

An oral history of the pandemic and the Lothian Diary Project, in conversation with Lauren Hall-Lew

Lauren Hall-Lew is a Reader in Linguistics and English Language, in the School of Philosophy, Psychology, and Language Sciences at the University of Edinburgh. We talked to her about the Lothian Diary Project.

Please tell us about the Lothian Diary Project. What are its goals? Also, what is the importance of gathering people's accounts of their lockdown experiences.

We have eight staff members on the project, each of us with our own research goals, but the goal of the project overall is to gather accounts of lockdown experience in people's own words, rather than via a pre-populated survey. We do ask our participants to also complete a survey, in order to give context to their self-recording, but the focus of the analysis is really on the audio or video diaries that they create prior to taking that survey. These self-directed responses are important because they show us what people want to talk about (and what they don't want to talk about), and the way in which they talk about those things gives us a range of perspectives that might not be otherwise obtainable, such as from a survey. For example, participants often recount the single most difficult aspect of their lockdown experience, and many of these are presented with detail and description that only comes from someone speaking extemporaneously.

The idea of using oral history as a research method is

intriguing. I was wondering how you are conducting the research during the lockdown?

At the moment we are focused on our Knowledge Exchange outputs, rather than academic research outputs. These include an Oral History Archive for Museums and Galleries, Edinburgh, and a report for the Covid-19 Committee at Scottish Parliament. We're still collecting video diaries and will continue to do so until the end of May. However, the committee report is itself a piece of research, and at the moment we are working on that by generating automatic transcripts of the diaries which are then manually corrected for accuracy. The focus at this stage is therefore on the content of what's said, rather than a study of the video image or the speech.

How did you recruit the participants from the Lothian citizens? How many volunteers have participated in the project so far?

We have had approximately 125 contributors so far. We began recruitment in late May 2020, and have completed two stages now, and we're moving into a third at the moment. Stage 1 followed convenience sampling. Participants were recruited via social media platforms, adverts in local newspapers and radio, press releases, and word-of-mouth. Stage 2 of data collection was introduced to recruit underrepresented participants. The sampling strategy at this stage was to contact and partner with charities representing homeless, disabled, or other vulnerable individuals, as well as caregivers of any group. We established charity partnerships by running a targeted social media advertising campaign and an online interactive workshop for the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Festival of Social Science'. We also rented a local community space for three days to allow digitally excluded members of the public (e.g., those without reliable wifi access) to participate in person. We've just gotten funding to launch a third phase, with will specific recruit young people and their caregivers.

Can you tell us about some of your findings so far?

As of now, most of the participants are from Edinburgh rather than the Lothians. Twice as many are female as are male. Most have an undergraduate degree or technical qualification, and most are between the ages of 16-64. Relative to the Edinburgh population, the sample has a greater representation of participants who are of colour (20%) and born outside the UK (27%). 20% are disabled and nearly 30% are LGBTQA+. One of the most important dimensions of variation is the day when the diary was recorded. The recordings span from May 2020 to February 2021, and so of course understandings of Covid-19 and “lockdown” changed quite a lot in the interim. For example, those recordings from early June 2020 are impressionistically rather different from those in July 2020, with the latter being more retrospective but also a bit more positive and optimistic. However, regardless of the day of recording or the state of lockdown on that day, one of the remarkable things we are seeing is a real resilience of the human spirit. Some of the most positive descriptions of the lockdown’s ‘silver linings’ come from participants living in some of the toughest of circumstances.