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Chapter 18: Working Creatively with Biographies and Life Histories

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Summary

Biographical and life history methods offer exciting opportunities for human geographers to generate data on how lives are situated and unfold in and across place and space. This chapter introduces you to biographical and life history concepts and methodologies and invites you to:

- 1- Critically engage with the academic literature on graphic elicitation, life mapping, life chartings and memory-work.
- 2- Explore how to generate biographical and life history data, using creative methods.
- 3- Critically reflect on a first-hand account of how biographical and life history methods have been used in research.
- 4- Attempt working with biographical and life history methods yourself by designing and piloting a basic project.

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1: Introduction

In this chapter we introduce you to creative methods to be used in conjunction with biographical or life history interviews. While biographical interviews have a long history in the social sciences and humanities, creative methods are a more recent development. This chapter demonstrates how creative representations of life histories

can be useful in human geography research and can bring about new aspects of individuals' stories as these unfold and are embedded in place and space. Creative approaches are productive in crafting innovative understandings of lived relationships to place, space and social change.

Creative methods are used in biographical and life history interviews to construct representations, such as charts, maps and timelines, of peoples' lives. They might also involve graphic elicitation, for example, presenting participants with visualisations of life trajectories and seeking their views on how they believe their lives are unfolding. Creating representations and eliciting feedback on pre-existing representations can enable researchers such as yourself to explore in greater depth moments, as well as places and spaces, that research participants understand to have been important in their lives.

The creative approaches covered in the chapter offer advantages for your research that traditional methodologies (e.g. semi-structured interviews) do not provide. Asking participants to draw a visual representation of their life history gives them a more active role in the research and decreases the power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee (Bagnoli, 2009). Memory work allows for in-depth engagement with past events and experiences in order to better understand taken-for-granted features of everyday life (Haug, 1987). Similarly, the creation of a memory book (i.e., a form of scrap book to curate and display memories) can provide an embodied and visually

engaging way to construct data with research participants (Thomson and Holland, 2005).

The chapter starts with an introduction to the conceptual grounding of the creative methods we present. After this, we explore specific uses of life mapping methods in biographically oriented research. We focus on diagrams and life charts but touch on another creative method that can be insightful for this type of research: memory work. Next, the chapter considers some of the ethical issues raised by creative biographical methods. We then conclude with an activity and recommendations for students interested in experimenting with the methods discussed.

2: Conceptual foundations of creative approaches to biographical and life history research

The conceptual foundation for many studies using life mapping exercises is found in life course research and transitions research where scholars are interested in how individuals' life trajectories develop over time, and how and when certain 'life course events' (Elder, 1974) appear and are navigated. Numerous concepts are used to characterise how some events come to have particular significance in individuals' lives. Sampson and Laub (2005:16) used the notion of 'turning points' to define 'an alteration or deflection in a long-term pathway or trajectory that was initiated at an earlier point in time'. This concept, then, is particularly focused on *changes* in a trajectory, such as sudden illness or divorce. Giddens (1991) proposed the term 'fateful moments' which has a slightly different emphasis. Hence, for Giddens (1991:113)

fateful moments are 'times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence; or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences'. Giddens (1991) foregrounds the active decision-making of the individual in such moments. Finally, Thomson et al. (2002:339) suggests the term 'critical moments' to refer to 'an event described in an interview that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities'. This approach views critical moments as grounded in the broader narrative elicited in the interview. These concepts have in common an attempt at bridging the individual and social level, or how individual trajectories are shaped by their social and cultural environments. The biographical moments that these concepts point to are often moments that involve movement across spaces and places, such as relocating for education or employment. In some people's lives, these moments are marked by immobility, that is, a lack of movement. From a human geography perspective, researching people's (im)mobilities enables a dynamic understanding of place and belonging across individuals' lives.

Memory is crucial to biographical and life history research. Researchers often ask participants to remember events, situations and experiences that may have taken place several years ago. Memories of the past are reconstructed and narrated from the point of view of the present (Mead, 1932). The past can feel like a closed book. Making the past feel 'alive' to participants, and enabling them to engage with it in a meaningful way, requires effort on the part of researchers. The techniques discussed in this chapter invite participants to think in open, lively and grounded ways about past

experiences. Creative methods can be particularly valuable in enabling the process of remembering as they ‘make the familiar strange’, i.e., they enable participants to reflect on otherwise taken for granted aspects of their lives (Mannay, 2016).

3: Working with creative biographical and life history methods in research

This section explores specific ways of working with life mapping and creative methods in biographically oriented research. In parallel with visual research methods more generally (see Pyyry et al., this volume), we distinguish between creative methods that draw on participant-generated representations or ‘life charts’ on the one hand (similar to what is known as photo-voice, where research participants are asked to take and bring photos to the interview, to ‘give voice’ to participants and capture their viewpoint (Eberle, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997) and pre-existing representations on the other (similar to photo-elicitation). We introduce each of these in turn before the third subsection introduces methods for working biographically with memory.

3.1: Pre-existing representations

Asking participants to respond to representations selected by the researcher in advance of the interview (e.g., diagrams depicting different life trajectories) is a method that has been used to capture participants’ views on how they feel their lives are unfolding. As Törrönen (2002: 354) argues, representations that convey the subject of the research in miniature are a kind of ‘microcosm’ stimuli that provide opportunities for participants to compare their own ideas and experiences with the version of reality portrayed in the representation. Crilly et al (2016: 342) point out that diagrams can

vary widely in terms of their level of abstraction, meaning they offer an overview of the topic that is not available in other kinds of representations.. Diagrams do not represent the world as our senses enable us to perceive it, but are schematic: they are 'visualisations of conceptual knowledge' that present us with a model of reality 'as we understand it' (Kazmierczak, 2001: 177; cited in Crilly et al, 2016: 344).

Presenting participants with visualisations of life trajectories can encourage them to reflect on their understanding of important changes in their lives. The exercise may enable research participants to make connections and imagine situations that they might not otherwise see (Crilly et al, 2006: 348). Savage and Flemmen (2019: 8) explore what happened when 220 members of a large British study called the National Child Development Study were asked 'if you had to depict your life up to now by means of a diagram, which of these would you choose; if none of these apply, can you draw a more representative pattern in the blank box'. Participants could choose from eight different diagrams or draw their own. The diagrams they could choose from included an upward arrow (i.e. one's life had improved over time), a downward arrow, a horizontal arrow (i.e no change over time in the quality of one's life), an upward staircase (i.e. improvements interspersed with plateaus), straight lines pointing either upward or downward with crosses in the middle (i.e. the person had faced a 'crossroads' in life), and jagged lines with either an upward or downward trajectory.

[insert figure reproduced from Savage and Flenmen, 2019, p. 93]

By presenting respondents with these diagrams, the researchers compared responses and interpreted the choices based on other information about the respondents. The

diagrams were thus used as a standardised instrument enabling comparisons across the cases, combined with interview narratives about respondents' reasons for choosing to represent their lives in one of the ways available to them. The majority of the respondents chose either the upward staircase (26.4%), the jagged lines pointing upward (26.8%), or to draw their own diagrams (32.9%). The authors used this exercise to show respondents did not have a linear understanding of how their lives had unfolded, and how changes in personal life can be as important – in some cases, more important – as changes in work life. The exercise was fruitful in eliciting rich narratives from participants when they explained why they had chosen a given diagram. Students might find that life trajectory diagrams are a useful way to engage participants in evaluating their lives, as they invite detailed accounts of how participants feel their lives are progressing.

However, these techniques are not without limitations. Savage and Flemmen (2019: 11) note it can feel like a 'contrived exercise'. Moreover, diagrams are not value-free, but are part of an encounter in which participants are invited to pass judgement on the quality of their lives. As Crilly et al (2006: 346) note, diagrams are not 'neutral with regard to mechanisms of hierarchy and power', but can be 'regarded as closely implicated in processes of discipline and control'. Asking people who have experienced difficulties to acknowledge this and effectively declare it to the interviewer by selecting a diagram with a downward trajectory may create feelings of discomfort for both the respondent and the interviewer, without necessarily adding much to the understanding of the respondent's life. Therefore, it is important to use life trajectory

diagrams sensitively. Students should monitor participants' body language and facial expressions for signs of discomfort. If you sense that participants feel uncomfortable, consider taking a break and/or not proceeding any further with the exercise.

3.2: Participant-generated representations

The most common method for letting research participants generate a life map is life charts (sometimes called life grids, life lines or timelines). A life chart exercise asks the research participant to map (draw) important events in their life on a piece of paper as part of, or embedded in, a qualitative interview. This can follow a more or less structured approach – while some argue in favour of leaving the task largely up to the participant, as in conventional biographical or life history research (Jackson and Russell, 2010), others structure the task by asking the participant to consider pre-defined dimensions such as family life, school/education, work, leisure etc. (e.g., Wilson et al, 2007).

Researchers using life chart methods are predominantly interested in the subjective selection of events that have been 'critical' (cf. Thomson et al., 2002) in participants' life. Rather than seeing the life chart as necessarily reflecting 'life as lived', researchers are interested in meanings participants associate with each event; what they select as important events in their lives. In her study of young people's everyday lives, relationships and identities, Bagnoli (2009) used timelines in conjunction with self portraits and relational maps to study turning points and other important events in participants' biographies. She demonstrates how the particularities in her participants'

life situations shines through in their timelines. For instance, one person's Jewish background and culture is central in organising her timeline, while for another participant her affection for animals and interest in becoming a vet is indicated by the numerous times her pets are mentioned in the timeline. The timeline is not only helpful for generating an understanding of how a participant makes sense of events in their life, but for getting a sense of the broader context of the participant's life; the context in which these events are given meaning. The 'Note from the field below' gives an example of how the life chart can be used in research.

Some scholars suggest using the method in a more realist way to map factual events in a person's life and triangulate findings from different methods to validate one against the other. One example is Berends' (2011: 4) interview-based study of individuals' pathways to alcohol or drug treatment as part of a broader review of services.

Timelines and interview data were compared to "fill gaps and identify major discrepancies". This was a first step of three in the analytical process. Second, themes and patterns were identified in both the interviews and the timelines and used to create 'typical' timelines, i.e., average timelines for different types of participants. For instance, 'most' participants with a median age of 19 did not seek treatment for alcohol-related problems, while the 'most common' type of treatment for participants with a median age of 38 was residential treatment. As a last step, those typical timelines were transformed into 'hypothetical' timelines; timelines of fictional characters that were based on both interview data and 'typical' timelines. This demonstrates how the creative aspect of the interview can serve as a means for

producing (visual) materials for disseminating research findings. This example does not follow common ways of working with qualitative data as the process of developing 'typical' and hypothetical timelines eliminates the nuances that are usually seen as a strength of qualitative approaches. A benefit can be that research findings are simpler to communicate.

A further point of critique that applies to the use of timelines or life charts is that they represent time as chronological and as progressing in one direction: forwards. As Bagnoli (2009: 567) writes, 'the very idea of defining one's life through a forward-facing trajectory can be highly problematic'. As the life chart at the front of this chapter demonstrates (see also 'Note from the field') some participants did break with this imposed format by drawing curved lines or more than one parallel line, but the majority stayed with the suggested format of a line with an arrow indicating time passing in a straight, chronological way. Another potential challenge when asking participants to draw a life chart is that some may feel uncomfortable with drawing as this for many people is something they rarely do.

[open box]

Note from the field: drawing a life chart with a young woman

I meet with Bella, who is 21 years old, in a meeting room in the local library. She is one of 31 participants in my ongoing research project about the everyday life and imagined futures of young women who have left school early in three geographical locations in Victoria, Australia. The research project is a longitudinal project where I meet with

participants up to five times over two years. The first interview is a biographical interview that includes a life chart exercise; a method I have chosen to get a good sense of the participants' pasts but also to let them lead the way in terms of what they want to emphasise.

I introduce the drawing exercise after around 15 minutes' talk about the participant's everyday life and current situation by asking them to map the 'events or people that have been important in shaping your life up to now and made you who you are today' and then I hand the pen and paper to the participant. Bella's first response is 'I have been through a lot', implying that she cannot possibly draw all of these events. I emphasise that the life chart is not meant to reflect everything that has happened in her life. I have also found it useful to remind participants that it is up to them how much detail they want to give about negative events; something I go through with Bella before we start the interview. Bella's next comment is 'I don't even know where to start, I don't know how far back I want to go'. This is a very common reaction in my research and have learned to give participants a few moments to think about the exercise before we proceed. I have also learned to simplify the exercise if participants are hesitant to start drawing by suggesting that we draw a line at the top of the paper that goes from left to right, with an arrow at the end, to symbolise time. When I draw this line for Bella, she thinks for a little while and then starts the drawing by putting the divorce of her parents at age six on the paper. After speaking about how her parents' divorce impacted her, Bella maps the next event; ballet for which she attended lessons from 2002-2011. When I ask why this hobby is on the life chart she is quick to answer: 'Because I loved it!'. The ballet was a constant factor and a 'happy space' in what was

otherwise some turbulent years that also involved bullying at school. Bella seems like she has now warmed to the life chart exercise and from here she goes from one event to the next. These events include moving (regions and houses); and facilitated discussions about whether such mobility was experienced as positive or negative and how it affected her sense of belonging. The resulting life chart is the one at the very beginning of this chapter.

(Signe Ravn, University of Melbourne)

[close box]

As discussed in the Note from the field (Box 10.2), simplifying the activity by drawing a straight line from left to right is one way to help participants to get started.

Encouraging people by reminding them this is just a task and that the aesthetics do not matter also helps.

3.3: Working creatively with memories

Memory has become a topic of growing interest in human geography over recent years (Leyshon and Tverin, 2015: 97) . As Jones (2011: 875) argues, investigating memory draws our attention to the fact that people are shaped by their ‘past everyday experiences’, including the spatial elements of these experiences. Memory work as a method was originally developed in the 1980s by German sociologist Frigga Haug (Haug, 1987). While memory work is not explicitly a life mapping method in the conventional understanding (such as the methods mentioned above), we want to highlight the role of memory in biographical research. Memory work as a method

involves the construction of memory stories: written accounts of past situations and experiences. These stories are then analysed by the researcher. The stories may be explored further in interviews with the research participants who have written them, or interviews may not take place. Crawford and colleagues (1992, cited by Thomson and Holland, 2005: 205) define memory work as 'a method par excellence for exploring the process of the construction of the self and understanding the ways in which emotions, motives, actions, choices, moral judgements, play their part in that construction'.

Thomson and Holland (2005) used memory books somewhat similarly to a diary method but in a 'scrap-book' style. They asked participants to document their everyday life over a period of time, providing participants with materials, instructions and suggestions for what could go into the book. Some of the participants found that engaging with this exercise provided a hands-on, tactile and highly visual way of crafting representations of their lives. This method can also be adapted to more biographically oriented purposes, for instance by prompting participants to attend specifically to memories of (certain events in) the past. As with the stories produced through memory work, follow-up interviews may take place, using the memory books to prompt reflection on the part of interviewees. Thomson and Holland (2005:204) argue that the value of using memory books in combination with qualitative interviews is that this allows participants to engage with the research outside of the face-to-face situation of the interview and that this can produce other 'expressions of self' than those that come to the fore in the interview. It is clear from their research that the

memory books can feel very private for participants and hence pose ethical concerns that we return to in the next section.

10.3.2: Ethical considerations

Several scholars argue that using life mapping methods is useful for interviewing about sensitive topics as it lets the interviewee set the pace of the interview and to a larger extent guide the conversation (Adriansen, 2012; Wilson et al., 2007). On the other hand, visual representations such as life charts can be overwhelming (Sheridan et al., 2011) because they capture one's entire life story on a sheet of paper. As we saw with life trajectory diagrams, participants may feel like the content and quality of their lives are being judged. Life mapping methods therefore need to be used with care.

Publishing life charts (such as the one in the very beginning of this chapter) calls for ethical considerations as they can compromise participants' anonymity through the details of the events that are depicted. While Adriansen (2012) warns against publishing the actual timelines, we believe this is possible but requires careful consideration and typically requires more extensive anonymisation where not only names but other identifying information such as hobbies, field of study, travel destination etc. are edited. Berends (2011) sought to avoid these ethical challenges by condensing individual timelines into 'typical' timelines, i.e., timelines that represented broader patterns in the data rather than actual individuals. Depending on one's research question, this may be a way forward although it is at the expense of the particulars in individual timelines (and indeed life stories). Finally, notions of ownership must be considered when using visual materials produced by research

participants. While materials such as a life chart created in the context of the interview situation can be seen as co-owned, memory books and other materials created by the participant outside of the interview is seen as owned by the participant. The researcher has to negotiate with participants how the researcher can access and use these materials in their research. It is good practice to always ensure that participants are happy for the researcher to take and use the materials (in anonymised version). This can be done via the consent form and an accompanying conversation but should be followed up after the task as well.

It is important to bear in mind that memory is strongly linked with emotion (Misztal, 2003). Participants may recall events and experiences that they would rather not remember as a result of biographical interviews. It is important to be attentive throughout the interview and to look out for signs of discomfort (e.g. facial expressions, body language). If participants seem affected the researcher should offer them a break or stop the interview entirely. If you are inviting participants to write memory stories or to create memory books, bear in mind that their stories will involve other people who have not consented to participate in the research. It may be necessary to ask participants to fictionalise key details of their stories (e.g. the names of people and places). For more reflections on the ethics of creative research, see Hall et al., this volume.

4: Suggested Reading

Mannay, D. (2015). *Visual, Narrative and Creative Research Methods. Application, reflection and ethics*. Abingdon: Routledge.

This book is a great introduction to creative research methods. It is accessible yet nuanced. Students will appreciate the rich and varied examples the author provides from her and others' research projects.

Bagnoli, A. (2009). Beyond the standard interview: The use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods. *Qualitative Research*, 9 (5): 547-570.

This article is one of the first to thoroughly argue for the value of creative methods in qualitative inquiry and has become a classic piece in the literature. The author develops a convincing case for what these methods can contribute as well as what their limitations are.

McLeod, J. and Thomson, R. (2009). *Researching Social Change*. London: Sage.

This book is an excellent and rich guide to qualitative methods for researching social change. It gives a thorough and nuanced introduction to traditions such as memory work, oral history and qualitative longitudinal research.

5- Have a go

If using biographical and life history mapping methods appeals to you, consider making your own life chart.

1. Use a blank piece of paper (A3 or A4). Along the top you can draw an arrow indicating the direction of time (e.g., an arrow going from left to right).

2. Consider the question: “What events and people in your life are important for understanding who you are today?” It is up to you how far back you want to go. Remember the aim is not an exhaustive list of events in your life. Only events that have been critical for who you are today should go on the life chart.
3. Now map the events and people you think should go on this map and reflect on why you put down what you did.
4. Take notes along the way:
 - a. Did you know right away what to put on the life chart or was it difficult to get started? What type of prompts could make the exercise easier?
 - b. Would it be easier if the chart had been structured into themes such as ‘family’, ‘school’, ‘leisure’? Would adding this structure (maybe with other categories) change what events you mapped?
5. When you are finished, take a step back from the life chart and consider it as a whole:
 - a. How does it feel to view your life laid out like this? What are the ethical considerations to take into account when asking someone to complete the exercise?
 - b. How much would someone who does not know you understand about your life if they only looked at the life chart, without hearing your explanation of each event mapped on the chart? What constitutes meaningful ‘data’ from this exercise?

When you have tried the exercise yourself, you can ask a family member or a friend if they are willing to give it a try. This makes you the interviewer who seeks to understand

another person's life story. Questions to consider while the person is making the life chart are:

I can see you put XX event on the map. Can you say a bit more about what happened then? How do you feel that is important for who you are today?

Trying the life chart exercise before using this in a research interview is helpful for understanding what you are asking of the research participants, and how you can make the exercise as easy to engage with as possible.

6: Summary

This chapter explored creative approaches to biographical and life history interviewing, including methods that involve asking participants to construct representations such as charts and timelines, and to engage with existing representations, namely visualisations of life trajectories. We also discussed the productive possibilities of inviting participants to approach the past in creative ways through memory work and the creation of memory books. These methods offer researchers opportunities to bring participants' pasts to life and to explore not only what happened but also the meanings and affective dimensions of biographical events and experiences.

We would like to put forward two recommendations for those considering drawing on biographical and life history methods in their research:

Read up on approaches you would like to try out before choosing a

method/methods. Try to unpick the assumptions underlying different methods. Some techniques carry assumptions that may not be in line with your research question. For example, timelines prioritise the passing of calendar time. If you are more interested in how participants construct the passage of time in their own terms, this might not be the tool for you. Critically consider the strengths and limitations of different techniques before selecting one.

Try out different tools before choosing one, and develop your ability to use your preferred tools through practice. Experiment with different techniques on friends, family members or colleagues, and see which tools generate the kind of data you require to answer your research question. Trialling the methods will develop your ability to explain the technique to the participant, and show you first-hand what kinds of knowledge you might gain from using the tools. The personal nature of biographical research means that you have to learn how to manage potentially sensitive situations, such as discussions of life events (e.g. relationships ending, the loss of loved ones, etc.) that can make the participant feel uncomfortable. Practising in advance may help you develop strategies for navigating these situations in a sensitive and ethical manner.

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