Qualitative Research Studies Online: Using Prompted Weekly Journal Entries During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Solicited journal entries are a qualitative research method with a fairly strong tradition in sociological research and particularly in qualitative health research. However, the practices and strengths associated with solicited journal entries have not been explored as frequently or comprehensively as more conventional qualitative research methods, such as interviews. During the COVID-19 pandemic we carried out two online studies employing solicited written journal entries and photos. One study focused on pregnancy and health care experiences during the pandemic and the other on everyday life while working from home due to public health restrictions. Here, we discuss solicited online journal entries as a qualitative method and reflect on the strengths and challenges we encountered, including those related to using the online survey tool LimeSurvey for a qualitative diary-based study. The richness of data and the ability to solicit participants' contemporaneous reflections over the course of a set length of time, the ability to reach people across time zones and in multiple places, and the ability to adapt prompts in a quickly changing research context are major strengths of online journaling. The level of commitment required by participants, the potential for attrition, the need for literacy and technology access, and the large amount of data from each participant are potential limitations for researchers to consider.

Keywords

journal entries, COVID-19 pandemic, Sociology, qualitative methods, online research

Introduction

For many qualitative researchers, the onset of the pandemic in 2020 made it impossible to continue with face-to-face interview-based research. Researchers have begun to reflect on the challenges of collecting data during the pandemic (see: Lobe et al., 2020; Lupton, 2020, 2021; Torrentira, 2020; Tremblay et al., 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). Facing these challenges and interested in new sociological questions raised by changes to life during the pandemic, including in the areas of maternity care and birth and everyday life for people newly working at home, we, like many others, began to explore the potential for online qualitative research relying on digital submissions (Lobe et al., 2020; Lupton, 2020; 2021; Park, 2021; Scott et al., 2021; Torrentira, 2020; Tremblay et al., 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020).

While it has become commonplace to use online platforms to collect survey data, much of the qualitative paradigm within sociology is built upon the human-to-human connection that occurs in person (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). However, a tradition of diary or journal-based qualitative study has existed in sociology for more than 40 years (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). In this context, we designed two studies based primarily on online participant journaling. One, a national study, completed by Sarah Rudrum, focused on the experiences of pregnancy, maternity care, information-sharing, and social support among women who were pregnant in any Canadian province or territory during initial public health responses to

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COVID-19. The other was a collaborative study, by all listed authors, about everyday experiences amid public health measures among Nova Scotians working from home during the pandemic. The studies shared a similar design, in which data collection began with demographic surveys and primarily comprised diary-style written responses to weekly prompts over a ten-week period, with the option of uploading and captioning photos or images relevant to the week's prompt.

Ultimately, the methodology was successful in both studies. It resulted in rich qualitative data that spoke to our initial research questions while introducing topics we had not considered at the outset. This is a strength of journal studies identified by Elliott (1997). We encountered some challenges and limitations of working with online qualitative journal entries, but nevertheless found that, beyond being possible while maintaining public health protocols, the approach offered rich opportunities for qualitative study. This article recounts our experiences and introduces recommendations for researchers seeking to pursue qualitative research that incorporates online journal entries.

Background

Journaling as a qualitative research method and research during the pandemic.
Journal-based qualitative methods in sociology were initially developed in order to facilitate entrée into ethnographic settings which the researcher might otherwise have difficulty accessing without changing the social dynamics that they wished to observe (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). Since then, researchers have drawn on the methodology for other strengths, including its ability to be contemporaneous to the events and emotions recounted while capturing participant experiences over time (Eidse & Turner, 2014; Taylor et al., 2019; Bolger et al., 2003). It allows researchers to explore nuances of experiences as well as changes that occur during the study period, and avoids recall bias (Taylor et al., 2019). Eidse and Turner (2014) have observed that:

> by allowing people time and space to reflect on a certain topic, rather than the immediate question and answer format of interviews or focus groups, journals – also called solicited diaries – potentially allow for deeper, more nuanced understandings of everyday subjectivities, emotions and activities over time (p. 242).

This richness of data is a major strength of the method (Eidse & Turner, 2014; Kaun, 2010; Meth, 2003), as is, in the case of online studies, the immediate accessibility of data without the need for transcription (Bolger et al., 2003). The applicability of diary methods to studies of the everyday is also emphasized by Kaun (2010), who writes that such studies require a method which "gets close to participants but leaves them enough space for personal reflections" (p. 139).

Qualitative health research has been one area to adopt a journal-based methodology, with questions focused on both health workers and patients (Ahlin & Li, 2019; Bartlett, 2012; Elliott, 1997; MacDonald et al., 2018). Bartlett (2012) notes that health research has had to adapt conventional research in order to meet patients where they are, both geographically and in terms of their capacity. Bartlett's study, for example, allowed participants with dementia the option to record visual, audio, or written entries in order to match their abilities and interests; in another healthcare context, breastfeeding, Taylor et al. (2019) opted for video diaries to avoid overwhelming participants with the presence of a researcher. Diary methods can be used as a form of ethnography or autoethnography or to replace direct observation (Torrentira, 2020; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977), and the journal *New Sociology* has published unedited diary entries without analysis or discussion, allowing the entries to stand alone (Park, 2021). While past diary studies have sometimes incorporated tangible elements such as notebooks and/or face-to-face methods such as interviews, the method can be adapted for remote research for research situations in which face-to-face is not viable or not desirable, particularly as digital media have become more accessible in many research settings (Kaun, 2010; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020). Such remote methods may become particularly relevant as researchers doing work across large geographic distance adapt their work to the climate crisis.

Researchers have made the case for the importance of qualitative research related to the pandemic. In their article about methods in the time of COVID-19, Teti et al. (2020) argue that the social dynamics of pandemic response, such as the unexpected consequences of interventions, patterns of compliance and resistance, and community action or inaction, shape pandemic dynamics and are best understood through qualitative research (Teti et al., 2020). Such research can facilitate an understanding of people's differently situated experiences in order to inform policy and practice (Tremblay et al., 2021). Research drawing on journal entries has been undertaken in various national contexts and on a wide range of topics during the pandemic, including a competition held by researchers in Poland challenging Poles to document their experiences (Lukianow et al., 2021); the Wuhan diaries, completed spontaneously by residents and posted online, and later discussed in various academic articles (see Qi, 2021; Yang, 2021); and a study of how young people in North East England experienced public health measures (Scott et al., 2021).

Two studies of life during the COVID-19 pandemic: Methodology

This article discusses two different research projects carried out during the pandemic state of emergency in Canada. "Pregnant During COVID-19," by Rudrum, focused on how

pregnant people across Canada experienced health care during what turned out to be the early months of the pandemic. The other, collaborative, study on "Everyday Life" was situated in the province of Nova Scotia and focused on the everyday lives of those who were working at home, a group of workers who had neither been laid off nor had to work face-to-face with the public, thus having some degree of economic security and protection from exposure to the virus while at work. In Canada, public health guidelines in response to COVID-19 varied by province or territory; focusing on one provincial context in the "Everyday Life" study meant that all participants were facing the same restrictions at the same time. In the pregnancy study, the variance in policies such as those governing the presence of support people during delivery became a site of analysis. Prompts in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study focused primarily on how participants experienced changes to care and pregnancy during COVID-19 more generally. The "Everyday Life" study included prompts about experiences of working at home, family life, and thoughts on pandemic measures and how they were communicated. Ethics were approved for each study by the Acadia University Ethics Review Board.

While focused on different questions, the studies employed a similar design and were undertaken during roughly the same time period. Participants were recruited via social media posts to relevant groups. These posts linked participants first to confirmation of inclusion criteria, then to consent, and then to a demographic survey, all linked within one click through "survey" on LimeSurvey. Participant consent was obtained through the initial LimeSurvey demographic survey. The consent process included information about crisis support hotlines (although both projects were minimal risk). Both demographic surveys included mainly closed-ended questions, soliciting basic demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, relationship status, number of children, level of education, occupation, income level, and location. The surveys allowed us to learn more about the participants and to assist us when analyzing the qualitative data collected from the journals. In the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study, participants were also asked questions about their pregnancy, such as the number of weeks pregnant, their type of primary care provider, and their planned delivery location. In the "Everyday Life during COVID-19" demographic survey, we asked participants more questions about their housing type, their access to outdoor space, and who lived with them, as we were, in part, exploring how they experienced stay-at-home protocols. Those who provided consent and wanted to continue participating in the projects submitted their email address so that we could send them the weekly journal prompts. Participants in each study were also asked to provide their first names, which we used when sending out the email prompts, as well as a pseudonym.

LimeSurvey is a widely available online survey tool that is used at our university and was available to us without a subscription. While LimeSurvey is oriented towards quantitative study, our Research Ethics Board advised that the platform would be useful for managing privacy in online research, and we were supported by campus technology services in designing the journalling studies within this platform. We had previous experience using LimeSurvey for surveys with both closed-ended and open-ended questions and felt that we could adapt the open-ended question design for the journaling projects.

Being over 18 and having access to a reliable internet connection were inclusion criteria for both studies. For participants in the "Pregnant during COVID-19" study, being between 12 and 30 weeks pregnant was a criterion (so that participants were actively in the care-seeking phase of a viable pregnancy and not imminently due). For the "Everyday Life" study, working from home was an additional criterion, as this was the focus of our research. It is also important to note that all participants had to be able to read and comprehend the weekly prompts. To recruit participants, we advertised through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and targeted listservs. For example, in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study, we posted to groups such as "pregnancy care Canada," midwifery associations, and to groups for Black or Indigenous pregnant people; in the "Everyday Life" study we posted to the Facebook pages of Nova Scotia municipalities and the Facebook pages of media outlets. We aimed to create as much diversity as possible and to recruit a higher number of participants to begin with than we ultimately hoped to include. We anticipated that attrition was likely over a ten-week period, particularly as diary writing can lead to fatigue (Kaun, 2010; Lupton, 2020). The problem of asking too much of participants in online research during a pandemic is particularly acute when focused on health workers (Tremblay et al., 2021); while neither study had a particular focus on health workers, there were frontline health workers in the "Pregnant during COVID-19" study and administrative health workers working from home in the "Everyday Life" study, and all participants were burdened by changes related to the pandemic.

After the surveys were closed, we created a participant table in Excel for each project, that included participants' first name and email address, using LimeSurvey to generate unique tokens for each participant[1]. This token was used each week and allowed us to link their responses over the ten weeks. We used this participant table in LimeSurvey to email participants about each weekly journal. At the outset of each study, we drafted ten prompts. The prompts for the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study focused on experiences of care and changes to care during the pandemic with questions about the various stages of pregnancy and aspects of maternity care. The prompts in the "Everyday Life" study focused on working from home, experiences of and feelings about public health regulations and communications, and changes to relationships and activities during the pandemic. Each week, we revised these draft prompts, staying with the general topic but responding to the emerging public health situation and emerging themes in the data, allowing for the collaborative co-creation

of the research outcomes of the study. Unlike studies in which all directions on journalling are communicated to participants at the outset, the online setting meant that we could generate and revise specific prompts each week. Each week, via LimeSurvey, we batch emailed participants a prepared message which included the prompt and a link to submit the entry. Links did not expire, so entries could be completed at any time during the study, which occurred during a 10-week period between April and July 2020. Participants who missed an entry were sent one to two follow-up reminders. In the "Pregnant during COVID-19" study, those who had not given birth within the initial ten-week period were invited to complete an additional prompt about their delivery.

The initial work of preparation and organization is time consuming but allowed us to use LimeSurvey as a mailing list to securely send the links to our participants. We could also use LimeSurvey to send out a reminder to participants who had not submitted their journal entry. We used the option for "huge free text" in LimeSurvey to provide participants with space for their journal entries. We also included an option for participants to upload images and captions, requesting that they avoid identifiable images of people.

It was in March 2020, early in the pandemic, when we selected a ten-week period for journaling: we could not have anticipated that the pandemic and related changes to health care and work would last as long as they have. In fact, we worried that we might miss the moment due to waiting for ethics or finalizing surveys and prompts. The ten-week period of journaling was selected to strike a balance between wanting to capture changes in participants' relevant experiences over time and wanting to manage the commitment asked of participants. The period of journaling selected by qualitative researchers varies: the shortest studies include one week with multiple entries (Eidse & Turner, 2014; MacDonald et al., 2018; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977), others include three weeks or a month (Bartlett, 2012; Meth, 2003) with longer studies lasting 6–17 weeks (Kaun, 2010; Scott et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2019).

Our studies include detailed instructions and a shared set of questions, following on Zimmerman and Wieder's (1977) call for more structure, while remaining open to participants' interpretations and interests. With specific prompts each week, rather than a generalized focus for journals, our study anticipated what might otherwise be follow-up questions and incorporated them into prompts. The online setting meant that we were also able to read responses as participants wrote them and could revise subsequent prompts to include any necessary follow-up questions as well as to reflect the rapidly changing social contexts during the pandemic. The inclusion of a detailed demographic survey gave us clarity on the nature of participants' work, who they lived with, and other demographic information that might not have otherwise emerged through journalling. Like Kaun (2010) and Lukianow (2021), we did not interview participants about their diary contents. This differs from Zimmerman and Wieder (1977) and others

following that tradition (Bartlett, 2012; Eidse & Turner, 2014; Elliott, 1997; Scott et al., 2021). Omitting the interview stage helped address concerns that participation might be onerous, particularly given the public discussion of "zoom fatigue" at the time. We determined that anyone who submitted at least four journal entries would be included in the data analysis. This ensured that the data included was submitted over several weeks and excluded any participants who had begun but quickly stopped journaling for whatever reason. Participants who wrote at least four entries were emailed a $50 CAD gift card (or had the option of donating their honorarium to a non-profit group), as identified in the consent.

In the "Pregnant during COVID-19" study 56 people completed the survey and of these 24 submitted at least four journal entries (six in Nova Scotia; four in Ontario; three each in British Columbia and Manitoba; two each in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island; and one each in Alberta, Newfoundland, Saskatchewan, and Yukon). Twenty-two participants self-identified as White, one as White and First Nations and one as Hispanic and Métis. A study limitation was the lack of representation of other ethnicities such as Black and African descent or Asian and South Asian descent. Participants ranged from 21-40 years old with an average age of 32. Twenty participants identified as straight, three as bisexual, and one as queer pansexual. There were two single participants; others were in relationships. In the "Everyday Life" study, 53 participants completed the survey and 27 submitted at least four entries. Six participants self-identified as men, 20 as women, and one as non-binary. Lack of representation of other ethnicities such as Black and African descent was also a limitation of the "Everyday Life" study. Twenty-two participants identified as White, one as East Asian, one as European, one as mixed race (European/South Asian), one as mixed ancestry, and another one as South Asian. Among the 26 participants who described their marital status, 17 were married or common-law, six were single, and three were either divorced or separated. Nine participants had children who were 12 years of age or younger. The majority of participants (20) lived in a single-family dwelling. As a group, participants in the "Everyday Life" study were relatively affluent: only four reported household incomes of less than $75,000 and 12 reported household incomes of at least $100,000. When writing about participants, pseudonyms are used.

Data analysis was inductive and occurred differently for different papers, but began with weekly readings of the journal entries, and, in the case of the "Everyday Life" study, discussion during research team meetings. At the end of the data collection phase, we used different analytical approaches in papers disseminating results, including thematic analysis and close reading (Rudrum et al., 2022). For an overview article on pregnant Canadians' experience of health care, all themes about care were coded (Rudrum, 2021). For a paper exploring the experience of parents working at home, we selected five participants who had shared life circumstances and drew on a close reading of their experiences over time (Rudrum et al., 2022),

and elsewhere, we focused primarily on certain weeks in which the theme of the prompt was central to our topic.

Challenges and Strengths of the Online Journal Entry Method

Below, we identify challenges and strengths that emerged with online journaling. Identifying challenges allows researchers who wish to adopt this method to be aware at the planning stage of potential limitations. Some of these are perhaps inherent to the method, while other challenges we faced could have been avoided by troubleshooting at the outset. Some of our challenges resulted from using LimeSurvey, a program designed primarily for quantitative data, to collect detailed qualitative data. The aspects of research design we reflect on here include building relationships remotely, the adaptability of prompts online, high demands of participants and the potential for attrition over the study period, working with prompts instead of questions, the "space" of an online survey, the feelings of participants, and research across time zones and distance. As the challenges and strengths to online journaling as a qualitative research methodology coexist, we have explored them together.

Connection and relationship with participants

The richness of data from qualitative research emerges in part from the ability of researchers to connect with their participants in face-to-face interactions and place them at ease (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). During the early stages of the pandemic state-of-emergency, meeting participants face-to-face was not possible. Additionally, repeated interviews with participants over many weeks would be time-consuming and make it difficult to respond to a quickly changing situation. The use of a platform designed for quantitative survey research, LimeSurvey, and the reliance on online textual and visual submissions, rather than face-to-face or another version of real-time interviews, initially appeared less-than-ideal for building a sense of connection with participants. However, we found that participants demonstrated their engagement and made bids toward forming connections, such as by addressing us directly, as did we as researchers. Ten participants in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study and 19 in the "Everyday Life" study affirmed, when asked, that they wanted a copy of their compiled journal entries, signaling high engagement with the study.

Throughout data collection, there were times when we felt surprisingly connected to individual participants. For example, Wendy, a participant in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study living in Manitoba, wrote about what she described as a travel ban to Newfoundland and how it affected her plans to give birth at home, making a bid for connection when she wrote: "my family are expats (Dad got transferred for work, we got stuck in the prairies, yadda—you know all about it

there in Nova Scotia)". She understood that she would have shared points of reference with the research team, located on the East Coast (and in fact most of us are also transplants). Jerald, a participant in the "Everyday Life" study, apologized for late entries, and in his final entry explained that he felt the study was important and that journaling had been ultimately beneficial yet difficult, which was why he typically put it off. We offered reassurance via prompts such as, "say as much or as little as you want" and by not requiring submissions every week. Several weeks into the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study when a technical glitch meant Rudrum temporarily couldn't see the names attached to respondents, she found in many cases that she could identify the participants based on their writing style and content, which offered a sense that she had come to know participants. While a sense of connection was possible, and something that participants seemed to work towards just as we did, there was less rapport and recognition than in a face-to-face study.

It was clear that participants felt that they were known, in a positive sense but also at times feeling potentially exposed. Dan wrote:

> Really, my only concern here is that I've shared too much—and people will be able to identify me. I'm new to journaling, I just started this year for the first time (Day 196)—but I do find it quite helpful in thinking things through. I've enjoyed the prompts and reflecting back on what's been a very unusual few months. I would like to read the papers that come from this work—to see what themes emerge. Good luck with your study!

Dan was encouraging about the value of journaling and the research, and his worry over being identifiable was something we had addressed in our research protocols, which included using pseudonyms and avoiding referring to jobs or family members in specific terms. As qualitative researchers, we rely on human connection with participants not only for "better" research outcomes through improved data quality, but also for personal grounding in the world and in our work. While the examples of connection were heartening and helped to anchor the study, the greater potential for connection and solidarity in face-to-face interviews remains a strength that researchers should not overlook, and a potential limitation of any online research setting (Valdez & Gubrium, 2020).

As the recipients of the participants' journal entries, the researchers became a kind of imagined "other." Participants may have experienced their imagined audience as a blank page or a neutral non-judgmental listener. They were writing their entries privately, at their own pace, which created a connection to the process identified by Wendy, who was navigating her first pregnancy:

> Honestly, the person with whom I have processed this pregnancy most thoroughly and most often, is you, Dear Reader. These research questions are the only pregnancy journal I have kept, aside from occasional letters to Baby. [. . .] Please know that

however valuable the work you're doing here may be as an academic study, it is equally if not more valuable as a compassionate, non-judgmental, interested outlet for numerous pregnant women trying to prepare for babies under difficult and (often) unprecedented circumstances. I've been extremely grateful for this study.

Wendy's framing of the participation as having personal impact alongside contributing to knowledge echoes Dan's experience. This kind of "reader" relationship is discussed by Kaun (2010), who identified that participants could develop a relationship with their diary and the imagined readership. A participant in the "Everyday Life" study, Ashley, also found being part of the study a valuable place to process her private experiences and feelings, identifying the experience as positive and noting that:

> many of the experiences and struggles I have had over the last few months are also experienced by or involve my family members, so it has been nice to have a separate outlet to discuss and reflect upon these changes and feelings over time.

Jeanne shared a similar sentiment, writing: "It was neat to be able to create space to think about how my life was being impacted. I don't think I would've been so contemplative about the pandemic otherwise. Thanks for the opportunity!" Participants were already engaged in thinking about the unique circumstances of the pandemic, and journalling was an outlet for their thinking and a form of support. The back and forth of an interview offers an opportunity for connection established through rapport, while journaling offered a different kind of connection that is built over time. This is consistent with findings from previous journaling studies, such as Taylor and colleagues' (2019) study of breastfeeding women who found that video journaling was therapeutic and "provided an avenue for mothers to talk to someone" (p. 279). Without any of the formality or nerves potentially associated with an interview, journaling offered our participants a private place to reflect and connect. The process of writing, the time offered to reflect, their engagement with the topic of the research, and perhaps their anonymity contributed to participants' rich reflections, demonstrating that journal-based studies can create the conditions for qualitative rigor.

As with any study, we caution against asking for unnecessary work from participants. This includes editing prompts carefully to ensure they focus on the research question. We also recommend thanking participants as they go and identifying the number of entries necessary to be considered in data collection (rather than making every week mandatory).

Attrition

Another potential methodological challenge of journaling, which takes place over time, is attrition (Lupton, 2020). Both projects included ten weeks of journaling, and we knew that

some participants were likely to stop submitting entries at some point due to the duration of the projects. Instead of actively recruiting until theoretical saturation (Low, 2019), we capped recruitment after the first demographic survey. This allowed for some attrition to occur without compromising learning about these groups and their experiences of the pandemic and prevented the project from becoming too unwieldy in relation to our resources. This was more participants than we wanted to retain, to account for attrition while keeping the budget on track. We avoided a rolling entry approach in favor of allowing all participants to receive prompts simultaneously. In both studies, we ended recruitment once we had attained approximately 50 participants. In the "Everyday Life" study, 63% of those who began journaling completed all ten entries; 74% completed nine or more entries; and 85% wrote eight or more. In the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study, 54% journalled in response to all 10 prompts 71% wrote nine or more entries; and 79% wrote eight or more. This demonstrates their engagement and commitment during a difficult and unpredictable period. Ultimately, the number of participants allowed for rich data in both projects. In each study, we created a study-specific email account and were responsive to questions there; this contact with participants may be important to avoiding attrition (Lupton, 2020).Table 1

There was slightly more attrition in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study than the "Everyday Life" study, in which working from home was an inclusion factor. Existing reliance on, and familiarity with, online technology for work may have helped facilitate working with the online space for "Everyday Life" participants. Among participants in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study, some continued to work face-to-face with the public, including in "frontline" jobs in the health care sector. The written journal format depends on literacy (Bartlett, 2012) and comfort with writing, and the online version relies on access to technology. The "Everyday Life" study focused on those working at home during the pandemic, a highly literate group who had access to technology. In the case of the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study, relying on online journaling will have meant that those included in the study may represent a more literate and tech-enabled group than pregnant Canadians as a whole. The need for literacy and technology is a limitation of online journaling as a method, as discussed by Jones and Woolley (2015).

In contrast to an interview, which captures the reflection of a participant on one day, the ten-week period allowed us to gather responses over time which was valuable enough that the prospect of some attrition was acceptable. Receiving responses over a long period worked well with the emerging and shifting nature of the pandemic and related protocols. It allowed us to "course correct," changing the phrasing of our prompts to reflect current conditions. However, managing the numbers of participants in these studies was less predictable than in studies we had designed that relied on a single face-to-face interview with each participant. We recommend the practice of beginning with more participants than you hope to

Table 1. Number of Journal Entries Written in Both Projects.

Number of Journal Entries	Pregnancy Study n (%)	Everyday Life Study n (%)
10	13 (54%)	17 (63%)
9	4 (17%)	3 (11%)
8	2 (8%)	3 (11%)
7	—	1 (4%)
6	1 (4%)	—
5	3 (15%)	1 (4%)
4	1 (4%)	2 (7%)
Total	24	27

retain, as well as including messages to encourage the participants and let them know that each entry need not be onerous.

The Journal Format

Designing prompts was somewhat different from designing interview questions. Through the two studies, we learned how to design distinct weekly prompts that elicit rich data, how to "tailor" questions to participants' demographics and experiences when working with a group, and how using analytic memoing (Charmaz, 2006) as a form of ongoing analysis can work when data collection takes place over multiple weeks. In designing prompts for both studies, we weighed how much detail to include. A totally open question might miss the chance to jog people's memory by providing a "for instance". Yet very detailed prompts might lead participants to stay overly close to what was asked, diminishing the exploratory potential of qualitative research methods. With added detail, there is also a potential to accidentally write leading questions. One participant, Felicia, found the questions too open-ended: "Very interesting topics each week, but a little too open. I'd have rathered more direct questions and responses as opposed to one big text box. It would have helped me direct my thoughts better". Her suggestion was for a format more like a survey; however, by using a more open format we found that participants introduced ideas they were not asked about, in similar ways to what we have experienced in face-to-face interviews. This demonstrates how participants' interests and priorities help to co-create the outcomes of research. For example, in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study, a prompt asked about non-medical supports that might have changed, but it was participants who introduced ideas about maintaining fitness when gyms and fitness classes had closed. Participants were not asked about how changes to employment conditions and to Canadian welfare supports changed how they navigated their leaves or benefits, but this was an important topic for some participants, which they wrote about in detail. With all participants in the "Everyday Life" study still working, financial issues were not a focus of our prompts, but some participants introduced saving money as a positive aspect of changes during the pandemic that they would like to continue.

While there was opportunity for participants to write about topics that interested them but that the researchers might not have anticipated, there were fewer opportunities on the researchers' side to tailor questions to probe unique, individual circumstances as would be the case in an interview. Our study was designed to solicit participant's reflections on shared experiences (rather than soliciting complete narratives of an experience as in an interview); the survey platform we used was also most functional when sending the same prompt each week to all participants. For example, one participant in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study was a second-time surrogate; the context of their pregnancy was somewhat different than for other participants. In an interview, Rudrum might have had specific follow-up questions to capture these unique experiences. With solicited journaling methodology, instead, she worked to be careful with prompts to the whole group, knowing that a question on post-partum experiences that referred, for example, to "your baby" would not correspond to this participant's experience and that they might feel overlooked if that was a consistent focus. The participant was able to recount in rich detail their experience of navigating health care as a surrogate during the pandemic.

One benefit of having weekly online contact, rather than having shared journaling instructions solely at the outset, was the ability to revise prompts in response to events and emerging themes in the data. The ability to change prompts is noted by Bolger et al. (2003) as a strength of online journaling. An example of a new topic occurred in the "Everyday Life" study when we included a question about major tragic events occurring in Nova Scotia, nationally, and in the US, including a gun rampage that was Canada's largest mass shooting event centered in the small community of Portapique, NS (McMillan & Mayor, 2020). Since one participant had already written about losing a friend in this shooting, we made sure to include a note that participants needn't respond to any part of the prompt that they had already written about. On a more mundane level, both studies included participants of various relationship and family statuses. We worked with our prompts to avoid any repetitions that might be stigmatizing or feel exclusionary (such as, "if you have a partner," or "if you have children"). This need to fine-tune prompts so that they could speak to both group and individual situations was

simultaneously a short-coming and an opportunity. It would have felt more familiar to us to tailor prompts on the go and in real-time, and might have allowed for more nuanced questions and responses. However, the need to consider the range of experiences among participants when revising prompts pushed us to stay with our participants and with the data, reading and analyzing responses each week. As noted by Bartlett (2012), the openness of the diary format lends it to meet people where they are, as "different personalities, backgrounds, and lifestyles" (p. 1722) can be captured by each participant's approach to crafting their response, with some offering long introspective accounts and others answering with a short record of events. The capturing of change over time is a benefit of the diary approach. As Meth (2003) writes: "diary writing, as a discontinuous process, can change with each entry. Its temporal nature allows for a break in logic between entries. This perhaps reflects more accurately the diverse range of thoughts and feelings that make up human consciousness" (p.198). Within our study, we were able to track the ways in which participants at times experienced contradictory emotions as well as ways in which their approach to life during the pandemic changed over time (Rudrum et al., 2022). We recommend that when deciding on the length of a study, researchers consider what they hope to learn. For our purposes, ten weeks worked well. The need to respond to diverse situations made the thought process when revising the prompts richer. It was useful to work with analytic memoing (Charmaz, 2006) to regularly record, in Zimmerman and Wieder's (1977) words, "what we know today" in order to develop "questions in mind," and to encourage further elaboration on themes that are emerging in the data provided through participants' journal entries but that may be "not quite there yet" (p. 492). In the collaborative "Everyday Life" study, we met weekly in order to revise prompts in response to emerging events related to the pandemic and to emerging themes in the data. As we moved from weekly online research meetings to face-to-face, our own work experiences mirrored those of participants, which was helpful in crafting relevant prompts. These meetings also helped us to navigate the emergency orders and isolation, providing the opportunity to discuss how we ourselves were coping with public health measures, working from home, and new forms of relationship and isolation. The process of creating prompts required our reflexivity, just as participants were reflexive about their experiences during journaling. We recommend meeting regularly, face-to-face where possible, to others approaching a multi-week journalling project as a team. In an editorial reflecting on what it meant to collaborate as a research team during the pandemic, Meskell et al. (2021) reflect that it was a time to "learn the lesson of gratitude for the people in our lives and the social interaction that is the lifeblood of all humanity and all qualitative research" (p. 3). This was also our shared experience.

The "space" of online

One challenge, that will differ depending on which tool researchers use for data collection, was the "feel" of our research platform. LimeSurvey, the online platform we worked with, was initially designed as a survey collection tool rather than for qualitative research. The feel of the platform is relatively "cold," so we worked within this to create a greater sense of personality, relationality, and to solicit rich narratives.

To mitigate against the "cold" feel of the research platform, we worked to create a "voice" in our prompts that would have some warmth, such as including thank you messages and updates about the studies. For example, in the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study, Rudrum let the participants know about plans to submit a paper based on the research to a special call from a journal about pregnancy during COVID-19 internationally, introducing it with "Thanks so much for your continued participation! I thought you might be interested in a (small) project update". Each week, we included a note "Remember, you only need to answer as much as you want/ what is applicable to you and, as always, feel free to provide any relevant information we may have missed!" The final prompt was prefaced with:

> This is the last week of the study! We are so grateful for your participation. Thank you! After the main prompts, we have a couple of administrative questions. The research team would like to offer all of you a copy of your journals, in case you want to keep them as a memento of this time. We also want to remind you that you are eligible for a gift card.

Offering thanks and reminding participants that they only need write as much as they wanted to were ways of managing the potential to ask too much of participants as well as adding "warmth" to the platform.

Despite our work to create some warmth within the platform, the tool does have the look and feel of a survey application and is designed to promote impartiality, clarity, and brevity. We wondered whether simply sending and asking for replies to email would have been as effective and more personal. However, in addition to privacy concerns with email identified by our Research Ethics Board, email would have entailed more potential data management issues and would not have facilitated the seamless use of both a survey tool and qualitative journal prompts. At times, project administration included dealing with technical problems and unanticipated issues such as photos not uploading as designed, or journals uploading correctly but participants receiving an error message. This meant additional needs for technical support early in the study. However, as no transcription was needed, there were also timesaving aspects to the design, a strength of online journaling noted by Bolger et al. (2003) and a difficulty with handwritten journals (Jones & Woolley, 2015). Without having to wait for transcription, all members of the research team were able to read the entries as they came in, allowing us to engage with analysis of data as it was generated.

An additional strength of the technology platform was that it meant we could offer our inclusion and exclusion questions, consent form, demographic survey, and journal prompts all on

the same platform. We were also able to solicit photos and captions. These elements meshed relatively easily, and made participation simple, as participants only had to get comfortable with one type of research space. One participant wrote how she was often late submitting her journal because she seldom checked her personal account, noting "I should have had this survey sent to my work email". We recommend that future researchers using this model include a note to sign up using the most used account to better sync participants' online space with the research space, bearing in mind that employers may access work email accounts (a warning we include as part of the consent process). Despite some of the technical difficulties, limitations, and "cold" feeling of Limesurvey, we would recommend it as a platform for other qualitative researchers. However, as with other research platforms, there is a learning curve and we recommend practicing before starting the project. We also recommend that researchers using LimeSurvey or any primarily survey-based platform consider how to create "warmth" or connection, such as by managing font style and size, creating thank you responses, and working to create a "voice" in communications with participants.

Feelings of Participants Who Journal

As a means of participation in a research project, journaling may feel intimate for some, with both positive connotations of connection and rapport and negative connotations of exposure and vulnerability. At the end of the study, we asked participants to reflect on how they had felt about participating. Participants welcomed the opportunity to participate for its intrinsic benefits such as self-reflection as well as extrinsic benefits such as the contribution to the study.

For example, Jerald was encouraging yet slightly trepidatious, writing:

> I've found participating in the study a lot harder than I anticipated. The lockdown was so long and slow that it became very easy to get used to it, and to accept the new normal. With this diary, I had to carefully think about how I felt, and how I was responding. On closer inspection, I was handling things much worse than I thought I was. This is why many of my entries were late - I kept putting them off because I knew they would bring me down for the rest of the day. I was scared to put my thoughts in writing. This is not meant as criticism. I respect your work, and I think it's important. I am very glad I participated, and I would keep going if you needed more. If anything, it's healthy to closely inspect your own life and thoughts, even if the results aren't always pleasant. Maybe I'll keep up the habit, even if the study has ended. Good luck!

His comment on continuing to journal highlights the personal value he found in the practice. Dee also found that there was a therapeutic aspect to participating. She wrote:

> I have really enjoyed pouring out my soul for this study—it's been another really therapeutic outlet for me. I also apologize to the folks that hafta read all my dribble. I do hope it proved helpful in some small way. Good luck with the study. I would definitely be interested in hearing about the results someday. In the meantime, be safe, stay well, and may the force be with you. :)

Her apology echoed a reluctance by some participants in Bartlett's (2012) study of people with dementia, one of whom worried that his routine was too close to "I get up and clean the house, blah, blah" (p. 1724) to be of interest to researchers. Participants' feelings about taking part in research about the everyday was a topic for Brownlie (2019), who found that "sharing about the ordinary in research involves more of an emotional gamble, and provokes greater ambivalence, than might be assumed by the apparently insignificant nature of what is shared" (p. 261). Where Dee found it "therapeutic," Joe characterized it as "cathartic," adding: "It allowed me to put my feelings into words, and work through what I was thinking and feeling about this very strange situation we're all in." Such reflections emphasize that while participation entails time and work for participants, it can also be of personal value to them.

Sonia, in the "Everyday Life" study, was positive about her participation, but, like Dee, worried over the quality of her entries. Indicating a concern over researcher expectations, she wrote: "I enjoy participating in the study. My only issue is wondering whether I'm answering the questions as they were intended to be answered." These concerns over the quality of journal entries were shared by participants in (Eidse & Turner's, 2014) study of street-vendors in Hanoi, Vietnam, some of whom strategized to produce good writing despite a lack of formal education, while others were sometimes too tired to write at length. We made efforts to temper such concerns by encouraging participants to write "as much or as little" as they wished each week. Researchers using this methodology may also consider advising participants that any quality or level of formality in their written response is appropriate as long as it conveys their thoughts and experiences.

LeeAnn found that participation was daunting at times, while valuing the opportunity to contribute. She wrote:

> Thank you for this research—I can see the worth of the study. Hearing about the everyday life of everyday people. History often records the broad strokes but we forget sometimes the small everyday things. Just like we've heard about the Spanish flu (usually about the large number of people who died) but we probably didn't think too much about how people lived every day. I will admit though that I am probably ready for this to be the last week. I have noticed that as pandemic fatigue sets in and work stress built, I started to feel like this was yet another thing on my plate that I couldn't get to. and my responses became later and later. I'm curious how other people have been answering these prompts if that slowness also started to happen and at what point. I look forward to reading your study and what it reveals.

LeeAnn was encouraging despite her experience of fatigue, which we hope was alleviated by reminders not to feel pressured to write long entries. Participants in the "Pregnant

During COVID-19" study also sometimes connected their positive feelings to their contribution to a public discussion of the needs of pregnant people, which some felt had been overlooked during the pandemic. For example, Ava wrote that participating: "has allowed me to be heard, as I feel pregnant women and new moms have not been heard during this pandemic." It was clear that Ava shared her experiences not just for herself, but to amplify the voices of pregnant people. Joanie was similarly concerned with the lack of recognition for pregnant people when she wrote:

> It felt nice to be recognized as pregnant during COVID … I feel like a lot of people don't realize the impact this has had on pregnant women […]. This is not how I had envisioned my first pregnancy. The journal entries made it nice to express what I was going through and allowed my feelings to be validated.

There was an individual and a political motivation for her participation. Sinclair, a queer single woman expecting her first child, overall found participating in the study to be emotionally positive and contemplated the contribution the research might make. She offered some advice: "It was a bit helpful to share. I think examining the varieties of types of pregnancies—single versus couple—along with intersectionality of race and disability would be worth considering." Her consideration of the social dimensions of pregnancy and care demonstrates her engagement not only with her own journaling but with the larger research project. Brin wanted to contribute to knowledge on the topic of experiences of maternity care and pregnancy during COVID-19, but, like LeeAnn, at times found it difficult to do so. She wrote: "In some ways, it has been nice to reflect on the pregnancy and the level of care. In other ways, although the pregnancy seems to have been crawling by, the weekly prompts seem to have come very fast. I'm hopeful this shed some light and may help others, even if just to provide insight in the future!" Like others, she valued the idea that her participation would be a contribution to knowledge of how pregnant people experienced care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, these participant experiences reflect the potential for journal-based studies to be a "potential source of empowerment" (Meth, 2003, p. 203) and thereby contribute to feminist research goals including "giving voice and empowerment" (Meth, 2003, p. 196). However, participation in any research involves work on the part of participants, and we recognize that ten weeks of participation required generosity, commitment and time on the part of participants.

Research from a Distance

Of course, the major benefit of working with this online journaling method was that it made qualitative research possible during a pandemic. The lack of physical proximity to participants is both a strength and a weakness of this methodology. It meant that, for the "Pregnant During COVID-19" study, time zones were not an issue despite a possible four-hour range, nor were the logistics and costs. Data could be collected from all provinces without the need to travel or consider time zones (beyond the time of day at which prompts were sent). It meant that we were able to collect data weekly, capturing an experience over time. Participants could also respond to the prompts at any time during the week, writing when it was convenient for them. There are aspects of being physically face-to-face with participants, or observing interactions in the field, that are invaluable. As Ahlin and Li (2019) note:

> Given the importance of localities in shaping field events, it remains crucial for ethnographers to drive a car, sit on a plane, or sail aboard a ship in order to carry out face-to-face fieldwork. Being physically situated in one site, or more, makes it possible to look outside the frame of the image provided by a smartphone or laptop camera, and to explore the complexities that ICTs are not able to transmit (p. 19).

However, being able to conduct research from a distance has also proved to be essential.

Conclusion

Exploring what was learnt in this time of social upheaval is important to sociology, and the methods we have described allowed us to connect with people who otherwise would be difficult to reach due to pandemic imposed social isolation. In both studies, we were able to capture the sense of shifting ground as the state of emergency and related public health advice changed. This was facilitated by the ability within the online platform to send participants new prompts each week, so that we were able to adapt our questions as we reflected on the shifts in real time. In a ten-week journalling period, we were able to solicit participants' feelings and experiences over time, allowing for a detailed and nuanced account of how participants were experiencing changes to maternity care and to working at home during the pandemic. Other advantages included the ability to reach participants across multiple geographic spaces in both studies, as well as allowing flexibility of time for participants, who received prompts and then could journal at their leisure. Post-pandemic, and amid the ongoing climate crisis, researchers are likely to be interested in developing rigorous methods that limit the need to travel by plane. It is valuable to explore methods that facilitate rich rigor while limiting the carbon and financial costs of research.

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Note

1. Tokens are used in LimeSurvey primarily to limit participation to only certain people and can also be used when sending email invitations to invited participants, sending email reminders to those who still need to complete their entry, tracking responses, and preventing people from participating more than once.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

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