



Making Use of Audio Diaries in Research with Young People: Examining Narrative, Participation and Audience

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Abstract

This article examines the use of audio diaries as an innovative method for research with young people. As the second stage of a project about visually impaired (VI) young people's transitions to adulthood, young people recorded their experiences and reflections about growing up on microcassette recorders. As a follow-up to a narrative interview, audio diaries allowed the research to get closer to the lives of young people, as participants actively reinterpreted the research questions in the context of their own lives. This article focuses on the utility of audio diaries—detailing the research process and the accessibility of the method for VI young people. Then, using excerpts from a set of twenty-two audio diaries, this article examines how the audio diary technique designed for this project engages with three key issues: how audio diaries capture narrative in distinctive ways; how the method can be employed within a participatory framework; and how audio diaries raise complex issues about the nature of audience.

Keywords: Audio Diaries, Qualitative Methods, Young People, Narrative, Audience, Transitions to Adulthood

Introduction

1.1 This article examines the use of audio diaries as a qualitative method for research with visually impaired young people. Audio diaries are an innovative way to capture young people's narratives of transitioning to adulthood, capturing their stories in distinctive ways. This article is part of a larger multi-stage, multi-method project interested in how visually impaired (VI) young people characterize their transitions to adulthood, and what the term adulthood means to them. The project's development of creative methodological tools that respond to the particularities of the research agenda with VI young people aligns with Law's (2004) concept of 'method assemblage', a term that builds from the Deleuzian idea of assemblage as a collage of sometimes incompatible parts, that is by definition active and in flux. Method assemblage is Law's way of redressing conventional methods that produce results that are deceptively ordered and complete. Beginning with the building blocks of a method, the idea of a solicited research diary, this article explores how the diary method was reworked using an audio format and a specific narrative and participatory research process. The wider research design, of which the audio diary is a part, attempts to capture the 'mess' of life with methods and supporting methodologies that embrace and support the partial, the tentative and the possible. In this way, this research has been designed to creatively 'resonate' with the complexity of youth transitions.

1.2 I first briefly outline my overall research, and then attend to how paper diaries have been used in the social sciences, and the small literature on audio diaries. Audio diaries are then examined in two ways: First, the utility of audio diaries is evaluated—detailing the research process and the accessibility of the method for VI young people. Second, using excerpts from a set of twenty-two audio diaries, I examine the methodological value of the audio diary technique. These are the *narrative* structure of the diaries; how the method can be seen as a *participatory*, empowering young people during the research process; and finally, the significance of listening to the audio diaries as one-way conversations, interrogating the impact of *audience*.

Visually impaired young people's transitions to adulthood

1.3 Audio diaries were used within a larger project that is examining the times and spaces where transitions

to adulthood are negotiated, focusing on the subjective meanings of transition for young people with visual impairments in the north of England. The research examines young peoples' current experiences of transition, how they relate this process to their own lives, and their hopes for the future. The research is situated in a diverse set of literatures, including youth studies, psychologies of identity, the sociology of childhood, youth geographies and geographies of age and the lifecourse. Within these areas, I incorporate agential aspects of individuation (Beck, 1992), chosen identities, networks of affiliation (Larsen et al., 2006) and personal understandings of impairment and disability (Butler, 1998) as well as structural qualities of institutional expectations (Holt, 2004), the labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007), and social attitudes towards disability (Shakespeare, 2006) into the research.

1.4 The research challenges a traditional linear understanding of youth transition, which presupposes a straightforward move from education to work (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000). Researchers have catalogued how youth transitions have changed in late modernity, becoming longer, more fluid and complex, while also being increasingly connected to global changes in education and labour markets (Ball et al., 2000, Côté and Allahar, 2005). Working with the transitions experiences of my participants, the research analyses how VI young people fit (or don't fit) into discourses of a 'successful' transition to adulthood. Using young people's transition narratives, I contrast traditional school to work transitions with the more fluid and complex experiences of my participants, who define transitions with intangibles—feelings of autonomy and responsibility—rather than concrete markers familiar to youth policies. Part of my reconceptualisation of how youth transition fits into the lifecourse explores how young people make use of space during transition, performing aspects of an adult identity at work or school, while simultaneously holding onto a fun 'young' part of themselves with friends in leisure spaces (Hetherington, 1998). Moreover, this research complicates stories of youth transition by exploring the difference that disability makes, working with young people's specific experiences of visual impairment, and how they relate to concepts of impairment and disability. Many of the young people involved in my research disavow themselves of any identity related to disability (Grewal et al., 2002), leading to a disconnect between young people and the policies and people there to support their transitions.

1.5 The research takes a qualitative longitudinal approach, gathering data in several stages over a year. Participants, age 16-25, were recruited from specialist and mainstream schools, colleges and universities, as well as charities, online forums and through existing participants. In the first stage, after gaining informed consent, young people took part in a narrative interview, which included the use of a large print/tactile life mapping tool that was developed for the project. Rather than a life history, the interview focused on narrative events (Flick, 1997), where young people told stories about the 'fateful moments' of their transition to adulthood (Giddens, 1991). These 'fateful moments' were the focus of the life mapping tool, where young people were able to define their own turning points of transition. The second stage, 4-6 months later, was the audio diary that is discussed in detail in this article. At the end of the main period of data collection, participants were sent a feedback report, asking for their comments about the preliminary analysis of the interviews and audio diaries, effectively creating a third stage of data collection. The narrative interview and life map, audio diary, and feedback report were developed for this project to engage with the messiness of young people's experiences in a participant-centred way, encouraging greater inventiveness and flexibility in youth transitions methodology.

Audio diary as research method

2.1 The use of diaries in social research can contribute personal, participant-controlled data, adding both complexity and detail about a person's experiences to research that is sometimes difficult to achieve with interviews. Diaries have been used in research in several different ways, with Plummer (2001: 48-51) reviewing 'requested diaries' kept by key informants, research logs, and the 'diary-diary interview method', where the writing is discussed and preliminarily analysed by both the researcher and the diarist. Diaries can achieve different research aims, based on their type and the guidelines attached to them. Research logs can act as a quantitative record of experience, while unstructured requested diaries offer highly contextualised experiences that the researcher may not have anticipated. The use of diaries has been popular in sociology and social geography, with diverse applications including sexual behaviour related to HIV/AIDS risk (Coxon, 1996), sensitive issues of violence and HIV infection in Africa (Meth, 2003, Thomas, 2007), time-use and domestic labour (Craig, 2006, Sullivan, 2000), and autobiography in the digital age (Hookway, 2008, van Dijck, 2004). Solicited diaries have also been successfully used to explore sensitive aspects of chronic illness and health across disciplinary boundaries (Grinyer, 2004, Mackrill, 2008, Theodosius, 2006, Elliot, 1997). While much of the literature on solicited (paper) diaries is useful to an examination of the audio diary method, it is important to go beyond the claim that audio diaries are a simple change of format when 'literacy is a constraint' (McGregor, 2006).

Audio diaries

2.2 Literature on the audio diary method remains scarce, and scattered across the fields of medicine (Monrouxe, 2009), psychology (Williamson et al., 2008), geography (Milligan, 2005) and sociology (Hislop et al., 2005, Moran-Ellis and Venn, 2007). Of these few articles, the sleep research conducted by Hislop et al. (2005) at the Centre for Research on Ageing and Gender at the University of Surrey has provided a detailed evaluation of the audio diary method. In this research, participants were given Dictaphones and a brief set of written guidelines, first requesting factual information, before asking participants to comment on different aspects of their sleep experience. Hislop et al. suggest that one of the benefits of audio diaries is that they allow access to private or personal aspects of life that can be missed by other research methods. Moreover, they argue that "seen through the frame of reference of the respondents, audio diaries provide insights into the roles and relationships, and life events and transitions which impact on everyday life" (2005: 7.2). For Williamson et al.'s (2008) research on new mothers' experiences of breastfeeding, the audio diary method allowed intimate access to the experience being researched, as women could record while breastfeeding their child. The convenience of audio diaries and their ability to capture experiences in real time were highly valued. In Monrouxe's (2009) research with medical students about their development

of a professional medical identity, audio diaries were used to capture their 'conversational narratives' (see Ochs and Capps, 2001). Monrouxe's focus is on the narrative structure of the diaries and the ethical responsibilities of the researcher as audio diary listener in a longitudinal project. In the close analysis of the diaries as narratives, Monrouxe (2009: 100) remarks on capturing non-linear stories in the making: "capturing this process gives a deep and unique insight into identity formation: this discursive think-aloud process is an unintended, yet profound insight into an individuals' sense-making activity".

2.3 Although suggested as an ideal alternative for those with vision loss by Milligan (2005), only one explicit instance of using audio diaries with visually impaired people has been identified, a three person 'day in the life' diary for the London borough of Enfield's Vision Research Project (Papadopoulos and Scanlon, 2002). The researchers were interested in the 'practical realities' and everyday experiences of being visually impaired, and the audio diary format matched their goal of capturing a 'live record'. Papadopoulos and Scanlon (2002: 457) were most interested in VI participants' running commentary about what they were doing, how they were doing it, and how they dealt with any problems or challenges. The audio diary was ideal for capturing this level of detail, identifying strategies used by VI people that could be shared with others, while also dispelling stereotypes by recording full independent lives.

Developing the audio diary method for research with young people

3.1 The audio diary method discussed in this article is the second stage of a research project interested in the transition experiences of VI young people in the north of England. Audio diaries were chosen as a way to more intimately capture the narratives of young people, a few months after an initial interview with the researcher. As a follow-up to the interview, the more private nature of the audio diary suited the request for personal reflections on moments of transition. All participants wanted to take part in the diary stage. Reasons for participation varied: some young people took part because they were interested in the research questions around their plans for the future and the concept of 'fateful moments' that had influenced their transition, while others wanted to support research that directly included the views of VI young people. Moreover, the smaller time commitment relative to the interview, and the novelty of the audio diary format were also important factors.

3.2 Interested participants were contacted by phone or email 3-6 months after their interview, reconfirming their interest in taking part in the second stage of the research. Each was sent an audio diary kit in the post consisting of a microcassette recorder, an audio diary guide (a list of optional questions to start them off), some brief instructions about using the recorder, a note restating my ethical commitments to them, and a pre-paid envelope to send the tape and recorder back to the researcher [see Figure 1]. The audio diary kits were designed to be accessible to all VI users, with the guide and instructions provided in the participants' choice of Braille, large print or email, and the microcassette recorder was modified with large print or Braille labels as necessary. The audio diary guide that accompanied the kit was also tested for its readability and use of inclusive language. Basic, analogue, microcassette recorders were chosen as to facilitate ease of use, and to minimize cost. Five recorders were purchased for approximately £15 each, which were rotated between participants. Costs were also minimized as bubble envelopes and microcassette tapes were purchased in bulk and postage to VI people is free under the Articles for the Blind program in the United Kingdom. ^[1]

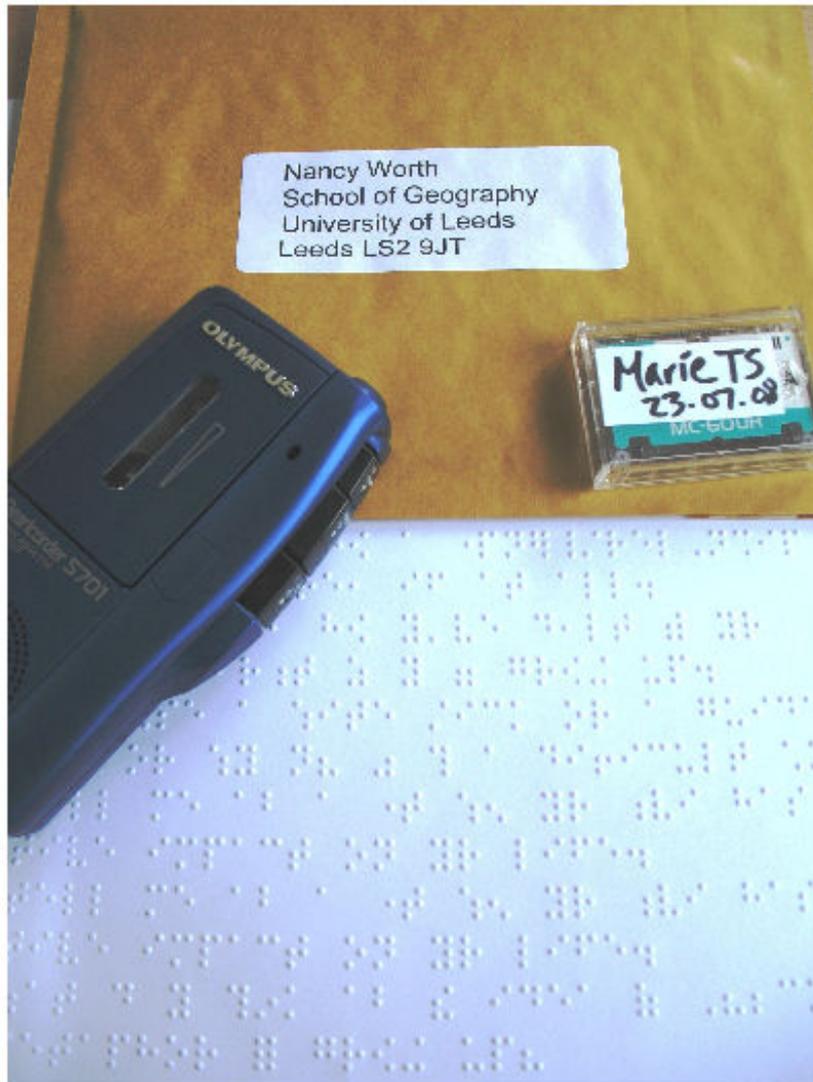


Figure 1. Photo of Audio diary kit

3.3 The audio diary guide reiterated thematic elements of the previous narrative interview, emphasizing that the researcher was interested in hearing more about VI young people's opinions and experiences of transition. The guide was also clearly positioned as an optional starting point for participants to use as much or as little as they wanted. The questions in the guide were designed to work in parallel with the narrative interview, both to be familiar and build the confidence of participants, and so that it might be possible to capture how stories have changed over time (see Figure 2). The 'finish these three sentences' icebreaker that sets the tone for the guide is adapted from Horowitz and Bromnick's (2007) youth transitions research as 'open-response stimuli', encouraging participants to discuss multiple, situated understandings of adulthood rather than struggle for a single 'right' answer. Overall, the audio diary guide, and the narrative interview of the first stage of the research, focus on 'tell me about...' questions that provoke talk about personal experiences, rather than 'why' questions that lead to generalisations or intellectualising. Finally, although 'transitioning to adulthood' can have many meanings, participants were familiar with the term from the first interview, and worked from their own understanding of it.

Figure 2. Sample audio diary guide

"When you talk about your experiences of growing up, you can make your tape whatever length you choose (the longer the better!) I would like to hear not only about your current experiences, but also about how your views have changed over time. I've included a list of questions you might like to start off with, but feel free to tell me about what you feel is important.

Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

What does being an adult mean? It might help to finish these three sentences:
You know you're an adult when...
Your parents treat you like an adult when...
Society treats you like an adult when...

Tell me about important experiences in your school or work life.

Tell me about your relationships with family & friends

Tell me about how a partner or relationship fits into your future, if at all

Has your VI had any effect on your current situation or future plans?

Tell me what you hope your life is like at 30. What will you be doing? Where will you be living?

Please also include anything that you feel is important or interesting about your experiences of growing up with a visual impairment and the idea of transitioning to adulthood"

3.4 The main challenge of the audio diary method was getting the diaries back. While many were returned promptly, just as many took upwards of months to come back as participants contacted the researcher to say they were busy with work and school. After two weeks if I had not received the diary I would call participants and check in. It was most helpful to let them know that other participants were waiting to use the recorders—it was a slight push that encouraged people to put completed diaries into the post box. Only one recorder ended up lost, with one participant telling me that he had worked on the diary but could no longer find it. The completion rate for the diaries was around 80% or 22 of 26 possible diaries, which is high given the time commitment of the audio diary process, and its personal nature (Milligan et al., 2005). There were also two participants who were interested in the diary stage of the research, but had changed their contact information when I tried to get in touch a few months after their interviews. Besides the logistics of getting the diaries back, the other concern was the amount of transcription that would be necessary. One way of focusing the diaries was the audio diary guide, which let participants know the general themes in which I was interested. Overall the diaries tended to be approximately 20 minutes in length, and with a single speaker proved easier to transcribe than the interviews. Before transcription the microcassette tapes were transferred to .WAV format using a PC mic input and the Audacity program. The high quality electronic version facilitated transcription, and allowed the voices of participants to be altered for use in the public domain.

3.5 In two cases participants requested the questions over email, and wrote the diary. I was initially concerned that writing the diary would result in shorter, less narrative entries as the participant's stream of consciousness might be interrupted by typing rather than speaking. Of the two, Tareq's diary is longer and more complete, including a detailed 'story of his life' section, while Macar's is short and to the point. From their narrative interviews, it is likely that Tareq and Macar would have had similar results using an audio diary—email was simply a better fit to their daily lives and level of accessibility. Yet comparatively, the overall brevity of Tareq and Macar's email diaries reinforced my use of the audio diaries, as participants who made an audio diary seemed to engage more fully with the audio method, with longer entries. Hislop et al. (2005) had a similar result, where transcripts of audio diaries tended to be longer and much more detailed than transcripts of paper diaries.

3.6 The audio diaries were analysed alongside other data sources as part of a participant case, using an experience-centred approach to thematic narrative analysis (Squire, 2008). So instead of taking interest in 'critical events' (Webster and Mertova, 2007) in and of themselves, attention was focused on how critical events are experienced by participants. This 'experience' focus builds from the hermeneutic work of Ricœur (1984), where a participant's story both explains and creates who they are and how they see themselves. This subtle shift in perspective towards the experience of the event rather than the event itself is integral to the choice of the audio diary method, where listening to a participant's tone of voice and pattern of speaking adds meaning to their stories. For some narratologists (Riessman, 2008) the definition of an experiential narrative is widening to the non-oral, increasing the number of sources available to tell a story. In this case, recreating the diary as an oral method adds to its potential to record experiential narratives.

3.7 The second half of this article shifts from the design and utility of audio diaries to their methodological value to the project, focusing on issues of narrative, participation, and audience. When designing the method, I wanted it to maintain the narrative focus on 'fateful moments' that I introduced to participants in our interview, and audio diaries allowed participants to tell their stories. The audio diary format also supports my goal of participatory research, as while I was still the designer of the audio diary kit, participants could introduce research areas not previously considered, allowing the research to capture young peoples' experiences more fully. Finally, moving the research dynamic from an interview to an audio diary draws out a more subtle relationship between researcher and participant, as the researcher remains an absent presence.

Methodological value of the audio diary technique

Audio diary as narrative

4.1 The use of narratives in social research has evolved from the technical approach of textual analysis in

the humanities (Herman, 2004) and the factual life history and ethnographic tradition in sociology (Goodley et al., 2004). The focus is on interpretation, where the emphasis is on the significance of events to an individual rather than the details of the events themselves. To be considered a narrative, an account usually includes an aspect of change or transformation, characters and a plot. Besides characters, action and a plot, a narrative must also have meaning—it must be interesting to its creator and its audience. Narratives often present unexpected, interesting stories, yet they still remain culturally recognizable and acceptable.

4.2 Rather than a collection of pieces of information that are representative of a person's life, narratives themselves are 'social products' that are created from culturally circulating and place specific 'public narratives'. For Somers (1994: 614), "life is itself *storied* and...narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*". The shift from understanding narratives as a representation of life to an integral aspect of how we make sense of the world refigures narrative as a source of personal identity formation and a way of relating to others. According to Bruner (2001: 25), in narrative "we set forth a view of what we call our Self and its doings, reflections, thoughts, and place in the world". For Bruner, the 'Self' is made visible through the 'turning points' that a narrator relates, similar to Giddens' (1991: 113) concept of 'fateful moments' which has been a helpful metaphor for this research. Turning points highlight the differences between the narrator's current and previous constructions of self while bringing them closer together. The idea of turning points or fateful moments was the analytical focus of my audio diaries, as I was interested in changing aspects of identity during transition.

4.3 Regarding the suitability of diaries to capture narrative, Latham suggests that "The diary becomes a kind of performance...the methodological focus shifts to plugging into (and enabling) respondents' existing narrative resources" (2003: 2002). A definitive narrative structure was present in the audio diaries, with many participants beginning with a greeting, introducing themselves to the listener. Where written diaries often include only three elements (a greeting, the date and a factual account), audio diaries often include detailed narrative episodes that give insight into participants' "intimate lives, played out against a backdrop of social constraints and circumstances" (Hislop et al., 2005: 7). Transcripts of the audio diaries tended to be almost twice as long as transcripts of paper diaries, indicating that participants engaged more fully with the method, perhaps due to the novelty of the Dictaphone and the ease of recording their thoughts. In the sleep research (Hislop et al., 2005, Moran-Ellis and Venn, 2007), and in Milligan's (2005) work with family carers, narrative audio diaries were part of a multi-methods approach that aims to synthesise diary data with interviews, questionnaires or focus groups (see also Williamson et al., 2008).

4.4 The following example of the narrative structure of audio diaries includes all the typical prerequisites of characters, action and a plot, with Beth telling the story of getting her guide dog, as a 'fateful moment' in her transition to adulthood (Giddens, 1991: 113). The main action is set up by a negative experience of using a white cane, and a pivotal discussion with her mother and a rehabilitation officer. More important than plot points and the story's beginning, middle and end, is the depth of meaning in Beth's story, evident in her contextualising of her decision (line 6) and the metaphor of having a baby (line 12-3). Her emphasis on the time and effort a guide dog requires flows through the story, culminating with a Beth summing up a guide dog as a 'lifestyle choice' (line 19) to conclude.

Excerpt 1. Beth telling a story^[2]

1 "When I first came to uni I used a white cane. And uh it got beaten up to death – it lost all
2 the paint off it. And student friends would make comments and say, 'What do you do to it?'
3 I have to say, 'I use it to find things'. I was sick of being pushed and pulled and shunted
4 and dragged around and spoken to like I had no brain. And one day my Mum said, 'You
5 might want to think about getting a guide dog', while I was still having mobility when I came
6 back to [hometown]. And I wasn't really up for it cause I didn't really like dogs. Still not a
7 major dog fan. Um a lot of family pressure. So I spoke to a rehab officer and she said to
8 me, 'Well your parents can say what they like, but it's got to be your decision'. So I went to
9 the centre and had a look at them. And family kept telling me I'd have more independence,
10 and I thought well I didn't have much to lose by trying. I had a very, very long wait. I had to
11 wait to go on the waiting list, and then I was on there for three years. And cause I wasn't
12 really up for having a dog, and didn't have good mobility in [uni town] having only just
13 moved there. I had a hell of a wait. And when I got her it was like having a baby. There's
14 so much to it. Um so I took this dog on and it was difficult cause I didn't really want it, but
15 here she was, wagging her tail and looking everywhere. Putting her nose into everything
16 that doesn't concern her. You've got to watch them the whole time, when they're that
17 small. When they're—I think she was twenty-one months when I got her. Then I had to go
18 through training and it's a completely new way of walking around. And then you've got to
19 actually look after her. You got to do all this medical stuff: medical checks, grooming, free
20 running in the park. It's a lifestyle choice, not a mobility aid."

[Click here for audio](#)

4.5 This story identifies the beginning of a major shift in Beth's life, as the autonomy that her guide dog has brought her has given her control over her life in ways that traditional markers of independence (moving away from home) have not. Although Beth told me many stories about growing up and becoming an adult when we met for the interview, reflecting on the transition process and working with the audio diary on her own allows Beth to work through her complex and often conflicting feelings and motivations about her own identity before and after getting her dog.

Audio diary as participatory

4.6 This research was designed with a participatory framework to reflect the researcher's attempt at inclusivity, one that values different kinds of knowledge, but especially participants' stories. Within the research process, participants have been involved as much as possible, beginning with a pilot study that asked young people about the research questions and the proposed suite of methods, refocusing the research questions during the first two stages of the project, and finally asking for feedback about the preliminary results. Designing the audio diary as a participatory method furthered the goal of accessible and co-creative data collection in two particular ways.

4.7 First, within the participatory framework of the project is a commitment to methods that involve and respect participants, while also engaging their interest. The shift from participatory *methodology* to *method* can be understood as a process of internalizing ethics, which means that researchers should conduct research in ways that they themselves would like to be researched. In this case, this meant thinking creatively about how to develop another way of hearing stories of transition, beyond an initial interview. The audio diary was designed to get at particular questions of interest to the research around the complexity of VI young people's experience of transition, while also remaining open enough to include participants' questions. A prerequisite of an 'engaging' method is one that is familiar to participants, where they feel confident about how to take part. Audio diaries became an ideal fit for the project, as young people, especially VI young people, are often highly technologically capable, recording messages and videos with mobile phones, while also being familiar with older audio cassette technology (Marsland et al., 1994, Henderson et al., 2002). Another aspect of familiarity stems from the 'diary room' made famous by *Big Brother* and other popular reality shows, where participants create a 'private' diary that they know will be watched by others ('Diary Room' also invoked by Boorman et al., 2009, Buchwald et al., 2009). By capitalizing on young peoples' familiarity with technology and their pop culture knowledge of solicited diaries, the audio diary method can be presented both as a method that is novel and fun, but also one that participants can take charge of confidently.

4.8 Second, the audio diaries were controlled by participants in four interrelated ways: First, at a very basic level audio diaries were an optional second stage of a larger research project; so participants opted-in if they were interested in helping the research further. Second, although a guide was provided as a support to give participants a starting point for their diaries, they were encouraged to ignore it, and talk about whatever they felt was important. During the introduction of the method it was also made clear that there was no 'right' way of making a diary, and that anything that participants wanted to say would be valued. Third, when and where participants completed the audio diary was completely up to them, so they could fit it into their life when it was convenient, and they could record it in a place they felt comfortable. The method also removes pressure that might result from the physical presence of the interviewer, or the demands of keeping up a particular flow of conversation (Shotter, 1993). Fourth, the final product—what was on the tape—could be controlled by participants by editing or erasing passages they decided they did not want to share.

4.9 The following excerpts from Danielle's audio diary illustrate two aspects of participation. Although most participants worked through the diary in one or two sittings, sending the kit back within the suggested time frame of two weeks, Danielle took a different approach. She received the audio diary in early January 2008, and made brief entries through June 2008 before sending it back. She discusses events as they happen, including returning for her final term at 6th Form, GCSE results, the preparation and then the reviews for a challenging dance show, as well as revising for final exams and meeting a new partner (see excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2. Danielle: managing the time frame of the diary

1 "Well [researcher], I think this is probably the last time or the last audio diary entry. I feel
2 I've sort of told you as much as I can about myself and about how things are now and sort
3 of as much as I know for the future.
4 This audio diary probably isn't as long as some you're going to receive but I've tried to sort
5 of do it as I go along through, you know, the year. So that's basically it I think. I will get it
6 off the post to you probably this afternoon or tomorrow. And as I said, it's been really good
7 knowing you. And if you want anything else, you know where I am. So I suppose, see you
8 later! (laughs)"

4.10 Besides shifting the suggested time frame for completing the diary, Danielle did not use the audio diary guide, preferring instead to tell specific stories centred around the 'fateful moments' she narrates. One story focuses on the importance of accessibility in examinations, especially diagrams in her Maths exam, where her frustration and anger at the unfairness of the exam then extends to similar feelings about inaccessible materials elsewhere (see excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3. Danielle: taking control of content

1 "And I suppose that leads me onto another thing really about how inconsiderate sometimes
2 people can be to those that have a disability. Umm you know we've had exams and that
3 before now where diagrams haven't been transcribed properly and pictures haven't
4 described properly, and you know things like that. And really I think sometimes it is a bit
5 ignorant because especially with the diagrams and that. A sighted person gets them done
6 no problem – they're all done on the computer or you know, however they do them. But for
7 someone who's blind it's not that easy and really we're at a disadvantage then.
8 Because something's that's mega-hard to us to find on a diagram, to a sighted
9 person could be really easy. And then they have got an advantage over us and they
10 possibly get more marks that really aren't deserved. Because the blind person could
11 probably get those marks just the same if they had the materials in the right size and, you
12 know, formatted in the right way so that they were, you know, more acceptable.
13 Um (sigh) it really, it really does annoy me actually when, you know, I sit and think
14 about that. And as I said, it's not just for diagrams and things, it's with other things like
15 menus in a restaurant. A lot of restaurants don't have menus in large-print and Braille. But
16 under the Disability Discrimination Act, they are all supposed to. But hardly any of them do.
17 And again, I think that's ignorance because you know, you managed to get the materials
18 that you needed for me in Braille. You managed to get your labels and the Dictaphone and
19 that in Braille, and you've done large-print ones for [X]. So if you can do it, you know, it
20 makes me ask why can't people like, you know – I don't know. Like why can't they do it?

Audio diaries as conversation: the power of audience

4.11 One of the most interesting outcomes of the method is that my audio diaries ended up looking like one-sided conversations (see also Monrouxe, 2009). This was important for two reasons—a creative ordering of participant experience, and the influence of audience. First, one reason paper diaries were not chosen is that writing often seems to steer participants into a linear record of experience, as writing draws on more formal communication structures than speaking (Farrell, 1978, Alaszewski, 2006: 2). In the audio diaries participants were comfortable discussing what they remembered most, supplementing their speech with details as they became relevant. Participants often began the audio diary with short stories that were prompted by the audio diary guide. As participants got used to the recorder, and into the flow of questions, the result was longer stories diverging from the guide. Rather than approaching the diary as a totally new method, participants responded to the diary in much the same way as they did the interview; some were reflective, emotional, and confessional, while others were more concise and detail oriented (Delph-Janiurek, 2001). Most participants began the diary with a greeting, and then introduced themselves to the researcher as the listener. As the intended audience, some participants spoke to me explicitly, while others acknowledged me as a listener more indirectly by engaging me in conversation, ending phrases with, 'you know?' and '—right?'. During the data collection, one participant called to tell me she was concerned she might be doing the diary 'wrong' because she found it difficult to think of the diary as a monologue. I acknowledged that it can feel strange talking to a recorder on your own, and I suggested she picture a listener, which she later reported made the audio diary 'easy'. Stylistically the audio diaries shared many of the quips and asides of the interview, and this conversational tone is one of the benefits of the audio diary, preserving 'stream of consciousness' thinking without the interruption that writing can sometimes be. (See work on video diaries Pink, 2007, Kindon, 2003).

4.12 Second, audience had a powerful effect on the content of diaries, pointing to particular knowledges and viewpoints that participants believed we shared, with many young people positioning the researcher as an insider to their experiences. Regarding my positionality, during the initial participants often asked about me, including how old I was, and what I knew about visual impairment. They learned that I am studying (like many of them), am in my twenties, and have (limited) experience of visual impairment. Most importantly, they learned that I was a knowledgeable listener about VI, not asking questions needing the explanations that most sighted people do. This insider status needs careful attention, as although moderately close in age and life experience to participants, the status of the researcher, and the positioning of the audio diary as a solicited research product complicate the relationship of participant as audio diarist and researcher as listener. Although diaries are conventionally assumed to be private, personal reflections, Martinson's (2003) work shows how diarists write/speak with a particular audience in mind, shaping their performance of self. Similar to the 'diary privileges' historically given to men to read the diaries of their wives, the power relations of having a researcher as a diary's audience cannot be overlooked. According to Martinson (2003: 9), "diary writers, as autobiographical subjects, find themselves on 'multiple stages simultaneously', caught in an ideological double bind, as it were, to maintain modes of social and moral conformity as well as to speak out and assert themselves". Knowing the diary will be read (or listened to) by someone in a position of power makes the very act of completing a diary a risk for the diarist and an analytical challenge for the reader. As the audience, the researcher must be a critical listener, not just for a diary's narrative content, and not for an illusory 'authentic self', but rather for the diarist's often contradictory performance of selfhood.

4.13 James' audio diary includes a conscious use of audience to emphasize his concluding point. James temporarily sets up a parent of a VI young person as an imagined audience, while also speaking to me as the researcher. This is an interesting use of audience, as instead of telling me that he is happy and confident living on his own in a new city, James is more comfortable saying this in a more roundabout way, giving advice to a parent of a VI young person, implicitly encouraging both to embrace independence and realize that what you do as a VI young person is entirely within their hands (see excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4. James: choosing an audience

1 I'm not sure there's really much more I can add to that to be honest....Um just one thing, I
2 think if anybody kind of came up to me who is a parent, uh which has happened in the past
3 and said 'What do you, what do you think, kind of, what are your opinions on my son or
4 daughter moving away on their own, um do you think a blind person could do it?' I'd say
5 like, yeah definitely. I think if I had (chuckles), if I can up sticks and move away and settle
6 down in [Uni Town] I think anybody can. So um yeah, I think it's kind of just really important
7 to grasp the opportunity and not kind of, not let your disability hold you back cause at the
8 end of the day it's, it's only you that it's going to affect, you know like it's not going to affect
9 other people if you're blind or not, so um, yeah. That's kind of a positive note to end on.

4.14 In this excerpt, rather than speaking to the researcher, or even another VI young person, James focuses on the parents of someone who is visually impaired, effectively addressing a stereotype about independence while implicitly informing the goals of the overall research project. Previous excerpts from Beth and Danielle also point to the researcher as audience, structuring both what is said and how. With Beth (see Excerpt 1), she tells her guide dog story with somewhat technical language without explanations of key terms, as she infers my level of knowledge of the issue. With Danielle (see Excerpt 2), she calls me by name, saying that she's told me all she can think of. Elsewhere in her audio diary Danielle tells me how her plans have changed, referencing a previous discussion from our first interview.

Conclusion

5.1 Audio diaries are an innovative method that appealed to the young people in my research, while also allowing the researcher to stay in touch with participants, capturing how their narratives of transition evolved over time. Methodologically, the use of audio diaries in this study made use of participants' familiarity with storytelling/narrative, allowing the research to capture the fluidity of identity formation through their stories. The audio diaries were designed to suit visually impaired young people as a participant-centred method, both in their accessibility and their novelty. Audio diaries were highly relatable and engaging to the VI young people involved in the research, while also giving them control over the diary in various ways. Moreover, the method encourages 'stream of consciousness' responses not present within the previous narrative interviews or the few diaries completed electronically. Both the narrative and participatory aspects of the method support the understanding of audio diaries as conversation, and the analytical importance of audience. The success of the audio diaries seemed to hinge on the audience aspect, and the rapport built up with participants during the initial interview. The method's connection to audience means that it could be more or less intimidating to participants according to who they imagine as the audience. This leads to a possible limitation with the method: audio diaries may be best suited to a follow-up stage of a research project. In this study our initial meeting not only allowed participants get to know me, but also the research and its aims. Overall audio diaries have both expanded and diversified participants' contribution to the research, providing greater insight into how young people understand and narrate experiences of growing up. In this sense, audio diaries have provided a better understanding of the complexity of young people's experiences of transition.

Notes

¹ A few participants preferred to use their own recorder, and they were reimbursed for their costs.

² All names are pseudonyms, and transcripts have been anonymised with square brackets.

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