

# Twenty-four hours and counting: Capturing life as it is lived

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**Twenty-four hours and counting: Capturing life as it is lived.**

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## **Summary**

The purpose of this development paper is to reflect upon the use of participant diaries aimed at capturing ‘a-day-in-the-life’ of an academic. These diaries are unusual in that they focus, in detail, on separate twenty-four hour periods, thereby providing snapshots in time of life as it is lived. The diaries are part of a larger on-going ethnographic study investigating how, and in what ways, formalised location independent working practices affect the lives and working relationships of academics. The diaries are also used to provide rich, grounded participant-generated insights into how the practices and contexts of the employing organisation and wider higher education sector are affecting, and in turn being affected by, the experiences and working practices of these academics. Whilst diary methods are well established in ethnographic and auto-ethnographic research, the format and way in which they are used in combination with other qualitative methods, makes this study unique.

## **Introduction and background to study**

An on-going ethnographic study of the case study organisation (herein referred to as Mercia University), forms the basis of the research design. Mercia University is a post-92 university located within the English Midlands. The main aim of my research is to carry out an in-depth investigation of issues associated with academic employees following the introduction of location independent working (LIW) contracts within Mercia University. I am particularly interested in exploring how, and in what ways, location independent working practices impact on the lives and working relationships of academics. Therefore, the focus is upon exploring the experiences, preferences, views, working relationships, day-to-day lives and self-articulations of academic employees who have chosen to be employed on either 'location-independent' or 'office-based' contracts. In other words, the focus and level of analysis is on how and in what way these individuals experience, articulate and make sense of their daily, lived realities and their identities as academics.

My study specifically addresses the following research questions:-

- How and in what ways do LIW and office-based academics articulate and make sense of their daily lived experiences.
- How does this affect their working relationships and sense of academic identity?
- How are the practices and contexts of the employing organisation and wider higher education sector affecting, and in turn being affected by, the experiences and working practices of these academics?

Since the beginning of this research project I have kept a detailed journal which has encouraged me to record and reflect upon my own, and others', observations of the practice of LIW and its consequences, as well as experiences of working within the managerialist landscape of Mercia University. Credibility and rigour is further enhanced by the use of participant diaries capturing a 'day-in-the-life' of an academic, completed by both LIW and non-LIW academics, over at least two separate 24-hour periods. These are triangulated with in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with participants both before and after diary completion. It is the completion of participants' 'day-in-the-life' diaries, which form the major focus of this developmental paper.

Symbolic interactionism (SI) is used as the underpinning framework to explore the personal and subjective experiences of these academics and their resulting interpretations. Following in the tradition of SI researchers such as Goffman (1959), it also served to inform and support my ethnographic research design, thus focusing on the world of the academic at a micro-level.

## **Selection of case study and rationale for participant sample**

Selection of the case study, Mercia University, was relatively straightforward and the reasons were twofold. Firstly, I am an academic embedded within the context of the

university and as such have first hand experience of working within the institution. This also facilitated access to potential participants. Secondly, Mercia University is unusual in its adoption of a formalised LIW policy and this made it unique as a case study. In this sense Mercia University was elected purposively as an extreme case (Saunders 2012). Selection was further justified due to the ideal position I held as a knowledgeable insider in terms of access, contacts, embeddedness and continuous immersion.

Academics within the Business School were invited, by email, to take part in my research. This group totalled 400 of which 32 (approximately 8%), were employed on LIW contracts. Thirteen participants self-selected, of which six were LIW (representing 19% of the overall LIW population) and seven were employed on standard office-based academic contracts (representing just 2% of the non-LIW academic population). Although a relatively small sample size, the multi-method approach being taken has the potential to yield rich data. Furthermore, I will be able to compare and contrast data between and within the two groups.

### **Research participants' 24 hour 'day-in-the-life' diaries**

At this stage it is crucial for me to make the distinction between my own personal research journal and the day-in-the-life diaries completed by my participants. The terminology associated with journals, logs and diary writing is often used interchangeably. However, according to Hedlund et al. (1989) the terms 'diary' and 'log' mean different things. A diary is considered to be a relatively unstructured and private account that includes thoughts, reflections and feelings, whereas a log is a more objective account or report of events. A journal is considered to combine the diary with the log, in that it merges accounts and reports of events with personal thoughts and reflections (Chabon and Lee-Wilkerson 2006). Personal diaries and journals also have the flexibility to be used in combination with, or as a prompt for qualitative interviews (Harvey 2011) and this is exactly how I am using them in my study.

For the purposes of my study participants were asked to complete a 'day-in-the-life' diary over a 24 hour time period. My intention is that these 24-hour diaries will be completed again after a six and twelve month period, thus introducing a longitudinal element to my research. Furthermore, as a participant observer, I too will complete a 24-hour diary, repeating the process after a six and twelve month time interval. Participants agreeing to complete diaries were encouraged to record their experiences, thoughts and reflections using any media of their choice, such as: written notes; electronic memos; photographs or audio recordings. Depending on the choices made by participants to record information, this could pose challenges in terms of data analysis. This is an area I would like to explore further at the conference. Nevertheless, the format of the diaries does allow participants to fully engage in the research process and enables a richness and realness of data that is 'in the moment'. Such data would not be easily accessible or obtainable via other techniques. It was explained to participants that I was interested in capturing the type of work they were undertaking and where, when and how this was taking place. Furthermore, I wished to establish the

level and amount of interactions they had with others during the course of their chosen 24-hour period and how this affected them and their working day.

Some writers argue researchers need to be aware of the challenges when utilising diary methods (Simmons-Mackie and Damico 2001; Hayman, Wilkes and Jackson 2012). These challenges include issues associated with participants' reluctance to become and remain actively involved with recording their own accounts; confidence issues associated with ability to write; participant apprehension in relation to the expected time needed to make regular journal entries; concerns relating to confidentiality and the creation of permanent records of personal and often emotional experiences (Hayman et al. 2012). In the case of my participants they are not required to make regular entries over a sustained period of days, weeks or months, rather just a specific twenty-four hour period. I also facilitated participant engagement by maintaining regular contact and communication and allowing participants to record information in a variety of ways (e.g. photos, pictures, audio, etc.), thus reducing the need for copious amounts of writing. Participants are more likely to engage with diary keeping if they have an understanding of its purpose and value. I made this explicit in a comprehensive participant information leaflet issued to potential participants in advance of the study. Together with the combination of in-depth interviews, conducted prior to and after diary completion, opportunities for participants to develop their own critical thinking and reflexivity were also created.

Critics of autoethnographic approaches suggest they are prone to introspection and self-indulgence (Holt 2003). However, it is this introspection that allows such detailed unpicking of the minutiae of everyday life as it happens, however mundane and eventful it may appear to be. Duncan (2004) argues that for research questions requiring an individual perspective, such techniques are tailor-made. Therefore, although it was important to recognise these individual accounts were subjective and personal, they were both 'real' and 'revealing'. For example, one participant recorded:

*“Get into office at about 11.25, switch on computer. Would normally go and make a hot drink in the shared kitchen immediately but I've brought coffee in a travel mug with me from home. Another big bonus of now working at home in the mornings is that I do not have to make so much use of the communal kitchen, which can get pretty grim”.*

This account immediately transports us into the world of this academic, at this particular point in time. Later on in her diary, the same academic notes her feelings on the news that a colleague is leaving and reflects upon her own thoughts about what being an academic means for her:

*“Research colleague comes along and announces that has handed in resignation and is moving to Australia in April. He and partner do not have job plans as of yet but he's sick of it after 10 years and feels have to love academia, is a way of life, and he's not sufficiently into it. Am sad as really like him and find discussions interesting and was thinking we could collaborate on a paper as there's an intersection between our research.... Bit embarrassed to admit in*

*discussion between colleagues that it is a way of life for me – I do eat, sleep, drink research and love it. Sad as feel losing one of colleagues see most eye to eye with”.*

Details about where and when academics work and how this impacts on their work and personal life have also been revealed, as seen in the extract below from one LIW academic:

*“I work in the back bedroom. No one else uses this room. The room is a mixture of social and work – so it is still part of the home. We display a lot of our photographs from our travels in this room but it is mainly occupied by work documents. Having the photos on display is motivating and I often gaze at these when I am thinking through an issue. As the walls contain photos, I do change the angle of my PC when doing Skype calls as I prefer not to have these in view (this is my personal life).”*

Asking participants to record their everyday experiences, thoughts and feelings in this way gives us as researchers a unique and privileged insight into their private worlds.

### **Concluding remarks:**

To date, completion of participant diaries is still in the early stages. However, by the time of the conference it is anticipated more diaries will have been completed, follow-up interviews will have been conducted and data analysis will be underway. The ethnographic design of my study lends itself to simultaneous analysis and interpretation and as such analysis and interpretation of data is ongoing and not restricted to a discrete stage or temporal period. Nevertheless, with the large amount of data generated, some form of data reduction, representation and analysis will be required in order to evaluate “*the story they have to tell, a chronology of unfolding events, and turning points or epiphanies*” (Creswell, 2007: 155). This will involve transcribing the data, organising it, qualitatively coding or thematically sorting, classifying, representing, describing and interpreting it. At this time framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer 1994) and narrative analysis (Bruner 1991; Reissman 1993) are being considered as potential techniques and both will be explored further in advance of the conference.

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