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Using a Reflective Diary Method to Investigate the Experiences of Paid Home Care Workers Caring for People With Dementia

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Abstract

This article reports on the use of an innovative reflective diary method with paid home care workers caring for people with dementia. It examines the key features of the diary design, recruitment and training of participants, diarists' approaches and responses to diary-keeping, and evaluates the use of diaries in this context. Following training, 11 volunteers (all female) employed by a U.K.-based home care organization kept diaries of their experiences of caring for those with dementia. Using specially designed diaries, they wrote about their visits to clients for a period of approximately 4 months and were remunerated for up to 16 extra hours at their usual hourly rate of pay. Overall, home care workers engaged well with the process, keeping regular, lengthy, timely, and reflective diary entries. Diary-keeping provided a means for these workers to express their emotions about their work, while enhancing their self-insight and care practices. We demonstrate the feasibility of diaries for research with this occupational group and conclude that the written reflexivity employed in diaries can document, enrich, and improve the work of these caregivers.

Keywords

reflection, home care workers, dementia, diary method, expressing emotions, professional self-insight

Introduction

The role of the home care worker is becoming increasingly critical¹ as more people with dementia are preferring to remain at home for as long as possible² and may rely on the support of paid home care workers³ to optimize their quality of life,⁴ maintain their safety in a community setting,⁵ and reduce their need for long-term or hospital care.⁶ The number of individuals with dementia is expected to double by 2030 and triple by 2050,⁷ which will result in an increasing demand for high-quality care.⁸

In the United Kingdom, where this study was based, home care is an entry-level job (in other countries, home care workers may be known as in-home assistants, home care aides, direct care workers, or support workers).¹ Home care workers are predominantly female with a broad age range of 45 to 54 years. Given the low barriers to entry into this occupation, home care workers often have limited education and few qualifications. They are typically employed by independent home care businesses that are regulated by the Care Quality Commission (CQC). The CQC requires home care companies to provide basic induction training for new home care staff (i.e., manual handling, health and safety, safeguarding,

whistleblowing, reporting abuse, and dementia care). Home care workers are often paid close to the National Minimum Wage, or even less^{9,10} and face other detrimental employment practices, such as zero-hour contracts (nonguaranteed hours of work) and no payment of travel time between client visits.⁹ They frequently deliver intimate and personal care, largely unsupervised, while working alone in private households with clients who are referred for home care by social services, council commissioners, their relatives or even themselves.

Caring for those with dementia is particularly challenging. For instance, people with dementia may not recognize the worker, they may lack ability to communicate their wishes and feelings, or they may be disorientated in time and

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place. In general, home care workers may experience low job satisfaction, burnout, and emotional strain, combined with limited emotional support and lack of preparation for death and end-of-life clients.¹¹ Those caring for individuals with dementia are especially vulnerable when compared with those caring for fundamentally able clients.¹²

Although diaries have been used to explore spousal and family interpersonal caring,^{13,14} prior to our study, diary methods have been absent in the investigation of paid home care workers.^{15,16} This article aims to explore the use of a reflective diary method with home care workers, specifically those caring for people with dementia. Employing diaries uniquely in this way can provide insights into how these workers carry out and experience their role.

A diary is a first-person, contemporaneous record of an individual's experiences, thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Diaries capture "the little experiences of everyday life that fill most of our working time and occupy the vast majority of our conscious attention."¹⁷ As research instruments, diaries can be used to collect detailed information about an individual's behavior, key events, and other aspects of their lives and can complement other forms of data collection.¹⁸ These personal, often reflective, written accounts can enrich understanding by affording a highly personal vantage-point from which to interpret data, a perspective that is fully embedded in a given context.

Self-completion diaries have a number of strengths as a research method. They provide a more immediate account of events that would otherwise be difficult to recall accurately, or are easily forgotten. They help overcome the reticence some people may feel in verbally articulating their ideas, and can be completed in such a way as to preserve anonymity. This may be an advantage in studies involving the collection of sensitive data which participants may not feel comfortable discussing directly in a research interview.^{19,20} Using diaries permits the examination of reported events and experiences by a firsthand participant.²⁰ Also, a diary can give access to activities largely hidden from outsiders and to social groups that are stigmatized or difficult for researchers to reach.²¹ A diary can also document changes within an individual, and their circumstances, over time.^{18,20}

Diaries have a particular application in the study of working lives and workers' reactions to them. Emotions and thoughts are difficult to observe reliably, but through diaries, the significance and meaning ascribed to phenomena may be recorded by the individuals most closely involved.²² Researchers have often used diaries to capture the emotional impact of work, for example, the tensions between work and family demands,²³ the rewards and difficulties of teaching,²⁴ and the experience of burnout.^{25,26}

Diaries have been used to structure systematic reflection at an intrapersonal level for professional groups in training, particularly those whose jobs involve substantial emotional labor. For example, police,²⁶ teachers,²⁷ midwives,²⁸ and doctors²⁹ have been tasked with keeping reflective diaries.

Bennett and Kingham³⁰ provided a framework for student nurses to systematically keep diaries as part of their nursing education, as a medium to record their experiences and reactions, and reflect on these with coaching from a clinical supervisor.

In this article, we explore (1) home care workers' engagement with the diary-keeping process, (2) what participants told us about the process of diary-keeping, (3) any effect keeping a diary may have had on diarists' attitudes toward their work and their job-related behavior, and (4) the impact of written reflection on their professional self-image and practice.

The Diary Method

The diary study formed one part of a larger research project funded by the National Institute for Health Research School for Social Care Research (NIHR SSCR). The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR SSCR, NHS, the National Institute for Health Research, or the Department of Health. The research protocol received ethical approval from the UK Health Research Authority Social Care Research Ethics Committee.¹⁵ In exploring the factors associated with quality care, the wider research project considered the following key questions: What do home care workers do in practice for people with dementia? What does it feel like to give—and to receive—home care? How are home care relationships experienced by care workers and recipients? and What are the stresses and rewards of working with people with dementia in home care? The reflective diary part of the study, reported in this article, was used as a method to gather illustrative data in relation to all these questions, to create an opportunity for diarists to reflect on the meaning and implications of their practice, and to give them a voice in the wider research study.^{15,16} This article specifically shares the diary method, that is, the design of the diary, the recruitment of the diarists, the diary training, and home care workers' responses to keeping diaries in this way.

Designing the Diary

The period over which a diary is kept needs to be long enough to capture the behavior or events of interest, without jeopardizing successful completion by imposing an overly burdensome task.³¹ A period of 8 weeks of diary-keeping was deemed suitable for our study: to provide home care workers with sufficient time to get into the habit of keeping reflective diaries, to limit the effort required and reduce potential drop out, to capture a sufficient number of visits to clients with dementia (as the number and frequency of client visits can vary between home care workers), and to capture changes in experiences over time. In practice, diary-keeping spanned 16 weeks from the first entry made to the last due to gaps in diary-keeping by some diarists.

Home care workers were to be remunerated for diary-keeping by their employer for an additional 2 hours per week for 8 weeks at their usual rate of pay—a total of 16 hours. Payment to diarists was deemed suitable and ethical as it did not constitute an undue inducement to participate and was viewed as a reasonable reimbursement for time spent focusing on work which would otherwise be unpaid.¹⁸ Diarists were required to submit a timesheet for payment, which was based on time spent writing, regardless of the length, number, and quality of diaries produced. A local design agency was commissioned to create a 40-page ring-bound lined booklet called “My Reflective Diary” for handwritten accounts. It was suitable to fit in someone’s handbag—an A5 size (5.83 × 8.27 in)—as we wanted to make diarizing as timely and convenient as possible. An editable pdf version was also made available. The front page had a space for the diary keeper to provide a pseudonym and also provided contact details for the lead researcher (C.J.T.), followed by a set of pages with information about the study and reflective diary-keeping. Prompts for practicing reflection and to aid diary-keeping were included in the diary and comprised questions from Gibbs³² six-stage reflective cycle designed to aid reflection following an event, that is, (1) Description—What happened, (2) Feelings—What were you thinking and feeling?, (3) Evaluation—What was good and bad about the experience?, (4) Analysis—What else can you make of the situation?, (5) Conclusion—What else could you have done? and (6) Action Plan—If it rose again what would you do? This approach was thought to be suitable as our diary approach was, in effect, an event-based design.³³ Diarists were instructed to write immediately following their visits to those with dementia and instructed to “Use the following pages to log and reflect on events in your role, as and when they occur. Date them and attempt to use the reflective cycle and the practice you did to prompt your reflections and comments.” This was to minimize the potential recall and memory errors and cognitive strain associated with retrospective accounts.³⁴ Most diarists wrote directly into the lined pages of the booklet except one who had dyslexia and used a voice recorder, and another who typed hers directly into an editable pdf version. At the end of the diary booklet, we posed several questions that invited reflection and feedback on the diary-keeping process itself, that is, What worked well and was useful for you when keeping the diary? Did you find anything particularly difficult/challenging? Have you noticed any changes regarding how you carry out your role as a caregiver due to your taking part in the diary study? Do you feel there has been any insights gained about how home care could be delivered more effectively? and Is there anything you would like to feedback to us about diary studies like this?

Recruitment of the Diarists

A well-established U.K. home care provider had agreed to participate in the study, and managers were given study information sheets to distribute to all their workers who were

caring for a person with dementia/memory problems. These sheets detailed the following: the study purpose and logistics, participation and payment, confidentiality and anonymity, use of the findings, and helpful contacts. Posters were also displayed on walls in the home care provider’s offices. Home care workers were invited to attend one of the three identical 2.5-hour diary-keeping training sessions at a familiar location; one at the home care provider’s office setting and two at a local resource center. Training is an essential design feature of diary studies.³⁵ In total, 19 attended and were each paid for the 2.5 hours at their usual hourly rate of pay, whether they signed up to keep diaries or not. Those who agreed to write diaries signed informed consent forms and were sent away initially with one diary notebook to complete. They were advised to try to write their diaries in the downtime between home visits as often as possible to reduce intrusion into their personal time.

Diarists were assured that support was available from the lead author (C.J.T.) throughout the diary-keeping period, but none took up this offer. They did, however, liaise with the two members of the research team (L.P-Y. and S.W.), who were undertaking participant observation while being employed part-time by the home care provider as carers for those with dementia. Home care workers handed in completed diaries to L.P-Y. and S.W. and collected further blank ones if required. Face-to-face contact with researchers throughout the process is an important feature of diary studies.¹⁸ Diaries were typically collected from the diarist’s home, or through meeting in local cafes. We discouraged diarists from handing in their diaries to the care organization, to ensure no accidental breach of confidentiality; however, a few care workers did this. Diary handover provided the diarists with the opportunity to ask any questions or voice any concerns with the process.³⁶ Anonymization of the diaries was guaranteed via the use of the chosen pseudonym, and confidentiality was assured related to any discussions that took place with the researchers throughout the study duration. The participant information sheet reminded the diarists that confidentiality could be waived:

in the event that you disclose anything to us which we consider may put you or anyone else at any risk. In that case we would discuss with you whether there was a need to report this to the appropriate person.

No such events occurred.

Training

Within each 2.5-hour training session, the aim was to engender confidence and enthusiasm for diary-keeping. To achieve this, we sought to establish a very relaxed, participatory atmosphere. All authors except K.S. (as she is based in the United States) attended the training sessions, and the lead author (C.J.T.) presented the training content using examples from well-known diaries (as well as her own) to illustrate the

concept of reflective diaries and to encourage the home care workers to take part. The key purpose of the study was outlined, along with the logistics of involvement and keeping diaries. Home care workers were given the chance to try writing a reflective piece in a copy of the diary notebook using the reflective prompts outlined above and to ask questions, before being invited to sign-up for the study. Diarists were advised of the expectation that they would not merely detail their visits with clients, but would explore their feelings and thoughts and reflect on their practice.

A few learning points were identified from observing the variety of responses to each training site in terms of (1) the physical space of the training, (2) the neutrality of the space, and (3) the participation of management. The first session at the agency headquarters had the biggest turnout, but was also the least relaxed in atmosphere. The office premises were large and spacious, but the training room was rather cramped and windowless. It was also attended by a couple of managerial staff from the employing organization. Although this may have shown organizational support for the study, the managers' presence might potentially have inhibited the home care workers and introduced an element of reserve and constraint in what they were willing to say. The other two training/recruitment sessions were held in a resource center away from the employer premises and influence. The home care workers seemed to feel more at ease and willing to talk openly about their employer and the nature of their job in this "neutral" territory and in the absence of management staff. This resource center, therefore, provided a better environment—lots of space, a café on site, and a room with plenty of light. Each of the two resource center training/recruitment sessions had home care workers in attendance who were willing to be quite forthright and forceful in their views.

Of the 19 home care workers attending the diary training sessions, 11 chose to take part in the study (58%). This was

considered a good take-up rate, especially from a group of workers unfamiliar with this approach to data gathering. No information was available regarding why the other eight chose not to take part. We did not formally collect participant details as we wanted diarists to feel assured of the anonymity guaranteed at the training sessions and subsequent diary-keeping to encourage their openness in reporting. This did mean that follow-up focus groups and interviews with diarists to sense-check our interpretations were not possible. However, during training, we did invite participants to share some personal details—such as their age, how long they had worked for the home care organization, their educational attainment, and any previous experience during the training session. A few gave details and these had been working for the home care organization for between 7 weeks and 4 years, ranged widely in age, educational background, and previous occupation. For example, the sessions included a young mother with no formal education; a postretirement, professionally qualified nurse; someone who had just completed a degree; an ex-taxi driver; and a supermarket worker. All of the home care workers had taken part in the induction process offered by their employer.

Home care workers were all visiting clients in their own homes. The home care provider covered a large geographical area, so visits were at a mix of urban and rural locations. Some clients were living independently, others lived with a partner, or had regular visitors from a relative, whereas others had very little in the way of family nearby. Home care workers were visiting male and female clients who varied in the extent of their memory problems and the level of care they required.

For the purposes of this article, diarists will be given a fictitious name beginning with the letter D (see Table 1), and clients' names have also been anonymized.

Table 1. Home Care Workers' Engagement With Diary-Keeping.

Diarist	Number of entries	Number of diary booklets completed	Total number of words	Average words per entry	Duration of diary-keeping from training (days)	Average frequency of days between entries
Deidre	15	4	15,523	1,035	84	5.6
Danielle	37	4	21,569	583	85	2.3
Debbie	27	3	18,002	667	53	2.0
Dawn	9	2	4,557	506	42	4.7
Diane	15	1	1,721	115	34	2.3
Daisy	39	2	6,848	176	75	1.9
Donna	17	1	4,003	235	46	2.7
Denise	25	1	3,170	127	83	3.3
Dorothy	22	1	8,719	396	84	3.8
Delia	9	1	1,035	115	30	3.3
Dee	16	1	2,606	163	100	6.3
Group average	21	1.9	7,978	380	65	3.1

Note. Total number of entries is 231; Total number of words is 87,753.

Analysis

L.P.-Y. and S.W. immersed themselves in the diaries by transcribing them electronically before they were read by the rest of the team. A summary of each diary including a description of the author in the context of the workplace was written by one of the researchers (L.P.-Y.) who also generated a word cloud from the transcription to help the research team become familiar with the key contents. A word cloud is a computer-generated cloud-shaped image made up of words from a piece of text. The size of the word in the cloud shows how frequently it appears in the text. Word clouds can help summarize large textual documents.³⁷ The research team read all transcripts, and met on two occasions to discuss and elaborate a preliminary coding framework guided by the study questions. Constant comparison was applied to identify the occurrence of recurring patterns or “themes.”³⁸ The qualitative software program NVivo was used to facilitate coding. The research team met on a further occasion to relate the emerging themes related to the diary method to core, overarching analytical categories and explanatory models³⁹ and to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretation and approach taken.⁴⁰ It was not possible to involve diarists in this process, but data were triangulated where possible with training session observations and those of the ethnographers who interacted with the diarists throughout the diary-keeping process. Descriptive data of diary frequency of entries and length were also calculated for each diarist and overall.

Results

Each diarist provided a detailed description of their working experiences, with most reflecting in some depth, although the amount of writing varied. Some wrote on average every couple of days, others less frequently. As entries relied on them making visits to clients with dementia, uniformity of reporting frequency was not anticipated due to variation in numbers and types of clients. The study yielded 231 diary entries over the research phase of 380 words length on average (see Table 1), and the writing process overall continued for 16 weeks from the start of the first diary entry written by Deidre to the last by Dee (see Table 2).

Engagement With the Reflective Diary-Keeping Process

Although not all 11 participating home care workers continued to keep entries for the 8-week period (see Table 2), in the main, they produced relevant, timely, usable, and mostly reflective diaries and with no dropouts. Our take-up rate and lack of attrition fares well compared with other written diary studies. For example, of the 20 stroke survivors who initially agreed to keep a diary for Alaszewski and Wilkinson,⁴¹ eight changed their mind, two kept a diary but decided not to give it to the research team, and 10 kept and sent in diaries, even

though alternative approaches were available (e.g., audio recording or keeping a computer-based diary). We consider the initial face-to-face training and ongoing check points with the researchers to collect and hand in diaries, which have been important in supporting the home care workers’ continued commitment and participation.

Table 1 shows the extent of diary-writing across the 11 diarists. There was some variety in the length of diaries, with Deidre (15,523 words), Danielle (21,569), and Debbie (18,002) producing substantially longer total diaries than the rest, and Delia (1,035) and Diane (1,721) the least. There was no expectation about how much they would write, but their actual output was considered sufficient to allow meaningful analysis. Frequency also varied, with Daisy (39) and Danielle (37) producing the most diary entries and Delia and Dawn the less frequent (nine each). On average, diarists provided 21 entries each. Table 2 shows the spread of entries over time from the training session attended by each diarist to their final entry. This shows that some diarists left longer gaps between their entries, which may have been due to the spread of client visits, or other priorities. Most of them completed all diary entries on the same day as their visits and dated the entries as instructed (i.e., Dee, Debbie, Danielle, Dawn, Diane, Daisy, Denise, and Delia). Deidre had a tendency to write up notes she had taken following visits into more lengthy “storytelling” diary entries a couple of days later when she had “more time to reflect.” Thirteen of her 15 diary entries were like this. Dorothy and Donna also occasionally wrote a retrospective summary of their week, in addition to daily entries, taking the chance to reflect more broadly. For example, Dorothy wrote,

During the weekend, and the last two days, have been quite challenging and a few unexpected things have happened. Rather than focussing on any of the particular events, I want to write about the overall feelings and thoughts that turned up, what I made of the situations and how I dealt or acted upon them.

A few wrote entries that were unrelated to visits: Dee’s first entry was a download of her feelings following the death of a client; Debbie occasionally wrote entries about how she felt about her experiences with her employer, or a particular client. Daisy wrote some “pre-reflection” entries, for example, “Feeling a little apprehensive about tomorrow.”


Most of our diarists did as they were asked and wrote timely entries. Retrospective writing is not ideal in diary studies, which focus predominantly on near event recording and reflection as feelings and memories of an event can decay over time. Although, any such diarizing is outside the researchers’ control, and diary entries, of necessity, have to be completed to fit in with the other activities and responsibilities of the diarists’ daily lives. For example, Dee wrote most of her 16 entries in the first 2 weeks. There was then a gap of 9.5 weeks before she wrote the last four entries over a 3-week period. She said that she “Had a break from diary

Table 2. Frequency of Entries by Diarist.

	Month 1							Month 2							Month 3							Month 4																					
Deidre	*																																										
Danielle	*																																										
Debbie	*																																										
Dawn																																											
Diane	*																																										
Daisy	*																																										
Donna	*																																										
Denise	*																																										
Dorothy	*																																										
Delia																																											
Dee																																											

Note.

Attended training *

Diary entry 

writing for a little while due to being busy and babysitting in my spare time.”

In contrast, Danielle was a regular diary keeper throughout, with one of the longest overall diaries, spanning 37 entries. She appeared to write in the evenings after her visits and in the “dead time” between calls. Although reporting that she had found it challenging to remember to write in the diary every day, Danielle appeared to get into a routine to ensure regular entries. She highlighted the need for practicalities when keeping the diaries as she recounted, “Am just sat writing my Diary in between calls. I have just nipped to the Co-op and am having a snack whilst writing.”

The diaries differed in terms of the balance between reflection and more straightforward reporting of events and also to the degree that they focussed on home care and their private lives and the impact of these different roles. Sheridan^{42(p. 35)} explains that many diary writers “have already forged for themselves an identity as that kind of writer, someone who keeps records, collects things, and preserves the present for the future.” Some of our diarists had previous experience of keeping diaries. For example, Deidre had been introduced to them in some counseling training she received.

Some diarists wrote primarily short, descriptive entries with very little reflection despite their training. These entries tended to echo what home care workers might write in client logs at the completion of a visit. For example, Diane submitted 15 short entries totaling only 1,721 words. She started most entries with a summary of the client’s disposition when she arrived (“client fine today,” “confused today,” “tired today,” etc.) and finished with “everything was ok when we left” or “apart from that everything was fine.” Although there is very little reflective content in these diary entries, she always commented on the mood and feelings of the client each day, for example:

Client very tired today, she didn’t want to get up so I tried to coax her getting up, but she still felt too tired, so I helped her with a clean nightwear and supported her to go back to bed.

Other diarists engaged in far more detailed reflection. For example, Deidre kept four diaries over 13 weeks (although not writing every week) and had an articulate, detailed writing style. She reported that she “put her soul into [the diary]” and found writing the diary helpful after stressful visits.

Some diarists engaged actively in reflecting about their work, and even how they could develop their skills and practice. For example, Debbie did not write a great deal about herself or her home life, but presented herself as very thoughtful about the needs of her clients. Hers was the second longest diary, at 18,000 words and 27 entries. Debbie was deeply reflective about her practice and how her actions may make her client feel. She even commented on previous reflections, and as her diary progressed, she tried out new approaches based on evaluating through reflecting on a previous approach she had taken and how it had not worked.

One diarist, Dorothy, clearly followed the Gibbs’ reflective cycle quite closely in her entries. She wrote 8,719 words over 22 entries spread over 13 weeks. Dorothy indicated that writing the diary was helping her in her work, as she felt that she was getting new ideas and inspiration from reflecting on her experiences “In writing this down in the diary it’s giving me ideas of finding ways of encouraging and suggesting to [client name] to socialize more with the other people in the home.”

Some diarists recounted certain events in lots of detail, often with humor and seemingly to entertain the reader. For example, Delia’s diary was the shortest of all. Each short entry focused on a single action or communication, often with a humorous slant and brief reflective commentary. She focussed on the humorous events and followed Gibbs’ reflective cycle to outline her experiences. She often reported what she was thinking and what she thought was good about the situation, albeit briefly. The following entry is typical:

On a visit to J today. I gave J his tablets out of his blister pack. He asked me “What are the tablets for?” I said I didn’t know and I was sorry I didn’t know. J then said they are to stop him getting randy. I said “Why do you think that?” He replied “Because I haven’t felt randy lately.” We both laughed. I thought “Oh my, that’s what he thinks his tablets are for.” It was good we laughed about it.

It is thus important to recognize that the diary entries do not necessarily constitute an accurate representation of everyday life, but are accounts, writing for a specific purpose and audience.

Reflections on the Diary-Writing Process

Overall, our home care workers responded well to using the diaries, and they told us that they enjoyed the process of writing, that the diary enabled them to make sense of their work, and that it helped them to become more self-aware. Although, some clearly held initial reservations. Donna’s opening entry in her diary revealed her ambivalence:

So, I sat through a presentation on diary writing and I signed up. Why? Now I feel very stressed and on the point of tears. Typical reaction for me. Seemed like a good idea at the time and couldn’t think of a reason why not to do it so hastily agreed. I feel railroaded but I know I wasn’t. Act in haste . . . then panic! After mulling it over and discussing it with my son I realise I am panicking about nothing. I don’t even have to do it. I wonder if I do it because I seek to please. It will be interesting.

Once the diary-keeping was underway, researchers were approached by the diarists to hand in completed diaries and collect new ones, and this seemed beneficial in terms of easing any worries they may have had. So, although Donna subsequently reported that she was “at a loss what to write,” following a chat with one of the researchers, she felt reassured about what she should be writing—“anything

apparently.” She was also anxious about whether her writing would be suitable, because her week was “pretty much the same, over and over again.” This suggests that it was important to encourage participants to write about the mundane or quiet times, as well as sentinel events, as these are just as relevant and valuable from a research perspective. Some diarists may have felt that they had “saturated” their varying accounts of visits and so chose to stop writing before the 8 weeks were done to prevent repetition.

The participants seemed keen to be “good diarists” and were concerned about the quality of their diaries. There was a clear need for affirmation and feedback in some cases. One of the researchers in her observational notes when collecting the diaries reported:

I met Dawn at the [. . .] office to pick up the diary as I had done last time . . . she did seem concerned that there was not much in the diary as she only has one client and has not seen them very much. I reassured her that this was absolutely fine and that is how it is for some people. I said that her first diary had been really useful and she seemed reassured by this as she said she wasn’t sure she was on the right lines. She did say that she had really enjoyed writing it.

Home care workers were also asked to reflect more specifically on various aspects of the diary-keeping experience, and nine of the 11 chose to comment. The following sections outline the key findings from these evaluative questions.

What Worked Well and Was Useful When Keeping the Diary?

Responses fell into two main areas: dealing with stress and emotions, and the benefits of using reflection. Deidre reported that “It helped writing after stressful visits,” “pouring out my emotions when writing the diary,” and “realising that at times the job is really difficult.” Denise added that it was “Good to reflect and put down sometimes difficult feelings.” Dorothy wrote, “What I realized in writing it up in the diary is my feelings about this was of sadness.”

Gibbs’ process of reflection presented in diary training was instrumental in that process by Dorothy:

Using the framework from Gibb’s Reflective Cycle helped and was useful. When something occurred whilst at work I would make a mental note of it, sometimes it turned up as a feeling and would reflect on this when I was at home.

Debbie said she “Loved reflecting on the day,” explaining further that she “enjoyed doing it because I don’t usually find time to reflect on what’s happened and how I could improve it. With this I had to find the time.”

These extracts support the argument that diaries can help the writer cope with stress,^{20,43} both in the short term and with hindsight.

What Was Difficult or Challenging About Keeping the Diaries?

Obstacles to diary-keeping tended to be related to the emotions generated by reflecting, finding time to write the diary, and remembering to write.

Denise said that it was “Challenging admitting to some thoughts and feelings,” even though she had earlier said it was good to reflect on them and write them down. Some commented on the issue of focusing and reflecting on emotional aspects of the job in their diaries and the impact this could have. Debbie reported, “Sometimes, if I’d worked a late shift and completed my diary when I got home, I’d still be thinking about it during the night and have a restless sleep.” This finding highlights a potential critique of data gathering in this way, in that it may affect the writer by making them unsettled following writing and researchers need to be sensitive to that possibility.

Some workers found it hard to find the time to complete the diaries due to work, but also due to life events outside work, as Dorothy explained, “Trying to juggle with work, doing 2 assessments (on-line) and 2 of my friends as well as 2 others dying one after the other, whilst doing the Diary.”

These findings highlight a potential vulnerability of gathering data in this way, in that it may be prone to being affected by unforeseeable events in diarists’ lives. Interpretation of this diary data should, therefore, take account of its inconsistent association with actual events or dates, and focus instead on its significance as a means to understand the subjective experience of the writer.

Some diarists discussed the importance of remembering to keep the diary, and especially as close to a visit as possible. For example, Danielle wrote, “I have to make sure I write in my Diary on the day of me working, otherwise I might forget and miss things out.”

Danielle was one of those who kept her diary very regularly over the 8 weeks (see Table 2).

Diary-Keeping and Changes in the Practice of Caregiving

Diarists were asked to comment on any changes in their caregiving as a result of taking part. Responses mainly fell into three key categories: the skills caregiving requires, greater awareness of the role, and approaches to their clients. Deidre talked about how her listening skills had improved and that she was now more honest and “upfront.” Debbie reported that the study had made her seek greater knowledge on dementia, “Because I’m reflecting, I’m now doing more research on dementia as I realize how much I don’t know.”

Denise felt that she now had a “greater understanding of the role and what is involved working as a team with my colleagues and in partnership with the clients and their

families.” Dee said that thinking about her role had made her realize “how rewarding it is.”

Comments from diarists suggested that the actual process of keeping a reflective diary impacted on their delivery of care. For example, Donna remarked that “I definitely look at my clients more individually and compassionately.” Denise also said, “I’m much more aware of what I’m doing and integrating what I’m learning and analyzing it in a practical and effective way.”

Perceived Impact of the Diary on the Diarist

Little is known about the effect of diary-keeping on participants themselves.¹⁹ In our study, reflection provided a powerful lever for some of the home care workers in stimulating learning and increased self-awareness throughout the diaries. For example, Deidre wrote,

On reflection, I think I was wrong during the story, because I stopped her to ask questions twice, and this would have stopped her flow . . . I will try and learn from this and listen to the whole story first. In fact, on my following visit I did this, became a better listener.

Dorothy also wrote, “It [diary] has helped me in my personal development enormously. It’s a very useful and insightful tool in getting to know oneself, both inside and outside.”

Discussion

This study successfully utilized a written reflective diary method to explore the features of good home care for people with dementia. Professional home care workers wrote about their experiences of caregiving over a 16-week period. The home care workers, whose diaries have been the subject of this article, generously shared some candid and insightful experiences related to working with people with dementia. Despite the relatively demanding nature of this reflective diary-keeping method, they mainly engaged well with the process.

The diary method has revealed its potential use as an approach which can provide psychological and emotional benefits for those individuals who take part, can help benefit their clients due to the promotion of improved working practices, and can aid researchers’ increased understanding of the relational aspects of some jobs.

Diary-Keeping Helps People Make Sense of Their Work and Manage Stress

By writing things down, home care workers can express their feelings and confront certain issues that might otherwise remain unacknowledged.^{43,44} Through reflection and writing, diary-keeping may help home care workers develop their own conceptual models to understand the challenges of

caring for people with dementia. It may promote clarity of thought, emotional regulation, and a more circumspect view of complex situations. Writing diaries can launch a roller-coaster of emotions, but it also permits these emotions to be witnessed in a relatively detached way, generating greater understanding about which aspects of the role lead to emotional reactions. The diarists in this study presented their work without being overly self-critical, which suggests that their self-perceptions, mediated through the diaries, may help them to develop confidence in working with their clients. This may have particular value for those in roles similar to home care workers, who work independently and largely in isolation from their peers.

Diary-Keeping Helps People Improve Their Caregiving

Keeping a reflective diary may also be a way of enhancing the commitment of home care workers to their role. As Drebing, McCarty, and Lombardo⁴⁵ have argued, professional home care workers’ commitment to their jobs and careers are most closely related to the extent that they feel personal growth and benefits, among other things. There is a logical link between critical reflection on one’s performance at work, improved service delivery, and—potentially—better outcomes for clients. Further research would be needed to establish this empirically, of course.

Diary-Keeping Affords an Insider View of Home Care

The 11 diarists varied in the extent to which they engaged in reflection or with the task. However, most provided detailed accounts of the rewards and challenges of caring for their clients. Interestingly, the reflective and nonthreatening nature of the diaries enabled home care workers to critique themselves, their practices, and that of their employing organization.^{46,47} Their entries revealed substantial accounts of the interactions, demands, and complexities that abound in the home care workers’ role. The stories told by the home care workers in their diaries (and indeed at the diary training sessions) could potentially be used to help develop critical incidents to be used in training and recruitment. The content of the diaries—relating to hundreds of hours of work in the field from 11 different angles—gives the reader a broad overview of the job. At the same time, the reader needs to be aware that the authors are not objective, but rather choose which angles to portray; diaries are written for imagined audiences.

Limitations

The diarists were self-selected and so cannot be considered typical of the home care worker population. However, there

is a high degree of correspondence between the content of the diaries and the data from other strands of the study, particularly the observations and interviews with home care workers.^{15,16} Although they were ultimately personal and reflective accounts, the diaries were written for the purpose of the study and consequently had an anticipated audience in mind and some filtering may well have taken place.⁴⁸ The entries are not just contemporaneous records of home care workers' experiences or timely reflections on their work, as the process of keeping diaries appears to have influenced the diarists' appraisals of their role as well as their self-presentation as a home care worker.

The diaries may enable us to gather insight into the work experience of home care workers, and as the extracts from the diaries suggest, they can act as a catalyst for personal change and professional development. However, diary-keeping is clearly not for everyone. Although our diary-keepers were positive about the experience, eight of the 19 people who attended the training sessions decided against participating. Also, the reflective element was less evident for a couple of the diarists. Perhaps, they might have benefited from a more structured diary to complete with regular explicit prompts.

The diary-keeping period was initially planned for 8 weeks, but instead spanned 16 weeks in practice. Future diary research may benefit from an initial orientation period so that diarists can get into the flow of keeping diaries and obtain helpful feedback before formal diary-writing begins. This might also lead to greater control of the time frame by the researcher.

Also, not all diarists wrote for the 8-week period. This may be due to a number of potential factors such as a loss of continued interest, saturation point regarding their reflections on visits, or maybe the time period needed to be shorter to maintain commitment. Diarists did not provide any negative feedback on the study from which to judge, but future research on diary methods could explore this further. For example, it might be beneficial to offer a time frame (e.g., 4 weeks) or a number of entries (e.g., 10), whichever is reached first.

Implications

This methodological description of the use of reflective diaries revealed an emic perspective and at least four major ways that a reflective diary can be productive: enabling home care workers to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves; as a means of emotional expression and stress management; as a mechanism for skill development and improvement; and as a window through which outsiders may observe a hidden world—in this case, home care for people with dementia.

Although this study has demonstrated that the method of diary-keeping can be implemented successfully, at least in the short-term, it raises questions about the feasibility and

acceptability of wider use of diaries by home care workers—or rather, by provider agencies, as a potential means of staff support, training, and service improvement. As researchers, we were seen to be independent of the provider agency, thus offering confidentiality to the diary-keepers. However, if diaries are to be offered as part of routine training and staff development, robust mechanisms for maintaining confidentiality within the organization must be developed, perhaps through the use of independent professional supervisors. One way that employers could foster a culture of reflective diary-keeping, while remaining blind to the content, would be to pay home care workers for some additional working time to write diary entries.

As with Bennett and Kingham's³⁰ work with student nurses, home care workers could be provided with the opportunity to keep reflective diaries as part of their home care training. This could be a way of exploring associations between diary-writing as an intervention and outcomes for clients with dementia and as a medium to download their experiences and reactions and reflect on these with coaching from their managers.

Conclusions

Reflective diaries have long been advocated as a method to bridge the gap between theory and practice in other occupational groups with high levels of interpersonal demands, including nurses and teachers.⁴⁹⁻⁵¹ This study has shown that home care workers are not only happy to keep reflective diaries but also that in doing so they derive benefits, both personal and professional, while contributing to a fuller understanding of the essential ingredients of good home care. By implication, this might be true for other occupational groups who are also relatively voiceless, or whose work is done out of sight.

Author Contributions

The lead author C.J.T. designed the diary and delivered the diary training. L.P.-Y. and S.W. supported the diarists throughout the process and transcribed all diaries and. All authors contributed with elements of conceptualization, design, analysis, and manuscript writing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.


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