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Beyond the standard interview: the use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods

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ABSTRACT This article reviews three visual methods based on drawing that I applied in my research on young people: the arts-based projective technique, the self-portrait, and the graphic elicitation methods of the relational map and the timeline. Examples of these methods are drawn from their application in two studies, the Narratives of Identity and Migration project, exploring young people and identities in England and Italy, and the Young Lives and Times. The article argues that applying these drawing methods in the context of an interview can open up participants' interpretations of questions, and allow a creative way of interviewing that is responsive to participants' own meanings and associations. The article discusses the analytical potential of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods, by making reference to the insights that they offered in the contextual analysis with more traditional text-based data. The efficacy of these methods is critically discussed, together with their limitations, and their potential within the context of qualitative longitudinal research.

KEYWORDS: *arts-based research, graphic elicitation, projective techniques, qualitative longitudinal research, visual methods, young people*

Introduction

In most qualitative research interviews are a standard method of data collection. The use of interviews relies on language as the privileged medium for the creation and communication of knowledge. However, our daily experience is made of a multiplicity of dimensions, which include the visual and the sensory, and which are worthy of investigation but cannot always be easily expressed in words, since not all knowledge is reducible to language (Eisner, 2008). The inclusion of non-linguistic dimensions in research, which rely on other expressive possibilities, may allow us to access and represent different levels of experience. In my research work I have tried to go beyond the

standard interview and expand the domain of investigation by adopting a variety of methods, visual and arts-based. Creatively mixing methods, as Mason suggests (2006), can encourage thinking 'outside the box', generating new ways of interrogating and understanding the social.

In this article I will be reviewing three visual methods that I have employed in the context of interviews: one arts-based projective technique, the self-portrait, and two graphic elicitation methods, the relational map, and the timeline. All these methods involve drawing, an activity that allows participants time to reflect about the issues being explored (Gauntlett, 2007). Drawing methods are most often used with children, or in cross cultural research, that is to say when there is an assumption that participants will find it difficult to express themselves verbally. However, they can be helpful even when applied more widely, with people of all ages. The use of visual and creative methods can generally facilitate investigating layers of experience that cannot easily be put into words (Gauntlett, 2007). Images are evocative and can allow access to different parts of human consciousness (Prosser and Loxley, 2008); communicating more holistically, and through metaphors, they can enhance empathic understanding, capture the ineffable, and help us pay attention to reality in different ways, making the ordinary become extraordinary (Weber, 2008).

Graphic elicitation methods usually involve the use of diagrams, which may either be produced by the researcher or by participants (Prosser and Loxley, 2008). Interacting with diagrams provides a basis for further interviewing and communication between researcher and participants (Crilly et al., 2006). Arts-based research is an 'umbrella term' which includes a variety of different methodologies employing some art form as a method (Finley, 2008). Projective techniques include any set of procedures which, being minimally structured, allow people to impose their own forms of organization, bringing into expression their needs, motives, emotions and the like (Allen, 1958).

Projective techniques have long been used in psychology, especially in clinical settings, with a variety of media. Much research involving drawings is done with standardized tests, such as the Draw A Person (DAP); House Tree Person (HTP); Draw a Story (DAS) (Leigh Neale and Rosal, 1993). In clinical frameworks, projective drawings are analysed by testing a connection between some personality trait or variable and features such as size (Prytula et al., 1978); colour use (Marzolf and Kirchner, 1973); and formal aspects of lines (Vass, 1998). The question in such contexts concerns what is to be regarded as pathological and what is not (Vass, 1998). However, drawings and other projective techniques may be used for a variety of purposes, and not solely in contexts that presuppose the existence of any pathology. In developmental psychology, early work on drawings focused on identifying stages of development in children's abilities. Studies on drawings regained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s and attention shifted from viewing the final form as a projection of intellectual

knowledge to considering the whole process of making a drawing (Thomas and Silk, 1990). In therapeutic contexts drawings are employed also within more holistic frameworks, such as in art therapy, to assess emotional needs (Silver and Ellison, 1995), and other dynamics, with attention to the meanings that participants themselves associate to them (Riley, 1999).

In more socially-based research, drawings are usually employed with children in order to make the process of interviewing more concrete: by being good memory-aids (Scott, 2000) they allow the inclusion of even very young respondents. In these contexts, it is not the drawings as such that constitute the data, but the whole process of their production (Morrow, 1998). The focus here is on children's own meanings, rather than on interpreting drawings on the basis of some pre-existing theory. Drawings may work well also as 'openers' and 'ice breakers' (Morrow, 1998) during the interview.

My use of drawings and of visual methods more generally has been led by an interest in designing participatory methods which could allow taking part in the research process according to one's own preferred modalities of expression. I was not interested in people's drawing abilities, or in evaluating the formal aspects of their drawings. My focus was on how visual methods could be used within the context of an interview in order to enhance participants' reflexivity and to gather a holistic picture of the topics under investigation that could take into account also their different needs and expressive styles.

The examples that I show in this article are drawn from two different studies. The Narratives of Identity and Migration study, my PhD project at the University of Cambridge, was an autobiographical investigation of young people and identities that I carried out in England and Italy on a case study of migration between the two countries. Forty-one young people aged 16 to 26 and coming from different but comparable backgrounds in both countries took part in this study, for which I designed a diary-based mixed-method approach that I have extensively described elsewhere (Bagnoli, 2009a) and which included the self-portrait.

The Young Lives and Times study is a qualitative longitudinal investigation of young people's lives, identities, and relationships based at the University of Leeds, which aims to run for a prospective 10 years. The young participants are drawn from different areas of metropolitan and rural Yorkshire and were 13 years old when first met. I was involved in the first two waves of this project, which were funded under the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Real Life Methods Node. A variety of qualitative methods were applied in field-work, among which included relational maps, timelines, and self-portraits.

The self-portrait

The self-portrait is an arts-based projective technique that I designed in the context of my PhD project on young people and identities with the aim of encouraging participants' reflexivity and getting them to think holistically about their

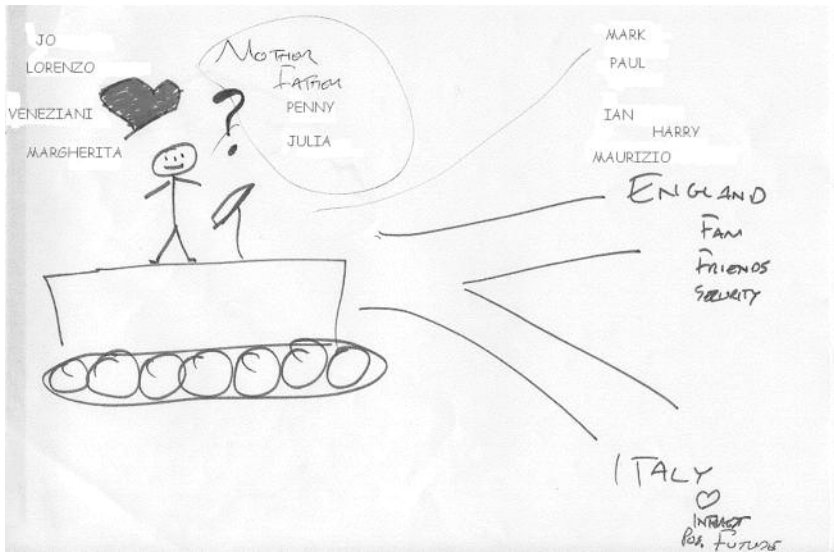


FIGURE 1. *Johnny's self-portrait*

identities and lives. I gave participants paper and felt tips, and asked them to show on the paper who they were at that moment in life, and then to add the people and things that they considered important at that time. This method successfully allowed me to gain an insight on their own visualizations about the moment in their lives they were currently living, with sensitivity for their own associations and meanings. Some of their visualizations were particularly insightful and became very important in my own process of making sense of the data I was collecting. The self-portrait drawn by Johnny,¹ a 26-year-old teacher of English as a foreign language living in Florence, is one such case (Figure 1):

Johnny: This is sort of me at the moment, on my track or whatever, and obviously here there's two different roads I have to choose... At the moment this year I have to decide really whether I'm gonna stay in Italy, and for these sorts of reasons.

AB: What did you...

Johnny: That's interest for and possible, I ought to write 'poss.' That's possible future, and here's England with family, friends and security, here is my question mark and here is my... on my shoulder that weighs me down, possible romantic interest there, and...

AB: So is it related to Italy?

Johnny: It could be, yes, it could probably be.

After living in Italy for more than a year Johnny is facing the dilemma as to whether to stay in Florence in his current job, which he much enjoys, or to

return to Britain, where his life could offer a higher degree of security. The crossroads that he draws is a poignant and appropriate visualization for a self-perceived important turning point in his life. It is in Giddens' terms a 'fateful moment' (Giddens, 1991), that is a moment when the course of events may be altered in some major and consequential way, and an effective turn may be impressed on one's life-trajectory. With a map of the alternative possibilities in front of him, and the risks associated with both scenarios, this picture well captures the turning point status that this moment has within Johnny's overall life plan. Through pictures like this I was able to develop my analysis on the basis of participants' own images. The images in the portraits would sometimes possess a 'condensing' quality that could narrate complex stories about young people's plans, dreams, dilemmas, and emotions. Some of these metaphors could be very evocative and, as it may be the case with images (Weber, 2008), could resonate with current theorizing on research on contemporary lives. Indeed the crossroads metaphor in particular is one which I took on in my subsequent work on biographical research exploring turning points in people's lives (Bagnoli and Ketokivi, 2009).

Johnny: God! It's all too clear, isn't it? My God, look at that! Wow! (*Laughing*)
Can't believe I did that!

AB: ...You did this and you were saying you were on your truck deciding where to go...

Johnny: Yeah.

AB: Do you think you have moved in some of these directions, or are you still thinking about...?

Johnny: Yes, I think we're a little further down this one... (*Indicating Italy on the self-portrait*)

AB: Down the Italy one.

Johnny: Down the Italy one, yes. Em... more because... partly... I thought very seriously about going back to England and taking this job. Because it was a nice job, em... whether it would go... no, it made me really think about why I was here, why I didn't want to go back to England, partly 'cos I think I'd go back thinking I've been here two years I haven't learned anything, you know, that I felt... and in Italy now I can... believe it or not, my Italian is getting a bit better, I'm now able to have relationships with my friends properly, I can talk about things... so I feel I can live in this world a bit easier.

When meeting Johnny for a second interview some time later I showed him his self-portrait again, his reaction was one of incredulity: The clarity with which the self-portrait captures Johnny's dilemma takes even its author by surprise. At a few weeks distance the picture already holds the fundamentals of his current situation. Johnny is able to relate to his crossroads metaphor and continue his narrative about the direction his life seems to be going. The



FIGURE 2. Alicia's self-portrait

longitudinal application of the self-portrait provided valuable results in terms of how young people accounted for change in their lives, giving an indication of the extent to which images produced at an earlier moment in time could still make sense of what one was living, or could otherwise have lost any meaning or significant associations.

Most participants seemed to enjoy this task, which provided some momentary regression to childlike expression. At times they expressed some initial resistance, and in one case one participant declined to take part, denying that she would be able to define or 'codify' herself. In most cases, however, the self-portrait helped to 'break the ice' during the interview (Morrow, 1998).

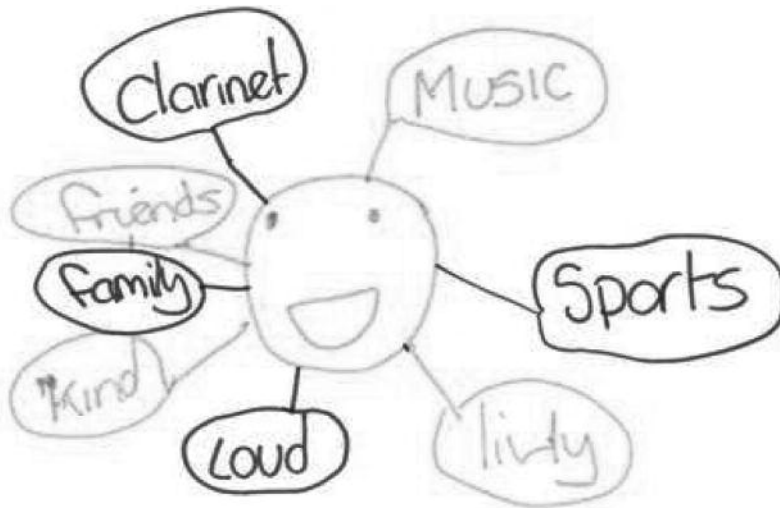


FIGURE 3. Grace's self-portrait

making people feel more comfortable. There was, however, no such resistance when I asked a younger sample of 13-year-olds to engage in the same task, in the Young Lives and Times Study. The self-portrait was one of the visual tasks which I asked the young participants to take part in at my first meeting with them. The variety of styles in these young people's self-portraits followed the same patterns that I had found in my previous project, showing different levels of abstraction, on a continuum going from drawing to writing (Bagnoli, 2009a). The self-portraits produced by Alicia, Grace, and Billy give an idea of this range of styles.

While Johnny's earlier example is a drawing of a scene depicting a whole metaphorical situation, Alicia's drawing (Figure 2) focuses on the self. By drawing herself in a school uniform her identity as a student comes across as fundamental to her self presentation. Grace's self-portrait is what the young people themselves called a 'spider diagram', in which a number of significant dimensions are organized radially around a central element which stands for the self (Figure 3). Here the important elements appear to be family, friends, music, and sports, as well as some defining characteristics, among which the self-trait 'loud', a quality that young people seem to be very appreciative of (see next section). Finally, Billy's self-portrait (Figure 4) is more based on writing and combines an essay-like format with some drawn symbols. In this case football and family appear central to his identity.

In the same way as in my previous study, the contents of the self-portraits were the basis for further interviewing, and the longitudinal framework of the research allowed me to ask participants about the relevance of these self-portraits again in the second wave of data collection. If producing a



FIGURE 4. Billy's self-portrait

self-portrait encountered no resistance among this younger sample, the styles of these drawings also indicated, however, a generally more limited expressive range. The boys' portraits made use of a very limited range of colours, typically black and blue, and the symbols they drew were all consistent with traditional constructions of gender identities. Including a symbol like a heart in one's self-portrait, as Johnny had done, seemed out of the question for the boys in this age cohort.

Relational maps

A variety of studies investigating relationships have used some form of relational map as a graphic elicitation tool during interviews. A good example is provided by Josselson (1996), who has employed 'relational space maps' in her study of human relationships, which she designed around the metaphor of the solar system. People are asked to draw themselves and the important people in their lives, taking as their model the sun and the planets revolving around. By important people, she means those people who were in the participant's mind at the time. The task is repeated several times in the interview, depending on the participant's age, for successive five-year intervals. The distance on the page should reflect the presence of the significant others within the participant's inner world. People may be indicated with a dotted circle, to show that this someone was not there physically, but just on an imaginary level, and some other people may be drawn as a group circle, when they mattered as a group, rather than on an individual level. By considering five-year intervals in the participant's life, the aim is highlighting the appearance and disappearance of others within someone's world over time, as retrospectively viewed at the time of interview. Another, more commonly used model of relational map is that employed by Roseneil (2006) in her psychosocial study of intimacy and personal life. Here participants are asked to construct a map of their relationships during the interview, placing people in order of importance within a set of concentric circles, with the closest relationships being in the inner circles and the others gradually around.

The relational map that I applied in the Young Lives and Times study is similar to these two models, but has a rather looser structure. This task came as part of the second interview that I had with each participant in the first wave of the study. After giving a blank sheet of paper and a set of felt tips I asked the young people to draw themselves in the middle of the paper, and to show the important people in their lives, indicating the different degree of their importance, by placing them closer or more distant to them. I did not specify any definite structure for the map, partly because I was interested in seeing what patterns the young people would come up with themselves. In the Real Life Methods Node our emphasis was on defining creative methods to study the social, and I thought that by relying on some wide and open instructions, we could leave more space for the participants' own interpretations and visualizations of my words. I therefore intended the instructions in much the same way Prosser and Loxley (2008) point out, as basic 'scaffolding' for participants, allowing them to construct their own representations. Relational maps were then the basis for further interviewing, which directly related to whatever the young people had drawn. Similarly to Josselson (1996), I asked participants to include people who might be important but pertaining to an imaginary level (Hermans et al., 1993), and not actually physically present in their lives. I also asked them to include any role models, people whom they admired and whose



FIGURE 5. Carlie's relational map

qualities they would like to have themselves, as well as anyone they might dislike for some reason, who could be regarded as a negative role model instead. In addition, I asked for 'special' objects that might be important to them as well.

Participants drew relational maps with various structures, which included what they themselves called 'spider diagrams', drawings with different horizontal layers, drawings with stick people, as well as more standard concentric circles maps, sometimes organized in complex arrangements. The different importance of the people on the map was sometimes indicated through the use of different colours, other times by adding an asterisk or circling people's names.

The relational maps by Carlie (Figure 5) and by Billy (Figure 6) are two examples of the rather common 'spider' structure. In Carlie's map the people who are drawn closest to the self are 'mum and grandma'. We also get an indication of the importance of the extended family in her life, something which is recurrent in her data. Carlie has grown up being looked after by her maternal grandmother since her mother, a single parent who had her when very young, was working. Her grandma has therefore had a central role in her life and Carlie looks up to her as a role model, because of her ability to maintain peaceful relationships within the family:



FIGURE 6. Billy's relational map

Carlie: My grandma can kind of reason with everyone without upsetting everyone... she doesn't really take sides on people's arguments and stuff.

In addition to family, Carlie indicates three groups of friends, coming from different environments: cadets, family, and school. Within each of these groups she also highlights one best friend, people she could contact in case she needed help:

Carlie: If I was ever really upset or if I needed to just like ring someone up and talk to them then I can ring them and they will listen to me.

One of these friends in particular is mentioned as a role model, because she is 'crazy' and 'loud':

Carlie: She's quite crazy

AB: Hm mm

Carlie: And erm she makes me laugh all the time but erm she kind of, she'll just say what's on her mind (...) she'll just speak her mind and stuff (...)

- AB: So is that what you mean when you say she's kind of crazy? Or is there any other thing she does?
- Carlie: Well yeah she is kind of crazy because she's just erm really loud and outspoken (*laughs*) and erm she don't really care what people think of her (...) she's just herself in front of everyone. She doesn't like change to fit with other people.
- AB: Okay. So when you say she's really loud.
- Carlie: Yeah.
- AB: What is it you mean exactly?
- Carlie: She just, she shouts quite a lot (*laughing*).
- AB: She shouts.
- Carlie: Yeah. Not in an aggressive way just in like a fun kind of way.

Being 'loud' and 'crazy' in Carlie's and more generally in young people's jargon (see also Grace's self-portrait in Figure 3) seem to mean having the confidence to be oneself in every situation, without changing to fit in with other people. In these meanings the terms are recurrent in their words and refer to qualities that are reputed very highly in the youth culture. In this relational map we can also see one friend indicated in red (shown as 'Friend 4' in Figure 5). Carlie highlights this friend in response to my question as someone she dislikes because she cannot be trusted to keep a secret.

Billy's map (Figure 6) shows again the centrality of the family and of the extended family: in this case two great-grandmas appear in the drawing. Throughout his data Billy presents his family as a compact and harmonious unit (see also his self-portrait in Figure 4). Here he has included his mum, dad and sister as very close to him, specifying for both his parents the different ways he looks up to them: his dad is important for his 'ability to make things', his practical intelligence, and his mum because she is 'brainy', an example of academic intelligence:

- Billy: Er, I put my mum's brain.
- AB: Okay.
- Billy: Because she's very smart. And my dad's ability to make, ability to make things.
- AB: Okay. Can you tell me more about these things I mean, about your mum being so smart in, in what things for instance?
- Billy: She's er – she works – well, she's work – works at a supermarket head offices and she does, she keeps everything organized because she's a manager and if any, like if we get some'at stuck with computer she knows how to come and sort it out and...
- AB: Okay.
- Billy: So she just keeps everything organized.
- AB: Yes, yes. So that's quite important. And what about your dad er, ability to make things. What sort of things?

Billy: He can er, he's – he makes settees and can upholster them and if something breaks in house, like say if a table broke he could take it in garage and just notch it up and fix it a bit.

Billy in turn supports his younger sister:

Billy: If she's ever got problems at school and everybody – somebody's picking on her I'll go up and speak to the school or some'at or just – just look after her because I don't want anything to happen to her sort of.

This map also shows the importance that football has in Billy's life, something that was clear also from his self-portrait (Figure 4). The passion for football is shared with his dad, who is a manager in his local team and who is 'a big part of the football'. The football entries, in Billy's map, which include Billy's team, a Leeds player of the past that is a sports role model, and a treasured possession, a hat that has been signed by the Leeds football team, have been added in response to my own input. Billy had been extensively talking about football, and I encouraged him to add anything about football that he thought might be relevant in the map. The maps are drawn within a social interaction, the interview, and the researcher's own questions and probes contribute to the context of their production.

The third map, by Rebekah, follows the concentric circles structure, a pattern which we have seen to be rather common in research on personal relationships, and which young people may also be familiar with from their own studies (Figure 7). In this case, it was only through drawing the map, in the context of our second interview, that Rebekah started talking about her dad and the two brothers she has in London:

Rebekah: Oh, sorry I forgot. Sorry, I forgot to write that before.

AB: Who are they?

Rebekah: They're my two other brothers who live in London. Like they're my dad's children. And it's the same thing with my dad really. I'm close to them but not as close as I could be.

AB: Yes.

Rebekah: They live in London as well so (...)

AB: So you're not so close to them you're saying? You don't see them so often?

Rebekah: No, not really.

Rebekah attributes the fact that she does not see her family in London so much to the geographical distance. However, as it appears from the same interview, her best friend is also based in London and she is in touch with her everyday with MSN.² The best friend is in fact placed in the innermost circle in the map, together with the immediate family Rebekah lives with. The relational

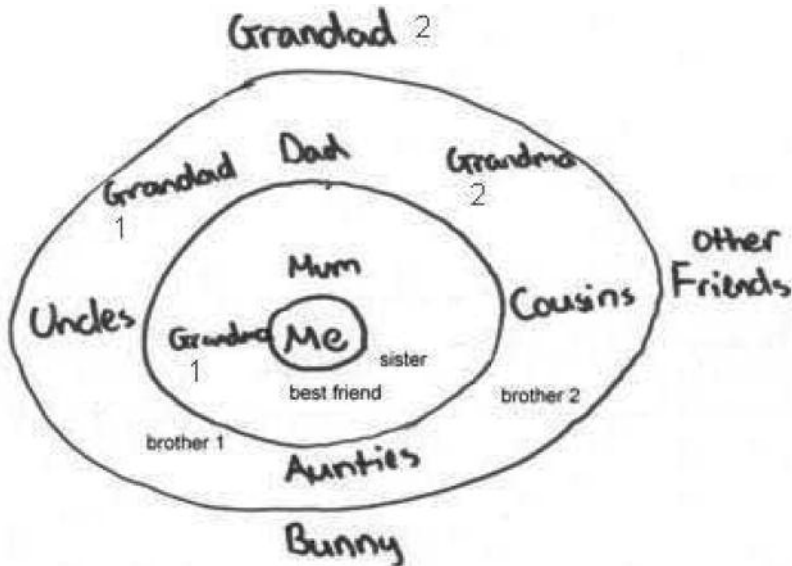


FIGURE 7. Rebekah's relational map

map highlights well how this side of her family Rebekah had 'forgotten' has not an emotional centrality to her life. Here it also helps overcoming silence about some aspects of their lives that young people may not find easy or immediate to talk about. By providing a task that engages participants on another level from verbally answering questions, the map helps thinking differently about issues and may elicit information which would possibly have remained unknown otherwise.

Timelines

Time is a crucial dimension within the longitudinal research framework of the Young Lives and Times study and one aim in data collection was allowing the young people to reflect on the different temporal dimensions of past, present, and future in their lives. In the first wave, the focus was on young people's narratives about their present and their past. The second wave focused instead on young people's projections and expectations about their future lives. In both waves I employed timelines in order to elicit biographical data about time during the interviews. In the first wave, I asked the young people to draw a timeline starting from zero and going up to their current age indicating the most important events and changes that had happened in their lives. I also asked them to include any events that had happened in the wider world that might have been significant to them, and which they might remember in connection with their own biographical events. This was an attempt to link the individual dimension of lives with the macro level of collective biographies and histories.



FIGURE 8. *Roxanne's timeline*

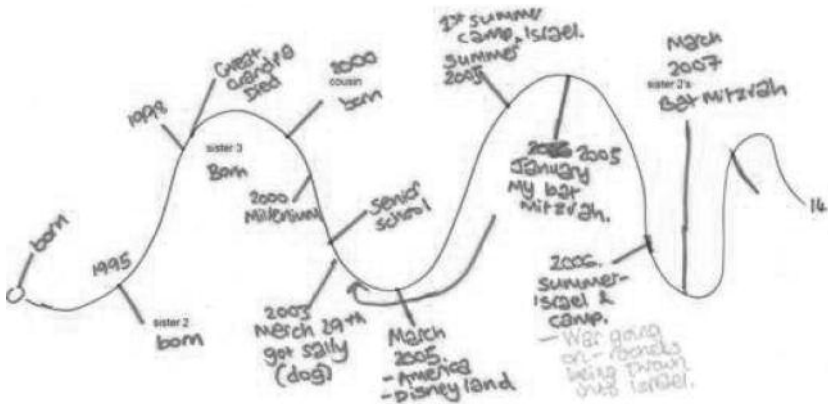


FIGURE 9. *Alicia's timeline*

Most young people represented their timeline through a horizontal line (Figure 8). However, there were also different representations of time: Alicia's wavy line (Figure 9), and Melodie's vertical line (Figure 10). This method aimed to collect the most important turning points and biographical events as seen from the young people's own perspectives. In Roxanne's timeline (Figure 8), the events have clearly been chosen from the young person's point of view. Roxanne loves animals and would like to be a vet in the future, and this does come across in her timeline, which emphasizes the importance of her pet rabbits in her life. Alicia's timeline (Figure 9) shows that her family culture and Jewish background frame the temporal organization of events in her life. The war in Israel is a world event she has directly witnessed. In Melodie's timeline school life and music learning dominate the selection of events structuring her life. The two world events that have been significant to her, 9/11 and the tsunami, were the most frequently mentioned by this sample of young people.

In the second wave of data collection the young people were asked to update this original timeline, by adding the events that had been significant during the year, year and a half which had passed since the first interview. They were then asked to draw a timeline for their future lives, indicating their expectations and dreams about their future. The future timelines drawn by girls show something interesting about their expectations of forming a family of their own in the future. Unfortunately a high number of boys dropped out of the

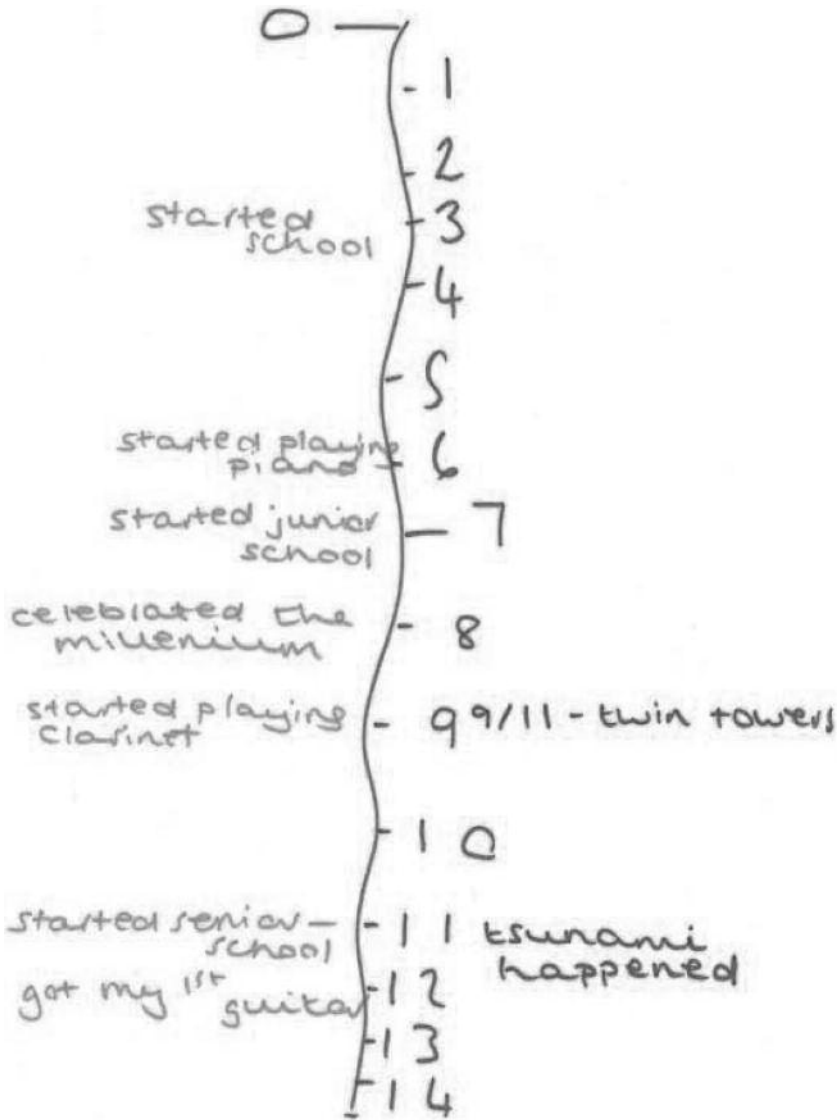


FIGURE 10. *Melodie's timeline*

study in the second wave, and the timelines of those who stayed do not show much that can be of relevance here. The most common timeline pattern among girls, and particularly middle-class girls, is exemplified by Carlie's timeline (Figure 11). Here the expectation is to go to university, then travelling, getting married at 30, and having children in one's 30s. This sort of projection reflects what has become a standard life expectation among middle-class girls,

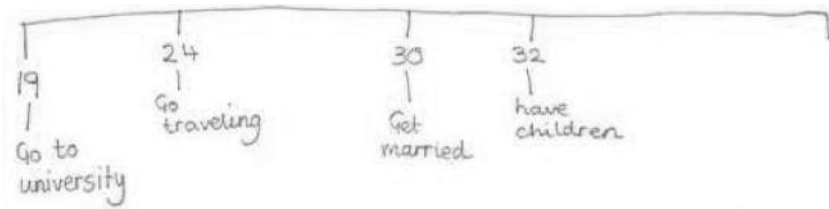


FIGURE 11. *Carlie's future timeline*

which sees motherhood delayed to one's 30s, when one has already had the chance to do other things, or, to say it in Carlie's terms, has 'finished finding who they are':

AB: So you want to have children also, and you put it after, at 32. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Carlie: Erm, well I think I'll be like settled down and I'll have done like all the stuff that I want to do, and like, erm, I think it's just like a nice age, 'cos you're like finished, you've like finished like being like, like finding like who you are like properly and everything like that. So, and you're like settled down and stuff so...

As it appears also from my previous research (Bagnoli, 2001), young people often seem to imagine a 30 threshold in their future which would somehow correspond to entrance into adulthood and settling down. The experience of travelling, which in these timelines is a standard expectation about the future, is indeed an important rite of passage and turning point for young people, whose travel, such as taking a year out, is often defined in institutional ways (Bagnoli, 2009b). Carlie's aspirations are shared also by Sophie and Naomi, two working-class girls living in a rural area of Yorkshire. However, the imagined timings of these events are different. Sophie (Figure 12) hopes to be married and with at least one child by the time she is 25. She wants 3 or 4 children, aiming to replicate her mother's family reproduction patterns:

Sophie: I don't think she's a role model for me now but I think she's a role model for me for when I get to her age. I would like to be like her (...) Just a, a good mum really if I do have, if I do have children, just to support them and, and I'm really, erm, like, I'm quite proud of her as well cos she's, she's been through a lot, erm, with my dad when I were younger, erm, and she's, she's, she's just, just managed with three kids before she met M. (current partner) and then she met M. and she had my younger brother and I, I admire her for that.

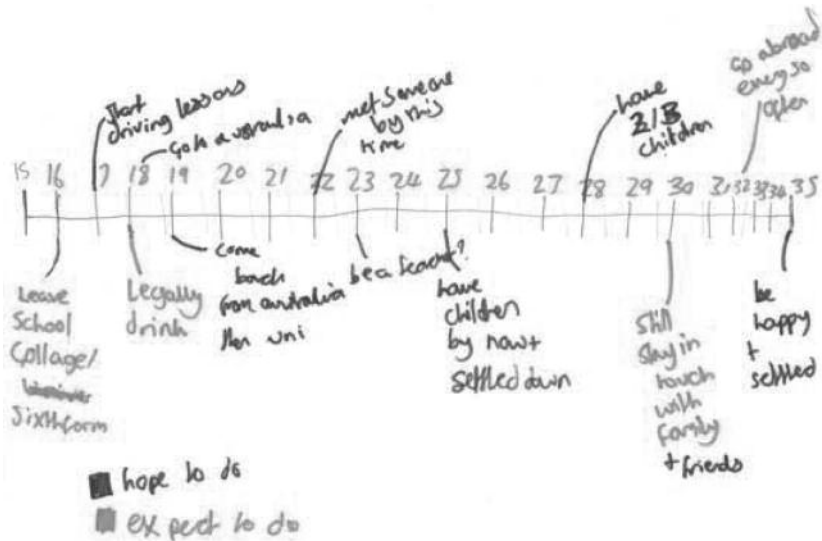


FIGURE 12. Sophie's future timeline

Sophie's mother is a role model providing an example of strength in the face of adversity in life: 'she's been through a lot'. The same sort of example is set by Naomi's mother, who has been able to cope with two children as a single parent, despite her illness and the difficult relationships with her partner and his own family. The timeline by Naomi, Sophie's friend, has the same pattern as Carlie's (Figure 13).

AB: And also you'd like, er, to have children around 30?

Naomi: Yeah. So I can have a life before that. You know (...) Not at 25. I, I'd, I'm, I'm not sure. I, I don't think I'd like to at 25. I might, I'd, I'd like, erm, early 30s, or really, you know, like late 20s.

AB: Why do you think you'd want that later?

Naomi: Because, erm, I'd, I want to have a life before I, I give it up to kids.

Naomi wishes 'to have a life before giving it up to kids': she looks up to her mother, but wishes a different life for herself, a life which may allow her to do other things before having children. She thus imagines having children in her 30s. Yet, she also imagines having grandchildren when she is 55. It would seem that she is not going to allow her own children the same 'moratorium' time she is aspiring to herself. The fact that her timeline extends up to 55 is also unusual, since most of these timelines do not go that far into the future beyond 30 or 35. The only thing that is included as meaningful in the more distant future, however, is an event related to family reproduction. Family reproduction thus emerges as central in this timeline, and in the expectations Naomi

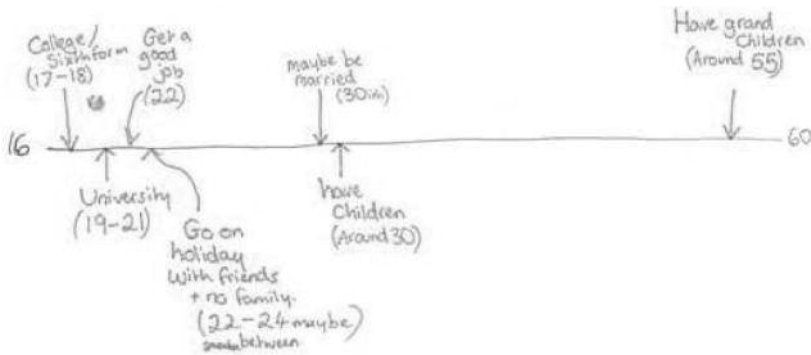


FIGURE 13. Naomi's future timeline

has about life, and this is interesting beyond what it makes explicit regarding young people's assumptions on appropriate ages for reproduction.

Past timelines helped collecting information regarding the events that according to the young people had been particularly significant in their biographies, and future timelines provided a projection of the events that were expected as structuring their lives in the future. The events highlighted in the timelines reflected young people's own interests, and the wider social contexts, such as family background, school, and also some world-scale events that had had a personal relevance to them. This method was helpful in engaging young people in a reflection about their past and future lives. However, it was not always successful. Discussing the issue of time with young people with mental disabilities was generally problematic, as these participants could not relate to the way of understanding time that was required for completing this task. In contrast with the self-portrait and the relational map, which showed no problem of inclusivity, the timeline had thus a more limited range of effectiveness.

Conclusions

This article has described three visual methods that I have employed in my research with the aim of allowing people to reflect creatively on the dimensions of interest to the investigation. With the self-portrait that I designed and first applied within the Narratives of Identity and Migration study my aim was to encourage the narration of a holistic picture of identities. With the relational map and the timelines that I applied in the context of the Young Lives and Times study the aim was eliciting information about the relational worlds and the events that participants considered to be turning points in their lives.

As we have seen in the examples from these two studies, the introduction of a simple visual task within the context of an interview may be very helpful for elicitation purposes. Focusing on the visual level allows people to go beyond a verbal mode of thinking, and this may help include wider dimensions of

experience, which one would perhaps neglect otherwise. A creative task may encourage thinking in non-standard ways, avoiding the clichés and ‘ready-made’ answers which could be easily replied. In this way, an arts-based method or graphic elicitation tool may encourage a holistic narration of self, and also help overcoming silences, including those aspects of one’s life that might for some reason be sensitive and difficult to be related in words.

Indeed, even visual data may be clichéd and produced in a standardized way. Yet, just as with words, even this may be informative, for example about the visual culture of some social group. Especially when participants are drawn from the same communities and know each other, as was the case with the young people taking part in the Young Lives and Times study, many of whom enrolled in the study together with their friends, one could occasionally get the impression that they had somehow discussed their responses with those of their friends. Again, this too may be treated as part of the data, informative as it may be about the worlds of their relationships and their reference points, as well as about what is considered to be appropriate self-presentation in some youth subculture.

One constant in my application of these methods has been the openness that I have tried to maintain when introducing these tasks. I kept the instructions as broad as possible, with the intent of enabling participants to structure the tasks in their own ways. This allowed me to collect a variety of patterns in the ways in which people made sense of the same instructions. However, not everyone may be comfortable working with such openness, and using a more standardized framework may just be more appropriate sometimes. Having an interest in how different people will make sense of the same task does mean that your analysis will then start being focused on the individual, and going beyond the individual case and making comparisons across larger units may sometimes be difficult.

In being attentive to people’s different responses to these tasks my aim was also emphasizing their participation, allowing them to guide me in the interview by highlighting the important dimensions of experience from their own perspective. There are, however, limits to the extent to which these methods may be said to be participatory. The self-portrait is of the three the most unstructured and open method, since it does not presuppose anything about what the participant would have to do with the paper they are given. This open format does not always favour participation though: some people may feel uncomfortable with it, as it happened with one young woman, who asserted the modality of her participation by actually denying her involvement with this method. As it emerged, younger participants happily got involved with the self-portrait, whereas some degree of resistance, such as defensively pointing out one’s poor drawing abilities, was sometimes present with the older sample. It must be said, however, that it was in fact with this relatively older sample that the self-portrait could collect data that were particularly evocative and insightful.

Although I gave a rather flexible context for their production, relational maps were relying on some assumptions about people: the assumption that they would see themselves at the centre of a relational world. Without the input of placing oneself in the middle of the paper, perhaps not everyone would have attributed this centrality to the self. The importance of relationships in people's lives was another assumption implied in this task: what about someone who would want to stress that they were in fact alone in the world, and for whom relationships' importance was defined through their absence? This method does lead participants to consider their lives in ways that might make sense within the context of the study, but which may not actually be the most significant to them on a subjective level.

In a similar way, timelines might have been really useful to collect the range of biographical events that young people saw as important in their lives, yet the concept of 'timeline' inherently suggests a linear interpretation of time, which as we have seen was not actually that participatory, since it made it difficult to take part for the young people with mental disabilities, who could not relate to it. Time may be subjectively experienced in ways that are not linear and that do not easily rest within the parameters of a mathematical progression. People may experience time in a circular way, with repetition being more important than progression. Perceiving life through repetition of events may link one's own experiences to past generations and even to mythical stories that are meaningful to the self. The very idea of defining one's life through a forward facing trajectory can be highly problematic. Indeed, even within this study two participants chose different ways of representing their lifetime, drawing a wavy line with ups and downs in one case, and a vertical line going downwards in another.

It must also be noted that these were solicited data, which were specifically made for research purposes. Their production was contextual to the interview, and arose out of interaction with the researcher. Some elements might not have been present in the data had it not been for my own input, which might occasionally have been stronger and more evident than other times. When producing their drawings, not dissimilarly from when answering interview questions, young people might consciously have tried to project some self-presentation that could match what in their view the researcher was looking for. The quality of the rapport established with each participant will also have contributed to the extent to which they may have felt comfortable in these visual tasks.

In this article I have shown examples of data collected through these three visual methods in relation to each other and in context with interview extracts. The analysis I carried out of these data was contextual with the rest of the materials, visual and text-based, that I collected within the projects. I do not consider visual data simply as an add-on to text-based analyses, but as significantly contributing to making sense at all different stages in the analytical process. With the aid of the Atlas.ti software I coded all data using the same

multi-media coding system, which enabled me to link text with visual-based quotations and to interrogate data on multiple levels. Both images and texts were analysed in terms of the stories that were being told, according to the parameters of narrative analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). Attention was paid both to what was present in the stories and to what was not there, and comparisons across cases were particularly useful in this respect.

Mixing methods allows one to see things from different perspectives and to look at data in creative ways. Throughout the analysis, I made an effort to establish links between documents of different type, so as to test and to validate any emerging interpretation through recurrence across multiple sources. The insights gathered from the reading of visual documents were sometimes extremely helpful thanks to the evocative quality of images, which can represent concepts in a particularly condensed manner. This made it possible to construct interpretations that were sometimes visually led. Visual data can thus centrally guide the process of analysis, allowing even participants' own metaphors to lead in constructing interpretations.

In this article, the contextual reading of images and text from these two projects provided important information on the substantive level with relation to the moments in their lives young people regarded as significant and fateful, as well as their projected life-plans, and the expectations they had about the events that might provide meaning to their lives in the future. Information was gathered also about some of the qualities and rituals that seem to be central to the youth culture, including the expectation to travel, and about the importance of different relationships, the relevance of family in their lives, including the modalities with which different people might be reference points for their identities.

The longitudinal application of these methods has shown how the clarity and 'condensing' effect that may be associated with images and which can have such strong analytical potential can sometimes come as a surprise for the authors themselves even after a relatively short time since the moment of their production. Within a prospective qualitative longitudinal research, such as the Young Lives and Times study, the researchers who will be involved in future waves of data collection will have plenty of materials in the archive that could be applied as prompts for elicitation. Seeing how the young people will respond to the drawings they produced years earlier, at 13 and 15 years old, should allow an interesting investigation of their own understandings of the changes that time will have brought to their lives. The longitudinal aspect could also potentially provide an opportunity for involving the young people in the analytical process, and for scrutinizing interpretations in the light of participants' views.

NOTE

1. All names have been changed to pseudonyms that were chosen by participants themselves. Drawings have been edited, with names and other identifiers either removed or changed.
2. Instant messaging software.

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