



# Using diaries to understand women's responses to crime and violence

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**SUMMARY:** *This paper describes the use of solicited diaries in research on crime and violence in a South African community, drawing on material collected from 15 diary writers. The paper explains the broader aims of the research, describes the circumstances of the diary writers, and relates some of the stories told by these women in their diaries. The importance of triangulation is discussed and, in this particular case, illustrated through a combination of diaries and focus group interviews. The paper concludes by discussing the benefits and drawbacks associated with the use of solicited diaries.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

THIS RESEARCH NOTE examines the use of solicited personal diaries in research that explores the complexities of crime and violence in a community in Durban, South Africa. Material collected from 15 diary writers (all Black females) is used here to illustrate the benefits and possible problems associated with this particular method. Since both diaries and focus group interviews were used in the research, the importance of triangulation is also addressed. This paper illustrates the capacity of solicited diaries both to serve as a means of gathering sensitive material and also to offer women an opportunity for emotional release.

## II. THE AIMS OF THE WIDER PROJECT: UNDERSTANDING RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

THE BROADER RESEARCH project on which this paper is based aimed to understand women's experiences of violence and how they responded to it. The project, which took place during 2001 and 2002, built on work examining the public and private nature of women's fears of crime and violence, and attempted to develop a fuller understanding of the strategies women adopted to cope with and counteract high levels of crime and violence. Implicit in this aim was an attempt to uncover the multiple ways in which women respond – some of which are "anti-social" or problematic in themselves. Thus, the project hoped to move beyond the simplistic description of women as "victims", and offer a more nuanced insight into what women were actually doing. This research note presents an overview of their various responses to

violence, and focuses in particular on the use of neighbourly relations and on the connections between neighbourliness and acts of vigilante violence.

### III. USING DIARIES IN VIOLENCE RESEARCH

THE USE OF solicited diaries is fairly common in health studies, but less so in political, geographical and development research. Solicited diaries are quite distinct in nature from personal private diaries. Bell defines the solicited diary as "...an account produced specifically at the researcher's request, by an informant or informants."<sup>(1)</sup> Solicited diaries, then, are written with the full knowledge that they are for external consumption. Hence, it is likely that what is written reflects an awareness of the researcher's concerns.

This method can contribute to progressive social research in two ways. First, it can provide an opportunity for the often marginalized subjects of research to have their say; and second, it can (although it does not always) contribute to a more empowered relationship between the subjects of the research project and the person carrying out the research. The diary writers may find the process of writing empowering because it allows them to identify their key concerns – and thus to set the agenda to some extent. It is clear, however, that the agenda remains strongly influenced by the researcher (who commissions the diaries, advises on topics to be covered, translates the diaries and then, most importantly, interprets the written words). These methodological issues will be returned to later in the paper, when some of the benefits and disadvantages are considered.

In this particular project, diary-writing was used in combination with focus group interviews. Focus groups have been distinguished from group interviews by their "...explicit use of group interaction to generate data",<sup>(2)</sup> a feature which can be particularly beneficial in sensitive situations (as would be common in violence research) because they can provide participants with a sense of support and empowerment.<sup>(3)</sup>

The use of focus groups in addition to diaries also allowed for triangulation, a process that is strongly recommended in any research and which allows the validity of research results to be maximized. Triangulation is simply the technique whereby researchers make use of multiple sources of information and/or multiple methods to widen their understanding of the research question.<sup>(4)</sup> This technique works best if each of the methods offers something specific to the process of understanding. In this case, for instance, the diaries allowed for extensive individual reflection, whereas the focus groups encouraged group analysis and topic development based on the interests and ideas of fellow participants. This particular project also made use of questionnaires with a larger sample of women.<sup>(5)</sup>

Initially, women were recruited by local community representatives for participation in focus groups. At the end of each focus group meeting, the issue of diary-writing was raised with the women, and details of the task explained. Overall, 39 women attended eight different focus group meetings (there were four or five per group) and they all agreed to participate in the diary-writing exercise. They were then given blank diaries to take home for a period of approximately four to six weeks. Each blank diary had an advice note (Box 1) translated into Zulu and pasted into the front cover. The women were asked to write freely (in Zulu) about their experiences of crime and violence and their responses to these experiences. Issues

1. Bell, L (1998), "Public and private meanings in diaries: researching family and childcare", in Ribbens, J and R Edwards (editors), *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, Sage Publications, London, page 72.

2. Kitzinger, J and R Barbour (1999), "Introduction: the challenge and promise of focus groups", in Barbour, R and J Kitzinger (editors), *Developing Focus Group Research: Politics, Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, London, page 4.

3. Farquhar, C with R Das (1999), "Are focus groups suitable for 'sensitive' topics?", in Barbour and Kitzinger (1999), see reference 2, page 47.

4. Clifford, N and G Valentine (2003), "Getting started in geographical research: how this book can help", in Clifford, N and G Valentine (editors), *Key Methods in Geography*, Sage Publications, London, pages 1–16.

5. The 50 questionnaires focused specifically on the issue of domestic violence and women's ability to manage this, as well as the links between their home environment and their experiences of violence. These questionnaires were also completed at three different locations, namely the inner-city Durban magistrates' court, the peri-urban Pinetown magistrates' court and the inner-city women's hostel, Thokoza.

6. For an extended discussion of the use of diaries in research, see Meth, P (2003), "Entries and omissions: using solicited diaries in geographical research", *Area* Vol 35, No 2, pages 195–205.

**Box 1: Notes given to each diary writer****HELP ON WRITING YOUR DIARY**

Dear diary writer,

Thank you for agreeing to write this diary for my research. This is an unusual method of research, but it is used because interviews only tell you about what a person is thinking on one day, not many days.

I would like you to feel free about what you write in this diary. I will keep your names secret; for example, if your name is Mrs Dlamini, I will call you Mrs D when I am writing up my research reports, unless you specifically say that I can use your name. Writing a diary takes time and effort, and I do not expect you to write in it every day. Some days you might write a lot and other days you might just write a few words or nothing at all, that is fine.

You can write whatever you want in the diary, but what I am specifically interested in is a record of your day to day experiences of fear of violence and crime. Every time you feel even slightly scared, concerned, worried about your safety, or your children or friends' safety, please write something about this. For example, you might be scared in the taxi because someone might steal your money, or you might be scared at night because you can hear people shouting in the streets, or you might be scared of someone at home. I am interested in any fear you might have, it doesn't matter how small it is. Please can you try and fill in the following details about each description (if possible):

- WHEN was it? (date/time)
- WHO were you scared of? (people/family/children/boyfriend)
- WHAT happened? (describe the event)
- HOW did you deal with it? (run away, hide, ignore it, pray, find your friends, avoid walking down a street for example?)

Even though I want you to include something about the above four points, please write in sentences if possible, and if there is anything else you want to say or elaborate on, that is fine too.

Please keep a record for a month and then return the diaries as arranged. You will be paid for filling in the diary and returning it, as writing a diary takes up time.

Thank you, Paula

**PAULA'S DIARY: AN EXAMPLE OF MY FEAR OF VIOLENCE/CRIME OVER TWO DAYS**

Monday 19 November, 11.30 a.m. (WHEN), I was walking on campus at the University of Natal, from the main campus down to the science block. I wanted to use the shortcut route around the back of a water reservoir, which is quite hidden and has lots of trees, but I had been told that several women had been attacked and raped on this path in the past. I felt too scared to take this path, even though it would have been a lot quicker. So I walked along the road where there are lots of cars and people (HOW).

Tuesday 20 November, 6.45 a.m., I was driving to the beachfront in my father's car. Four taxis (WHO) pulled out in front and behind me, keeping very close to my car. I felt scared that I might be car-jacked at the robots (WHAT). I closed my windows and stared straight ahead, and when the lights changed I drove off fast (HOW). I was probably over-reacting but I was a bit scared at the time.

of language and literacy are discussed in the latter part of this paper.<sup>(6)</sup> The women were offered R100 (about UK£ 10) to complete their diaries, which seemed appropriate considering the significant labour required. The impact of the payment cannot be measured; the almost perfect return rate suggests that it was significant. However, many women wrote cover-to-cover, in some cases over 10,000 words, a level of involvement that cannot be attributed to the financial incentive.

Both the diary-writing and the focus group interviews focused specifically on women's experiences of violence (domestic and civil), and how they managed this violence.

#### IV. INTRODUCING THE DIARY WRITERS

THE FOCUS GROUPS (and hence the diary entries) covered three different areas in the city of Durban, South Africa – the formal Black township of KwaMashu, the inner-city settlement of Cato Manor, and the inner-city trading area of Warwick Junction. This research note focuses on the women in Cato Manor. Historically settled by both Indian market gardeners and business people, the Cato Manor area was illegally squatted by Africans prior to the introduction of grand apartheid in the early 1950s.<sup>(7)</sup> At the time, the number of shacks had grown to 6,000, and these were believed to house between 45,000 and 50,000 residents.<sup>(8)</sup> Starting in the late 1950s and up until the late 1960s, a process of sustained removals took place, during which the area was effectively cleared of all its residents. It remained “empty” right up until the early 1990s, when laws regarding the settlement of Black South Africans were relaxed. At this point, land invasions began to take place, and areas of informal settlement grew in size. In 1993, the Cato Manor Development Association was formed, to manage the negotiation and implementation of development in the area.<sup>(9)</sup> The women interviewed in this project came from three different settlements within Cato Manor: the Jamaica informal settlement, Old and New Dunbar informal settlements and the Cato Crest greenfield project. The first two settlements are in the process of being upgraded, while the third (Cato Crest), an incremental “greenfield” development, was provided with block-style housing in 1999. A range of social investment projects have also been (or are in the process of being) delivered in some areas of Cato Manor. For example, Cato Crest primary school has been upgraded, a secondary school, community hall and child care facilities have been established, and New Dunbar has received child care facilities for 150 children.<sup>(10)</sup> The Cato Manor Development Association was dismantled post-March 2003, and development of the area fell to the Durban city authorities, namely the municipality of eThekweni. Development of this area is ongoing; indeed, the municipality launched the re-development and upgrading of the Jamaica settlement only in February 2004.<sup>(11)</sup>

Table 1 provides the arrival dates in Cato Manor of the women interviewed for this project, as well as their origin and form of livelihood. The majority of the women moved into Cato Manor in the early 1990s from a range of different urban and rural environments. The fairly consistent arrival dates are not surprising, as these coincide with the land invasions and squatting that began in Cato Manor in the early 1990s.

The areas from where the women moved are quite wide-ranging, although they all fall within the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa. Several women moved from KwaMashu (a large formal township) to Cato Manor, citing rising crime and violence in KwaMashu as their reason. Others had moved from rural areas to Cato Manor. The diversity of backgrounds and the recent establishment of the community are characteristics which may be of significance in analyses of violence.

The livelihood strategies adopted by the 15 women in Table 1 indicate a predominance of small-scale “survivalist” informal-sector activities, which are often insecure and provide inadequate income.<sup>(12)</sup> These strategies point to extensive poverty, which was confirmed by most of the women. Such poverty is a common causal factor in high levels of crime and violence, and can also contribute to a serious lack of social cohesion. The survivalist strategies that these women depended on are especially vulnerable to crime, and the consequences can be extreme. BM from Old Dunbar told of her mother

7. Cato Manor Development Association (CMDA): [www.cmda.org.za](http://www.cmda.org.za).

8. See reference 7.

9. See reference 7.

10. See reference 7.

11. eThekweni Municipality website: [www.durban.gov.za/eThekweni/Municipality/press/556/](http://www.durban.gov.za/eThekweni/Municipality/press/556/)

12. Rogerson, C (1997), “Globalisation or informalisation? African urban economies in the 1990s”, in Rakodi, C (editor), *The Urban Challenge in Africa: Growth and Management of its Largest Cities*, United Nations University Press, page 347.

<b>Table 1: Interviewees (and diary writers) at Cato Manor</b>				
<b>Name and diary number</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Arrival date</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Livelihood strategies</b>
FN 1	Cato Crest	1993	KwaMashu	Dependent on her mother's pension, does voluntary cleaning at a school
ZD 14	Cato Crest	1992	Umzumbe*	Son works as security officer – dependent on him
NN 17	Cato Crest	?	Mtwalume*	Dependent on husband's blue card (he died in 2001)
KSB 16	Cato Crest	1993	KwaMashu	Pensioner – relies on payment
NN 7	Cato Crest	2000	Lindelani	Husband working at restaurant
F 11	Jamaica	1993	Chesterville	Garden, sells vegetables
A 5	Jamaica	1998	Umlazi	Pensioner, garden, sells vegetables
FN 6	Jamaica	1993	Chesterville	Collects and sells metal, garden, sells vegetables
L 3	Jamaica	1993	Chesterville	At school (FN's daughter)
R 13	Jamaica	1993	Chesterville	Sells candles, garden for subsistence
N 12	New Dunbar	1995	Umlazi	Sews and sells ironing-board covers
BM 8	Old Dunbar	1994	Umkomaas*	Sells second-hand clothes
NM 2	New Dunbar	1995	Krashoek *	Sells food and cigarettes
JM 15	Old Dunbar	1995	Ntuzuma	Sells snacks and underwear
NM 9	New Dunbar	1994	Unknown	Husband works, she does not

NOTE: \* Rural location of origin.

being mugged one day of all the clothes she hoped to sell: “*We were thankful that she was not killed, although we starved for that month, as she had nothing to sell*” (BM, Diary 8, Old Dunbar). All the women interviewed felt that levels of crime had increased dramatically, and they had various ways of assessing the situation. FM from the Jamaica settlement explained it in terms of rising informal trade: “*...more than ten people come to my house each day selling stolen goods. This is one of the indicators that the level of crime has increased*” (focus group interview, Jamaica settlement).

## **V. WOMEN'S STORIES ABOUT MANAGING VIOLENCE**

IN THE FOLLOWING account of women's experiences, based on both diaries and focus group interviews, the advantages of solicited diaries and the benefits of triangulation become apparent. Especially when the stories deal with more incriminating and sensitive material, the diary-based extracts are far more revealing than the stories from the focus groups.

Various responses to crime and violence are employed by residents of

Cato Manor. Women made repeated references to the police when responding to criminal events, and their opinions varied on the usefulness of this strategy. On the whole, they described the police as inefficient, corrupt, powerless and unavailable. For example, ZD from Cato Crest questions the role of the police in her diary:

*"...the most intriguing problem is the fact that the police services do not respond in time to the criminal events. According to law, one has to report his or her problem to the police services. Each time that one reports their case to the police, it becomes clear that the police do not care. This is depicted by the fact that their investigation into the crime does not bear any fruits."* (ZD, Diary 14, Cato Crest)

The inadequacy of the policing services is a function of staffing shortages, inappropriate training and low police-to-civilian ratios (1:2,758 in metropolitan Durban), and is fuelled by intense mistrust and the inaccessibility of many of the informal settlements, which accommodate 43 per cent of Durban's population.<sup>(13)</sup>

Women also reported problems to community leaders and committee members, and turned to them to assist in deliberations over disputes. Again, their opinions regarding this particular strategy were varied. KSB from Cato Crest explained in her diary that:

*"Some boys have been beaten in our area...it is rumoured they broke into a tavern and stole everything... They were beaten by the committee members. It's amazing because, usually, when there are criminals, the committee negotiates with the community before taking any action... In this case, the community was not consulted."*

Some women, but not many, made use of *sangomas* (witch doctors) to deal with criminal events (such as the theft of chickens, in one instance) although, again, there was growing suspicion of the benefits of this approach. During the first focus group interview with the five women from Cato Crest, they explained that:

*"...the information one gets from sangomas causes chaos, as they point out somebody whom you are not sure if he is the one who stole your belonging. Such information causes feud... among people."*

Many of the women were religious, and they used their Christian faith to assist in coping with high levels of crime, both spiritually and practically. For example, in a focus group discussion, R from Jamaica settlement describes *intambo yokuqirha* (a coloured wool rope to help with healing), which the church gave her, saying:

*"They said it will protect me from criminals whenever they want to attack me, they will fear and run away. My hope is in it."*

Other adopted strategies involved the active avoidance of particular areas, bridges, streets, townships and groups of people, to minimize the criminal threat. Several of the women admitted to arming themselves with sticks or knives to use in self-defence, if necessary. For example, five women in a focus group from Dunbar described the weapons they carried:

*"I always carry a stick"; "I have a short stick with a bolt on the tip... I have used it many times"; and "...my experience is that most if not all criminals are cowards; if you take out a weapon, unless he has a gun, he runs away."*

All these strategies are examples of what may be described as "largely acceptable" responses to managing crime and violence, and were openly discussed during focus group interviews and also written about in the women's diaries. These strategies operate alongside those which may be deemed "less acceptable", but which are probably no less understandable, and these more problematic strategies were first revealed in the solicited diaries. The insights offered in the diary extracts extensively develop

13. In comparison, policing ratios in 2002 in the larger KwaZulu-Natal region were 1:503. See Newham, G, T Masuku and L Gomomo (2002), "Metropolitan police services in South Africa, 2002", research report written for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation; see the Centre's website for a broad range of papers concerned with policing in South Africa.

themes that are briefly touched upon (or that may even be ignored) during focus group interviews, pointing to the importance of triangulation. Thus, women wrote fairly extensively about the vigilante violence that they either witnessed or actively engaged in, in an effort to manage high levels of crime and violence, although they barely mentioned these during group interviews. Women connected these acts to neighbourliness in complicated ways, and this relationship, again, was revealed in the diaries rather than in the focus groups.

## VI. WOMEN'S STORIES OF NEIGHBOURLINESS

IN CATO MANOR, reliance on neighbours for help with criminal matters was common. During the focus group interviews, most of the women were positive about their neighbours and about using them in times of need. In one focus group discussion, the women from Cato Crest described their neighbours as:

*"...very good neighbours, very helpful" and "...nice people ... in cases where criminals may enter my house, I can run to them for help."*<sup>(14)</sup>

Unfortunately, dependence on neighbours can be undermined by high levels of fear, which may stop help from being forthcoming, as revealed in this diary entry:

*"...one of my neighbours here at New Dunbar never enjoyed the December holidays because criminals opened the back of his mjondolo [shack] and took all the clothes, food that he had bought for Xmas. Although we could hear that there was something going on in his mjondolo, we were not able to react, in fear of our lives. As a result, criminals are very free... because they know that we as a community won't do anything about it. In case they are disturbed, they make sure that such a person who disturbed them dies, to send the message to anyone in the area that they must not involve themselves... I therefore believe that any mjondolo residential area serves as a dark forest where criminals hide."*(NM, Diary 9, New Dunbar)

There are also frequent references in the diaries to high levels of neighbourly mistrust, pointing to a breakdown in the social fabric. In terms of managing crime, this is problematic, and the importance of a strong social fabric in the management of crime is not lost on the residents of Cato Manor, as noted in these diary entries:

*"In the mjondolo I am never happy. This is because when I have to walk around in this area, I feel like a stranger. I don't feel free in my own residential area. This is because we live our lives trying to figure out who is looking at us, where I am at this time. Is it safe to be here? We are always on the lookout for suspicious people. What is even worse is that in cases when you see that some criminals are up to something, you can't act for the sake of your life, and also we don't have phones and we don't have a police station nearby."*(N, Diary 12, New Dunbar)

*"There is a lot of jealousy and hatred among people. It makes it difficult for crime to be solved because the community is not united itself. Everyone tries to protect oneself and is less concerned about whatever happens to the other person on the street... In a way, we are prepared to live with crime. In other areas, you find that the neighbours are watching each other's premises when the neighbour is not at home. In our case, it is different, the neighbour(s) is the culprit. This makes things worse, because if we were neighbours that were united against crime, we were going to partially solve the problem or work towards overcoming it completely."*(KSB, Diary 16, Cato Crest)

Neighbourly relations shape other responses to crime and violence, such

14. Obviously, the group interview method may have influenced this positive response. Certainly, within their personal diaries, women were far more critical of neighbourly relationships.

as revenge violence and vigilante crime. Analysis of the language used by women in the diary extracts below points to frequent use of the words “we”, “us”, “my neighbours”, “people” and “the community” in stories of revenge violence – it is always in the plural.<sup>15</sup> These women made use of their neighbours or their surrounding community for support in carrying out revenge attacks or to act as witnesses. Many of their statements reveal an acceptance (indeed approval) of this form of response to crime. One woman (R, Diary 13, Jamaica settlement) assessed the action of group revenge by writing that the “problem was solved” by this action.

15. These terms have been highlighted in the extracts to emphasize their use.

## VII. WOMEN'S STORIES OF VIGILANTISM AS AN INFORMAL RESPONSE TO MANAGING CRIME

*“SUCH STRANGERS ARE a problem because we don't know them and we also don't know how to deal with them. Local criminals are better because they are within our community and we know how dangerous they are. From there, we know how to deal with them. For instance, we beat up the less dangerous criminals and refer those that we are afraid of to the police.”* (NN, Diary 17, Cato Crest)

*“[In response to a criminal man who was attempting to con women into paying him money for building materials]... we planned to beat him up with the neighbours so that he can tell us exactly what he wanted. All the neighbours came up to where I was waiting for him. It was females only, mainly because the men were at work... We waited and he never came back to show me the cement bags... I think he realized that we were going to do him bad, he never got back again.”* (JM, Diary 15, Old Dunbar)

*“On the 16th May 1995, criminals entered my house and took everything that they wanted... I told my neighbours and we agreed that I should report the matter to the local leaders... They helped me as well. They found my belongings although some were already sold... I was also happy because before the police arrived, the criminals were severely beaten.”* (NM, Diary 9, New Dunbar)

The language used is evidence of group complicity. Furthermore, violence is justified in terms of the “crime-fighting” motivation, a typical element of vigilante discourse.<sup>16</sup> Several explanations of group violence were also rationalized in relation to police practice, either in terms of perceived police lenience or simply as part of the process of arrest.

*“In 1996, I ... heard that someone raped a child... The child told [her mother] who the person was and everybody in the neighbourhood knew him. The community asked the boy about it and he declined. He was beaten and taken to the police. He was imprisoned. After a while, he came back and it was said that he was out on bail. The community decided that it is unsafe to stay with such a person, and thus destroyed his shack to compel him to go away.”* (JM, Diary 15, Old Dunbar)

*“There was a very old lady ... A certain boy went into the old lady's room. He closed her mouth and raped her... she cried and someone... heard. He realized that he had messed up. He went out trying to run away and that person was already there. He caught him and told the other people about him... He was beaten and handed over to the police.”* (N, Diary 12, New Dunbar)

Some of the diary extracts tell stories of vigilante violence that are much harder to accept. Indeed, as Harris<sup>17</sup> explains, this discourse (of crime-fighting) is often a veil for more sinister criminal motives. In the following extract, murder is committed as a result of crowd fury.

*“Thugs wanted to take these young girls away so that they could prostitute them... The thugs fled into the nearest bush. The third member of the thugs ran*

16. Harris, B (2001), “As for violent crime, that's our daily bread: vigilante violence during South Africa's period of transition”, *Violence and Transition Series Vol 1*, May, pages 1–90.

17. See reference 16.



*by the road. Unfortunately for him, the community saw him. They called on everyone in the area to catch the thug. He was caught and beaten... He asked for mercy, but nothing of the sort could be obtained from the angry community... He was crying so loud that you could hear the echo from the dongas [ditches] around. He cried until he died. They used all sorts of weapons. For instance, he was stoned until he died. Having satisfied themselves that he was dead, they stamped him with a huge stone on his face."* (ZD, Diary 14, Cato Crest)

## VIII. REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF DIARIES AS A RESEARCH TOOL

THE USE OF diaries in violence research provides the subjects of the research with substantial scope for reflection and the opportunity to present their knowledge in a self-determined way. It also provides the researcher with material that serves to reinforce data gleaned through other methods. Three specific benefits of the use of diaries in violence research are considered here:

- improving researchers' access to the home environment;
- conducting research that may be empowering and supportive; and
- combining these elements to maximize understanding of complex and personal matters.

### a. Overcoming researcher inaccessibility

Research linking violence and gender suffers from difficulties of access. Issues of privacy arise when violence takes place in or around the home, and when experiences are sensitive in nature (particularly those around sexual violence or complicity in acts of violence.) These "private" experiences are often not accessible to researchers using "normal" methods. As Elliott explains:

*"...the potential to use diaries as a vehicle for research informants to observe situations which researchers cannot access has been explicitly drawn out within the context of ethnographic research."*<sup>(18)</sup>

Diaries offer the opportunity to record events and emotions in their social and spatial context. This process can, however, present risks for the diary writers themselves, who may, for instance, be caught recording stories of domestic violence, and precautions must be taken against this.

### b. Diary-writing as an empowering experience

Based on extracts from some diaries and also from an evaluation interview, it is clear that diary-writing provided some form of emotional support for the participating women. Diary-keeping has been described as a *"...kind of coping behaviour, more prevalent amongst females."*<sup>(19)</sup> A single post-project evaluation interview was carried out with one of the participants from the Jamaica squatter settlement of Cato Manor. Although one interview is clearly not representative, it is obvious that she found the process supportive and positive.

*"In my heart, I felt that in our suffering we were given an opportunity to talk about our feelings and how we would tell the world how 'stormy' are our lives. Writing the diary was a task I liked to do... I also felt relieved. It was like a big luggage has been removed from my shoulders... Writing the diary made me feel good because I had an opportunity to revise and cough out everything that was*

18. Elliott, H (1997), "The use of diaries in sociological research on health experience", *Sociological Research Online* Vol 2, No 2, page 4, after Zimmerman, D H and D Wieder (1977), "The diary-interview method", *Urban Life* Vol 5, pages 479-498.

19. See reference 1, Bell (1998), page 73; also Burt, C (1994), "An analysis of self-initiating coping behaviour: diary-keeping", *Child Study Journal* Vol 24, pages 171-189.

*haunting me all my life. I felt really good; in some instances, I even laughed. There is somewhere in the diary where I write about employment issues. That thing was really eating me inside but I couldn't talk about it to anyone ... but having written about them is like telling the world about these things and it makes me feel better.*" (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002)

Empowerment, or the ability to effect "progressive" social change through the research process, is increasingly a research outcome that many social scientists and policy practitioners aim for. Diaries provide participants with an alternative platform from which to reveal particular stories about their everyday lives. For example, two different diary writers made it clear that they were telling their stories for the first time. One woman commented:

*"I couldn't talk about this problem to my family; I kept it within me. I'm the only one that knows about it."* (ZN, Diary 34)

Another explained: *"I never told anyone about this, it is the first time I'm talking about it."* (F, Diary 11, Jamaica settlement)

Revealing personal stories can, of course, be emotionally disturbing for participants too, as re-engaging with painful memories can be intensely upsetting. In the case of this project, some women wrote about violent events that had occurred in their lives more than 30 years ago, obviously dredging up painful memories. Indeed, Cloke et al. argue that the process of research always has an impact, including on those people "...with whom we have not had direct contact, but who belong to the social worlds of those we have talked to."<sup>(20)</sup> An ironic reality is the fact that the researcher is not present when distressing accounts are being written, and thus cannot offer support to the diary writers; nor are researchers trained as counsellors and able to offer full support. Diary writers themselves can (and will) decide what experiences to engage with and what to omit, thus demonstrating their own agency. Researchers should make it clear to diary writers that they must disclose only what they feel comfortable disclosing. A fuller discussion of the emotional costs (and benefits) of various methods of research is presented in more detail elsewhere.<sup>(21)</sup>

### **c. The benefits of combining methods: diaries and focus group interviews**

Elliott,<sup>(22)</sup> referring to diaries within health research, argues that the combination of the interview approach and the diary method "...accommodates different response modes" on the part of the respondents. Different respondents will engage more fully (for a range of reasons) with certain research methods than with others. In addition, as outlined above, combining the two approaches fosters data triangulation, which serves to strengthen the material gathered and provide deeper insight into the research issues. Interviewees in this project discussed a range of issues concerning fear and violence in the context of focus group interviews, and their individual responses were often quite detailed within this context. However, on the whole, the diary entries were far more detailed, personal and insightful – as was particularly evident in the stories of vigilante violence and neighbourliness. During focus group meetings, women told largely positive stories about their neighbours and the ways in which they supported each other. In their diaries, however, they revealed that their relations with many of their neighbours were far more strained, but also that neighbourliness was used to facilitate strategies of vigilante or group violence. The diaries, then, offer the space for a more honest discussion of events

20. Cloke, P, P Cooke, J Cursons, P Milbourne and R Widdowfield (2000), "Ethics, reflexivity and research: encounters with homeless people", *Ethics, Place and Environment* Vol 3, page 151.

21. See Meth, P with K Malaza (2003), "Violent research: the ethics and emotions of doing research with women in South Africa", *Ethics, Place and Environment* Vol 6, No 2, pages 143–159.

22. See reference 18.

that could not be fully outlined in a group situation. Focus groups, however, encouraged group topic formation around unforeseen topics such as the role of religion and the use of *sangomas* in managing crime. Women were also able to gain a sense of their shared experiences through the group interviews.

The benefits of mixed methods as a form of corroboration and thematic development are evident. Decisions must be made by the researcher, however, about which method is more appropriate for which circumstance. In the evaluation interview, Mrs F from the Jamaica settlement revealed that diary-writing was, at times, a better avenue for her to express her views, compared to focus group interviews:

*"I found it better to write the diary than talking during the group interview because I wrote at my own pace. There was no rush. I had time to memorize. There are some secrets I wrote about, things that I couldn't disclose to any person. I never felt guilty when I did that, but I tried to avoid people's names when writing about them so that I don't find myself in trouble in future. The feeling that these things should be known drove me. It helps to have all the things you cannot talk about written down."* (Interview with Mrs F, Cato Manor, 2002)

An additional point is the comparative ease with which these methods can be used. Organizing and running focus groups takes a substantial amount of time for the researcher, and is frequently a frustrating process. Furthermore, the facilitation of focus group sessions requires skills that junior researchers may lack, and the issue of language and interpretation can be problematic. On the other hand, for the participant, the event is fairly speedy and contained, and this could be considered an advantage. Soliciting personal diaries is relatively quick and simple to organize (particularly if you use the same group of people). For the diary writer, the disadvantages are the effort required to complete the diary and the confusion that may arise in understanding the task at hand. For the researcher, the process is complicated by the fact that it may be difficult to carry out any follow-up. Where translations of the diaries are necessary, this may take months. The sheer quantity of material and the difficulties in querying writers later about their contributions may complicate both translation and interpretation.

There are other potential drawbacks related to diary-writing that also deserve consideration. First, it requires a range of skills, in particular literacy, that many interviewees may not possess. Thus, particular individuals may be excluded from the research process. In this case, the women had varying levels of school education, but most were educated up to primary school level only. Women who had difficulty with writing (illiteracy or eyesight problems) suggested having a child write for them rather than be excluded from the project. Obviously, this raises several issues; however, given that these women were comfortable sharing their knowledge through this medium, their suggestion was respected.

A second drawback in the use of diaries is that diary writers are obviously selective about what they write. In addition, the veracity of their written stories cannot be guaranteed. On the issue of selectivity, in the field of violence studies, it is normally accounts of domestic and sexual violence that are omitted, for various reasons. However, in this study, this was not the case, and women wrote very openly about these experiences, which suggests that more painful or private stories were not being selectively excluded – but this cannot be established with any certainty. Issues of truthfulness and validity are even more difficult to establish, and are an ongoing concern for social researchers – whatever method they use. The combination of different methods helps to address this issue, as does the repetition

of methods (using the same method with various people), which generates a benchmark against which stories can be judged. But again, concerns about the veracity of diary entries cannot ever truly be resolved.

A final drawback is the effort that diary-keeping demands of its respondents. Researchers must thus make informed judgements about whether or not paying participants is appropriate. With solicited diaries, as with any method, the disadvantages should be carefully considered when research is being designed, and carefully managed when they are used.

Despite the various drawbacks, however, the use of diaries as part of a broader multiple-method approach within a violence research project has much to recommend it. Diary-writing offers access to material that is often private or hard to get. It allows the writer to set the tone and agenda of what they reveal, and this is particularly empowering. As an element in a combination of methods, it allows for the verification of particular events and beliefs as well as the introduction of issues that are not easily revealed through more conventional methods. Here, the problematic theme of vigilante violence was revealed through diary-writing, and the stories the women told about this form of violence management, in turn, revealed their deeper views on neighbourly relations. Obviously, the small scale of this research project precludes broad generalization – whether on the nature of violence or on the use of diary-writing within violence studies. However, this project has generated in-depth insights into the lives of some women, and has indicated that diaries can yield extensive amounts of fascinating material. The material gathered from the other two research sites (Warwick Junction and KwaMashu) revealed very similar stories, suggesting a reliable in-depth understanding of the experiences of a particular group of women, which can be used to tease out analytical concepts.