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Reaching revelatory places: the role of solicited diaries in extending research on emotional geographies into the unfamiliar

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Solicited diaries can be used to delve into otherwise unreachable interpretations of social and physical experiences. Diaries help researchers to understand the embodied and the emotional in human geography. In this paper we develop on the work of multiple disciplines, enhancing the rationale as to why and how to employ diaries, and highlighting the benefits and drawbacks associated with this methodological tool. Notably, we extend the literature related to solicited diaries into the unfamiliar through examples from our research with scientists working in Antarctica who maintained diaries for us. We illustrate the potential for such diaries to elicit meaningful narratives that complement and extend data collected through interviews. Diaries provide timely, in situ space for emotional reactions to and contemplations of the immediate environment, as well as on every day and out of the ordinary events, while interviews provide interviewees with time and distance from the field to offer reflections based on lasting impressions. In particular, when combined, solicited diaries and interviews can substantially enrich investigations of those innately human, yet often elusive, places of the mind – revelatory places – in-between people and the environments that move them.

Key words: *solicited diaries, journaling, interviews, emotional geographies, Antarctica*

Introduction

> In the late evening alone it was finally possible to meditate on the wonderful surroundings . . . [they] generated a sense of awe and thankfulness to God for the privilege of being in such a wonderful place. . . . A sort of hoar frost had developed on snow and ice – delicate crystals like mini snails. This leant a delicate beauty to an already fascinating scene. Ice never ceases to amaze and inspire me through such beauty. . . . I revelled in the surrounding beauty, recalling the hymn 'For the beauty of the Earth' [presents whole verse]

The above is an excerpt from a diary kept by one of our informants in Antarctica. In our research, the diary has proved a valuable tool for drawing out the revelatory (experiences of powerful emotional or spiritual forces in a place) and the relational (the space between people and between people and environment). When interviewed, the above informant provided few details of Antarctica's physical environment *per se*, despite our questions seeking such information. Instead, his account focused on field logistics, as well as explorer histories. In contrast, his diary contains elaborate descriptions of the Antarctic environment, engendering feelings of awe, gratitude, wonder, fascination, amazement and inspiration. As such, the diary provides deep insights into this informant's emotional, cognitive, experiential and imaginary – indeed, revelatory – sensitivities that are absent in his interview. The opportunity to muse in private – even in a solicited diary requested and guided by us as researchers – afforded a freedom to express intense sentiments alluding to a sacred admiration of this place and his relationship to it, contrasting with his more pragmatic interview declaration that Antarctica is 'a hostile environment'.

Drawing from our recent work in Antarctica, in this paper we demonstrate how diaries can secure nuanced, relationally complex reflections when reaching into the emotional space between people and environment. This

Antarctic research is exploratory, investigating the relationship between cognition, emotion, connection and the emergence of environmental stewardship. We wanted to reflect on the surfacing and development of attachment to place in an unfamiliar location (Antarctica) where those who are connected through their work are commonly adamant that people do not belong. We began by conducting in-depth interviews; however, after several months of fine-tuning questions, we grew concerned that interviews alone were not reaching into revelatory places of the mind critical to enlightening us on how Antarctica is experienced and imagined on a deep, emotional level (Davidson *et al*. 2005). We then decided to employ solicited diaries to extend our interview data. In the project, nine informants kept a daily diary (for 3 to 5 weeks) while in Antarctica. Diary-keepers were briefed to record details of their daily context (work, location) and to elaborate on how they felt about their physical and social environment. In this paper we focus on how diaries tease out emotional relationalities. Such information was co-verified during follow-up interviews using diary entries as prompts. In this way, the combination of interviews and diaries proved fruitful in multifaceted probing and triangulation of data.

A foundational element of this research was delving into the likely links between emotional relational experiences and environmental commitment. Increasingly, human geographers' investigations have extended into the realm of action and positive change, from mundane actions to broader social and environmental engagement. The meaning and morality derived from everyday experiences – mediated by our bodies and senses (Bijoux and Myers 2006), and intertwined with the emotional over the long term (Brown and Pickerill 2009) – are negotiated within larger social, political, environmental and spiritual frameworks to make action possible. The consideration of everyday experience and meaning through embodied and emotional geographies is valuable for understanding long-term investment in and active engagement with a particular environment. With growing geographical interest in how the emotional and embodied experiences of an individual's everyday life feed into environmental concern, there is scope for exploring a wide range of methodological tools beneficial to such investigations. Our recent research explored the use of solicited diaries to consider their merit for delving into the role of emotions when examining links between personal impact and environmental action (Speed 2003).

In this paper, we start by highlighting the recent geographical interest in emotional relationalities, which Pile (2010, 10) identifies as 'flows between people, and other things'. We then illuminate the role that diaries can play (in conjunction with interviews) in reaching into those emotional spaces between people and environment, which we identify as revelatory. Focusing on why and how solicited diaries have been used in human geography, we tease out the benefits and drawbacks of this qualitative method. We explore the potential for solicited diaries to aid both researchers and the researched to reach into such fluid, revelatory places and processes between bodies and landscapes they inhabit. We also sketch out how we employed solicited diaries in combination with semi-structured interviews for our project with Antarctic scientists. We argue that the resultant emotional and embodied capacity of this combined approach is worth actively pursuing, and can help researchers better identify connections between experience and environmental action.

The emotional and embodied in human geography and solicited diaries

The emotional has become an investigative focal point in human geography, especially since Anderson and Smith called for 'conventional human geographies' to 'embrace their emotive topographies' (2001, 8). An array of emotional investigations has since emerged, anchored by Davidson, Bondi and Smith's *Emotional geographies* (2005). Within such investigations, emotion has been largely understood geographically as embodied; 'tak[ing] place within and around this closest of spatial scales' as we go about 'the most basic bodily tasks' or participate in more 'magical and moving realm[s]' of life (Davidson and Milligan 2004, 524). In his review of emotions and affect in human geography, Pile (2010, 5) argued that emotional geographies had to date 'under-examined' the 'space in-between' bodies. Accordingly, emotional geographers have more recently sought to unveil complexity and sometimes find justice in the space in-between bodies. For example, recent work has examined philosophical, social and political facets of staged, everyday 'atmospheres' (Bille *et al*. 2015); the 'more-than-social' emotional relationality of children (Kraftl 2013); and the possibility of expressing and enhancing the affective space between performers and audience (Barbour and Hitchmough 2014).

In our investigation, we examine the connection between people and environment by building on the work of emotional geographers. Emotions experienced in Antarctica are relationally complex, responding to informants' 'participatory existence between finite processes on the one hand, and an unlimited, intracosmic or transmundane reality on the other' (Avramenko 2004, 117). Therefore, we employed a methodological tool that embraces relational complexity. Emotionally intricate, even conflicting, accounts emerged. Most intriguing was our discovery of what is best described by Deloria (1993) as an emotional response alluding to the sacred, known through a sustained association with a particular

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landscape/environment (Speed 2003), or the revelatory. Revelatory responses tell us 'things that we cannot possibly know in any other way' (Speed 2003, 60), revealing *inter alia* insights into the ways in which places affect or deeply move us. Informants living and working in Antarctica during summer expeditions recorded emotional – almost spiritual – reactions to the harsh, isolated landscape that could not be known or recorded from afar. Furthermore, these intense emotions were often experienced during 'finite processes' (Avramenko 2004, 117) – like collecting samples or waiting out a storm – that in another context might be considered quite tedious. Since 'emotions become integral to how places are imagined and portrayed', having 'profound implications for embodied experiences' (Davidson *et al*. 2005, 6), the informants' stirring reactions have implications for their perception of Antarctica as a place not only for scientific research, but also for emotional investment and moving human consciousness.

In our study we also want to draw attention to different methodological options that probe the emotional and embodied. The solicited diary is one of these options. In recent years, occasional human geography studies have employed solicited diaries towards this end (Latham 2003, 2010; Meth 2003; Bijoux and Myers 2006; Meth and McClymont 2009), yet we suggest that the method's usefulness could be further extended into the realm of emotional relationalities, such as those captured in our Antarctic study. More recently, and since Pile's (2010) review, diary-based studies have emerged responding to the current relational impulse of emotional geographers. Duffy and Waitt, for example, used sound diaries to explore emotional relationalities, emphasising 'the ways in which subjectivities are not separate entities situated in place, but rather are co-constituted through place' (2011, 120). Likewise, Morrison (2012) explored heterosexual relationships through diary-keeping, probing assumptions and unveiling relational complexities about the space between love and home. The focus by geographers on emotion and lately the space in-between via diaries, establishes the potential of this method to illuminate emotions as 'a key set of relations through which lives are lived and societies made' (Anderson and Smith 2001, 9). As we exemplify in this paper, solicited diaries can also be utilised to enhance understanding of the relational affects of extraordinary places. First, however, we outline some of the benefits and challenges of this method.

Solicited diaries: benefits and challenges

Revealing and reflecting on the relational complexity of lived experiences

Solicited diaries can draw attention to the relational complexity of lived experiences, providing rich tapestries of narratives with multiple, diverging themes (Bijoux and Myers 2006). Diaries enable this because of their 'longitudinal approach' (Meth 2003, 198) and unique creation of a situated, personal, disarmed and safe space which allows for 'extensive individual reflection' (Meth 2004, 154). Emotion and consciousness of lived experience alter the way humans perceive themselves and ideas. The 'material boundaries through which embodied persons are differentiated from one another and from their surrounding environments' are 'never impermeable or entirely secure' (Davidson *et al*. 2005, 7). In other words, the space in-between is ever-changing and diaries – particularly when combined with interviews as we found – can reach into and observe fluctuations as influenced by emotion in different places and times. For instance, Myers' (2010, 333) study of homosexual men living with HIV revealed a striking contrast between the response of one informant to an interview question and his later diary entry. During an interview, he claimed to have experienced no (or very little) change in how he viewed his body since diagnosed with HIV. Yet he later recorded 'moving (re)conceptions of self and body' in his diary, admitting to being 'more self-conscious about not letting anyone see [his] body'. This dynamic relationship between mind and matter is of particular interest to geographers, and solicited diaries offer a unique opportunity in this regard (Murray 2009; Mackrill 2008). Fluctuations in the space between people and their environment were evident throughout the Antarctic diaries we received. For example, early during her stay, one diarist expressed fear and anxiety with regard to clothing choices for extreme winds. When she later lost some clothing, she chided herself about the necessity of ensuring clothing is secured carefully because you cannot survive in clothes that have 'blown away'. A few days later she felt comfortable in Antarctica, and even 'connected to the ice' despite the environment being 'a bit hostile'. Then, during a storm event she wrote of being scared and of realising that there was no room to make even a single 'faux pas' in this context. Such on-going fluctuations are relatively unfettered in diaries, but much harder to draw out in retrospective interviews.

Similarly, rich narratives recorded in diaries are further enabled by a 'temporal dimension' (Spowart and Nairn 2013, 331). Unlike interviews that 'rely on memory' and may generate 'idealised accounts' (Alaszewski 2006, vi), solicited diaries challenge the 'retrospective recall problem' (Mackrill 2008, 12). In this way, diary data could be considered more 'accurate' than data gathered through other methods (Neff and Karney 2005) and more consistent with the ways people process everyday activities and emotions (Latham 2010); however, this is dependent on participants' comfort and familiarity with diary keeping. If participants are comfortable with the method, diaries can

provide space in which they feel free to reflect or reminisce. This not only allows elaboration on the complexity of thoughts and emotions at any moment, but also challenges temporal and relational sequences of how we process the world (Meth 2003). For example, during her interview, one of our Antarctic informants had a tendency to shift any discussion about the physical environment back to its link with the social setting of the research team. While her diary also focuses strongly on social context, the structure and long-term nature of the diary exercise meant she weaved-in material throughout on her experience of the landscape. So while such elements are imperceptible in the interview, and not the informant's highest priority, the nature of her diary entries establishes that such factors are still important for her to process. This highlights the additional deliberations possible via the diary route.

Therapeutic value and empowerment for informants

Not only does the situated nature of diaries allow genuine insights for researchers, the method has potential to enrich informants' lives (Keleher and Verrinder 2003). The therapeutic value of diaries is extensively reported in health sciences (Dwyer *et al*. 2013). Geographers have also observed this, finding that 'the diary-keeping process was found by some to be therapeutic and that involvement in the research had made them feel that their opinions were valid' Thomas (2007, 80).

Solicited diaries also offer informants 'potential for a deeper participation in, and power over, the research process' (Bijoux and Myers 2006, 48) through co-constructed accounts (Meth 2003). Informants may experience an enhanced degree of control than with other methods (Morrison 2012). In Antarctica, we found that some diarists demonstrated this. One participant, contrary to instructions, configured his diary as a series of letters to his wife, which resulted in the copy of the diary we were given having numerous whited-out sections. Another Antarctic participant liked his resultant diary so much that he asked to keep the original, providing us instead with a photocopied version.

Challenges and ethical implications

Solicited diaries of course have their limitations. There is always need to take account of autonomy, confidentiality and safe storage (Murray 2009; Kenten 2010). Thomas (2007, 80), in her study of people living with HIV/AIDS, took care to limit 'the opportunity for potentially upsetting statements to be seen' by others – particularly the patient's carer – but hiding diaries was not simple. These diarists faced the risk of increased stigma, as the diary might be seen as a symbol of their infection in a sensitive social environment. Hence the researcher needed to ensure local anonymity, as well as encouraging informants to speak up if 'the research was impacting adversely upon them' (Thomas 2007, 80). In our Antarctic research, we were confronted with issues of confidentiality resulting from conflictual interactions among several informants operating within a single research team. As a result, one informant felt uncomfortable about the potential social exposé, and elected not to hand us his diary after his Antarctic season.

Keeping a diary may also cause anxiety or discomfort. Meth (2003) notes that recalling past trauma is potentially stressful for both the informant and researcher. Hence, it is important to recognise the vulnerabilities of diary writing. Morrison notes the 'increasing level of consciousness . . . can simultaneously cause ethical harm to participants . . . [The researcher is] unable to provide the same type of emotional support during the diary-keeping exercise' (2012, 73) that is possible during face-to-face interviews. This consideration reinforces Kenten's (2010) argument that a post-diary interview is integral to diary research. Not only can such an interview clarify, elaborate on and member-check diary data, but it might mitigate emotional harm.

Researchers also stress the importance of contemplating who is able to keep a diary. When aspiring to empathise with the under- or mis-represented, researchers should anticipate that those whose voices are seldom heard may be reluctant to participate if barriers exist in the research design. Eidse and Turner (2014), Murray (2009), Mackrill (2008), Bijoux and Myers (2006) and Meth (2003) draw attention to concerns regarding literacy and other limitations (such as blindness or infirmity). For example, Meth (2003) and Eidse and Turner (2014) urged informants to write in their native language – Zulu and Vietnamese respectively – later translated into English. Such accommodation reinforces the importance of providing informants choice when it comes to the diary's medium (e.g. written versus voice recorded) and process (e.g. having someone help record) to adapt to different abilities and response kinds.

Similarly, cultural divides or 'assumptions about diary keeping as a universalistic process' may lie behind poor participation (Meth 2003, 199). Even among those who are able, Kenten (2010) and Myers (2010) recognise that few are in the habit of keeping a diary. Hence researchers might be forcing a routine, or informants may simply forget. Researchers might also assume certain skills that some people do not have. For example, many in higher education warn that reflexivity is not innate to everyone and may be resisted at first (McGuinness and Simm 2005), or might need to be taught (Dummer *et al*. 2008). There are also concerns of time commitment and effort (Dwyer *et al*. 2013; Eidse and Turner 2014); those with busy schedules or stressful lives might find a diary too laborious to keep.

Like many situations where informants are outside their normal routine (e.g. away from home, engaged in tourism, confined by illness), Antarctic expeditions offer a potentially advantageous context for the employment of solicited diaries. Removed from the complexities and demands of everyday life, our Antarctic participants were particularly attentive to the task of diary-keeping, elaborating on their experiences at length. Expedition commitments are demanding, but informants commonly spoke of the reflective gain from a 'time-freeze' while in the field. Nonetheless, obviously it is important to recognise the types of context within which the success of diaries may be more or less likely.

Observations on the interweaving of diaries and interviews

In this section we demonstrate not only the specific benefits of employing solicited diaries *per se*, but highlight their value when used in conjunction with semi-structured, in-depth interviews. By way of example, we provide two excerpts from diary entries and post-diary interviews from our Antarctic research. Distinctions between the content of diaries and interviews are very clear. The diary entries are based in the moment and often emotional, whereas interview reflections step back, commonly intellectualising the experience. In both cases the informant's interview and diary excerpt focus on the same topic. These two male informants are physical scientists who have been to Antarctica more than once for research. One is based in New Zealand, the other in Britain; one recently completed a PhD, the other is a senior Professor. Clearly this is one thing to note regarding the level of nuanced contemplation gained in these diaries – we were working with highly educated individuals.

Example one, pondering the Antarctic physical environment:

> Interview: I could list any number of experiences which imprinted on the memory including our 5 day blizzard. . . . I'm glad I experienced it. Yes, in fact, although it was a bit prolonged it was sort of enjoyable in a way because it was demonstrating what Antarctica can do even in mid-summer and it made you feel quite insignificant in relation to the total environment there.
>
> Diary: How does a blizzard sound lying in a polar tent? We could consider this in musical terms as follows. The Lull. Total silence is quietly interrupted by short lived bass notes, sounding like muffled drums, while faint varying higher-pitched notes (the violins) rise up and down the scale quietly. The Gust. Heralded by a more urgent 'roll of the drums' and crackling of canvas (percussion) then a rising shriek of violins drowns the drum-roll, with increase in tempo. The gust reaches a peak with more percussion – the swish of snow against the tent. Another group of violins from another corner of the tent strike a discordant tone. . . . [he continues this metaphor for several pages]

As with many of our informants, this respondent was a private, reticent individual whose verbal responses to interview questions were thoughtful but brief. Yet in his diary, the disarmed and *in situ* musings demonstrate the degree to which the emotional space in-between can be teased out through rich, expressive, even passionate data gained by longitudinal diary keeping. This informant's diary observations included creative, sensitive and spiritual revelations that were a faded memory by the time of the temporally and spatially removed post-diary interview. Such heightened emotion is not intrinsic to the Antarctic conditions, but socially framed (Picard 2012) – in the case of this informant by scientific and historical insights, and even notions of pilgrimage (Witztum and Kalian 2012). Teasing out such revelatory insights between person and environment helps geographers better understand how landscapes affect or penetrate our embodied persons, subsequently altering how place is relationally perceived, constructed and safeguarded.

Example two, appraising the social setting, personal insights and connection to place:

> Diary: I will be sad to leave this place, with its amazing, though raw, natural beauty and challenging environment. I also think I will miss just having two other human beings around. After two plus weeks with just two other people one inevitability becomes comfortable with the others. I think this level of comfortableness is probably greater than what one might establish in the same period of time in any other situation. I guess that is another unique characteristic of doing fieldwork in remote places like Antarctica. . . . I have to admit that over the last two weeks [camp] has developed a sense of home. . . . I find it rather funny that it is so easy to get attached to a few tents. I guess in such a foreign landscape the brain latches onto whatever becomes familiar.
>
> Interview: Luckily for us I think everybody got on pretty well, there weren't any personal conflicts – when we were together in the main tent it tended to be just laughs and jokes. . . . I think that in Antarctica with your limited social relations [and] the time spent by yourself . . . you're actually made to look inward a certain amount, and . . . for me it drove some self-reflection. . . . it's the extreme nature of that environment . . . there's nothing between who I am and this raw environment. . . . I don't feel like I belong – in fact it's almost the opposite – you don't feel like you belong in the environment and I think it's a catalyst for self-reflection; and I think that's the connection I feel to that place.

In his diary the second informant offers sentiments spurred by his pending departure from the remote field location and reveals his sense of attachment to his colleagues and this curious home. The account is emotional

and immediate. Then in the interview, the informant has the opportunity to step back and reflect on lasting impressions of social and personal life in the field and their correlation with the environs. In his interview, having had the advantage of time and separation to process the meaning of the experience, he adds a dimension of insight into his personal self-awareness, his sense of connection to Antarctica but his lack of belonging.

The Antarctic study demonstrates the potential for interweaving distinct opportunities provided by diaries and interviews used in combination. Key in terms of our argument are the ways in which informants 'express' such experiences when in the present and when looking back on the past; and the differing opportunity thereby represented by interview and diary. Diaries offer an opportunity to sit back and mull over being present in an experience; a space for emotional reactions to the environment and events. Interviews can build on this, with interviewees having time and distance to allow reflection on the meaning of their experience; and although more impassive and intellectually packaged, they facilitate provision of a bird's eye view, even an unravelling of perspectives on personal development and commitments to the future.

Conclusions

Our Antarctic study demonstrates how diaries deliver emotional material centring on the relational complexities that develop between an individual, other people and landscapes. Diaries create private spaces in which informants can delve into often well-hidden entanglements of emotional responses to the social, political and physical environments around them. Through the use of solicited diaries, researchers can access otherwise unreachable or retrospectively simplified space to unravel the complexities, contradictions and even poetic or spiritual interpretations of everyday life. In the Antarctic context, we discover amplified emotional – revelatory – responses to a place that, despite its inhospitality, inspires rich narratives of affinity and care.

More broadly, within geographic investigations, 'questions about how emotions are embodied and located merit further elaboration in the context of typical and less typical everyday lives' (Davidson *et al*. 2005, 5). Here we have argued there is scope for investigation of embodied and emotional responses in the landscape. The suppression or over-simplification of emotions 'inspired in and through relationships' may ignore elusive, but fundamental 'unconscious communication' (Bondi 2014, 47–8). We suggest that probing this often unarticulated, yet highly affective space in-between people and the landscapes they inhabit may help geographers unravel the relational impact that places have on the human soul and human motivation. Great scope remains for future geography studies to probe the emotional relationalities of human–landscape interaction, and resultant active engagement in environmental action and we suggest that solicited diaries offer untapped potential in this regard.

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