

Chapter 4

Diaries

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“In diary studies, people provide frequent reports on the events and experiences of their daily lives. These reports capture the particulars of experience in a way that is not possible using traditional designs.”
(Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003, p. 579).

The history of diaries as a tool in mental health intervention research and the history of writing are intertwined. Chronicles describing significant events have been kept for over 500 years in Europe by the church that once held a monopoly on writing. Chronicles are, however, not personal and reflective descriptions of events, which are a characteristic of the modern diary. In Japan, there are examples of personal reflective diaries dating back to the tenth century (Alaszewski, 2006). Personal reflective diary writing first became more common when the following two interconnected historic changes had taken place. With the introduction of formal schooling and the increased availability of the instruments of writing, pens and paper, writing became more commonplace among certain classes of people who were not clergy or monks. The second important historic development was the rise of individualism. Individualism is generally associated with the development of Protestantism and capitalism (Alaszewski, 2006; Symes, 1999). Protestantism stressed the significance of the individual person's relationship to God. Formally, the church had claimed responsibility for mediating people's relationship to God. As the individual's development of their relationship to God became more significant, some people started writing about their personal religious life and development in diaries. Protestantism also stressed the significance of personal diligence. The diary offered a technology for monitoring diligence; for organizing and reflecting about one's life in relation to time (Symes, 1999). The rise of capitalism was also central to

the development of individualism. As the legal bond that once tied peasants to certain lords and masters was broken at various different times across Europe (Asplund, 1985), even more peasants had to move to sell their labor to make a living. Life as a peasant had been tied to a specific place, and peasants typically carried out tasks similar to those their parents had carried out before them. Personal development and questions of identity were not central to life under these conditions. Moving from place to place, however, challenged the way people thought about themselves. People started to have to fit into a range of differing contexts and they began to meet more people from other places, who they also had to fit in with. These new conditions meant that people had to think far more about who they were, and how they behaved, than they had done as peasants (Asplund, 1985). Making sense of who one was, and getting one's life to hang together became a more central feature of people's lives. Diaries offered a technology that some people with writing skills used to conduct reflections about such issues.

After the rise of secularism, personal development was no longer necessarily tied to religious or spiritual development. With the development of new scientific participants, such as ethnography and psychology, secular ways of understanding and reflecting about personal development became more commonplace. As formal schooling became available to all in many countries and notions of the individual, individual freedom, and personal identity became increasingly widespread, diary writing gradually became more commonplace and less tied to elite groups.

The development and availability of new technologies also changed the form and the content of diaries. Where there once were but few accessible diaries, and diaries were generally considered a personal or private document and few diaries were published, the World Wide Web and blogs have now made many personal diaries available to others. It has now become far easier to write diaries together with others, and to write diaries for others to read. Diaries are no longer just read by others after the diary is completed and perhaps after the author is deceased. Other peoples' diaries can now be read on a daily basis. The Internet diary or blog as a technology enables a new form of interpersonal communication. This highlights a significant change in diary formats. The boundary between what was once kept private and what is in the public sphere is undergoing a change. Social media, reality television, the mobile phone (with or without a camera), video surveillance, web cameras, and blogs are just some of the new technologies that are bringing what was once kept private more frequently into the public domain.

Within the social sciences, diaries have long been employed as a research tool. The early ethnographer's field notes had a diary format (Malinowski, 1989). Historians have long used diaries as a source of data (Sheridan, 1993). Within psychology, Gordon Allport is usually credited with first emphasizing the significance of diary data.

“In its ideal form, the diary is unexcelled as a continuous record of the subjective side of mental development. The first stirring of an interest, its growth, perhaps to the state of an absorbing passion, and its decline, can be traced. The turning points in a life are exposed to