Chapter 16

Utilising New Media Technology: Web-Based Diaries for Data Collection with Adult Participants with Autistic Spectrum Disorder

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ABSTRACT

Utilising emergent media technology for data collection is rapidly advancing. As the technology continues to develop, there is increasing need to understand the practicalities, challenges, and opportunities that it holds for social and business research methods. This chapter presents a practical guide to using one form of new media technology, Web-based diaries, and, in doing so, provides a base on which research practitioners, from Masters students to professors, can build similar empirical research projects. Rationale for choosing this “novel” data collection tool is contextualised in a case study with university student participants with autistic spectrum disorder that explores disability support services. Sampling, ethics, and design are set out, with a step-by-step guide to the diary schedules’ construction. Materials and procedures are supported by screenshots to aid readers’ experience of the Web-based diary interface and critical description of its use. The challenges and opportunities this technique offers are subsequently explored.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3918-8.ch016
INTRODUCTION

A significant limitation in qualitative research is the use of methodologically narrow research designs that mask the fluid, ever-changing nature of phenomena. The extant literature is dominated by studies using static designs that capture snapshots of human experience as fixed and unchanging. This presents important methodological concerns, such as the potential for making false inferences of within-person change from results using between-person comparisons (Affleck, Zautra, Tennen, and Armeli, 1999). For example, evidence indicates that estimates of student support obtained from static designs can mask variation in within-person support in terms of both extent and direction (Kenny, Bolger, and Kashy, 2002). It is important to capture change over time because as Marin and Wellman (2010) assert, social support networks are not static; they alter according to amounts of both interdependency and dependency, and they progress, not only in relation to choice but also social context.

Silverman (1996) and Plummer (2001) both assert that the preferred data collection method for qualitative research tends to use not only static designs, but it is over reliant on verbal, in-person interviews. Moreover, verbal in-person interviewing is unsuitable for samples that may include adult participants with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD see Key Terms and Definitions) because of a preference for text-based rather than verbal-based communication (see Blamires and Gee, 2002). Conventional in-person interviews have been found to be problematic for participants with ASD, who are argued here to be more comfortable with alternative forms of communication, such as text-based email (Hinchcliffe, 2009) and mobile telephone text (O’Neil, 2008).

Textual diaries provide an alternative data collection method to interviewing, although they are less commonly used in qualitative research (Elliott, 1997). The primary strengths of end-of-the-day diary designs are the ability to capture participants’ daily accounts of activities/events (Symon, 2004) and “their flexibility to capture and examine fluid phenomena” in its immediacy (Bass, Linney, Butler, and Grzywacz, 2007, p. 57). Diaries can collect participant subjective knowledge, reflective experience, emotions, meanings of phenomena and changes taking place over time (Välimäki, Vehviläinen-Julkunen and Pietilä, 2007). A fluid conceptualisation of phenomena is necessary because participant experiences can be transient in nature and/or changeable (Allan, 1993). It is therefore possible that diaries are a viable data collection tool suitable for participants with ASD.

Although diaries may not offer the distinctions achieved through tone of voice present in verbal communication (Begley, 1996), as a text-based medium they may ease the communication pressure for participants with ASD. This, in turn, may increase access to participant experience and thus enhance data quality: “Face-to-face contact during normal conversations is too stressful, they [people with ASD] are under less pressure and can think better when they read and write” (Frith, 2003, p. 125). Furthermore, participant diarists have a ‘major’ part to play in the decision-making process of which activities/events to record, making their reports self-initiated. This may facilitate the capturing of participant diarists’ own priorities and understandings about activities/events in question (Milligan, Bingley, and Gatrell, 2005).

Specifically considered here, is the use of Web-based diary (see Key Terms and Definitions) techniques as a tool for qualitative data collection with participants with ASD, whose preferred communication medium is text. A case study (Hinchcliffe, 2009) was undertaken by the first author, hereafter referred to as the researcher, which explored the social support networks of five university students, utilising Web-based diaries. An overview of this study, and the context in which it took place, will demonstrate evaluation of the viability of this technique in research. The reflections of participants and the researcher’s