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Lockdown Diaries: Merging Fact and Fiction in Auto/Biographical Research

Peer Reviewed Article

Julia Bennett

University of Chester

Contact: j.bennett@chester.ac.uk

Abstract

From January to March 2021, the UK experienced its third Covid-19 lockdown. By this time, ten months after the first UK lockdown started, the scenario of staying at home, working from home, and home schooling had become familiar. Towards the end of, so far, the final complete lockdown in England, and on the day of the budget announcements, people from across the UK were asked to complete one-day diaries for this project. The diaries, along with media accounts and other publicly accessible data, have been used to create a series of short, fictionalised narratives of one day during the pandemic. Based on the autobiographical accounts the participants produced, the stories explore how people from different backgrounds, life stages and geographical areas spent their time during the lockdown, highlighting both shared and very different experiences across and between places and age groups. The stories draw attention to mundane everyday lives during this time. The relatively experimental method of creating composite characters taken from real life also provides material for exploring how the use of fiction (here, biographical fiction) in research can help bring social science research into the public realm.

Keywords

Covid-19, Lockdown, Diaries, Fiction, Stories, Everyday Life

Introduction

The imposition of Lockdowns across large parts of the world from early 2020 into 2021 meant that researchers were somewhat limited in the type and scale of research they could carry out. For example, face-to-face research was not allowed by my institution, although online interviews and focus groups could continue. Some archival research was restricted through the closure of archives, although online archives, and other documentary sources, were, of course, still

available. In addition, many were busy juggling caring for others alongside continuing to work in new ways (Watson et al 2021). Despite this, a plethora of research around Covid is ongoing across multiple disciplinary areas (see, for example, Skeggs 2020; Patrick et al 2022; van Emmerik et al 2022). My contribution to this is a collection of participant diaries from 3rd March 2021, just before the final (so far) lockdown in England began to end. The diaries are, by nature, autobiographical. Most tell a single person's story, although one or two write at least in part using the plural 'we' signifying a couple's joint lives and experiences. I received diaries from across England, Wales and Scotland. The research was restricted to the UK to have a sense of experiencing similar lockdown conditions across the participants. I received 59 diaries and included my diary in the analysis, making 60 in total. The project was clear from the outset that the diaries would be fictionalised. This was an experiment in trying to create sociological research that would engage a wider audience than standard academic outputs of journal articles and books aimed at other academics and students. The personal nature of a diary enabling a peek into all aspects of someone's daily life meant that anonymity was essential, and creating composite characters allowed that (Frank 2000). As Bertaux (1981) points out, multiple stories from within a community will tell us more about the reproduction of social life in that community than an individual story possibly can. Bruner (1991) also demonstrates how multiple narratives ultimately make up a cultural history. In its history of collecting diaries annually on 12th May, Mass Observation has contributed to understanding changes in the culture of the UK since 1937 (see massobs.org.uk). In 2020 they received over 5,000 diaries, some of which are highlighted on their webpage. In fictionalising the diaries I received, I am also condensing them into more compact stories. Telling the story of this day in lockdown from different perspectives but as a unified, fictionalised story brings the day alive in a material sense in a way that the more usual academic practice in qualitative research of quoting short extracts from a variety of different diaries would not (Inckle 2010).

This paper will briefly review some of the social or sociological research into the pandemic and the conditions it created for everyday lives before discussing the value of diaries as both autobiographical and research documents. Two quite different short stories from the project are then introduced through a discussion of the long relationship between fiction and sociology.

Covid and Everyday Life

There has been a considerable amount of research from around the world into the changes people have experienced in their daily and working lives due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Much of this has been focused on particular aspects of life and social change, such as food (Scott and Ensaff 2022), environmental issues (Collins and Welsh 2022), working from home (Watson et al 2021), the now ubiquitous face mask (Lupton et al 2021) and changes to teaching practices (Vandeyar 2021). This sudden but almost universal disruption to daily lives has provided a unique opportunity to find out what it is about everyday life that we value, what we are happy to change and how far people are prepared to sacrifice for the common good (Skeggs 2020). Any significant variation in, or disruption to, the everyday makes one look anew at the ordinary. Even activities as mundane as having lunch become very different when everyone is at home, the coffee shops are shut, and work has taken over the kitchen table. Therefore, change in daily routines provides a valuable window through which to research everyday life (Bennett, 2015), which is often difficult to do due to its generally unremarkable nature (Silverman 2013: 1-6). Guided by earlier research undertaken under challenging circumstances, such as Mass Observation during the second world war, it is possible to find the remarkable in the mundane through participants' own stories (Silverman, 2013: 3). And, as Silverman shows in his example of a play by Harold Pinter (p. 6), fiction can represent this as well as, or potentially better than, 'facts'. Basing the stories presented here on diaries lends them considerable sociological authenticity (Frank 2000; Leavy 2013; Phillips and Cara 2021).

Diaries as Research of Everyday Life

Diaries can answer the same types of questions as interviews regarding what people do, when they do it, who they interact with, and so on (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977: 483). Using autobiographical accounts has a long pedigree as a sociological method. As Thomas and Znaniecki said, 'personal life-records ... constitute the perfect type of sociological material' (as cited in Stanley 2010: 139). In migrating from Poland to the United States in the early 20th century Thomas and Znaniecki's participants would have had a heightened awareness of the minutiae of everyday life in a way not entirely dissimilar to Lockdown lives. And, as during Lockdown, migrants learn new ways of being and doing everyday life.

During this period of rapid change in daily life, I felt it was particularly important to be guided by what the respondents saw as significant aspects of their lives rather than me providing an agenda by asking specific questions, as might happen in a structured interview, or even an openly worded Mass Observation directive (van Emmerik et al 2022). Practically, using diaries as research data, whether those written specifically for a research project or a pre-existing diary, allows the participant more control over what is said and what is not said than most interview situations, thus partially reversing the usual power relations between researcher and researched (Bennett 2014). Diaries also give a unique insight into the writers' life world, allowing for an unobtrusive ethnographic study of mundane aspects of everyday life (Latham 2003). They provide a relatively immediate account of activities over the course of, in this case, a day. In this way, elements that may be forgotten about in an interview conducted later or a report written later are more likely to be present (Latham 2003). Many of the diaries I received for this project are detailed hour-by-hour accounts of the day. Some included wider thoughts about the pandemic, lockdowns and government responses, adding helpful background information. Several commented on writing the diary (Phillips and Kara 2021). Any document created for a particular piece of research has limitations as the author will, either consciously or not, self-censor to some extent, and it is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that none wrote of any significant struggles through the lockdown. All narratives are written for a reason or with a reader in mind, and this will shape how the story is told (Kehily 1995).

Some commented on issues with space at home, sharing homes, keeping to a routine for young children with furloughed parents, and the ability to fully be themselves (see *The Painted Dress* below). Some seemed to try to comment on what they saw as 'sociological' issues, such as housing or vaccines, although few mentioned the budget speech which took place that day. The diarists were self-selecting, being recruited through social media, which means they are not representative of the UK population as a whole. Ages ranged from 23 to 84 years old. One described themselves as Bangladeshi British, all the others as white, either British, Scottish, Irish or Welsh. Forty-six were female, 12 male and two non-binary. Diarists were not asked to give a social class, but jobs mentioned included furloughed retail workers, teachers, academics, doctors, carers, artists, IT consultants, as well as retired people and one person actively looking for work.

Many of the diarists shared specific circumstances and could be divided into categories: retired, either married or single; young adult children living at home; families home schooling children; working from home; continuing to work outside the home; single people living with others or alone. To write the stories, I grouped those with similar circumstances to create composite characters and experiences and to show a variety of similar but different lives. In order to situate the stories and, in some cases, link together different narratives, wider data about the day has also been used. I included weather forecasts (although this was included in many diaries), information from the day's media, and in particular, news such as the budget announcements made on that day. By bringing together multiple perspectives, I was able to create a 'three-dimensional' view of this day in lockdown (Bennett 2014). The private troubles that are written of in the diaries, such as difficulties of home schooling and working, are merged with the public issues, such as furlough and which children can attend school (White and Hope 2021, 22nd February) to create an evocative narrative (Inckle 2010).

As noted above, many of the diarists were people who would be likely to be confident in their writing abilities, but not all were middle class (see also McKenzie 2021). All the diaries I received were clearly and confidently written, and several diarists have since commented on versions of the stories I have sent them. One or two of my participants took a performative approach to their diary, perhaps trying to entertain the reader (Latham 2003), but the majority were more reportage or ethnographic field note style, including some personal reflections. In writing stories, I am turning them into a performance, of sorts, particularly in the more ‘made up’ and story-like narrative of *The Painted Dress* below (Richardson 1997).

Sociological Fiction

Fiction and other creative methodologies have been used in sociology, particularly feminist sociology, since at least the early 1990s (Inckle 2010). Sociologists have long also been fiction writers (for example, Du Bois 1911/2008; Martineau 1839/2008; Perkins Gilman 1915/2018), and this trend continues into the 21st century (for example, Leavy 2011; Oakley 2022; Watson 2020). In addition, much fiction can be considered sociological (Becker 2007). On 21st century everyday life Jon McGregor’s novel *Reservoir 13* is exemplary, and I have attempted to use some of his techniques of repetition and refrain to indicate the passage of a natural (*durée*) rather than clock (*temps*) time in *Young Families: Syncopating Lives* below. Fictional or not, narratives are a traditional way of presenting social research, indeed essential to its understanding (Richardson 1997). Sociologically the issue is not the (de-)construction of the narrative but how the narrative helps to construct a particular reality (Bruner 1991). As Denzin (1992) explains, all ethnographies are about telling stories, and the ‘truthfulness’ of that story is always open to question to some extent. As social scientists, we need to work with what we have, which is always going to be partial, biased and probably, to some extent, misunderstood. What novelists and social scientists try to do is present an argument for the verisimilitude of their stories (Frank 2000; Inckle 2010). This can be likened to what Laurel Richardson calls ‘the collective story’. That is, a story which ‘tells the experience of a sociologically constructed category of people in the context of larger socio-cultural and historical forces.’ (1997:14). This is what I have attempted here. By pulling together diverse elements from the different diaries, I have tried to create a more holistic understanding of the issues the diarists, and therefore many others in similar circumstances, faced in their day-to-day lives during lockdown (Frank 2000; Phillips and Kara 2021). In telling stories of this shared experience, the ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Bruner 1991:10) is completed by the reader’s understanding that the story confirms, to some extent, their own experience and knowledge of lockdown. My fictionalised ‘3rd March 2021’ imparts a culturally shared understanding (Bruner 1991). By fictionalising the research findings, I can tell the whole story of the day, giving it a rhythm and a sense of time (*durée*), within which readers can name and identify their own situations. I hope that by developing stories, readers will be able to empathise more closely with the diarists and begin to appreciate different experiences of Lockdown.

One of the reasons for writing sociology as fiction is to widen its appeal, to make it a public sociology (Leavy 2011, 2013; Watson and Gullion 2021). Fiction, to paraphrase Watson and Gullion, can bring research to life. Leavy and Watson, amongst others, have done this through writing and publishing novels (for example, Leavy 2011; Watson 2020). Tipper and Gilman (2020) created an information-style booklet of their stories of fertility treatment for distribution at clinics. Richardson (1997) acknowledges that it is challenging to be both a working academic, social scientist and a novelist or poet. Her stories, poetry and performances are primarily for other social scientists. Others, too, such as Frank (2000) and Letherby (Letherby and Davidson 2015), incorporate fiction into otherwise ‘standard’ academic papers, as I am doing here. From the point of view of wider publishing, there may be a question as to whether the quality of the writing is sufficient when fictionalising research. One solution is to employ a professional writer, as Tipper and Gilman (2020) did (see also Bailey and Tyler 2018). However, that was not possible here. I have, however, attended writing workshops and sought feedback from other fiction writers.

I have written several different stories from the wealth of material I received in the diaries. Covid is the historical backdrop to all of these stories, but I hope they say far more than ‘this is what people did during lockdown’. My aim with the research is to show some of the texture of everyday lives, whether or not they are amid a global pandemic, as a disruption to the normal routine can bring to the fore what we consider to be ‘normal’ daily life (Bennett 2015).

The story of the different but similar lives of families with school-age children was chosen here because their lives are perhaps more disrupted than others, with the added responsibility of home schooling and caring for those whose present and future have been seriously disrupted. The four families represented here are composites from the ten diaries received from parents of young children. The story illustrates how days have fallen into new rhythms around work, study and food. As mentioned in numerous media articles, women also undertake most of the childcare and domestic duties (Adams 2020, 22nd July). Underneath the straightforward accounts of the day’s events, there is a sense of longer-term worries. Although by this time, we knew that schools would reopen the following week, the future was very uncertain. Writing these condensed family stories together is intended to open up a multi-vocal space within the data and to expand our understanding of possible ways of being a family during Lockdown (Watson 2021).

The second story is a one-off. Rather than a fictionalised version of a diary, this is a story I created which incorporates elements of one diary. This particular diarist mentioned the impact of lockdown on an important aspect of their life in a way that would be applicable more widely but was not discussed directly by any other diarists. I had not foreseen how a lockdown might restrict someone in this way. As Tipper found with similarly unanticipated findings (Tipper and Gilman 2020), it seemed to give the basis for a compelling and enlightening story showing a different aspect of lockdown from the more routine issues explored in the other stories I’ve written. It takes us away from the disruptions to daily routines and explores instead how lockdown caused disruptions to their identity for some. Following Morgan’s (1998: 658) call for more ‘mystery’ within sociology, this story is less straightforward than the first. Good fiction aims to generate questions rather than provide answers and help us understand what life may be like for others (Leavy 2013), which is what these two stories try to do.

Story 1: Young Families: Syncopating Lives

"When one does not have what one wants, one must want what one has"

Sigmund Freud

Cold-grey-foggy. Maria looks out onto a blanket of clouds obscuring the view on the North Wales coast. She knows the tide has just turned and is on its way in, relentlessly regular regardless of the weather, lockdowns, or other human concerns. She goes downstairs, taking the empty tea mug that Alex had brought up to her before he left for work. As a hospital doctor, his work has intensified, but the routine of being at work hasn’t changed. This means home schooling and other family issues are Maria’s responsibility. She is furloughed from her job in the tourist industry, freeing her up to focus on their children: Hannah, who, at twelve, has just started at secondary school, and Will, ten, still at primary school and in need of more hands-on home schooling. Maria thinks about their return to school in a few days’ time. Hannah will have to catch the school bus, which is an added risk due to the mixed group of children on the bus. Alex will get his second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine today, as he is a “front line” worker, which is a relief. Maria calls for Rolo, their caramel-coloured labradoodle, and takes him for a quick walk down to the end of the lane and back before getting the children up. Despite the greyness of the day, bright yellow daffodils in front gardens anticipate spring. Maria hopes, too, that warmer weather will bring an end to the lockdown.

In the east of the country, in Yorkshire, Sam has been up since before dawn with toddler Ollie. At 7.30, a sleepy six-year-old Emily joins her little brother on the sofa to watch *Duggee* while Sam and their Mum, Becca, prepare breakfast. The children have cereal– some healthy-ish Weetabix

with Cheerios and Rice Crispies mixed in. Sam slices a banana into his yoghurt and has his second coffee of the day. Becca has Weetabix and honey with a cup of decaf tea. Having breakfast together is one of the positives of lockdown. Without the mad dash to work or having to get ready for school, the mornings have become more relaxed and family oriented. After they've eaten, both parents get the children dressed, and then Sam has a quick shower before heading off to work. Sam still works on-site, and on a Wednesday, a lack of formal childcare means Becca has to juggle this with her full-time job, which she is currently doing from home. On other days her mother comes over to home school Emily and Ollie is at nursery. But Wednesdays are difficult – Becca's work are great about it, but she still feels that she is missing out on opportunities open to others and letting them down too. Torn between being a good parent and a good worker, a perennial dilemma even without the added complications of Covid. Becca will shower later. Now she has to tidy up the kitchen ready for school and find time to check work emails too.

In the midlands, Mike is the first up in his household of teenagers. The eldest is still away at university, living out lockdown with friends. Sophie, the middle one, came home at Christmas and hasn't been back – as a first-year student, she has found it much harder being taught online and unable to socialise and make friends. At 14, James is the youngest and needs the most encouragement to get on with his schoolwork. He really misses the sporting activities which he has been unable to do during lockdown. Mike gets himself tea and toast, takes a mug of tea to his wife, Jane, still in bed and climbs the stairs to the loft room, which was hurriedly converted from junk room to home office a year ago and still has a pile of moving boxes in the corner. Looking out of the window, he can look down on trees not yet in leaf. Usually, there is a good view towards the distant hills, but these are obscured by clouds today. By eight, he's checking emails and preparing for his nine o'clock interview as the rest of the household is getting up. Jane drinks her tea whilst thinking about her day. She will be going into the school where she works for the first time since Christmas in preparation for reopening next week. She needs to pick up lateral flow tests for herself and James. Despite some concerns about infection, Jane is looking forward to being back to teaching "3D" children. She has found online teaching magical and painful at the same time, depending on the mood of the students and her mood too. She also has a significant administrative role to play as part of the team organising Covid tests for all the students. She goes to wake James, then showers before getting breakfast and shouting for James to get up again. He appears downstairs at 8.30, complaining that he doesn't have any lessons today until 10. Jane reminds him he still has work to submit from yesterday. Looking out of the window of her "office" (eldest daughter's bedroom), Jane notices the heavy grey clouds and mist – she hopes it clears before she drives to school.

Suzy has been dozing since Tom crept into her bed at about 6 am. Once ten-year-old Livvy joins them, along with the two cats, Suzy decides it's time to get up. She leaves the children in her bed, playing with the cats whilst she prepares poached eggs and toast for breakfast. She fills the cats' bowls, too and then calls Tom and Livvy down. Suzy is a nurse at a GP practice on the outskirts of Leicester, a key worker, and the children are still attending school. Whilst the children are finishing their breakfast, she irons their uniforms so that they are warm to put on – it is such a cold day, and the house isn't very warm. Leaving the children to watch some TV, she goes to shower and dress then they all get into the car to drive to school. Livvy goes in first – times are staggered to avoid the mixing of "bubbles". Whilst they're waiting, Suzy reads to Tom from a joke book which is his current favourite: *What was the biggest moth of all time? The mam-moth!*

9 am. As the tide invades the shore in North Wales, the sanderlings run to avoid the spindrift, rushing to collect the last of their breakfast before the sand disappears again. As for these birds, dependent on the weather and tides, life in lockdown is a series of improvisations, a daily routine that is both so repetitive that it fades into the background and so off-the-cuff that it is a continual reinvention.

In Yorkshire, Becca has the playdoh out to keep Ollie busy and entertained while she helps Emily engage with her symmetry lesson. Emily keeps making suggestions to Ollie about what to make rather than listening to her teacher. Whilst Emily is unmuted to answer the teacher's question (she doesn't know the answer), Becca tries to keep Ollie quiet and silently encourages Emily to speak to the teacher. Becca admires the teacher's patience and skill in engaging the children individually and wishes she knew how to do it. By 11 am, the online sessions are over, and Becca makes coffee for herself and gives the children a drink of water and a snack of mango slices. Emily can, at last, join Ollie with the playdoh and shows him how to shape the yellow into a banana. Drawing a symmetrical butterfly can be done later, Becca decides. She uses the time to log on to work and see if anything urgent has come up. She's relieved to see there is nothing that can't wait until tomorrow.

In Wales, Hannah is able to follow her lessons on her own, except when the internet suddenly cuts out in the middle of an English lesson, one of the hazards of living rurally. The teacher is reading a story, and by the time Hannah rejoins the class, she has missed most of it and is in a panic about being able to do the worksheet. Maria calms her down and says she will read the story to her later so that she can answer the questions set by the teacher. Hannah has a desk in her bedroom, but Will uses the dining table as his schoolroom. This way, Maria can keep an eye on him and help out as necessary. The internet glitch doesn't interrupt Will's lesson as he's completing a maths worksheet at that point. After switching the router off and on again, Maria asks what they'd like for lunch. Hannah wants to make her own, probably instant noodles. At twelve, Hannah craves a bit more independence and yet this first year of high school has largely been spent stuck in the house. Will and Maria have baked potatoes microwaved and then crisped up in the air fryer with baked beans and cheese.

Suzy drives on to work after dropping the children at school. She has a full day of appointments as usual, but this hasn't changed since before the pandemic – this job is always hectic. The children are going to their dad's tonight, so she doesn't have to collect them from school. It makes a difference not having to constantly clock watch to make sure she isn't late.

Mike comes down to the kitchen at 10.30 to make a cup of tea. On the way past her "office", he asks Jane if she'd like a cup and checks when she'll be heading into school. She says she'll go in after lunch. Sophie wanders into the kitchen in her pyjamas. Mike knows that she doesn't have any lectures on Wednesday. She gets a bowl of cereal and sits at the table to eat it, scrolling her phone constantly. Mike makes tea for her too. James comes in, saying he is hungry and looking in the fridge and cupboards. He eats some vegetarian sausages left over from last night. Mike asks what his lessons are today, and James says he has some maths to do. He asks his dad to help (Mike is a computer scientist) as he doesn't understand the teacher's explanation. They both head up to James' room. Mike is glad to be able to help James and feels this is a big benefit of home schooling, and his flexibility allows it as both his afternoon meetings have been cancelled.

Becca has lunch with the children. Ham and cheese sandwiches, carrot sticks and cucumber, and a few crisps as a treat. After tidying the kitchen and getting the children to "help", Becca goes upstairs to make the beds and sort out the morning's mess in the bathroom, which she hasn't had a chance to do yet. She has found through staying at home so much that it really starts to get her down if she doesn't make an effort to tidy up. She lets the children watch *Go Dog Go* giving her another chance to check in with work. Then she gets out some ingredients to bake cookies together.

Jane has some ratatouille left over from last night's dinner with sourdough toast. She shouts upstairs, "I'm off now", and leaves for school in her old but reliable red Fiesta. There are some roadworks on route which mean the journey takes longer than expected. She notices changes where trees have been cut down and the road layout has been changed; a boarded-up pub looks like it won't be reopening. Despite the cold day, there are encouraging signs of spring in crocuses and daffodils sprouting along the grass verges. She is surprised at how busy it seems and how many people are out, wondering if they have all given up on lockdown or if she's just forgotten

what “normal” is. It’s quiet as she parks in the almost empty car park. She grabs a clean face mask from the glove box and heads inside to collect the tests.

Having explained to James how to complete his maths worksheet in a way that he seems to grasp, Mike makes himself a cheese sandwich for lunch. The sausages he was expecting to eat have already been eaten by James, who is now making himself two packets of instant noodles with several pieces of toast thickly covered in Nutella. Mike’s next meeting isn’t until 3 pm, so he walks down to the local shops for bread, milk, and some fresh air. A sliver of blue sky is visible above the damp, grey rooves.

The tide is drawn in tight now on the North Wales coast, hugging the edges of the land. The mist has cleared, and the sky is brighter. In the still-damp fields, lambs are crying for their mothers.

Jane is at school longer than she expected. The organisation for the lateral flow tests for the pupils is complex, so it takes time to go through, but she also spends time chatting with people and catching up after two months of isolation. As it’s after five and she is tired, she picks up fish and chips on the way home. Sophie doesn’t want any chips and picks the batter off the fish, but James hoovers up the extra.

After lunch, Maria helps Will with geography and maths, as well as reading the English story Hannah missed this morning. Once schooling is over for the day, she leaves the children to socialise online. Hannah messages groups of friends while Will plays games with his friends. Maria takes the dog out again, persuading Will to come with her for some fresh air, and then prepares dinner. She usually cooks from scratch these days. One of the few benefits of lockdown is that the children are not at multiple differently timed activities in the evenings, and she is at home and so able to cook proper family meals. She realised last week they haven’t had supermarket pizzas for ages as they have dropped off her internet order “favourites” list. Tonight she is trying out a new recipe for a vegetarian curry with chickpeas. Although they do still eat some meat, as a family, they have decided to eat more plant-based meals in an effort to do something about climate change. Her mother-in-law – who she does a weekly shop for – has baked them some caramel shortbread which they have for dessert. Maria still reads to Will at bedtime – they are reading Anthony Horowitz’s Alex Rider series at the moment. Alex spends the evening knitting himself a jumper in a dark blue, slightly fluffy yarn. A new hobby which helps him to relax. Maria puts the television on but scrolls through her phone at the same time. She sees on her news feed that the furlough has been extended to September, which is great news, as she points out to Alex. Less positively, there is the usual doom and gloom from Mumsnetters about the Government’s ‘road map’ out of lockdown and the dangers of new variants developing with increased infection rates, even without extra hospitalisations. She knows how exhausted Alex is and dreads hospitals becoming full to overflowing again. This makes her realise once more how relieved she is that Alex is fully vaccinated now.

As the children are at their dad’s, Suzy is staying with her partner tonight – they are “bubbled” with her. She enjoys the drive over there, passing familiar landmarks. She notices the pub that is now boarded up and doesn’t look like it will be reopening. A red Fiesta pulls over on the other side of the road outside the chip shop. The trees are still bare of leaves, but there are some daffodils poking through garden railings. Suzy’s partner Maggie has cooked her favourite pasta for them, and there is wine too. After eating, they snuggle on the sofa in their pyjamas, watching ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’. It’s become a habit during lockdown to watch box sets together, but this is Suzy’s favourite so far.

Becca manages to sit down with a cup of tea at about 4 pm. Sam’s messaged her to say he’ll be able to be home early at 4.30. Emily has her Zoom dance class at five, so it will really help that Sam can play with Ollie while she watches Emily dance. Becca cooks curly pasta for the children, which they have with pesto and some fresh cherry tomatoes, followed by their homemade

cookies. Then she helps Emily change into her dance clothes, and Ollie goes into the playroom/office with Sam for some “boys’ time”, taking a couple more cookies with them. Becca checks her work emails one last time whilst Emily is dancing, relieved that it has been a very quiet work day today, and Emily will be back at school by next Wednesday. Sam takes Ollie up for a bath, and Emily joins them after her class. Sam reads them *Where The Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak and then gets them settled in bed while Becca fits in a 20-minute yoga DVD. She tries to go for a run three or four times a week and does yoga on the other days. With the children in bed, they cook their meal of salmon with roast vegetables and chat about the day. After clearing up, they put the television on for a bit and watch *Taskmaster*. Sam gets a phone call, which he takes in the kitchen. It’s his grandparents, who he hasn’t seen in over a year. They discuss summer holidays and meeting up but daren’t go as far as arranging dates. At about 10 pm, they head off to bed, exhausted at the end of yet another of these days in lockdown. Becca puts on a story from the Calm app to help her to get off to sleep, needing some distraction from intruding thoughts and worries about daily life.

As Maria is drifting off to sleep in North Wales, she hears the cry of a seagull and realises that the tide has come all the way in, receded and turned again since she got out of bed this morning. Nature’s relentless repetition mirrored in her daily life.

Story 2: The Painted Dress

Steve was sitting at the dining room table, wondering whether to tip out the contents of the box in front of him. He hadn’t attempted a jigsaw in what, nearly sixty years. He had opened the door this morning to be presented with a brown paper package which, although not tied up with string on this occasion, was nevertheless one of his favourite things during these rather dull times. The calendar on the kitchen wall, which Steve can see through the open door in front of him, depicts a host of daffodils under a blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds. The legend beneath says, “March 2021”. He’d torn off the last sheet, a snowy picture of bare-branched trees, just a couple of days ago.

When Steve had carefully removed the brown paper and folded it for future reuse, he’d found a box with a picture of Gustav Klimt’s *The Virgin* on the lid. Inside were a thousand small pieces of cardboard. He and his wife, Paula, were bored with endless games of Scrabble and gin rummy, so he’d ordered this jigsaw as a new challenge for them. He’d chosen the thousand-piece option as it seemed better value for money, but now it was piled up in front of him, it looked extremely daunting. Would the finished puzzle even fit on the dining room table? And where would they eat whilst it was under construction, which, he realised, could be quite some time? He turned the box over with the lid still on and checked the dimensions. It would fit at one end of the table, and there would still be room for the two of them to sit and eat at the other end. There was no chance of having any dinner guests in the next few weeks anyway; more’s the pity. Taking time to cook gourmet meals, choosing the right wines, laying out the best china and, especially, dressing for the occasion was their favourite way to spend a Saturday evening with close friends. Taking a deep breath, Steve decided to go for the tipping-out method and flipped the box over. A small mound of colourful cardboard pieces sat in the centre of the table. Steve propped the box lid up to be able to see the picture.

An hour later, Paula got home with their dog Pippin. “Hello,” she called from the door, and Pippin ran in to say hello too. Walking into the kitchen with a bag of shopping, Paula popped her head around the door.

“It’s arrived then.”

“Yes, came while you were out.”

“I thought you might have got lunch ready.”

“Oh well, I just thought I’d have a quick go at this first.” Steve looked up from the table at the clock on the mantelpiece. “I had no idea that was the time! I thought I’d just spend ten minutes trying to sort out the edge pieces.”

After clearing away the lunch things, Steve went back to the puzzle. By dinner time, he had managed a short strip of edging but was beginning to realise just how out of practice he was with these things. Perhaps he should have stuck to word games. As they ate their pasta with the delicious tomato sauce Paula had spent most of the afternoon preparing – she really was a very good cook making giving up meat easy – they looked at the picture on the box lid. The spread-eagled woman in the colourful dress at the centre of the painting dominated. In fact, the shape of the puzzle meant that some of the other women were missing. Paula found the complete picture on her phone to show to Steve. As she was searching for artwork, she came across last year’s lockdown trend – recreating famous works of art with household objects.

“Of course!” Steve exclaimed. “Jerry can do that! She can be the Virgin.”

“Hardly a virgin,” Paula remarked drily.

Jerry loved to dress up to the nines and hit the town. Pre-lockdown, she’d been a regular at cocktail bars accompanied by one or other of their daughters. Lockdown had put paid to all of that for now, frustrating Jerry’s exhibitionist side. A whole wardrobe full of slinky dresses and size nine high heels had sat unopened for months now.

“She’s got that long blue dress, we can paint on the pattern. Do we have the gold pen left over from Christmas?”

Steve spent most of the evening in the shed going through old pots of paint to see what would be usable. He then made a list of the colours he would need to buy and looked at the DIY shop website to check their stock and opening times. This was going to be more fun than the jigsaw. Jerry was looking forward to a chance to put on some make-up and a fabulous dress again.

By the end of the following day, the dress was ready. They laid out some sheets and scarves on the floor to represent the background and the other figures. Fortunately, there was a good selection of colourful scarves in Jerry’s wardrobe that she usually used to cover her ageing décolletage. Paula had spent the afternoon making flowers from tissue paper which she carefully placed around the sheet figures. Jerry stepped into the newly painted dress. Her face was pale with foundation, and blusher generously applied to cheekbones, eyebrows a careful arch, a touch of blue mascara, and carefully applied Yves Saint Laurent ‘Red Enigma’ lipstick, her favourite, perhaps because she loved the name. Just for fun, although they wouldn’t show in the picture, she slipped into some blue satin heels too.

“Lie down carefully,” fussed Paula, “So the flowers don’t get blown around.”

Slowly Jerry placed herself in the space between the sheet figures and the paper flowers. She positioned her arms above her head, just as in Klimt’s painting. Paula adjusted the dress so that the hand-painted pattern was shown in all its glory. She already had the stepladder out and positioned herself atop it to take the photo looking down on Jerry. After she’d taken a few shots to choose from, she climbed down and gave Jerry a hand to get up. They had a gin and tonic to celebrate their creativity!

Later on, Steve posted to the WhatsApp family chat group: “Jerry making the most of lockdown”, with pictures of both Klimt’s original and Paula’s photo of Jerry. Some smiley faces came whizzing back through the ether, Steve’s phone pinging away as he chatted to his old rugby friends on Zoom.

Conclusion

Richardson (1997: 29) lists five ways in which narrative enables us to make sense of the temporal nature of life: through the everyday, the autobiographical, the biographical, the cultural and the collective story, all of which are present in the stories here. They are fundamentally about everyday life at a particular moment in history, told by the participants themselves. Although the first story explicitly tells us what these families were doing on 3rd March 2021, it also implicitly tells us what 'the nation' was doing on that day (Anderson 2006) and during the rest of the period of lockdown and, by implication or omission, how people spent their daily lives in pre-Covid times. The second story focuses on an individual identity. This story differs more substantially from the diary which inspired it, although it adheres to the original diary's 'spirit' (and many of the facts). In learning to empathise with Steve's character through writing them, I also tried to create an 'informed provocation' (Fraser 2012: 95) of Steve's experience in order to 'disrupt dominant ideologies or stereotypes' Leavy (2013: 50).

As Phillips and Kara (2021) highlight, writing creatively is a standard part of writing up research. The writing is, in large part, the analysis: writing is a repetitive process, just as is analysis: finding themes, testing them out, refining, and rewriting (Hanley 2019). Writing, in the sense used here, is not presenting results but creating them (Hanley 2019; Richardson 1997). As a reflexive process, writing up research, either in a traditional format or through storytelling or fictionalisation, fully implicates me, the researcher (Hanley 2019; Leavy 2013; Richardson 1997). Richardson (1997: 149) refers to this as 'empathetic understanding'. Despite the distance most academic writing requires us to maintain, the personal is always implicated, although here, by acknowledging the storying of the 'research findings', my subjectivity can also be acknowledged (Letherby and Davidson 2015). These auto/biographical stories, as with any research findings, aim to be 'good to think with' Morgan (1998: 657) and to encourage thinking critically about how we live our everyday lives, both in these very particular circumstances and in 'normal' times.

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ORCID iD

Julia Bennett <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3216-4424>

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Author Biography



Julia Bennett is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Chester, UK. Julia's research centres on belonging, place and community, and everyday life.