

# Ethical Reflexivity, Care, and Slippery Data: Lessons From Working With the Mass Observation Project

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/sro](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sro)**Corine van Emmerik**

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## Abstract

As part of a research project on the lived and everyday temporal experiences of British people in the Covid-19 pandemic, a Mass Observation directive was commissioned that asked volunteers about their changing rhythms, feelings, and imagined futures. The responses were rich and raw. Some of these reflections, however, expressed a risk of harm that raised ethical issues that were not anticipated beforehand. These issues were complicated by the interstitial character of the data, being not primary and not quite secondary. This *Sociology in Action* paper reflects on one diary that expressed risk of harm to think through the slipperiness of the data as well as the ethical responsibility researchers have towards the well-being of participants and that of their own. I suggest a proactive ethical framework for such interstitial data that includes an ethics of care towards the participants and stimulates ethical reflexivity that prepares the researcher for potential emotional ties and investments.

## Keywords

COVID-19, ethics of care, mass observation, methodology, secondary data analysis

## Introduction

In early summer 2021, I had the opportunity to read about the lives of around 250 Britons and their experiences during a global pandemic through the Mass Observation Project (MOP). The MOP is dedicated to recording everyday life in Britain, usually in the form of reflective diaries written by volunteers and making these records publicly available through an archive based at the University of Sussex. As part of the British Academy funded project, *Feeling, making and imagining time: Everyday temporal experiences in the Covid-19 pandemic*, led by Rebecca Coleman (University of Bristol) and Dawn Lyon

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(University of Kent), a MOP directive was commissioned that asked about the lived experience of time of people living in the United Kingdom during and after lockdown. The project aims to understand the changing rhythms, feelings, and futures both at an individual and collective level. I used NVivo to code the entries on these and other topics. The entries responding to the Directive were sent in between August and December 2020 and ranged from multiple pages to a couple of bullet points. In other words, the diaries were as diverse as the lives they described.

The richness of these accounts and the insights they offered into the lives of people all over the United Kingdom proved to be incredibly valuable. Moreover, due to the extraordinary situation of the pandemic and lockdown, the accounts were often raw in their reflections on what was unfolding. Doing research on lived experiences during a global pandemic while still in the midst of it, prompted me to reflect on some issues I encountered during the coding process. Even though the volunteer respondents participate in full knowledge that their contributions will be read and interpreted by researchers, with the MOP safeguarded by the Archive, in an understanding that they remain anonymous and do not have to respond to a directive, some respondents to the commissioned directive seemed to entrust their darkest feelings and thoughts to the paper and thus to me, their reader. These encounters raised some ethical concerns that the project team did not fully anticipate beforehand that incited questions around if, how, and when responsibility and care for participants should be activated. These concerns were compounded by a methodological issue that rendered the data neither primary nor secondary, but something in-between. The interstitial space that the Mass Observation archive seems to inhabit in this project, asks for an intervention into the ethics of the commission of and reuse of data, which this *Sociology in Action* paper aims to address, attending to the methodological and ethical implications of how we think about reflexivity and care.

This paper thus reflects on some of the methodological and ethical issues that arose while working with this MOP directive. I will expand on one entry that, along with several others, mentioned harm or risk of harm. I will think through some of these ethical problems by bringing to light a paucity between ethical procedures and contributing new insights into the methodological problem of what I call interstitial data and its implications for the ethics of qualitative documentary analysis. I conclude by highlighting some points researchers wishing to engage with MOP should be alerted to and offer an example from our own ethical practice in response to the problem outlined as a tentative proposition.

## **An emotional encounter**

Early on in my coding of the diaries, I encountered the life of one MOP diarist B6664 which lays bare some of the ethical issues we encounter as researchers grappling with our own and other people's feelings and thoughts. For each response, biographical data are available such as age, gender, occupation, and household status and is often written on the response as well by the diarist.<sup>1</sup> B6664, however, did not write biographical data on her diary, but by reading the entry, I could ascertain that the writer was female, in her 1960s, possibly living in a rural setting, and probably a homemaker or retired. The entry opened by describing how time 'froze' for her not necessarily due to the lockdown, but

because of her husband who keeps her ‘trapped’, determined to not let her ‘escape’. The opening passage felt like the beginning of a sad and eerie novel that made me feel closed in with her. She described how her family belongings and her dog keep her from leaving while she contemplated how she would have done it all differently if she were younger. The situation of lockdown was not new to her, she wrote, as she is used to being alone in the house with her husband every day, who can get angry and vengeful, trying to ‘make [her] life worse’. Having no family, she feels she is left to her own devices.

Volunteer B6664 seemed apprehensive when she mentioned a solicitor to whom she wrote to follow through with the divorce she was contemplating. The solicitor didn’t respond to her letter, and she questioned whether her letter was ‘embarrassingly bad’ or maybe put her on the bottom of the solicitor’s list. The new situation in which the nation, and the rest of the world for that matter, found itself in seemed initially to pass her by, not affecting her world. Nonetheless, as her weekly swim was cancelled, she started walking almost every day. Her tone seemed to be more upbeat as she brought up the many people she met over the months and briefly described the lives of her new acquaintances. Even though the descriptions are short, I imagined her out of her prison-like home, talking to strangers to get her mind off the worries she might have or just to have a chat. She wrote, ‘They helped me more than they can ever imagine’. Sometimes the subtle details of the account are telling of B6664’s living situation, where comfort is found in the people outside of the home or in the coping mechanism of writing she created to ‘deal with her life’. She mentioned how she keeps two diaries of which one is ‘hidden’. Such snippets stimulated my sociological imagination (Mills and Gitlin, 2000 [1959]), and I wondered where she would keep it hidden and what she would write in it? How does it differ from her ‘normal’ diary and who does she write it for? It almost felt like she was writing passages from her hidden diary as she seemed so open and trusting in me, her reader. Indeed, working with the MO asks for an ‘imaginative investment’ from those who do the research, as Annabella Pollen (2014: para. 1.4) describes in her work on the connections between contributors and users of the MO, especially when intimate details are shared. Anna Doucet (2007) has beautifully formulated this sense of connection elsewhere as a ‘gossamer wall’ between the researcher and respondent and this is certainly something I felt in this encounter.

Due to her lack of family, work, friends, holidays, and other markers of time, B6664 found a creative way to mark the days and the passing of time by writing to-do lists and even installing a ‘knicker monitoring system to keep track of the underwear’ she uses every day. She portrayed it as embarrassing, but I understand why someone might dedicate attention to such an everyday routine. It is a way to manage what’s going on, in and outside of the house, that shifts attention to the mundane and the safety provided by structure and routine. Refusing to succumb to life, as B6664 described, she pointed to two moments in her life that offered a sense of pride: the fact that she has stopped biting her nails for the last year, and that she lost two stone in weight in 2015 that she has not regained. ‘So although my life seems pointless and depressing, I have not totally given up’, she concluded. What I find poignant about her description, is that she radiates a glimmer of volition in determining her own life and its course. Setting in motion a divorce from the husband who treats her badly and demonstrating she is strong by continuing her good habits, these minor gestures seem to make big ripples.

Almost in anticipation of what the reader will think, she asked whether she thinks things will be better for her. Her answer is ambiguous. I will relay her answer here as it moved me quite a lot and I think it is portending some of the ethical issues arising from working with the MOP:

Sometimes I just give up and I have considered suicide many times. But I know that if I kill myself he will have won and I will never have escaped him. How I wish I could take my life back and have my life again, this time not making the same mistakes. How many people wish for the same thing? It's never going to happen, so I just try to improve things. Now I am in my 60s I have a terrible feeling of running out of time.

It was painful to read this section and her intimate thoughts contemplating suicide tightened the imaginary bond I felt with her even more. The power play that B6664 describes between herself and her husband occurred as a matter of life and death, literally, and it is strangely comforting that the thought of him winning prevents her from giving in. I also wondered what kind of life she envisioned for herself if all of this was different? And whether the thought of not being alone in this brings her any consolation? The respondent's situation resonates with wider national debates around domestic abuse, ranging from physical to psychological, that saw an increase during coronavirus pandemic and lockdown (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2020). The inside view of the writer's life and depth of the account, even though some of it might be oblique, provides researchers relevant insights into her life that reverberates with others in similar situations. Through the life of one, we can discover many.

A further element that drew me to this entry, besides the content, was the way in which it was written. She seemed to direct her writing to me, the reader, a trope that other diarists use as well, showing an awareness of someone reading their entries, whether explicitly directed at them or not, or whether that be a future generation in line with the romantic idea of the MO during the Second World War or a researcher a couple of weeks after. Some of the literature exploring the relationship between the MO writer and reader (see, for example, Lindsey and Bulloch, 2014; Pollen, 2014; Shaw, 1994, 1998) categorizes diarists who imagine the reader and write with them in mind. To illustrate, B6664 signed off her entry with the following paragraph: 'I just hope that if everybody ever reads this in the future, they are free and happy, with a life that means something. I send you my best wishes and hopes for the future'.

These imagined relationships between the writer and the reader, especially when the reader is addressed directly, are dynamics like in an interview, as Rose Lindsey and Sarah Bullock (2014: para. 7.6) point out in their reflections on working with the MO. The researcher is pulled in (and out of) the life of the respondent that removes some of the felt distance in-between, which requires enhanced ethical alertness. Regardless of the absence of the visual clues of an interview, still, the emotional investments and ties that are forged when trying to make sense of someone's lived experiences or 'narrated subjectivities' (Doucet, 2007: 83) contribute to an ethical reflexivity. Hughes and Tarrant (2020: 49) make this point in light of re-presenting stories that are told in secondary data, but, as I claim, also mobilizes other responsibilities and duties of the researcher. Reflexivity is understood here as critical and dynamic self-reflection and consideration

of other relationships in the knowing and writing about others (Doucet, 2007: 73; Mauthner et al., 1998: 736). Triggered by an emotional involvement and an appeal to the moral responsibility of the researcher that is intended by the writer or experienced by the researcher, or both, such ethical reflexivity considers conventional ethical themes such as consent or anonymity. Moreover, it further performs a feminist ethics of care for the well-being of the diarist in an attempt to take people's stories seriously and understand their situated needs to live well (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

Thus, reading a passage like the one above brings up many complex ethical issues that require careful consideration. After studying B6664's diary, her situation and expressed feelings, I felt uneasy as I was worried for her physical and psychological safety and felt like I needed to reach out or do something. I felt responsible for her as it was our research team who formulated the questions that prompted such response – as if in an interview – while sensing the gossamer transforming into a concrete wall since I could not approach or respond to the diarist directly or immediately. Ensuring the well-being of participants, after all, is one of the researcher's main ethical responsibilities. It is this very inability of reaching out while attempting and feeling the need to perform an ethics of care that makes these concerns different from the messiness of fieldwork, ethically and emotionally, that has often been explored in sociological research (see, e.g., Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2007; Plummer, 2001; Stodulka et al., 2019; Van den Hoonaard, 2002).

## **Slippery data: methodological reflections**

This ethical difficulty arises from a methodological issue where data are neither primary nor secondary. The slippery character of working with the MOP problematized my ethical considerations. Niamh Moore (2007: para. 2.17) briefly mentions the difficulty of assessing the MO data as primary or secondary data and the methodological questions it opens up, 'whether data can be reused, if they never have been used', for example; I suggest that this indeterminateness is further dramatized in this situation.<sup>2</sup> Not quite primary data, as the diarists send their entries to the MO archive and are not labelled as live research, and not quite secondary data, as we commissioned the directive that the diarist responded to, the MO archive as data set sits between the two, with the MO archivists functioning as data stewards. With this conundrum in mind, I wondered about the ethical responsibility we as researchers and directive commissioners should take, our duty of care, and the potential risk of harm we also encounter in engaging with these entries. What would be considered appropriate care in this instance while still ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and security of personal data (Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) 2009)? Naturally, collaborating with the MOP requires the approval of an ethics form around the use of data for research purposes, but these ethical procedures do not alert the researcher to the issues that arose in this instance as it is generally considered secondary analysis and hence reveal a gap between ethical procedures.

Likewise, other data gathering bodies, such as QUALIDATA – now hosted by the UK data service – mainly mention the duty of confidentiality and other principles for UK social science research ethics, such as minimizing risk of harm, but do not mention specific processes or regulations related to their duty of care, except the requirement to report information about a planned terrorist attack or suspected child abuse (UK Data

Service, 2022). Furthermore, on a broader, institutional level, the difficulty of slippery data is further complicated by a turn towards a more legalistic framing of ethics starting from the 1990s onwards that is informed by biomedical approaches and predominantly aimed at protecting institutions. This shift has resulted in a move away from individual concerns such as an ethics of care towards an understanding of ethics around legal liability, for example (see, for example, Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; Meskell and Pels, 2005; Van den Scott, 2020). While the literature on qualitative secondary analysis signals the need for an ethical sensitivity towards the re-use of data and consent from participants (see e.g. Grinyer, 2009; Hughes and Tarrant, 2020; O'Connor and Goodwin, 2013), much less discussed are the ethics related to ensuring the well-being of participants, especially when working with slippery data that is not quite primary or secondary.

I shared my concerns about the entry and several others that mentioned suicide or domestic abuse with the rest of the research team, which was a first step to engage in a process of ethical reflexivity that is situational and responsive on the one hand and performs an ethics of care towards the researcher on the other. We then discussed our concerns with the MO archivists Kirsty Patrick and Jessica Scantlebury, who were extremely helpful throughout the collaboration, and notified us that they would mobilize their duty of care towards their diarists – with whom they nurtured a relationship of trust over the years and decades that produced open and candid narratives<sup>3</sup> – and suggested we send them the identification codes of those recognized as at risk. The archivists would then go over the entries and contact the respondents or relevant organizations as they deemed necessary.

Additional difficulties arose from the temporal lapse between the actual writing and reading of the entry, as B6664 wrote her entry months before we were started to work with it. First, an ethical sensibility is therefore required, as bringing up past memories or statements from an account of someone's life, might be painful to be reminded of (O'Connor and Goodwin, 2013: 299–300). Second, a temporal ethical sensitivity needs to be cultivated when working with the entries, as the temporal difference between the writing and the reading call for different ethical responsiveness (see Hughes and Tarrant, 2020). Anna Doucet (2007: 84) highlighted the temporal quality of reflexivity or 'degrees of reflexivity' (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003) in research that finds its fruition along the passage of time. Indeed, the temporal distance to the data might very well change our emotional involvement and level of reflexivity, as Mauthner et al. (1998) showed. As we worked relatively fast with the entries, we were able to respond quickly to what was an issue at the time of the directive and in the world of the respondent (Mauthner et al., 1998: 741); however, this might be different for longitudinal studies working with the MO, for example.

## Conclusion and discussion

Encountering a story mentioning the risk of harm, revealed the need to attend to the ethical responsibility of the researcher to activate an ethics of care in cases where data analysis is not quite primary nor secondary. While the analysis of some of the entries required a distinct emotional investment, it put us in a position to inform researchers wishing to

work with the MOP about issues that are worth taking into consideration. The ethical uncertainty of working with data that neither fits the categories of primary or secondary data – what I call ‘interstitial data’ – could benefit from more reflection, I argue, so that ethical frameworks not only include conventional ethical themes such as data protection and anonymity, but also the well-being of participants. This is especially pertinent considering the entanglement of researchers within larger systems of power and socio-legal regulations cemented in institutions through, for example, legalistic formulations of ethics that homogenize (see Van den Hoonaard, 2011) and control social science research and thus lose sight of a more attentive ethics of care. At the same time, dealing with interstitial, slippery data open up further questions about what kind of methodology might be required and how such methodological decisions are made. Even though these questions go beyond the scope of this *Sociology in Action* paper, the complex character of the data nonetheless informs a different kind of ethical sensitivity that is outlined below.

In our discussions, MOP archivists emphasized that through regular communication their volunteers are informed that their writing will be used by both contemporary and future researchers. The diary writers are also made aware that upon submitting their responses their writing has been received by the team but is yet to be fully processed. Moreover, the MOP explains they ‘are currently updating their communications to ensure contact details of support organisations are easily accessible should any volunteer find a Directive triggering in any way’. Taking responsibility for their well-being performs an ethics of care towards the participant, regardless of the distance between researcher and researched. Such proactive ethics could anticipate potential risk of harm for example, that prepares the researcher for an ethical responsiveness and potential emotional investments and ties (Hughes and Tarrant, 2020: 43). In addition, it can also aid in developing an ethical reflexivity able to attend to the complexities of the research process and lives reflected in the diaries (Hughes and Tarrant, 2020: 43). In this way, researchers might be able to navigate the ethical complexities that arise when working with ‘interstitial data’ like the MO archive.

To perform such an ethics of care and ethical responsiveness we decided – in conversation with the MOP – for the MOP team to write B6664 to ask for her consent for me to discuss her entry and therefore her life in this *Sociology in Action* paper. This was the first time the MOP archivists had written to a respondent directly about the inclusion of their writings in research outputs. The MOP received a response that is worth quoting here at length:

I imagine that in the Directive you refer to, I wrote about my current marital situation, which is not good. That anybody would find anything I write, really as therapy for myself, interesting, and worthy of note, absolutely stunned me. I can only say that I feel very honoured and grateful . . . I would like to say that everyone at Mass Observation has helped me enormously, probably without having any idea that that was the case; and without ever having met me.

It was a relief to learn that she feels heard, recognized and cared about. Her intimate response moved me and made me appreciate that our ethics of care made her feel her life and story are taken seriously and valued. In addition, just like the people she met on her

walks, the MOP team ‘helped her enormously [. . .] without having any idea’. Making explicit these nurturing relationships between researcher and participant emphasized this ethics of care. Even though this might be a time-consuming process, it is nonetheless a vital one to fulfil our ethical duties as researchers, whether working with primary data, secondary data, or something in-between.

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### Notes

1. More recently, MOP also captures self-defining data on sexuality, disability, and ethnicity.
2. See also Libby Bishop’s (2007) reflexive account on the primary secondary data divide.
3. Email correspondence with MOP on 20 September 2021.

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