

Solicited diaries and the everyday geographies of heterosexual love and home: reflections on methodological process and practice

Carey-Ann Morrison

University of Waikato, Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand

Email: careym@waikato.ac.nz

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This paper draws upon material from a study with 14 heterosexual couples who live in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand to consider the use of personal solicited diaries in research on the everyday geographies of heterosexual love and home. Critical feedback, in the form of evaluation questionnaires, as well as diary content is used to reflect critically upon the usefulness of diaries as a methodological tool. This paper argues solicited diaries have the ability to provide research participants with a space of embodied and emotional self-reflection and they can facilitate researchers with access to emotional spaces and situations typically beyond their reach. It concludes that while solicited diaries can potentially offer a more accurate portrayal of everyday life in process, they continue to be a product of research momentariness.

Key words: *New Zealand, heterosexuality, love and home, embodied and emotional geographies, solicited diaries, qualitative methodologies*

Introduction

Personal solicited diaries are a unique form of qualitative research whereby diarists, at the request of the researcher, write about, and reflect upon, their experiences, thoughts and emotions. Solicited diaries have the ability to provide research participants with a space of embodied and emotional self-reflection. Crang makes the point that while discussions of 'the body' are increasingly the focus of geographers' research, 'these ideas have had a muted impact in terms of thinking through qualitative research practice' (2003, 499). With the exception of a few notable studies (Meth 2003; Myers 2010; Thomas 2007), the potential of solicited diaries to offer insights into participants' embodied and emotional everyday geographies has not been realised. In this paper, I want to suggest that solicited diaries are a useful method for eliciting and thinking through the 'felt, touched and embodied constitution of knowledge' (Crang 2003, 501).

The lived experiences of 14 women in heterosexual relationships, who live in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand,¹ make up the empirical basis of this research. This study focused on the homemaking practices and relationship activities of heterosexual couples as a way of

challenging ontological assumptions about the naturalness and normality of heterosexuality (Blum and Nast 1996).² In order to make sense of the complexities inherent in everyday experience, the research project combined solicited diaries with joint semi-structured interviews, self-directed photography, follow-up interviews, and evaluation questionnaires, in a mixed method approach. A mixed methods approach (Barbour 2006; Meth and McClymont 2009) is useful for attempting to understand the nuances of everyday life because it can reveal different facets of embodied and emotional experience in complex and multi-layered detail. This is particularly important in research that seeks to acknowledge the fluid, changing and incomplete nature of lived experience (Longhurst 2001). A full consideration of the value of a mixed method approach is outside of the scope of this paper, however where necessary, solicited diaries are discussed with reference to, and in the context of, the other methods used in this study.

I begin by introducing solicited diaries as a research tool and situating them within wider methodological debates. I bring together the limited body of work by geographers who have used solicited diaries as a method before introducing the research in more detail and

outlining the mechanics of the data collection phase. Diary content and critical feedback from participants, as well as my own observations, are then used to consider the usefulness of solicited diaries in the context of this research. I conclude that while diaries can offer a more accurate portrayal of participants' embodied and emotional geographies, they continue to be a product of research momentariness.

Geography and solicited diaries

The recent growth of interest in the emotive, sensuous and haptic dimensions of everyday life within human geography has seen the emergence of research methodologies that aim to access ways of knowing and being in the world through embodiment and emotionality.³ Some geographers have shifted their focus from more traditional methods, for example semi-structured interviews and participant observation, towards methods like musical and dance performance (Wood and Smith 2004); photography and video (Dodman 2003); art and drawing (Young and Barrett 2001); and cooking and eating (Longhurst *et al.* 2008). The development of these methodologies can be seen, in part, as a response to criticisms about geography's methodological conservatism (Crang 2005; Thrift 2000) and the questioning of the effectiveness of words in articulating embodied and emotive dimensions of everyday life. Latham argues 'we simply do not have the methodological resources and skills to undertake research that takes the sensuous, embodied, creativeness of social practice seriously' (2003, 1998). Solicited diaries can potentially provide researchers with access to the sensuous, embodied and emotional spaces of everyday life.

Solicited diaries are quite different from personal unsolicited diaries. In a personal unsolicited diary, the writer is writing for her or his own benefit and usually other people do not read the diary. Solicited diaries, however, are written with the full knowledge that the diary is for research purposes and public consumption (Bell 1998). Meth (2003) suggests that the production of the diary is a negotiated process between the researcher and the diary writer. The content of the diary thus reflects the diarist's awareness of the research aims. Participants' familiarity with research objectives plays a critical role in determining the type of information they choose to include or not include in their diaries.

A major benefit of using solicited diaries is that they provide longitudinal rather than snapshot views (Meth 2003; Thomas 2007). Unlike one-off methods, such as interviews, which provide momentary interactions in a specific time and place, solicited diaries have the potential to offer a more considered and nuanced insight into the embodied and emotional complexities of everyday life. Meth (2003) suggests that because diary writing is a

discontinuous process, solicited diaries more accurately reflect the diversity of human feelings and thoughts. Solicited diaries provide a selected recording of an ever-changing present. They allow for flexibility, variation and changeability in what is recorded and reflected upon, and provide the space for a multiplicity of emotions and lived experiences to be documented.

Diaries are often overlooked by geographers as a methodological tool, but have been used extensively in health-related research outside the discipline (Elliott 1997; Jacelon and Imperio 2005; Mackrill 2008). Diaries that are used by geographers tend to be of a historical nature and are often unsolicited (Blunt 2003; Gorman-Murray 2006; Royle 1998). Moreover, geographers who have used solicited diaries in their research tend to be motivated by a desire to 'give voice' to socially and spatially marginalised people. Meth, for example, explores South African women's experiences of domestic violence and believes that solicited diaries have the ability to fulfil the feminist aim of giving 'voice to everyday experiences, particularly the marginalised' (2003, 196). Myers (2010) examines the experiences of men-who-have-sex-with-men who are living with HIV/AIDS in Auckland, New Zealand. He explains that he was driven by a 'desire to give voice to marginalised experiences that risk remaining unheard in societies dominated by ableist and heteropatriarchal perspectives and power structures' (Myers 2010, 3). Thomas looks at people's experiences of living with HIV/AIDS in Namibia in an attempt to provide 'a detailed insight into the personal experiences and emotions of a sample of people living with [a] long-term and stigmatised illness' (2007, 75).

These researchers all report success in the ability of solicited diaries to provide Othered people with a space to record and reflect upon their emotional geographies. In contrast to these examples, the women who participated in my research occupy normative socio-spatial positionalities. They do not have children, are educated, work mostly in full-time paid employment, identify as middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexuals. They had the freedom and ability to spend time writing and reflecting in their diaries. In this research, solicited diaries proved to be an effective, relatively unobtrusive and unique means of examining how home space is normatively constituted and materially lived through social, cultural and intimate relations.

Research context: everyday geographies of heterosexual love and home in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand

The relationship between heterosexual love and home is often taken-for-granted as 'natural' and 'normal' and as such is little researched and not well understood. Domi-

nant discourses of home present a monolithic, fixed and inflexible version of heterosexuality that is founded upon static notions of reproduction, domesticity, monogamy and love. The aim of the research project, then, was to probe these epistemological and ontological assumptions. I argued that the practices of heterosexuality and home are multiple, multifaceted and complex (see for example Morrison 2010). In order to capture some of the diversity of heterosexual love and domestic experience, I made use of a variety of qualitative research methods.

Joint semi-structured interviews, solicited diaries and self-directed photography, follow-up interviews and evaluation questionnaires were used to conduct a critical reading of the competing discourses, social imaginaries and embodied experiences of heterosexual love and home in contemporary New Zealand. I used multiple methods because they allow for a breadth of coverage. Multiple methods are highly compatible with feminist poststructuralist analyses. Feminist poststructuralists raise important epistemological questions about the social construction of knowledge. They offer a critique of scientific, detached and objective research methods and argue for recognition of knowledge as local, partial and embodied (Moss 2002). Against this theoretical backdrop, I therefore sought to create an embodied, emotionally situated, and partial geography of heterosexual love and home. I attempted to make available space for embodiment and emotions to be acknowledged in the research process.

Participants were recruited through posters, advertisements in local newspapers and word of mouth. In accordance with the aims of the research, participants range in age from 20 to 40, live with their partners and do not have children. They live in a variety of situations and configurations. They have varying degrees of education and are employed in a range of occupations. They vary in terms of political and religious beliefs, background and ethnicities, and the length of their relationships ranges from one to ten years. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

The first of a sequence of encounters between myself and research participants was a joint semi-structured interview with couples. This phase was designed to elicit narratives on the importance of home to the construction and lived experience of heterosexual couples and interpersonal relationships. Diaries, in combination with self-directed photography, formed the second phase of research. At the conclusion of the first interview, each woman was invited to participate in the second stage, and if they agreed I gave them a diary and a pen so they were able to produce a solicited diary (I also gave them a disposable camera so they could take photographs). They were also given the opportunity to type their diary out on the computer if this suited them better. Solicited diaries (and self-directed photography) were useful in the way they provided further layers of complexity to the information gained from the first

interviews. They allowed for the production of different types of knowledge through embodiment and emotionality. Indeed, diaries provided participants with a space of emotional self-reflection, while photographs allowed participants to document the material, tangible and physical aspects of love and home that make up their everyday lives. As Bijoux and Myers suggest, 'Used in combination, diary entries and photography offer a way of clarifying less than conscious experiences and feelings about daily life experiences of place' (2006, 44).

My decision to focus primarily on women's experiences of heterosexual love and home was a conscious and considered one. The discourses of love are situated within a patriarchal and heteronormative framework (Jackson 1993), which contributes to the ongoing association of heterosexual women with love and home. This association is ideological, in that it helps to prescribe gendered roles and norms, and in practice, in that women still spend more time at home (McDowell 1983), gain a greater sense of self from homemaking (Domosh and Seager 2001) and continue to find pleasure in love and romance (Jackson 1993). By asking women only to be involved in the diary phase of research there was limited scope to examine the gendered differences and continuities of heterosexual love, intimacy and homemaking. Discussions of methodology in relation to conducting research with couples suggest speaking to partners together and apart in order to tease out differences and similarities in beliefs, opinions and narratives (Valentine 1999). On reflection, it may have been useful to have both women and men complete diaries in order to think through potential gender contradictions and continuities in relation to the process of diary-keeping.

I also completed a solicited diary. I am a young woman in a long-term heterosexual relationship. My partner and I live together and 'practice' love in a house we jointly own. I am therefore the 'researcher' and 'researched'. As feminist geographers have long argued, the production of knowledge is influenced by the researcher's positionality (England 1994; Rose 1997). My embodied subjectivity is intimately connected with the research and I 'live' the research on a daily basis. I did not complete the diary with the intention of including the material in research publications, rather it was used as a way of gaining a better understanding of diary-keeping as a method.

Given that power is imbued in and intersects with research in a number of ways, I was conscious of the possibility that the material properties of the diary would influence the type of information recorded. Most of the diaries available to purchase contained 30 plus lined pages and I thought this would suggest a certain level of participation. I therefore spiral bound 10 double-sided A5 pages into a booklet and made a cover page (Figure 1). In the front of the diary, I included a set of instructions that

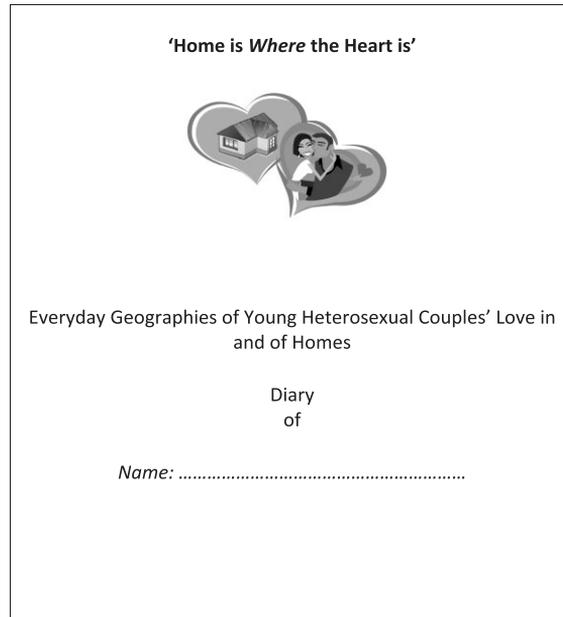


Figure 1 Diary title page

outlined what was required. I tried to keep instructions brief so that responses were not overly prescribed. I asked participants to reflect upon their day by writing about their homemaking and relationship activities.

At the end of the 7 days, I returned to collect the diaries (and cameras). After I had read the diaries (and developed the pictures), women were asked to participate in a final follow-up interview. While I am interested in the diaries (and photographs) as sources in, and of, themselves, I am equally attracted to the ways in which they can be used to move beyond that which is recorded to a more general understanding of experiences and attitudes. The follow-up interviews were used to gain a deeper understanding of the contexts and processes surrounding that which was recorded in the diaries (and to contextualise the photographs) and to fill in gaps (Bijoux and Myers 2006; Elliott 1997; Latham 2003). In particular, they allowed me to encourage participants to reflect further upon diary entries that were replete with embodied and emotional experience, such as arguments and disagreements.

Evaluation questionnaires formed the final phase of research (see also Myers 2010). They were used as a way to access participants' thoughts and feelings about their involvement in the project. Respondents were sent an email thanking them for their participation and asking if they would like to reflect on their involvement in the research process. The findings from the questionnaires are incorporated throughout this paper.

Cope defines coding as 'partly data reduction, partly organisation and partly a substantive process of data

exploration, analysis, and theory building' (2005, 223). The initial stages of coding and analysis began after I transcribed each couple's joint interview. I used Kitchin and Tate's (2000) procedure for analysis, which aims to describe, classify and connect data. It is an iterative rather than linear process, which allows for changing and flexible interpretations of data. Transcripts, diaries and photographs were coded into separate but sometimes overlapping themes and I cross-referenced the diary entries and photographs with the interview transcripts. Repeated and detailed readings of diary entries, transcripts and photos allowed me to identify themes, commonalities and differences in participants' experiences. It is to the diversity of participants' experiences that I now turn to.

Diary writing: styles and shared knowledge

Each woman approached diary writing differently. The open format afforded participants a degree of authorial control, as they were able to be selective in what they chose to write about and how they decided to structure it (Meth 2003). The type of information recorded in the diaries, and the way in which it was written, varied considerably and provided a wealth of qualitative data. At times, some women were extremely contemplative of their lives and demonstrated a high level of self-reflexivity. Sheree, for example, considered the meaning of home:

Home to me is a FEELING. To be home, to think of home, is a[n] indescribable feeling. I move through different

thoughts of home – home to me will always be the beach, my parent’s house, the drive home. But home to me is also Alex, our cat and our house, wherever that house is. It’s a SENSE of home that involves people more than a physical space of a ‘house’. (Diary entry no date, capitals in original)

Others were less reflexive in their accounts and instead provided a description of their daily activities, like Sophia for instance, who wrote: ‘about one hour later Alec woke up, made breakfast and went to university as usual. I got up a few minutes later, ate breakfast, cleaned up the house a little’ (diary entry 30 April 2008). Some women invoked themes and writing conventions reminiscent of romance novels:

This morning was one of those mornings that sorts the chaff from the wheat, sparkling, crisp and bright, perfect weather, lying naked in the world’s warmest bed with the world’s warmest and most wonderful man. The alarm sounds at six, I re-set it for seven, the alarm goes off at seven, I hit snooze, before it can go off a second time I make to roll over and the lightest touch of a hand on my hip restrains me. I can’t tear myself away, so much for an early morning. (Debbie, diary entry 12 May 2008)

While others decided to represent their thoughts and opinions in drawings and diagrams. Donna, for example, demonstrated in a graph how her feelings towards her partner, Mark, and their relationship, change during the course of a week (see Figure 2).

The nature of the research also ensured each woman was able to write as little or as much as she wanted. I made it clear in the instructions that whilst it was preferable that they fill in their diary each day, if this did not suit they could fill it in whenever best suited them. Consequently, response patterns varied both in terms of frequency and length of recordings. Some diaries were returned to me completely filled, while others contained only a few entries, and some diaries consisted of entries that were several pages long, while others contained only a few lines.

There is debate surrounding the length of time deemed optimal for gaining sufficient detail. In his research, Myers (2010) restricted diary-keeping to 3 days, Jacelon and Imperio (2005) suggest that 1–2 weeks is an appropriate length of time, while Meth (2003) had participants record

in their diaries for a period of 4–6 weeks. I deliberately chose to restrict the length of recording time to one week. I was highly aware of the intensive, and potentially intrusive, nature of this research and did not want to place unnecessary demands on participants’ time. And, while I agree that a longer period of time would yield more information, I do not necessarily think this always equates with depth or detail. As it stands, the combination of diaries and photographs with the interview material means I have over 400 pages of interview transcripts, 14 diaries and around 50 photographs.

I was also aware of the potentially repetitive nature of diary-keeping. Some women commented that they felt like, within the space of a week, they were beginning to repeat themselves (see also Langevang 2007):

I felt often that I was repeating myself or saying things that the researcher wouldn’t particularly want to hear . . . a lot of things would come up over the following month which I felt would better exemplify my idea of how we live and how our home reflects us. (Debbie, feedback form 14 July 2008)

Diaries offer respondents the opportunity to define the boundaries of their shared knowledge within guidelines set by the researcher (Meth 2003). It is important to remember, however, that diaries are written with the researcher in mind (Elliott 1997). Often this means that the researcher is written into the narrative. Solicited diaries are therefore reflective of the socially constructed and partial nature of knowledge production. Participants were certainly aware of me and wrote me into their narratives in a variety of ways. Some women used their diary as a means to correspond with me. Other women demonstrated an awareness of me through concerns about how I would interpret their diary entries and the assumptions I would make about their relationships. Some women worried about the legitimacy of their experiences, while others were concerned about their handwriting and spelling mistakes. All of these concerns reflect the complex entanglements of power that constitute, and are constituted by, the researcher–researched relationship. ‘Researcher’ and ‘researched’ are embroiled in a dynamic relationship where both are implicated in the construction and lived reality of the other’s emotional geographies (Bennett 2004; Widdowfield 2000).

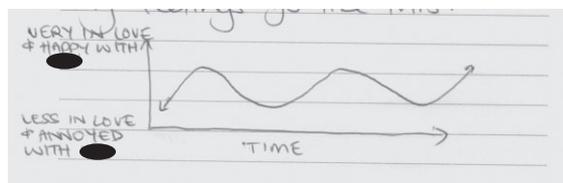


Figure 2 Donna’s drawing that represents her changing feelings toward her partner

Recording emotions: the ebbs and flows of daily domestic life

Diaries enabled me to trace the various socio-spatial processes and fluctuating emotions of diarists as they were experienced. Meth also found diaries to be useful in this respect and suggests that the temporal nature of diaries allows for a 'break in logic between entries' (2003, 198). Diaries can similarly allow for a diversity of emotions and experiences within entries. A single diary entry can give an accurate reflection of the emotional ebbs and flows of daily domestic life. In the following excerpt, for example, which is a single diary entry, it is possible to see a diversity of emotional experience:

I was kind of grumpy and tired when I got home from work . . . so of course that pissed me off and I had a go at Cooper. He got annoyed at me because I was annoyed and we had a bit of a fight . . . so we are pretty much over it by dinner and we make burgers together . . . before dinner Cooper made a smart comment . . . so that made me mad again. (Angie, diary entry 6 May 2008)

I suspect that one-off methods, like interviews, would not be sufficient to convey these complexities. It is also highly unlikely that I would have been able to observe situations like this. Diaries offer researchers the potential to gain access to emotional contexts that are not usually available to them (Elliott 1997; Meth 2003). In addition, I was aware that some women may not have been comfortable discussing the intimacies of their love life with me in an interview situation. Diaries therefore offered participants another medium through which they were able to express themselves. The flexibility afforded by the mixed methods, particularly the diaries, was valued by some women:

I just think that it is a really useful way to do research by using a range of techniques. It was good for me as a participant because where I thought I couldn't say something in the interview the diary and the photos gave me an opportunity to get those thoughts out. (Melissa, feedback form 15 July 2008)

Meth suggests that diaries can be an empowering tool because they can offer a space to unburden emotional 'luggage' (2003, 201). Several women made comments about the cathartic nature of filling in a diary:

I definitely think the diary was a positive thing for us. Reading Joseph my diary entries was great as it gave me a chance to share my experiences of love with him and so he could feel appreciated for the things he does. (Rose, feedback form 15 July 2008)

Yes, definitely! It was great writing in the diary. It helped me to recognise many little things that Mark does that I

often take for granted and kept them at the forefront of my mind. (Donna, feedback form 13 November 2008)

Although the consensus about participation was positive, the very act of recording personal details has the ability to cause problems for respondents and can hence provoke ethical dilemmas for researchers (Thomas 2007). While a key advantage of diary-keeping is that it can 'create a space that engenders self-reflection and enables scrutiny, contemplation and deliberation of the taken for granted frame of reference of daily life' (Bijoux and Myers 2006, 59), it is this very increased level of consciousness that can simultaneously cause ethical harm to participants.

While completing her diary, each woman was embedded within a specific social-spatial context. This inevitably affected what they decided to record and affected the emotional constitution of the space itself (Meth 2003). For example, several women noted that because diary-keeping prompted them to be more aware of their day-to-day lives, they began to notice things, good and bad, that they had not previously considered. Kylie, for example, explained that the process of writing and consciously reflecting on her day was, at times, difficult:

[thinking about her relationship and then writing about it] almost made me question [our relationship], and like we are fine and everything but it was just like it was just kind of weird when you actually have to sit down and write something. (Follow-up interview 15 August 2008)

Angie similarly reflected upon the impact diary-keeping had on her relationship: '[completing the diary] didn't cause any stress or distress but because I was so aware and analysing everything it made me sort of set up a situation that led to an argument' (feedback form 14 July 2008). Situations like these raise important ethical questions about participant support. In asking these women to think about their relationships and home-life, I was prompting them to consider things they had potentially not thought of before. While I was able to, at least, lessen potentially negative emotional outcomes during face-to-face interviews by being a sensitive, attentive and empathetic listener (Bondi 2003), I was unable to provide the same type of emotional support during the diary-writing exercise. In an attempt to minimise potentially negative effects, I kept in regular contact with participants throughout their week of participation and offered support where I could.⁴

Conclusion

As the above argument demonstrates, participants' lives were affected by participating in this stage of the

research. However, many participants noted in their feedback forms that any changes, both good and bad, that occurred because of diary-keeping were temporally specific and confined to the week of participation. What this demonstrates is that although diaries can provide a more accurate portrayal of everyday life in process (Elliott 1997; Meth 2003; Thomas 2007), they still only provide a snapshot into a constantly shifting set of lived realities.

Plummer makes the point that

each diary entry... is sedimented into a particular moment in time: they do not emerge 'all at once' as reflections on the past, but day by day strive to record an ever-changing present. (2001, 48)

Diaries, then, cannot be understood as a definitive account of each woman's lived actualities. They are partial, situated and embodied accounts, located in time and place. Solicited diaries do not represent a single unified truth. Instead, they offer researchers snapshots of particular social spaces, embodied and emotional practices in the making.

In this paper, empirical material from a study on the everyday geographies of heterosexual love and home has been used to consider the usefulness of solicited diaries when attempting to access the emotional and embodied complexities that make up research participants' everyday lives. In line with recent developments in human geography, solicited diaries have the potential to allow for the production and documentation of different 'ways' of knowing and being in the world based on embodiment and emotionality. I hope this article encourages geographers and other social scientists interested in the emotional and embodied dimensions of everyday life to consider using solicited diaries in their next research project.

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Notes

1 Hamilton is located in the North Island of New Zealand and has an estimated population of 130 000. It is the largest inland centre as well as the nation's fourth largest city (Statistics New Zealand 2006). Hamilton is suburban in character and surrounded by land used mainly for dairy farm production.

- 2 Given that the focus of this paper is on the methodological processes and practices of using solicited diaries, I do not go into any great detail in my analysis of the diary entries.
- 3 See the 'Progress Reports' by Crang (2002 2003 2005) and Davies and Dwyer (2007 2008) and Dwyer and Davies (2009) for detailed discussions of the changing place of qualitative methods in human geography.
- 4 For example, I created a list of services that I had ready to pass on to participants if they needed to talk through some of the issues raised by the research questions in more detail.

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