

# THE USE OF PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND RESPONDENT DIARIES IN A STUDY OF ORDINARY LIVING

DOROTHY ATKINSON

Social Services Department, Somerset, U.K.

## BACKGROUND

A classic study in this field was Edgerton's follow-up of discharged patients (1967), in which he combined observations of his respondents with discussions on selected areas of interest. In a later study, (1975), he continued his use of prolonged contact with his subjects, taking time to build up rapport, dropping-in on his subjects at home and going out with them into community settings. Later still, (1977), Edgerton used a combination of research methods, including participant observation and diary-keeping, as well as more conventional interviews with respondents and with key people in their lives. Edgerton aimed, by these means, to portray the lives of his subjects in great detail.

In a more recent study, in this country, Malin (1983) employed some similar techniques. He incorporated participant observation into his regular visits to respondents in their group homes, over a period of 2½ years.

## THE RESEARCH

The research project, on which this paper is based, was a follow-up study of people discharged from mental handicap hospital to independent living situations. Members of the research cohort were identified from hospital records, and they were all discharged during the decade 1971 to 1981<sup>1</sup>. They moved from the three mental handicap hospitals in Somerset to a range of ordinary domestic units in various parts of the county.

Fifty five people, 27 men and 28 women, were identified, from hospitals records, as members of the research group. Their average age at discharge was 48 years, and their average length of stay in hospital was 27.5 years. In the period between discharge and follow-up one person had left the county and four people had died, leaving a group of 50 persons available for follow-up.

The project aimed to study the current lifestyles of respondents in terms of their social contacts (their 'support networks') and in terms of their weekly patterns of activity (their 'weekly timetables'). The fieldwork was carried out in the six months from November, 1982, to May, 1983. The information was collected primarily from three sources; (i) from the detailed scrutiny of hospital and Social Services casenotes, (ii) from focused interviews with social workers, and (iii) from interviews with clients. However, other methods were employed as part of the overall research design, and this paper is concerned with these other methods, the exploratory use of participant observation and respondent diaries.

<sup>1</sup>This research project was preceded by a small study of ten people discharged from hospital to live independently in the community, a study carried out by the author and colleagues. (Atkinson *et al.*, 1980). The ten people followed-up in the earlier study were all included in the initial group of 55 people identified for the major project. Readers might be interested to refer to the earlier social and domestic circumstances of Roland, John, Mary, Stuart and Maureen, who feature in both studies. Two others, Nicholas and Jean, who appeared in the 1980 study as secondary householders, are also included in the present project.

### THREE EXPLORATORY STUDIES

The research design incorporated three exploratory studies which supplemented the main research methods. The two participant observation studies (studies (1) and (2) below) were conducted before the main data-collecting exercise, whereas study (3), the week-long diary kept by respondents was introduced after the completion of the rest of the fieldwork.

#### **Study (1) The Community Project**

##### *Target group*

The target group in this exercise was a sub-group of 17 people (from the whole group of 50). They met two criteria; they lived in one social services area and were, therefore, local to the researcher and, in addition, they each knew the researcher primarily in the role of social worker.

##### *Rationale for the Study*

The impetus for this study came from the acknowledged ambiguity of the researcher-social worker's role. It seemed feasible that independent researchers could counteract observer bias, and possible role conflict on the part of the researcher-social worker, in the case of the 17 known clients. An independent study could validate, or question, the personal knowledge of the researcher as social worker, confirmation of this knowledge could then allow, with confidence, the inclusion of other social workers as key observers in relation to their own clients.

As well as testing social work knowledge of clients' lives, the study could serve as a pre-pilot exercise. Independent interviewers/observers could test two methods; the use of a detailed questionnaire, and the use of participant observation in community settings.

##### *Aims*

The project had two aims:-

- (1) To map the respondent's activities in the community — to establish where they go, who they see and what they do.
- (2) To observe respondents in their community activities by accompanying them on selected journeys.

#### **Method**

A group of six undergraduate students undertook this project. They had no previous experience of mental handicap and had no prior knowledge of the respondents. The students were introduced to the research respondents by social workers, and it was explained to respondents that they were participating in a project on community living, the results of which could help other people still living in hospitals elsewhere.

A detailed questionnaire was administered to respondents covering six main areas of community activity; finances, shops/services, health and welfare, mobility, relaxation, and social visits. Each section sought specific details of, for example, which (named) post office, shop or doctor was visited, as well as the regularity and frequency of the visits. The questionnaire, in its own right, was a data collecting instrument on the respondent's activities in the local community. However, it could also serve as a means of mapping out a respondent's week in terms of routine visits. Students could then plot a mutually convenient timetable of shared visits, as a lead-in to the second method in this study.

In the second part of this exercise, student-interviewers were to become student-observers. The plan was that each observer would accompany his or her respondent(s) on

some agreed excursion(s) into the community in order to observe the latter's use of ordinary facilities, and his or her interaction with ordinary people.

### **Outcome**

The questionnaire was disliked for specific, and valid, reasons; it was too long and too repetitive. However, respondents were able to answer the questions with accuracy, and in detail, and in particular the questionnaire drew out personalised routines of community activities. Respondents nearly always walked to their pre-set destinations, taking the same route at the same time each day, or week, walking alone, or with a friend, or partner, from their home base.

The participant-observation study yielded little, except in terms of clients' reasonable objections to being observed going about their 'normal' everyday business! Most clients politely agreed to be observed though with varying degrees of certainty, and individual subject's 'reticence' 'reluctance' and 'puzzled air' were noted by students at this stage. In the event, even some clients who initially had agreed to be observed were then not at home at the appointed time, having broken their own set routines in order to escape their would-be followers.

Only five people were actually observed engaging in community activities, and little was learned from the observations. For example, Ronald's shopping expedition, with his student-observer was described by the latter thus — "He refused to walk with me and said I had to walk in front of him — as he walked extremely fast, this was very difficult. We attracted considerable attention as he was walking so fast, directly behind me, and he kept shouting to me that he didn't want people to see me with him..." In Howard and Elaine's case, the trip became social, comprising a visit to a jumble sale, some Christmas shopping, and tea and toast in the local cafe. More positively, a third student caught up with his 'escaped' couple, John and Mary, noting their easy negotiation around their pre-set list of shops, and their exchanges, using first names, with acquaintances and shopkeepers.

### **Study (2) The at-home Project**

#### *Target group*

The target group in this exercise was a smaller sub-group of 11 people. Respondents were drawn from the whole group of 50, and were included in this study if they met three criteria. They lived in the same social services area, they knew the researcher primarily as a social worker, and they lived in minimum support groups. It was felt that participant observation in individual or two-person units would be unnecessarily intrusive and disruptive of home life, and those local clients living in small units were, therefore, excluded from this study.

#### *Rationale*

This small study was conceived as a second independent assessment of the social worker-researcher's knowledge of client's lives. Again this study would serve as a pre-pilot exercise, this time to test out the use of a simple checklist and the use of participant observation in the homes of clients.

#### *Aims*

The study had two aims:-

- (1) To establish each person's pattern of activity at home, both on a daily, and on a weekly basis, and to note interactions with household peers, and to note links with social contacts located outside the house.

- (2) To observe clients in their home base; to note activity, conversation, silence and conflict on the part of each member of each household.

### **Method**

An undergraduate student carried out this project. She had no prior knowledge of mental handicap, nor any prior knowledge of the subjects. Personal introductions were again made by individual social workers. The time allowed for this exercise permitted two long visits to each of the three group homes. Each home was visited for one evening and one weekend day. The visits were long, lasting several hours, incorporating both the checklist of events, and the timed observations made, and noted, by the student-observer.

### **Outcome**

The checklist was simple and straightforward, and the student-observer used it flexibly as opportunities arose during the course of visits. The checklist sought information on activities on all the days and evenings of the week, and details of all social contacts, including visitors and telephone callers.

The participant-observation exercise yielded a mass of good descriptive material. The observer described her approach thus, "In practice, what participant observation meant was to observe the activities and relationships between the group home members with a certain distance, in an attempt to reduce the influence of an observer's presence. However, it was necessary to join in the activities and conversation to some extent and so build up a relationship that enabled the members to relax and to continue with their routines as normal, and not to be continuously aware that they were being observed." The observer visited around mealtimes, as these occasions engaged householders in decisions about who was to cook, what was to be prepared and how, and who was to wash up afterwards. The meal-time interactions revealed the house-hold structure, the relationship between members, their respective roles and areas of collaboration and conflict. Inevitably the keen observer found herself part of the mealtime interaction, sitting down to traditional Sunday lunches and home-baked cakes for tea.

The method worked well in this study. The observer noted actions, movements, words and silences, she sensed atmospheres and noted feelings. Clients mostly got on with their own business, and the observer was generally allowed simply to be there, in their habitat, letting situations arise naturally and noting these down. The daily household routines emerged, and against this background, individual home-based timetables were drawn out. Telephone calls were logged, visitors noted, and preparations for visits out were observed.

In particular, the observer captures fragments of ordinary home life. Thus, at 5.30 p.m. on a winter's evening, the observer is sitting down to tea with Melanie, Stuart and Nicholas, "Stuart carries the teapot into the living room, Melanie calls upstairs for Nicholas and he comes down. Melanie places my sandwiches down and draws up another seat. She pours out the tea. Stuart asks me, 'How do you like your tea, black or with milk? Sugar?'" Later on, at 6.00 p.m., everyone clears away — "Melanie and Nicholas stand up and begin to clear the tea things away. Stuart a little slower, begins to help. They work in silence, each knowing what is to be done. Nicholas washes the pots, Stuart dries them and puts them away. They continue to work in silence. Melanie tidies up. The silence lasts for five minutes."

### **Study (3) The Respondent Diary**

#### *Target group*

The target group in this exercise was the whole group of 50 people followed-up by the researcher. Thus, the respondents already studied in the two earlier exercises were included alongside all other non-local and previously unknown research candidates.

#### *Aims*

This exercise had two aims:-

- (1) To study household, and individual, routines over one week, incorporating activities in the community and home-based activities.
- (2) To facilitate personalised accounts of an ordinary week, written/dictated by the respondents themselves.

#### **Method**

The bulk of information about clients' lifestyles was collected from casenotes, social worker accounts and respondents' own accounts. However, as a means of cross-checking information collected by conventional means the household diary was introduced as the final stage of data collection. It was designed to supplement existing information, and to provide personal illustrative accounts. The exercise also tried out diary-keeping as a method of data collection.

The 'diary' comprised seven sheets of A4 paper, stapled together, each sheet representing a day of the week, and subdivided into three sections, 'morning', 'afternoon' and 'evening'. An attached front sheet had simple instructions to respondents to "jot down what you do, how you spend your time, where you go and who you see". The open-ended format was chosen in preference to pictorial or written checklists, or other structured documents, in the hope that respondents would feel free to note down items that they considered important rather than helpfully ticking off preconstructed items to please the researcher. A household diary was chosen, rather than individual diaries, in the hope that, in shared situations, at least one person would be able to write a little or, failing this, that their combined networks of social contacts would include an accessible and willing scribe.

The diary was introduced at the end of interviews with respondents, when it was anticipated that engagement in, and commitment to, the project would be at their highest level. For those particularly well motivated clients it did indeed provide a means of continuing their involvement in the research and, as such was welcomed. For other people the diary posed a problem, which they then had to solve, by engaging a competent person to help them. Other respondents simply chose not to do it. A stamped addressed envelope was left in each household for the return of the diary.

#### **Outcome**

In the end, 17 diaries, representing 17 households, or 34 respondents were returned. The open-ended format was successful in that it had allowed respondents to note down items, activities and people of importance to them and, as a result, had yielded some fascinating insights into their daily lives. The diaries produced some original illustrative material as well as serving as cross-checks of material collected by other means. However, the individualised responses precluded comparisons between individuals or between groups. The content, detail and degree of completeness varied widely between different diaries. Some clients noted, very precisely, the times for getting up, having meals and going to bed, and their routines were recorded in full. Some noted what they had to eat, others the people

they had seen, a few observed the day's weather, and some how they felt on particular days.

The introduction of diaries to mentally handicapped respondents goes right to the heart of their perceived incompetence, their poor academic ability. At the very least, the diary represented a challenge, sometimes it posed a problem which then had to be solved and occasionally it seemed a threat, a source of worry. In the interview situation, some respondents made immediate disclaimers, saying that they could not write, or could not write 'very well', could not spell or could not do 'joined up writing'. Some clients wrote their own diaries, in spite of disclaimers, and these personal accounts included some very detailed descriptions of their lives. Others had engaged their home help, or volunteer, or friend or neighbour to write the diary on their behalf. Some people did neither, and nothing further was heard from them. One group, claiming literacy skills, promised to do their diary, but being entirely illiterate they had to approach their home help to act as their scribe. Her rebuff left them anxious about their promise, and their failure to keep it, and they then called in their social worker to help them!

A full account of her daily life was recorded personally by Ada who lives with her mentally handicapped husband, Vincent. On Monday morning, in her ordinary week, she wrote — "We got up about half past nine and we have been down to the Post Office to get my husband his money and we have been down to the shop to get our groceries and came to have our lunch time hour and now we are busy cleaning up the house, and I am also baking the Milk Pudding for our tea." Similarly Jean now widowed and living alone, described her Friday morning thus — "I got up seven o' clock and had a wash. Then I made the bed, and next I got my breakfast. Then I cleaned up, and went to the Doctors and got some medicine and tablets. Then I came back and done shopping. When I got home I got my Dinner ready, I went and looked around the market, I seen a lot of people." Maureen in honest vein, noted that she was "in a mood" on Wednesday, and "had an argument and was jealous over Diana." And Charles noted "it was cold" on Thursday, but "fine" on Friday when he went for a walk. In his diary, Roland observed how "the time goes by so very quickly when we Begin to Get older", and Glenda ended her diary on a positive note, "I have enjoyed writing My Diary".

## DISCUSSION

The recognition of the right of mentally handicapped people to lead their lives alongside other citizens, given an impetus in the U.N. Declaration of Rights (1971), is now widespread, and fundamental rights are written, into for example, the Jay Report (1979) and the King's Fund project paper, 'An Ordinary Life' (1980). The concept of 'normalisation' expounded, for example, by Nirje (1970) and Wolfensberger (1972), likewise envisages mentally handicapped people located in the mainstream of ordinary life. As a result, there are now a number of mentally handicapped people living in their own homes in the community, and, as such, they are a potential source of information about community living. Their domestic situations are of interest, but they present the would-be researcher with ethical and practical problems.

On the one hand, the pioneers of ordinary living are knowledgeable about, and experienced in, life in the community, and their first-hand accounts of their lives could inform planners and practitioners and thus help other mentally handicapped people follow in their footsteps. On the other hand, they are now private citizens, seeking to lead normal lives. Thus, at the same time as they present as obvious, and legitimate, subjects for research, they could be excluded on the grounds of having, at least, earned the privilege of freedom from prying eyes.

If the moral dilemma is resolved by the researcher, it still leaves some practical research problems. Mentally handicapped respondents, with a history of long-term institutional care, could prove difficult interviewees, and their present 'normal' living practices could prove difficult to study or observe. The present paper has addressed some less conventional methods of data collection, as a contribution to the development of appropriate, and effective, research methods in the field of ordinary living.

The three studies are exploratory and, as such, they contain some useful lessons about the uses, and limitations, of participant observation and diary-keeping. Perhaps more refined versions of these techniques will allow, in other studies, more systematic comparisons between individuals and groups. However, due account must be taken of respondent's feelings about methods. The research subjects in the present study drew clear distinctions between the different methods of data collection. Apparently, it is acceptable to answer questions in the privacy of one's home, even to be observed in one's group home, and, in many cases, it is acceptable to write about one's daily life. However, it is *not* acceptable to be observed outside the home, to be watched in and around one's neighbourhood and local community. Probably everyone would draw the line at that point, and it is a tribute to the respondents in this research that they did so, and so convincingly!

### SUMMARY

This paper describes some research methods used in a county-wide follow-up of mentally handicapped people discharged from three Somerset hospitals to live independently in the community. This study had a forerunner, a small localised study of the people followed-up by the author and colleagues (Atkinson *et al.* 1980).

The author's more recent project (Atkinson, 1984) focused on the lifestyles of a larger group of 50 people discharged from hospital. In particular, details were sought about the places they visited and the activities in which they engaged. Several methods of data collection were used, including relatively straightforward casefile studies and structured interviews, as well as less conventional, and less straightforward, participant observation and respondent diaries. This paper looks critically at the use of, and the limitations of, participation observation and diary-keeping as means of data collection in a study of ordinary living.

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