

Personality: know thyself?

As you will have noticed by now, this seminar follows a weekly pattern that, ideally, goes something like this:

- **Short (ideally) talk** on a specific diary or diarist, followed by discussion and further research (you need to download and read the PDF on the website for this talk to be effective).
- **Research and discussion:** you work in the class, using your laptop or iPad or just reading and annotating your diary and diary material, checking in with me as and when you need to.

All the research – basic facts, historical background, basic fact collection, archival research, background study that you have done on your diarist and the people around him or her are driven by your curiosity, simply because, on an ordinary, very human level, the part of your diary you will probably be most curious about is your diarist.

What kind of person wrote this diary? What kind of person put down these facts? Had these feelings? Had these relationships?

We all want to get away from the sort of description that in the end tells you nothing – ‘shy young man’, ‘busy housewife’, ‘ambitious businessman’ – and yet sometimes these are all you have to go on when you start looking into the personality of your diarist.

Over a three-year period (2005-2008), the Berlin Diary Study project, collected diaries from volunteers who wrote about their state of mind in diaries that they then submitted to the study centre. The diaries are online at:

<http://www.psychology.hu-berlin.de/profship/perdev/download/diarystudy>

Here’s what the Berlin Diary Study people hope to understand when their diarists hand back their diaries:

1. Personality
2. Self-esteem and self-concept (I think this means the diarists’ ‘sense of self’)
3. Daily positive and negative affects
4. Daily contacts and conflicts with family members, friends and partners
5. Personal goals and effort to achieve them
6. Definition and evaluation of important life domains
7. Additional variables: for example, amount of sleep, leisure time, sports activities

From the diaries it collects, the Berlin Study aims to develop understandings of psychological make-up and motivation.

This list – points 1-7 above – could work as a model for you in exploring or trying to explore your diarist's personality. You are trying to get to grips with personality, the deepest, trickiest, most slippery aspect of humanity there is. And because personality, or true human nature (and I'm not even sure that there is such a thing) is so hard to define and discover, to research it and describe it from the evidence in your diary, you need to go forward in a systematic way, as they tried to do in Berlin, because you are dealing with:

- Somebody you don't know and will never really know, whether they are dead or alive (even if you find them on a social network).
- Somebody who wrote a diary at a certain age or stage in their life, who – if they could be reborn or (highly unlikely) or were willing to discuss their very private life with you, a complete stranger, still wouldn't be able explain the feelings they expressed in the diary they have, the things they did, or why their life turned out the way it did, because people are 'strangers unto themselves'.

Academic specialists on 'the Japanese' (Japanologists) will tell you that, very generally, Japanese people have two basic levels of self-presentation, social relations, sense of self and so on, and that these can be expressed as *tatema* 建前 (or 立前, / 建て前 / 立て前) /*honne* 本音 and that one wider social expression of these distinctions is made by the terms *uchi* 内/*soto* 外.

Of course these distinctions are inadequate, but they are no more inadequate than their Western equivalents *private/public* or *insider/outsider*.

Part of this inadequacy has to do with the fact that because we communicate by email instant messaging, social networks, tweets etc., and because all our 'private' communications are so open to social, legal or official scrutiny, there is no privacy in any case except for what we tell ourselves – in thought – and tell each other, in unrecorded speech.

Thus the notion of privacy is something that is different and may have been stronger and clearer in the pre-Facebook / Skype / Google era. The diaries we are examining all belong to this earlier time. The most recent is from 1997. The sense people once had of privacy was probably more conventional and more agreed in the diaries that we are using in this seminar than it has become.

Thus while we can all agree that private life is the life that we want to keep to

ourselves and the people we are closest to, and sometimes record in diaries, even today, this part of the work of this course is the most difficult.

Personality – researching it, even defining it – is the slippery, almost undefinable core of this seminar because people, whenever they lived, *simply do not know themselves*. They know themselves better than other people know them, or think they do (parents usually think they know their children) but everybody has elements of their personality they don't want to look at, that they don't even know exist or that it has never occurred to them might be worth thinking more about or trying to explain to others.

Insight is a quality we all subscribe to: the ability to see yourself and know yourself is A Good Thing. But we don't all agree that demonstrating insight is something we want to do. Who wants to join an 'encounter group' or 'group therapy' and tell other people their deepest fears, fantasies, experiences?

The upside is this: even if we don't know ourselves, what we write in our diaries can tell other people more about us than we realise. Not just about our secrets, but about our personality, our character, which is closely related, obviously, to our secret, but less discrete, and less easy to put into words. Think about it: it's easy to tell someone something secret, but much more difficult to explain and describe the person who kept this secret. And the most secret parts of some diaries are written in a code, an aspect of diaries that we'll explore in Week 12.

Finally, here is an excerpt from the UK's **Great Diary Project** (reproduced on this site under Writing Resources, below), about privacy and historical value:

Privacy

Most people regard their diary as very private. Often they write about people and events in the certainty that no-one else will ever read their words. With the passage of time, however, this factor diminishes, and the moment comes when no-one any longer could be affected by the contents of someone else's diary. It is then that a manuscript diary passes from being just a personal record and becomes a testimony of far wider significance. Once a diary is no longer 'contemporary' its message can have value and interest for many other readers who come after. From this perspective a private diary becomes an important historical source.