexts (e.g., interviews/focus groups) (Busby, 2000).

Hayes et al. (2024), studying international students during the enforced lockdowns instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic, discussed multimodal QDMs as affording a more inclusive data collection methodology, offering a decolonial methodological praxis, by enabling researchers to research with international students rather than about them. They point out how much existing research “on” international students positions the researcher as the only legitimate producer of knowledge, frequently leading to the adoption of a deficit framing and attempts to “fix a problem.” Rather than the research being conducted by outsiders and positioning participants as objects of study, they discuss how their particular use of QDMs enabled a participant-led alternative to ethnography, which acted upon the assumption that participants are powerful agents of their own experience and the ultimate experts, enabling them to explore and express their own systems of meanings and interpretations.

Relatedly, Islam (2015) introduces the notion of para-ethnography within participant-led research to explicate the way in which participants, while not in practice “ethnographers,” do take an active role in collecting research data and become involved in building their own theories about their experiences, thoughts, decisions, or actions. In this way, they offer insights from the inside-out, rather than from the outside-in, drawing on an intimate knowledge of their own context or culture in a way that enhances collaboration between the researcher and the researched. Given that research participants using QDMs are involved in collecting data on a particular topic without the presence of the researcher and over a period of time, which certainly may lead to their own deeper reflections and theory building, the term *para-ethnography* seems apt when discussing QDM research. Indeed, referring back to our discussion earlier in this chapter, regarding earlier interest in qualitative diary methods stemming from ethnographic approaches (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977), we can see how QDMs offer a rather different way to engage in participant observation but here through the eyes of, and therefore led by, the participants themselves, thereby also aligning with a more participatory research approach.

## QDMs as a Method for Sensitive Research

Relatedly, researchers employing QDMs to examine particularly sensitive topics have suggested that such a participant-led approach, and in particular one that is predominantly private, without the presence of the researcher, can be highly beneficial (e.g., Dawson et al., 2016; Elliot, 1997). For instance, Elliot (1997), in the context of examining sensitive topics in relation to health and illness, highlights that QDMs work particularly well as participants have the freedom and control to edit, share, and discard their diary writings as and when they want. In her research examining mistreatment at work, Leighann also found that having a degree of distance between the researcher and participant, as permitted by the use of QDMs (particularly where QDMs are used alone, see Chapter 2), enabled participants who were feeling particularly vulnerable to express how they were feeling more openly in a diary, without any requirement to speak directly to another person about the challenging experiences they were facing.

In this way, QDMs can, in some circumstances, enable access to harder-to-reach samples, wherein the nature of the topic focus means that some participants may be more likely to take part when they are not required to meet with a researcher face-to-face, whether physically or virtually. In other senses, QDMs are also adept at accessing participants who may be difficult to reach for other reasons, such as those who are geographically dispersed. Considering the aforementioned challenges of traditional ethnographic research and participant observation in such contexts, QDMs lend themselves to a more remote-friendly mode of data collection wherein the research requires some form of “observation” or ongoing engagement with participants within their lived contexts. This utility also offers an explanation for the rapid rise of QDMs during the COVID-19–instigated lockdown, where other such methods often became impossible, and more remote-friendly approaches to data collection were required. Indeed, in certain disciplines, it has been noted that QDMs are in fact popular in research on and/or during pandemics and epidemics more broadly, not limited to COVID-19, but also during particular outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease and HIV (Thomas, 2006, 2007). For instance, their particular value for distanced research and their capacity to capture fluctuations during “disasters,” not only during pandemics but also during other natural disasters such as earthquakes, has been noted (Mueller et al., 2023). In this sense, QDMs are particularly useful for conducting remote research, which may be especially pertinent to consider in the face of pandemics, epidemics, and natural disasters, as well as when trying to attain insights into hard-to-reach communities (e.g., Filep et al., 2015).

## QDMs as a Reflexive Method

A further increasingly acknowledged benefit of using QDMs is the way in which they instigate participant reflexivity, defined as “the reflexive considerations of research participants that are stimulated by their involvement in research” (Cassell et al., 2020, p. 750). Cassell et al. (2020) argue that the context of a research study is one in which reflexive thinking is likely to occur, not just for the researcher who is actively encouraged to engage in reflexivity but also for the participants who are part of this study. This is particularly the case when the research is longitudinal in nature and when there is an element of the research that participants are asked to engage in without the presence of the researcher, where they have greater control over the data collected. Considering discussions above regarding the participant-led nature of QDMs and the inherent longitudinality, alongside a broader awareness of the way in which diaries encourage reflexivity in other contexts (e.g., for researchers or for our students), it is therefore not surprising that QDMs are considered particularly adept at encouraging in-depth participant reflections on the topic of study. Encouraging and accessing participant reflexivity can have clear benefits for researchers, enabling a more in-depth, nuanced, and rich understanding of our research topic, and enabling both participant and researcher reflexive thinking to be part of data collection and analysis processes (Cassell et al., 2020). In this sense, accounting for the participants’ standpoint when analyzing data encourages greater focus on QDM projects as co-research environments where “researchers and informants [are] working together as a team to co-produce knowledge” (Takhar & Chitakunye, 2012, p. 932). These perspectives emphasize that richer and more nuanced interpretations may be achieved by gaining an insight into the reflexivity of our participants. Reflexivity is also well documented as having positive therapeutic outcomes and being important for personal learning and development (e.g., Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Moon, 2013; Suedfeld & Pennebaker, 1997; Symon, 2004; cf. our discussion in Chapter 2 of potential cautions surrounding instigating participant reflexivity). For example, in her study exploring how young people make decisions about higher education, Baker (2021) explains how, through her qualitative diary study, respondents found the diaries to be an active tool to enhance their decision-making process, something she interprets as a positive and insightful outcome of the research. Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, numerous studies employing QDMs also refer to the therapeutic effects expressed by participants (e.g., Bartlett, 2012; Milligan et al., 2005; Proff, 1992; Radcliffe, 2013, 2018; Suedfeld & Pennebaker, 1997), including, for instance, those who are recovering from illness (Furness & Garrud, 2010;

Milligan et al., 2005). In this way, qualitative research diaries also have the potential to positively impact participants by encouraging self-reflection, self-awareness and subsequent learning, development, and change.

In Laura's research, she also found that participants frequently express how the process of engaging with QDMs "was really useful actually . . . it feels a bit like self-therapy," due to increased self-awareness, encouraging them to "think more about what I actually do" and enabling them to "analyse my motives." In couple-level studies, others also expressed a growing awareness of their partner's roles and responsibilities, "realising more what the demands are on each other." For some participants, this even instigated behavior change. For example, one participant, who worked from home, realized that a great deal of his daily stress emanated from trying to engage in work and home roles simultaneously, explaining, "It causes stress doing something and then going back and checking my emails and then doing something so I'm not doing it anymore." Another participant even discussed how her reflections, instigated by engaging with QDMs, led to in-depth discussions with her partner (who was not a participant in this particular study) about each of their work roles and desires, which actually caused him to seek changes to his work. This further demonstrates the potentially far-reaching consequences of the way in which QDMs influence reflexivity over time potentially even for those who are not directly involved with the research itself. In this sense, it has been acknowledged that diaries can be used not only as a research tool but also as an intervention having the capacity to enable reflection and raise consciousness about a particular topic, allowing a deeper understanding and space for thinking and acting on change (Alford et al., 2005; Plowman, 2010; Radcliffe, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

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In summary, in this chapter, we have provided an introduction to QDMs, what they are, and also a brief history of their use in social science research. We have considered when and why QDMs might (not) be useful within your own research projects, which involved an introduction to some of the main benefits and affordances of QDMs. Below you will find a checklist based on this discussion to help you think further about whether QDMs are appropriate for your current project and to help you structure a rationale for their use. We hope that having engaged with this introductory chapter, you now have a good general understanding of QDMs. In the next chapter, we will aim to provide a more practical knowledge of how to design your own QDM study, including



how to tackle typical challenges and ethical dilemmas faced along the way. This includes a discussion of examples from our own research, and the various research projects of our PhD students, to support further understanding and formulation of project ideas.

## APPLICATION ACTIVITY

### SHOULD I USE QDMs IN MY RESEARCH PROJECT?

While we are evidently strong advocates for the use of QDMs and the benefits they bring to a wide range of research projects, as we discussed in this introductory chapter, methodological choices should always emanate directly from, and align with, your project research questions. It is also important to consider your target sample and the context of your research more broadly.

The following checklist is designed to help you to start to think about whether QDMs are appropriate for your study but also to have something physical to look back at, and reflect on, when developing and writing up the justifications in your methodological choices within ethics applications, funding bids, and within the Methodology section of your final project write-up.

### QDM METHODOLOGICAL EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Project considerations: Is a QDM study suitable?	Y/N
<p>Does your project require you to capture events/experiences in the moment? [e.g., Are there momentary details that are needed that might be difficult to recall at later time points? Are experiences ongoing?]</p> <p><i>N.B. If your research involves reflection on prior events that are no longer ongoing, QDMs may be less likely to be useful or appropriate.</i></p> <p><b>AND/OR</b></p> <p>Does your project require you to capture events/experiences/processes over time? [e.g., Do your research questions focus on how "things" may change (or not) over time?]</p> <p><i>N.B. If your research is not concerned with how an ongoing experience or occurrence changes overtime, consider whether QDMs are necessary.</i></p>	
Is a participant-led research approach suitable and/or needed for your research? [e.g., Would participants benefit from being able to recall experiences in the absence of the researcher?]	
Is a participant-led research approach suitable for your research? [e.g., Would participants benefit from being able to recall experiences in the absence of the researcher? Is understanding the phenomena through the eyes of participants key?]	

(Continued)

(Continued)

Project considerations: Is a QDM study suitable?	Y/N
Is it appropriate, and feasible, to ask your participants to maintain engagement and continue to reflect on their experiences/events that are of interest to your research project? (e.g., Is enhanced and ongoing participation and commitment from your participants feasible?)	
Do you have the time and resources necessary to collect and analyze voluminous qualitative data?	
N.B. If you are conducting a short-term research project spanning only a few months, with a quick required turnaround, QDMs may not be feasible.	

FURTHER READING

Cassell, C., Radcliffe, L., & Malik, F. (2020). Participant reflexivity in organizational research design. *Organizational Research Methods*, 23(4), 750–773. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428119842640>

Radcliffe, L. (2018). Capturing the complexity of daily workplace experiences using qualitative diaries. In C. Cassell, A. L. Cunliffe, & G. Grandy (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative business and management research methods* (pp. 188–204). Sage.

Zimmerman, D. H., & Wieder, D. L. (1977). The diary: Diary-interview method. *Urban Life*, 5(4), 479–498. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124167700500406>