

Review:

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Andy Alaszewski (2006). Using Diaries for Social Research. Thousand Oaks, London; New Delhi: Sage (IQM series), 136 pages, ISBN 0 7619 7290 0 (Hardcover) \$99.95, ISBN 0 7619 7291 9 (paperback) \$35.95

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Abstract: "Using Diaries for Social Research" by Andy ALASZEWSKI fills a gap in methodological writings. The book is unusual in that it provides a "holistic" approach to research methodology without distinguishing arbitrarily between quantitative and qualitative methodologies. "Using Diaries for Social Research" could be very useful for students, as well as for more seasoned researchers delving into this particular form of autobiographical or self-observing text. When I discovered a diary written by an Ethiopian Jew in Jerusalem after the First World War, I could have benefited from this lucid book, which explicates alternative strategies for analyzing diaries, delineates the key issues researchers should consider when confronting diaries, and shows how one can analyze the structure of diaries. The book is an excellent beginning on a fascinating subject, illustrated by exercises and providing recommended reading. It is a pity that the word "reflexivity" does not appear even once in the Index.

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1. The Diary of an Ethiopian Jew

Several years ago I discovered a diary written after the First World War by an Ethiopian Jew named Solomon Isaac who had been brought out of Ethiopia by the French Semitic scholar, Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch. Between the years 1905 and the 1930's, Dr. Faitlovitch selected 25 young "Falasha"¹ boys for education abroad in the capital cities of Europe and in Palestine. In 1909, Solomon Isaac was taken to Palestine to study at the Lemel School, where for most of the time he felt like a lonely Ethiopian in Jerusalem. By 1917, only eight years after his arrival there, Solomon Isaac was regularly writing a diary. We do not know whether this was his first diary, or whether it is the only one; it may be that others will be discovered. The diary is written in clear Hebrew script in a notebook. Only occasional names or dates, but no sentences, are recorded in Amharic. The text is spiced with quotations from the Old Testament and Jewish commentators. In

1 "Falasha" is the designation of Ethiopian Jews, who called themselves "Beta Israel" in Ethiopia. The word "Falasha" means "stranger" or "outsider" and was a stigmatic connotation. Today, the "Falasha" prefer to be called "Ethiopian Jews" (WEIL, 1995b).

addition, throughout the diary, the reader becomes aware of the secular knowledge that Solomon Isaac had attained, in the classic orthodox Germanic style of religious-cum-secular studies, and his familiarity with literature, history and philology. In his diary, Solomon recalls a book about the rise of Islam and the development of the Arab nation; he quotes Descartes and other philosophers. [1]

One of the most important tracts in the diary is the eye-witness account of the victory of General Allenby and the British conquest of Jerusalem. Solomon writes that he managed to evade the Turkish soldiers, who were still standing guard, and get past "an English knight on horseback" to reach a good position near Jaffa Gate:

"We waited a quarter of an hour and then I heard a fanfare; then I understood that he (General Allenby) was arriving at that moment. In front of him, four beautiful cavaliers arrived and after this, his Excellency appeared riding a very grand horse. On his left, there was another General of lower rank². They were most impressive, as were their horses. Some of the women, who stood on the balconies, threw beautiful fragrant flowers. The procession which stood in honour of the great Minister stretched from town to the Austrian consulate." [2]

Although I eventually published on Solomon Isaac and his fascinating diary (WEIL, 1999), I never had at my disposal a good methodological book to help me decode the content of this rare diary and outline for me the rules of analysis. [3]

2. Diaries—a Hitherto Unexplored Arena

"Using Diaries for Social Research" provides a useful service for the researcher and student alike. This lucid book fills a lacuna in social science research methodology, showing that the study of diaries in both quantitative and qualitative research can be a fascinating and rewarding methodological pursuit. "Using Diaries ..." is unusual in that it provides a "holistic" approach to research methodology without distinguishing arbitrarily between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, something I advocated over a decade ago (WEIL, 1995a). The book is elegant and user-friendly, providing delightful exercises for the student and tips on how to fill out a diary, how to identify a suitable diarist, and how to locate a diary in a hypothetical applied research situation. An advantage of the book is its extreme clarity, with boxes which illustrate the narrative and summarize the content. Thus, one box lays out possible strategies for analyzing diaries, another delineates the key issues researchers should consider when recruiting a diarist to participate in different types of research studies, and a third shows how one can analyze the structure of diaries, and explore how and why the structure is used. [4]

The book is part of the IQM (Introducing Qualitative Methods) series published by SAGE, the aim of which is to introduce different types of methods to the student and researcher. These books survey basic literature in the field in a user-friendly

2 This was no doubt Sir Philip Chetwode, the commander of the 20th corps.

manner and, according to the blurb in the inner cover of each book, "also cover the 'cutting edge' issues in the area." While this book on "Using Diaries" may not be the best book in the series, it is arguably focusing on one of the most neglected yet interesting areas of social research: the use and analysis of diaries. [5]

The author, Andy ALASZEWSKI, a professor of Health Studies at the University of Kent, England, first became interested in the techniques of diary-writing when he was commissioned to write a study on the ways in which community nurses manage risk. ALASZEWSKI had already explored the advantages of the technique by which research subjects, in his case nurses, became para-researchers or, in his words, acted "as self-observers" by recording their observations in diaries. He defines a diary as "a document created by an individual who has maintained a regular, personal and contemporaneous record" (p.1). He maintains that a diary contains regular entries, is personal, is written close to the time when events occur, and is a record of activities, interactions or impressions. In the case of the nurses, the simplest form of a diary is a log, which contains a record of events with personal comments, but in the survey in which he was involved the nurses were encouraged to write down much more than this, thereby qualifying as diarists, according to ALASZEWSKI's definition. [6]

3. The History and Utility of Diaries

In this section I shall delve into the structure of the book itself. "Using Diaries in Social Research" is divided into six chapters, each with defined key aims and key objectives at the beginning, and a summary and exercise at the end. The chapters are each about 20 pages long, all with clear and well-written comments and boxes. The book opens with an interesting historical survey of the development of diaries, both in Europe and in Japan, which the author connects to developing forms of recording technology. He maintains that diaries in their modern form emerged only in the early modern period in Europe. However, texts that take the form of quasi-diaries predate the modern diary by over 500 years and can be found in Japan, written by the Emperor's court literati, and in Europe, written by monks in medieval monasteries. The former Japanese "diaries" contain personal accounts but lack the time references of modern diaries; the latter Saxon Chronicles produced by medieval monks are the opposite: they constitute a regular record of contemporary events but lack personal reflections. [7]

According to the author, diaries in their present form, as a means of keeping personal records, emerged in 16th century Europe. The main precondition for their development was technological progress and access to writing. [8]

After the historical survey, ALASZEWSKI moves on to a discussion of different forms of diaries, including the memoir, the artistic journal and the diary as fiction. Alas! He does not see fit to include French Nobel Prize Award winner for Literature, André Gide, whose journal represents for many the epitome of the diary as fiction, although he does make mention of another favorite, Virginia Woolf, who kept a diary most of her life. Altogether there is little attention paid to

Francophone literature and so ALASZEWSKI ignores such pioneering work in this field as LOURAU's "Le Journal de Recherche" (1988). [9]

In the chapter "Researching Diaries," ALASZEWSKI examines the utility of diaries for social research. While he quotes several surveys that used the diary technique, he makes little distinction between the difference *in quality* between a diary kept for national surveyors, who have to record household expenditure on particular items, and the personal journal, in which intimate thoughts are recorded, usually with no thought of the Other reading them. In my day, dairies often came with a magical key, which one used to lock secretly after committing one's most private memoirs to eternity in black and white. Publishing or writing the diary for someone (like a cold survey researcher) would have destroyed the very notion of a diary, which was a personal, safe place, where one could write freely by and for oneself. [10]

ALASZEWSKI is far from this kind of genre, and, indeed, this may be to the advantage of the student reader who is seeking clear answers to simple paradigms. In systematic fashion, ALASZEWSKI methodically outlines for the student the circumstances under which one can identify diaries or diarists for research in experimental or naturalistic research—as representative samples of a wider group, or as foci of research and prime centers of interest. There is even a discussion of how researchers have accessed privately held diaries, in the fine tradition of THOMAS and ZNANIECKI (1958). Once accessed, these have to be managed or structured. The researcher then has to analyze the data, undoubtedly the most interesting part of the exercise. [11]

Analysis depends upon which theoretical framework one wants to adopt. There is an array of frameworks available, but ALASZEWSKI skilfully homes us into content analysis, structural analysis and quantitative types of analysis, facilitated by software such as ATLAS.ti. ALASZEWSKI himself used ATLAS.ti to analyze data from a diary-interview study of the ways young people cope with a stroke. Survivors and carers alike were requested to keep a diary for one week per month for three six-month periods. The research methodology was complicated but, following the initial stages, each diary was entered into ATLAS.ti and coded according to agreed themes and categories, and a comparison was made between all the diaries. For example, a dominant theme identified was driving and cars: diarists who referred to disabilities associated with driving regarded regaining the ability to drive as a major sign of recovery. [12]

In my own analysis of Solomon Isaac's diary, I could not have compared his unique diary with others. I could, though, have identified themes and issues and grouped the text according to similar and relevant codes in order to elucidate the major identity issues troubling the lone Ethiopian Jew in Palestine at the time of the conquest of Jerusalem by General Allenby. [13]

A final chapter, which could have been positioned much earlier, before the reader got down to the nitty-gritty of how to read and analyze diaries, debates the advantages and disadvantages of using diaries as a methodological technique. In

a final comment, ALASZEWSKI states (p.121) that diaries "can be used in many different ways, and the types of knowledge they represent and can provide access to depend on how they are used." [14]

4. Lost Reflexivity

"Using Diaries for Social Research" is not the last word in the study of diaries. It is a mere beginning on a fascinating subject. The book is a very useful handbook for students interested in diverse methodological tools; it could also be of assistance to more seasoned researchers. I, for one, would have been happy to be the proud owner of such a book when I was struggling with a "Peeping Tom" existence, reading Solomon Isaac's diary, written as a private tract and not meant for a researcher who would find interest in it 80 years later. "Using Diaries ..." succeeds in ordering and structuring what could be a complex field with great agility. [15]

All the same, something is missing. Maybe it is a fuller discussion of the research journal as a process which provides an innovative view of research progress and acts as a tool for research design modification. Maybe it is the possibility of participant and researcher writing which offers an opportunity for triangulation of data sets at multiple levels (cf. JANESICK, 1999). Of maybe it is simply that missing word "reflexivity," which does not appear even once in the Index. After all, reading someone else's diary is a bit like looking in a mirror, which reflects upon oneself and the Other. And how could anyone discuss diaries without debating issues of reflexivity? [16]

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