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“Self-narratives of children: Using digital journals”

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# Self-narratives of children: Using digital journals

## Abstract

This paper takes the position that children are at risk of being marginalised when research methods are not tailored to their requirements. In particular, children who are negotiating early adolescence are presented as an ideal group for involvement with narrative research approaches that attempt to be flexible and creative. With the premise that the need to juggle multiple realities within complex societal structures is challenging and isolating for such children, narrative methods offer a promising mode of access to their individual realities. Children's own self-narratives in the form of email journal entries are proposed as research tools that can help to minimise issues arising from resistance to adults and problems of shared vocabulary that may occur using more traditional methods. Digital journaling, as a means of capturing self-narratives, can provide a convenient space for young people to generate and share their own personal accounts of their lives and their experiences that can also serve to inform others. Guidelines are offered for how to manage a journaling project that is not reliant on children's physical presence within school settings. Digital journals are thus described as multi-function mechanisms that can support personal growth as well as promote shared understandings and social fairness between adults and children.

**Keywords:** self-narratives; digital journals; early adolescents; narrative methods

## Introduction

The lack of empirical research carried out with children in the liminal age phase of early adolescence leads to two assumptions. First, it is reasonable to assume that there are cultural features of this population that may pose challenges to qualitative research design. Second, in light of claims from childhood researchers regarding the low representation of children's own views as research participants, it may be that they are marginalised because their knowledge is not yet taken seriously. Early adolescence is used here as a term of convenience and refers to children aged 10 to 14 years. Childhood researchers have argued that notions of children are social constructions that have long denied children the right to speak and to 'write' their own self-interpretations into our cultural fabrics. While we no longer talk of "rescuing" children, the suggestion that they may have multiple stories to tell about themselves can open up different kinds of research conversations (Aitken, Lund, & Kjørholt, 2007).

Beyond broader issues of status and participation, investigations into adult life stories attest that the remainder of life is heavily coloured by key events that occur during early adolescence (White, 1998). Yet, we appear to know little about the lives and experiences of children who are departing their childhoods outside of media clichés and developmental domains. Therefore, in assuming that such children may be responsive to research methods that recognise their own perspectives, the rapidly expanding landscape of narrative research may have much to offer.

This paper thus seeks to explore the promise of a specific narrative approach that includes the use of on-line methods for generating and delivering individual accounts over an extended period of time. In order to achieve this aim, consideration is first given to the potential role of self-narratives in allowing individuals to share their hopes, dreams and self-evaluations. Next will be an examination of some of the cultural issues surrounding early adolescents that provide guidance in attempting to tailor research to their preferences. The discussion then moves on to establish the 'fit' between the features of traditional journaling and the ease, convenience, privacy and cultural relevance of digital settings. A distinction will be made between research in open on-line settings and the proposed email-based methods. The final section addresses some of the practical issues of implementation of a digital journaling project, such as sourcing participants outside of school settings, the problems of adult gate-keepers and the recommended duration for running a digital journaling project.

## Narratives as excursions into personal meanings

The use of personal narratives to access details of individual lives is now commonplace across disciplines. Sharing one's personal story supports progress towards self and mutual understandings. In particular, the harnessing of personal narratives that focus on individual experiences is linked to a revived interest in 'who' we are and what we find meaningful (Bamberg, 2007). As part of the human condition, themes of identity, ambivalence, transition, disruption, and marginalisation are important issues for the narrative researcher. It seems reasonable to suggest that some or all of these themes resonate with children who are negotiating early adolescence.

## Young adolescents: challenged and challenging

When it comes to children who are 'betwixt and between', it appears that we may know them more by reputation than by research. Inspired by marketing, the term "tweens" is often used to describe children who yearn for the habits, freedoms and perceived privileges of older youth. Almost ten years ago, author Kay Hymowitz (1999) wrote of young adolescent children:

The youngsters we now call 'tweens', far from being simply a marketing niche group, speak to the very essence of our future. They are the vanguard of a new, decultured generation, isolated from family and neighborhood, shrugged at by parents, dominated by peers, and delivered into the hands of a sexualized and status- and fad-crazed marketplace. (p.3)

While Hymowitz's descriptions may contribute to the sensationalisation and stereotyping that she condemns, they also hark to the importance of social science research. Attempting to break down stereotypes and to shift perspectives by undermining what is routinely accepted about groups and individuals is part of the social fairness to which good research aspires (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As such, young adolescents may stand to benefit from opportunities to develop a language that leads to more respect in the ways they are perceived and managed.

There are specific features associated with young adolescents that point to their suitability for involvement in narrative research methods. First, is the onset of greater capacities for reflection and awareness that lend themselves well to activities that involve evaluative self-commentary. The urge to keep a diary begins in early adolescence as

children aged 10 years onwards demonstrate an interest and readiness in wanting to think and write autobiographically (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). As the question of ‘who am I?’ surfaces, it is fuelled by a growing sense of a ‘private self’, a newfound and burgeoning ability to self-evaluate and the emerging capacity to consider ‘possible selves’ (Harter, 1999). In addition, most young adolescents generally face having to negotiate increasingly more complex relationships as they enter high school, a situation that can place stress on newfound skills. Consequently the task of trying to establish ‘who’ they are in the scheme of things can produce a level of confusion and ambivalence that can potentially find helpful expression in narrative form.

The second aspect of young adolescents that heightens appropriateness for narrative research is a well-documented penchant for resisting adult agendas. Potential for conflict with adults is heightened when children leave late childhood and ‘up the ante’ in seeking autonomy. According to Mayall (2002) children aged 9-12 regard their negotiating power severely limited by a sense of subordination that includes dependency on adults and a general sense of lacking knowledge. Perceptions of “adult hypocrisy and injustice” can result in resistance to adult governance and an increase in rights-based expectations (Corsaro, 2005, p.220). Researchers also observe an onset of inclusionary and exclusionary behaviours; the increased ability to be manipulative, controlling, and “capricious”; a heightened sense of personal appearance; and increasing secretiveness (Corsaro, 2005; Harter, 1999). Such hallmark resistance to adults combined with demands for privacy can translate into mistrust towards researchers and an unwillingness to co-operate with self-disclosure. Therefore, the liminal age phase of early adolescence can present challenges to researchers (who are adults) and it is not surprising that it is generally underrepresented in childhood research outside of developmental psychology and lifespan publications.

## Narrative methods and research with children

When approaching narrative research with children, we cannot simply ask them about themselves and their lives and expect they will tell us. Whether there is indeed a ‘secret language of children’ or not, it is plain to those who are involved with them that young people do not always seek to have shared meanings with adults. Additionally, they may not always use the same vocabulary to convey different experiential aspects of their lives, especially where complex and difficult emotions are involved. Nonetheless, narrative research conducted in recent years with children, notably by Ely, Abrahams, MacGibbon and McCabe, (2007), Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Orr, and Pearce (2006) and Maybin (2006), demonstrates the value of using personal narratives to investigate their sense of ‘self’ within a social context.

## Self-narratives as self-defining instruments

The term *self-narrative* refers to those accounts that children make that are specifically self-referential. As such, it achieves greater focus than the more generic term ‘personal’ narrative. To further explain the distinction, one might produce a personal narrative that recounts an interesting sporting event to friends, yet it may not contain any references to oneself as narrator. Gergen and Gergen (1988) used the term *self-narrative* to describe an individual’s organised and reflective attempts to comment about themselves and the events in their lives. Thus, for current purposes, self-narratives are accounts that are likely to be heavily saturated with personal pronouns such as “I”, “me” “my” and “mine”. Since self-narratives are carriers of much self-relevant information, they are considered a key location for where identity processes can become visible. Hence, self-narratives make an ideal

cornerstone for an investigation into the ways that children express and construct a sense of *self*.

### “Myself & I”: Capturing themes of ‘self’ amongst young adolescents

Having argued the significance of *self-narratives*, attention can now turn to the ways in which a researcher might achieve statements that are the most heavily laden with references to the *self*. In order to access identity statements, the journal genre appears to offer an approach “par excellence” in terms of delving into themes of ‘me and my life’ (Alazewski, 2006). Unlike life history and some other autobiographical approaches, journals (in the ‘diary’ sense) are arguably undervalued and underutilised within social sciences research (Alazewski, 2006; Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). In emphasising the user-friendly and unobtrusive nature of journals as a research method, Lee (2000) emphasises the suitability of this approach for use with “special” populations. Whether one philosophically considers young adolescents to be a special population or not, journals may represent an ideal venue for them to explore and express a sense of their own individuality and agency.

Few methods can offer such unrivalled access to ‘self’ in naturalistic settings, in this case meaning settings that are not impinged upon by the research process or the visible presence of the researcher (Alazewski, 2006). According to childhood researchers, an important way to address power imbalances between adult researchers and their young subjects is to minimise intrusion (Corsaro, 2005). Those who have used journaling with young adolescents claim that it is a technique “particularly suited” to this group because it relieves them of the face-to-face pressures they sometimes find hard to manage (Alexander, 2001, p.35). When removed from the blaze of peer and adult scrutiny, young adolescents can experiment with issues of identity in a way where they are able to take risks and work things out for themselves (Burton & Carroll, 2001). Overall, the value of journal methods lies in their potential to reduce power imbalances and to provide an extended view of growth and change within individual lives. Journals thus offer a practical, cost effective, and minimally intrusive research technique to use with young adolescents.

### Digital journals: solving the tedious problem of writing

A problem that arises when considering journaling use with young adolescents is that they typically find conventional writing to be a tedious activity. However, when journals are generated and maintained within a digital environment, writing becomes much less of a chore (Alexander, 2001; Goettsch, 2001). Since many children in western cultures are frequent and enthusiastic users of technology they generally find computers and digital environments to be a highly convenient and culturally relevant tool (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). As such, the placement of journal methods within an on-line setting seems a logical progression.

## Benefits of using digital mediation

There are additional benefits to situating journaling within a digital environment that are salient to research with young adolescents. First, digital-mediation supports the experience of meaning-making and communication by allowing individuals to focus on their own voice and to become more fully absorbed in what they want to say (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2004). In other words, the user does not have to communicate and compete in a real time setting, hence there are fewer distractions. Second, digital-mediation allows users the freedom to “self-pace” (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2004), which means that they can take as much time as they like to think, edit and self-reflect in new and different ways away from the pressure of visible social cues. Third, digital writing has been found to offer young adolescents a form of “authorship” (Merchant, 2005). Authorship in this sense means written experimentation, whereby as authors of *themselves*, young adolescents can build the confidence to explore, invent and re-invent themselves on-screen. Thus, digital writing is seen as an ideal enhancement to conventional journaling which dovetails with the self-concerns of young adolescents and the appeal of technology to them and their peers.

## Email as a mode of journal delivery

In order to facilitate delivery and to support engagement and motivation within a journal project, digital entries can be conveniently delivered using Email. Email is a highly popular mode of Internet communication, since many children run multiple email accounts in order to manage their different levels of communication (Richardson, 2006). An important aspect of the level of email user comfort amongst young adolescents includes the non-confrontational benefits that emails offer. Compared to face-to-face contact, there is less stress attached to maintaining effective communication and young adolescents report feeling less threatened when using email (Livingstone & Bober, 2004). Additionally, young people feel more confident and safe when they know they are not being seen, when they can take their time, and when they don't have to respond immediately (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2004). There is also greater freedom and convenience in being able to post email journals “anywhere and anytime” (Goettsch, 2001, p.80) compared to traditional journaling, thereby fostering a sense of comfort and relaxation. In fact, email journal writing specifically has been shown to increase motivation to write due to the ease of use and lack of pressure to conform to standard rules of writing (Goettsch, 2001). Hence, there are key benefits in incorporating email use with journal research that can be summarised as: achieving cultural relevance; convenience; increased motivation; being non-confrontational; and, providing the freedom to take time to explore. As such, the emailing of digital journals can provide the researcher with a valuable tool for accessing shared information about matters of personal significance while at the same time offering social-emotional benefits to participants.

## Offering safety and privacy in children's on-line research

As a method of generating and submitting journals, email communication does not typically arouse the same safety concerns as other virtual spaces. While other on-line arenas such as Myspace and Youtube offer highly popular opportunities for self-expression amongst young people, their use involves a very different set of parameters (Seale & Abbott, 2007). Given their highly public nature, there is exposure to countless others creating many practical and ethical dilemmas that accompany the use of open on-line

settings for research (Seale & Abbott, 2007). Email, on the other hand, is one form of on-line representation that offers young people a popular means to communicate, share photographs and to practise different forms of identity without the hazards of open-source settings. Thus email is seen to offer the benefits of being on-line with much less likelihood of arousing the concerns of parents or invoking ethical approval problems surrounding risk to participants. In addition, research with young adolescent's open on-line journals is reported to be quite difficult to conduct (Moinian, 2006). Therefore, for safe use by children, an email journal format represents a relatively straightforward means of delivery without exacerbated concerns for participant safety.

## Practical design and implementation issues for digital journaling

What are the practical issues for managing a digital journaling project? In order to design and manage a digital journaling research project, each researcher will have a unique purpose in mind. In working with young populations for the purposes of harnessing their personal perspectives, issues of access and trust are paramount. Such issues pose challenges to researchers seeking to work more flexibly outside of school structures. Therefore, achieving a balance of low visibility for the researcher and garnering trust amongst potential candidates needs to be factored into *recruitment*.

Whether working inside or outside of schooling structures, a recruitment strategy is needed. All or most recruitment can be carried out on-line in keeping with the overall nature of the project. A suggested strategy for finding suitable young candidates beyond the school environs is to take a three-tiered approach as follows.

First, participants can be sought by word-of-mouth. This is a self-explanatory step in talking to as many people as possible about the aims of the project and the basic candidate requirements of age, gender and so on. Sending emails to all individuals who may have an interest, or who have ever expressed an interest, serves to cast a wide net that can narrow down to the re-contacting of key individuals. The feedback gained during this process gives direction to the next step.

Second, is a process that may be thought of in terms of saturation . Organised sites such as conference venues can provide ideal opportunities to distribute flyers at registration points. Groups (such as parent support groups) and committees may be willing to send out bulk electronic mailers seeking expressions of interest from their members. Such groups or committees may also have a newsletter that can be accessed for notices. Random mailers to schools running special programs can lead to further opportunities to attend meetings and speak directly to people.

Third, is to target key individuals. The previous steps progressively yield a list of key resource people who can be selected for direct contact and negotiation regarding access to potential candidates. These are people who are typically known and trusted within their roles, such as teachers, school psychologists, educational consultants, and program co-ordinators, who are then in a position to contact children directly.

Implementation of the third tier leads to the practical issue of *gatekeepers*. Gatekeepers are adults who control access to children, such as parents, teachers and carers. Most gate-keeping systems encountered by researchers tend to treat children as dependents who are in need of adult protection (Balen, Blyth, Calabretto, Fraser, Horrocks, & Manby, 2006). Hence there is perceived vulnerability on the part of children that must be negotiated in order to strike a balance between denying children a say over whether to be involved and considering their gatekeepers concerns. In most cases, children are not treated as the 'decision-makers' in research processes. Additionally, research ethics committees require both the child's and the parent/s informed consent in order to proceed. While there



are no techniques that guarantee a solution to potential exclusion of children from a planned journaling project, there are ways to emphasise a *sense of ownership* within participants. Thus, children are, as far as possible, their own gatekeepers (Danby & Farrell, 2005).

Some strategies for supporting ownership include: using wording for the recruitment information that focuses on importance of children having a say; the provision of separate individual preference forms that negotiate individual levels of involvement; and, conducting a focus group that engages participant opinions. These issues are briefly addressed in turn.

First, in sending expressions of interest material to gatekeepers, information can be provided that foregrounds the importance attached to children's agency. When accompanied by specific descriptive requirements of potential candidates, such as being, for example, "an independent thinker", "likely to enjoy being involved in self-expression", "willing to independently share opinions with others", and "likely to take their involvement in research seriously (i.e. consider it a worthwhile thing to do)" – it is likely that names of individual children might 'spring to mind' immediately for those who know them. Such emphasis automatically signals to gatekeepers that there is an active ethos of child ownership at work. It may be anticipated that those individuals who appreciate the significance of child agency will respond, thereby strengthening the likelihood of reaching suitable candidates who will commit to regular journaling through being philosophically supported. While it could be argued that any need to filter access to children through adult gate-keepers potentially removes child agency, researchers must work with the pragmatics of the situation. A 'perfect world' argument in terms of social fairness would decree that all children should be able to exercise the democratic choice to be involved in research or not. However, within the described methods, indirect ways to enhance a message of agency is seen as an achievable option.

Second, a strategy for enlisting a sense of ownership amongst participants of a journaling project is to allow them to establish their own set of rules. By providing an individual preference form that enables participants to indicate aspects such as: the frequency of making submissions; permission for and mode of preferred contact from researcher; whether they are happy to receive reminders or not; and the selection of a preferred alias (e.g., *Spiderman*, a movie super-hero, or *Hermione*, a strong female character from Harry Potter books) – a personalisation process is underway that can foster positive feelings of agency and commitment.

Third, the involvement of children in a start-up focus group also provides an opportunity for them to contribute opinions and thereby increase their stake in the research process. Invitations can be sent to each participant (similar to birthday party invitations) that invites participants to meet each other, to ask questions and to reflect on their role as a research participant. While any opinions and feedback may not necessarily count as data they can serve to reinforce participatory principles that help children to feel that their perspectives matter. Since children's own meanings and interpretations are indeed central to a journaling project, taking the opportunity to cement this commitment is important. However, whether or not to be involved in such a session should remain optional, since some participants in an on-line project may choose to remain invisible.

### How long should a journaling project run?

Since digital journal entries are meant to capture individual nuances over a period of time, they qualify as longitudinal data (Alazewski, 2006). Practitioners with young adolescent groups suggest that 6 months is required in order for budding journalists to progressively

gather the confidence needed for self-revelation and to experiment with identity (Alexander, 2001; Burton & Carroll, 2001). Young adolescents tend to move from impersonal to personal writing and it can take weeks or even months for them to build trust in the journaling process. If the aim is to capture an extended view of each individual's life, then a commitment over months is required.

### Providing and designing a journaling 'tip' sheet

As a practical measure that can support self-sufficiency in journaling, the provision of a tip sheet to candidates can help them to plan their own strategy for generating and lodging entries. Suggested items for inclusion would be: a set of stimulus questions eg "what do you like to do when you're alone?" or "what does your dream life look like?"; setting a time limit such as 15 minutes; setting a minimum amount of lines to write; setting a regular time to write; giving permission to abandon any focus on writing conventions such as the use of correct grammar. A journaling tip sheet also provides an opportunity to reinforce that children should, above all else, *be themselves* in their journals – or whoever they may choose to be on any particular day or moment.

### Conclusion

This paper has described the benefits of using digital journal methods as a narrative means to access the lives of children who are negotiating the challenges of early adolescence. The combination of the principles of journaling with the use of digital technologies appears to offer significant potential as an engaging research method. A summary of these benefits include: supporting young adolescents to develop a personal voice; helping them develop a sense of audience; and fostering the confidence to explore identity in a low-risk environment. Specifically, a digital journaling approach can overcome some of the problems of shared meanings between adults and children, and of children's resistance to adults in general and researchers in particular. Digital journals can thus be shown to offer a culturally relevant, beneficial and easily accessible mode for gaining access to children's lives in a way which can allow interested adults examination of children's own representations. The possibilities for tapping into children's self-representations through their self-narratives are seen by the author as presenting a special opportunity to achieve better mutual understanding between children and adults. The methods outlined are suggested ways to enrich what is known about children and contribute to social fairness by seeking information contributed by children themselves.

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