

INTRODUCTION

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This guide explores the generation of timelines and relational maps by research participants, as mechanisms for capturing time in Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) field research. As well as situating these approaches within the relevant methodological literature, we examine the rationale for the use of these graphic elicitation methods within QL research. We go on to document the application of 'participant diagramming' and 'future narratives' within the Timescapes Young Lives and Times (YLT) project, giving examples of the kinds of data produced by the young people in the study. Our aim in this guide is to illustrate the value of using these techniques to draw out and complement data generated through in depth interviews. The techniques explored here have particular value as tools to 'think with', enabling the joint construction of temporal insights by researchers and participants in QL research.

BACKGROUND

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Methods of graphic elicitation within social research are frequently used to supplement or 'embellish' interview data (Mason, 2006). The relationship between verbal and visual methods can be seen to be an important one for social researchers, in that their intersection can aid the production of rich and detailed data (Varga-Atkins and O'Brian, 2009). Not only can these methods add depth, but they can be a means of accession, offering the researcher a 'way in' to more complex dimensions of experience that participants may find difficult to conceptualise or verbalise.

KEY POINTS

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- Participant generated data, using diagrammatic or narrative elicitation, offers ethnographic insight in QL research, and a means of condensing and complementing interview data.
 - Relational maps, Timelines and Future accounts are useful 'return to' pieces to use within interview work, enabling a nuanced understanding of past and future in the ever shifting present.
 - Past Timelines are a good tool for 'consolidating' researcher understanding of past events within participants lives, whereas Future Timelines offer useful insights into life trajectories, plans and goals, and, used at each follow up, the over writing of biographies as lives unfold.
 - Relational maps used over time allow researchers to gain greater insight into the connections participants see as significant within their lives, and for assessing changing relationships over time and in relation to significant life events.
 - Capturing imagined futures in QL research is a useful means of measuring people's aspirations against real time trajectories, and discerning the factors that enable or constrain individuals in reaching their aspirations.

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Capturing Past and
Future Time in Qualitative
Longitudinal Field Enquiry:
Timelines and Relational
Maps

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Timelines and Relational maps fall into the category of 'graphic communication,' which "...involves representations with increased clarity that assist in the process of visually talking to others" (Crilly *et al*, 2006: 4). Focusing on the visual level allows people to go beyond a verbal mode of communicating, and this may help to conceptualise and make tangible otherwise abstract dimensions of experience (Bagnoli, 2009).

While some visual methodologies, such as photography, and the use of pictorial representations are now well established within social research, the use of diagrams in interviews is less well accepted - although their potential role and value is quite clear (Crilly *et al*, 2006). Timelines and Relational maps are diagrammatic, and need to be clearly distinguished from other forms of graphic elicitation, such as drawings. Diagrammatic visual methods have a number of key features: they can aid the simplification of complex ideas; they have both visual and verbal dimensions; and are quite direct in terms of their structuring and conventions (Varga-Atkins and O'Brian, 2009). It is also useful to differentiate between researcher produced and participant produced diagrams; the Timelines and Relational maps discussed here fall into the latter category.

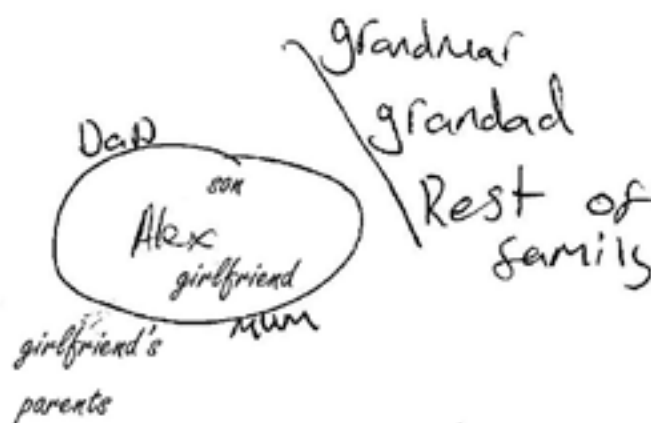
It is perhaps also useful to situate these methods in terms of their longer term uses and preservation, specifically in the context of use for secondary analysis. Visual representations are a comprehensive tool for finding a 'way in' when conducting secondary analysis. Diagrams, by virtue of their format, offer accessible modes of data, allowing secondary analysts the opportunity to gain initial insight into the lives and relationships of participants, before accessing interview transcripts or when viewed in conjunction with transcripts. Participant diagramming also offers condensed forms of interview data, which are particularly useful given the huge volumes of interview data generated through QL fieldwork. These condensed forms of data are useful for contextualising datasets, for sampling in the archive, and in identifying themes for interrogation. These data are, therefore, key components of a dataset, to be archived alongside more 'traditional' verbal data to aid analysis.

An important facet of temporal experience is the complex relationship between past, present and future. Time theorists (Adam and Grove, 2008) remind us that we only live in the present, and that both past and future are imaginary realms. However, we cannot live in the present without a sense of where we have come from and where we might be travelling to. As we live in the ever shifting present, we continually re-interpret the past, overwrite our biographies, and reframe our orientations to the future. The past, seen as oral and social history, hindsight, heritage, and memory is a well established field of enquiry. Freeman (2010), for example, shows how hindsight produces self understanding and plays an integral role in the shaping of moral life. The future, in contrast, is a relatively neglected

topic. Yet it emerges as vitally important. Imagined futures may well influence the direction of the paths that people follow, and an analysis of future orientations and aspirations opens up new possibilities for understanding the seeds of change (Neale, 2011). Work within the Timescapes initiative has extended the field in relation to 'futures' (Winterton, Crow and Morgan Brett, 2011).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

Timelines, relational maps and future accounts have been used to good effect in the Young Lives and Times project within Timescapes. YLT has tracked an age cohort of young people from the age of 13, to explore the dynamic intersection of family, school and friendship networks through their teenage years. In 2010 the project recruited a sub sample of young fathers into the study, to explore the impact on their lives of the transition of early parenthood. The young men were then tracked intensively over an 18 month period (see Guide no. 20). Our methods of fieldwork across the sample included repeat in-depth conversational interviews, focus groups, vignettes, and a palette of ethnographic methods, including the three techniques described here. We explore here our use of timelines and relational maps with the young fathers in the study. Within the research, the logic of timelines, relational maps and future accounts is that of a 'Rhetorical logic' (Mason, 2006): the core method used to generate data is in-depth interviews and the diagrammatic techniques are used to draw out and facilitate conversation around the themes and information provided in the diagrams or accounts. For example, enabling the young fathers in the study to focus on a visual representation of their lives and to go beyond verbal ways of communicating was very helpful – both practically in terms of providing variation in the interview, and conceptually as a focused way for them to think about their lives through time. The visual approach was particularly useful for one young father with a speech impediment and demonstrates the importance of not over relying upon verbal means in research.



Relational Maps

The young fathers in the study were also asked to draw relational maps - a series of concentric circles, with the young person at the centre, upon which they recorded those closest and least close to them. The exercise was repeated at follow up interviews. This technique is a well established one in childhood and family research. It may be administered in a variety of ways – ranging from highly structured pre-drawn maps, sometimes divided into segments for family, friends and others, to highly unstructured exercises, giving participants scope to devise the map as they choose.

Embedding such a technique within an interview is a useful means to draw out details of the quality and significance of relationships. Simply asking why participants have located a particular person in a specific position on the map, or why certain individuals (e.g. a parent or sibling) are missing, can yield sensitive information that may not otherwise be verbalised. Repeating this exercise at follow up enables the gathering of data on the changing dynamics of relationships over time, with the first map providing a base line for comparison.

Part of the value of this tool is that participants are given the 'scaffolding' (Prosser and Loxley, 2008) for this task, and the time and freedom to produce the map independently of the researcher; they have ownership of the production and can express strongly held feelings and create a meaningful way of representing their relationships in ways that are non-threatening (Gabb, 2008). Diagrams such as relational maps are useful means of capturing changing relationships and changing family structures where a particular transition has occurred, such as the entry to parenthood. This was the case for the young fathers in our study where a significant shift had occurred in their relationships across maternal and paternal families with the arrival of a new child. In our study the maps revealed improvements and deteriorations in relationships with the child's mother and both sets of grandparents over time. The inclusion of 'adversaries' on the maps offers insight into the complexities of relationships, demonstrating that relationships may be significant, even if they are negative or ambivalent, and revealing ideas about obligation (the inclusion of maternal grandparents is often a case in point within the young fathers sample). In sum, a diagrammatic tool, such as the relational map, offers a condensed way of constructing 'core' family networks and support, and discerning the shifting significance of relationships

Timelines

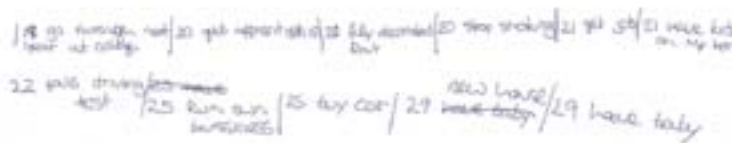
For the young fathers in the study, timelines (also known as life grids, Gabb, 2008) were introduced in their first interview. They were asked to draw a horizontal line across a page and to mark on the line details of significant events and milestones in their lives, from birth onwards, in chronological order. They constructed two lines – for

past events leading from birth to the present, and a future line, for anticipated or imagined events or aspirations. For the future line, which starts with the present day and runs through the life span, participants were asked to ascribe a possible age to any aspiration.

The past time lines were useful in producing a condensed life history and revealing the shape of a life and significant events relating to the topics of the research. They were also useful in enabling the young men to document difficult and sensitive topics – the death of relatives or friends, losing their virginity, family conflicts - without having to verbalise them. These documents then provided a 'way in' to discuss some of these sensitive topics in interviews, using follow up questions such as "why was this event significant to you?" The past timelines help to order events for young people and build up a biographical picture to situate their lives as they are currently understood. Timelines also reveal 'turning points' and 'critical moments' within participants' lives, which aids understanding of the shape of a particular life journey.

The future time lines reveal varied dimensions of the future in relation to different time horizons. Some are tangible or realistic aspirations of life, e.g. finishing a college course that they have already embarked upon, while others may be more idealised and distant, such as having another child or owning a house. Future timelines reveal data that is not 'fixed' – they can be returned to in subsequent interviews to discern whether aspirations have changed, or new trajectories are now envisaged, with the opportunity to tease out in interview why things may have changed. By returning to the future timeline, we are able to assess how participants lives are changing over time, exploring how their aspirations have grown or diminished; it also gives the participants an opportunity to reassess the direction of their lives in relation to their current life situation.

The timelines were used to draw out the accounts of the young people about their past and future. They were invited to talk about the events and milestones noted on the time line and to say why they were significant. For the future line, they were able to reflect on why they held particular aspirations, how realistic they felt they were, and how they envisaged realising these aspirations. At follow up interview, the timelines were revisited. Participants could revise their scripts – both past and future - and reflect in interview on why things may have changed since the previous construction.



The image shows two handwritten timelines. The top one is dated '18/03' and lists events like 'start of college', '22/03', '25/03', '27/03', '29/03', '31/03', '01/04', '02/04', '03/04', '04/04', '05/04', '06/04', '07/04', '08/04', '09/04', '10/04', '11/04', '12/04', '13/04', '14/04', '15/04', '16/04', '17/04', '18/04', '19/04', '20/04', '21/04', '22/04', '23/04', '24/04', '25/04', '26/04', '27/04', '28/04', '29/04', '30/04', '01/05', '02/05', '03/05', '04/05', '05/05', '06/05', '07/05', '08/05', '09/05', '10/05', '11/05', '12/05', '13/05', '14/05', '15/05', '16/05', '17/05', '18/05', '19/05', '20/05', '21/05', '22/05', '23/05', '24/05', '25/05', '26/05', '27/05', '28/05', '29/05', '30/05', '31/05', '01/06', '02/06', '03/06', '04/06', '05/06', '06/06', '07/06', '08/06', '09/06', '10/06', '11/06', '12/06', '13/06', '14/06', '15/06', '16/06', '17/06', '18/06', '19/06', '20/06', '21/06', '22/06', '23/06', '24/06', '25/06', '26/06', '27/06', '28/06', '29/06', '30/06', '01/07', '02/07', '03/07', '04/07', '05/07', '06/07', '07/07', '08/07', '09/07', '10/07', '11/07', '12/07', '13/07', '14/07', '15/07', '16/07', '17/07', '18/07', '19/07', '20/07', '21/07', '22/07', '23/07', '24/07', '25/07', '26/07', '27/07', '28/07', '29/07', '30/07', '31/07', '01/08', '02/08', '03/08', '04/08', '05/08', '06/08', '07/08', '08/08', '09/08', '10/08', '11/08', '12/08', '13/08', '14/08', '15/08', '16/08', '17/08', '18/08', '19/08', '20/08', '21/08', '22/08', '23/08', '24/08', '25/08', '26/08', '27/08', '28/08', '29/08', '30/08', '31/08', '01/09', '02/09', '03/09', '04/09', '05/09', '06/09', '07/09', '08/09', '09/09', '10/09', '11/09', '12/09', '13/09', '14/09', '15/09', '16/09', '17/09', '18/09', '19/09', '20/09', '21/09', '22/09', '23/09', '24/09', '25/09', '26/09', '27/09', '28/09', '29/09', '30/09', '01/10', '02/10', '03/10', '04/10', '05/10', '06/10', '07/10', '08/10', '09/10', '10/10', '11/10', '12/10', '13/10', '14/10', '15/10', '16/10', '17/10', '18/10', '19/10', '20/10', '21/10', '22/10', '23/10', '24/10', '25/10', '26/10', '27/10', '28/10', '29/10', '30/10', '31/10', '01/11', '02/11', '03/11', '04/11', '05/11', '06/11', '07/11', '08/11', '09/11', '10/11', '11/11', '12/11', '13/11', '14/11', '15/11', '16/11', '17/11', '18/11', '19/11', '20/11', '21/11', '22/11', '23/11', '24/11', '25/11', '26/11', '27/11', '28/11', '29/11', '30/11', '01/12', '02/12', '03/12', '04/12', '05/12', '06/12', '07/12', '08/12', '09/12', '10/12', '11/12', '12/12', '13/12', '14/12', '15/12', '16/12', '17/12', '18/12', '19/12', '20/12', '21/12', '22/12', '23/12', '24/12', '25/12', '26/12', '27/12', '28/12', '29/12', '30/12', '31/12'. The bottom one is dated '22/06' and lists events like 'start of college', '25/06', '27/06', '29/06', '01/07', '03/07', '05/07', '07/07', '09/07', '11/07', '13/07', '15/07', '17/07', '19/07', '21/07', '23/07', '25/07', '27/07', '29/07', '01/08', '03/08', '05/08', '07/08', '09/08', '11/08', '13/08', '15/08', '17/08', '19/08', '21/08', '23/08', '25/08', '27/08', '29/08', '01/09', '03/09', '05/09', '07/09', '09/09', '11/09', '13/09', '15/09', '17/09', '19/09', '21/09', '23/09', '25/09', '27/09', '29/09', '01/10', '03/10', '05/10', '07/10', '09/10', '11/10', '13/10', '15/10', '17/10', '19/10', '21/10', '23/10', '25/10', '27/10', '29/10', '01/11', '03/11', '05/11', '07/11', '09/11', '11/11', '13/11', '15/11', '17/11', '19/11', '21/11', '23/11', '25/11', '27/11', '29/11', '01/12', '03/12', '05/12', '07/12', '09/12', '11/12', '13/12', '15/12', '17/12', '19/12', '21/12', '23/12', '25/12', '27/12', '29/12', '01/01', '03/01', '05/01', '07/01', '09/01', '11/01', '13/01', '15/01', '17/01', '19/01', 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based approach to the investigation of people's perceptions of their future. Future accounts have been used successfully in the Young Lives and Times sample when the young people were of school age and used to undertaking writing tasks (Winterton et al 2011). However, for the Following Fathers sample we used Timelines in preference to written accounts, since they are inherently accessible and make negotiation of literacy issues more straightforward (see also Guide no. 4, where the use of written accounts of the future with adult fathers was less effective). This suggests the need to tailor these methods to particular groups of participants.

Analytical Value

Aside from elicitation purposes, the techniques outlined above are also useful in the analysis and theorising of the data generated. The analysis of visual data is a neglected area within the methodological literature (Crilly et al, 2009). Broader themes can be articulated from the timelines, allowing an overview of the lives of the sample to be ascertained. For example, the young fathers' timelines show 'compressed childhoods' in that they many experience 'adult' life events at an early age, for example smoking, sexual activity, and ultimately parenthood. The future timelines equally give a generalised insight into the life courses and life chances of the sample, showing the participants perceiving a future that is very much traditional in its format, i.e. getting a 'good' job, owning a house and having a family, demonstrating that despite compressed childhoods, these young men aspire to conventional life paths.

CONCLUSION

Diagrammatic methods such as timelines and relational maps, are important 'tools' for the QL researcher in that they have a useful role to play in supporting in-depth interviewing, adding variety and stimulus to interview situations. Visual representations are easily returned to, thus offering a mode of recall for participants and a clear delineation of the ideas and points they raised at an earlier juncture in time. Timelines and relational maps are specifically useful in terms of the temporal, since they can be added to and amended easily over time and are easily comparable, thus allowing access to changes over time, but also allowing for accession to notions of the future. The data yielded by these methods can be analysed separately or in conjunction with interview data, so are flexible in terms of their contributions to analysis, and they offer fruitful 'ways in' for secondary analysts, further amplifying their analytical usefulness. These techniques place the participant as central in the construction of their biographies, imagined futures and relationships – the resultant representations are useful tools to 'think with' enabling the joint construction of meaning and knowledge between researcher and participant in the interview – a participatory approach which strongly aligns with and supports the logic of QL research.

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