



Methods for Change

Life Mapping

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Life Mapping



Life Mapping is a qualitative narrative visual method that involves following a person's life over a specified time period, from a point in the past through to the present day. The researcher asks the participant open-ended questions about their life history while the participant uses pens and paper to draw or 'map' significant moments in their life in relation to the topic being explored. For example, if homelessness were to be explored, participants who had experienced homelessness might be asked to draw the first place they remember living in, up until the present day. The researcher would then use the participants' drawings as a prompt for further questions, developing a rich personal account of an individual's life. Life Mapping therefore encourages the participant to draw their memories, with the participant's own drawings assisting the participant and researcher to talk together about these moments in space and time. The visualisation within the Life Mapping method is about the participant's own drawing as a process that aids in the exploration of emotions and memory about certain places and times across a life-course. The flexible and interpretive nature of the visual component means a range of different life maps can be created. While some participants may draw a line, which rises and falls at different moments to depict their life events or emotional journey; others may create detailed sketches of buildings or places. While some may present something akin to a flow diagram; others might draw abstract shapes to represent different places. These unique interpretations can shed light on different experiences, provide insight into how specific services might be improved, and highlight what matters to individuals. This versatile method can be used to understand a person's entire life, or a particular period in their life, in relation to a particular topic or issue. While Life Mapping is most often used to explore the past through to the present, future oriented reflections can also be incorporated.



How does Life Mapping create or contribute to change?

Change is a central component of Life Mapping; the method is often used to understand points of change and transition in individual life-courses. This method allows researchers and participants alike to better understand the circumstances that might have led an individual's life to unfold in a particular way. Comprehending these often-overlooked processes might then shed light on various opportunities and challenges in relation to particular services or wider prospects. The tensions and conflicts that Life Mapping reveals can then influence the allocation of resources. For example, in the homelessness project that is introduced in greater detail later in this guide, leaving home as a teenager indicated a risk of homelessness throughout the lifetime. Policy and interventions could focus on increasing resources for individuals or families via mediation in the mid-teenage years or financially supporting the young person to leave in a managed way if home life is not possible.

Participating in a Life Mapping exercise could also instigate ongoing reflection for participants as they continuously and retroactively construct a narrative around their lives. The memories awakened by the Life Mapping exercise might then encourage participants to reframe old social connections or situations. In the case of family-finding work, in which mapping is used directly to re-find social networks, this may bring about reunification with family members which in turn provides support opportunities.

What ideas or concepts influence Life Mapping?

The development of Life Mapping as a social science research method is influenced by the work of sociologist Robert Atkinson who is a major proponent of Life Story Interviewing. Like other social science research methods including Oral and Life Histories, Life Story Interviewing and Life Mapping are concerned with the narrative study of the life-course. Outside of academic practice, adaptations of the Life Mapping method have been used in social work practice and post-conflict family reunification (see De Lay, 2003). It is the participatory and visual component that defines the Life Mapping method, and this is influenced by a shift toward visual and participatory methods across the social sciences more generally. Life Mapping is also part of the narrative tradition, in that participants are invited to construct and share a story of their lives with the researcher. By listening to how participants narrate their story, researchers can understand how meaning is continuously constructed. Like any kind of narrative method, the stories participants share are selectively crafted, oriented toward what they understand to be significant in that particular moment. This makes Life Mapping a reflexive method in which participants are likely to revisit parts of the map they had already drawn at a later point in the interview as they iteratively recraft their narrative.



Why might I want to use Life Mapping?

- Life Mapping can help researchers to better understand issues in the context of an individuals' entire life. This broad perspective can shed light on nuances and dynamics that might otherwise be overlooked by more traditional research methods, such as interviewing.
- Through participating in a Life Mapping activity, participants may come to realise certain burdens, validate personal experiences and obtain greater self-knowledge and awareness.
- The flexibility afforded by Life Mapping means this method can be as simple or complex as the researcher and participant desire. Some participants may talk for hours and provide detailed drawings, whereas others may wish to talk for a shorter amount of time, creating simple or schematic drawings, or drawing abstract shapes and arrows.
- The visual timeline that is produced through the Life Mapping method can help participants and researchers to understand the ambiguity and complexity of life by cataloguing and reflecting on significant events, either those oriented to by participants or structured around a particular research topic.
- Paying attention to what participants choose to draw and how much time they spend on different sections of their life map can provide insight into what matters to individuals. In the homelessness project, for example, participants would often detail their personal achievements, such as sporting prowess or owning a business or property. This nuanced understanding might help to disrupt dominant representations or stereotypes surrounding particular societal groups by highlighting the differences therein.
- The act of drawing and writing might help participants to reflect in greater depth than in a conventional interview setting, and in this way gives participants the opportunity to move beyond an often stereotypical 'usual' story. This is because drawing helps to divert attention away from a question-and-answer structure toward a more reflective practice as participants decide what to draw and the researcher can respond as the life map progresses.



Step by step guide to using Life Mapping:

- 1. Evaluate your aims.** Life Mapping offers a flexible way of creating narratives of people's life histories and enables a visual depiction of an individual's story. This creative method will produce rich detail of the participant's understanding of their experiences and can be structured around a particular topic or experience.
- 2. Select an appropriate environment to conduct Life Mapping.** This environment will preferably be somewhere that the participants are familiar with to ensure they feel comfortable. For example, if you are researching with drug users, it might make sense to conduct the Life Mapping in a support service location that they have visited before.
- 3. Set the scene and create the right atmosphere.** It is a good idea to bring some biscuits and drinks with you and place these on a table before participants arrive. You might also want to arrange pens and paper on the table to foreshadow the mapping activity. Preparing the space in this way can help to put participants at ease by providing a sociable focal point and reinstating the nature of the mapping exercise.
- 4. Ask participants your first question.** Remember, Life Mapping often follows a chronological structure, so you may want to start with the earliest point in the participant's life you are interested in hearing about. This might be from their earliest memory, or you may have selected a specific timeframe in their life. Try to not be too rigid with this and let the participant lead.
- 5. Participants will begin to story their lives.** It is your job to continue asking thoughtful questions that move the Life Mapping exercise in a useful direction. This can be both forwards and backwards. Remember that the Life Mapping exercises are interpreted differently by people, so adapt your approach if necessary.

Think carefully about the types of questions you are asking and how to word them. For example, if you are researching a sensitive topic such as homelessness, try to avoid asking participants to draw their first home as this has complex connotations of family, love, and security. A better way of framing this might be to ask participants to reflect on the first place they remember living in.

Before you begin the interview, be sure to get the participant's permission to audio record the conversation that will unfold as the map is drawn. You can then listen back to this audio alongside observing the visual life map to help you make sense of the material once the activity has ended.



Step by step guide to using Life Mapping:

Remember to pay attention to what the participant is drawing as well as to what they are saying. If the participant is spending a long time on a specific moment and drawing in detail, try not to rush them and instead ask about the drawing; it may be a significant moment for them.

6. Think of a way to end the interview.

If you have reached the present day the interview will find a natural ending, while ending the interview at another stage will require more consideration. You can end the interview by thanking the participant for sharing their story with you, switching off the audio recorder and changing the feel of the conversation to be more general to help the participant return to the present.

7. Point participants to extra help and services.

Life Mapping exercises can sometimes evoke unpleasant memories. Even if you think the exercise has gone smoothly, it is your responsibility to signpost participants to any relevant further help and support on the day so offer an information sheet of useful phone numbers.

8. Follow up with participants.

It might be a good idea to phone your participants to check they are feeling okay a few days after the Life Mapping exercise.

9. Creatively use the maps.

This can be done in a range of ways, from life maps forming the central analytical focus to being used to supplement the interview transcripts. Life maps can also be used effectively within reports and presentations and may illustrate the story of people's lives in a more impactful way than a written account.



Ryan's life map showing his housing history in a series of houses, flats, and a tent.



Examples of Life Mapping in social science research

Homelessness in Oxford: Risks and opportunities across housing and homeless transitions

Researchers: Dr Elisabeth Garratt, The University of Sheffield, and Dr Jan Flaherty, Kings College London

In this project, Life Mapping was used to explore people's life histories around the topic of housing and homelessness. The research focused on risks in the transitions between housing and homelessness to better understand different types of homelessness such as sofa surfing, street homelessness and statutory homelessness, people's movements between these, and the reasons for such movements. It highlighted the frequent – sometimes constant – transitioning between unstable housing and homeless experiences. For many participants this instability was rooted in their early lives and often took several forms, and began a trajectory of insecure housing and homelessness. Many participants had left home to live independently as teenagers, first became homeless during the teen years or had experienced traumatic events.

Noting that many participants had complex and unstable lives, the visual cues provided by Life Maps acted as an aide-mémoire while providing the opportunity for participants to reveal and revisit their practical and emotional understandings of their earlier life and life events. Jason, one participant in

this research, used his Life Map as a tangible framework when reviewing his history, offering a summary both to himself and the researcher when indicating how: 'So, I'd gone from prison, to the bail hostel house, to here, to here, to here'. Sam, another participant, similarly contextualised the relationship difficulties and mental health issues that led him to experience homelessness in his 40s as stemming from trauma induced by childhood domestic violence.

Some participants produced detailed drawings. For example, Angavu grew up in an African country before seeking asylum in the UK as a young adult. She drew her boarding school surrounded by a fence to illustrate the rural area, and explained how elephants and other animals would approach the school grounds. When later describing her experiences in the UK, Angavu drew several rows of windows to depict the scale of the tower block where she lived when awaiting her asylum assessment.



Where else could Life Mapping be used?

Life Mapping can be used in a range of different settings to numerous ends. This method is particularly useful when researching anything with a temporal theme; that has a sense of emotional interpretation; topics which might have high and low points; or sensitive subjects. It is adaptable in that it can be used to look in an open way across the life-course or be structured around a particular theme, such as political engagement, people's interaction with services, or their experience of technology.

Life Mapping can be used with an identifiable group – such as people who use particular services – and could be used to explore their relationships with those services. For example, using Life Mapping with young people in care or those using drug services may help to understand how services have featured in an individual's life, what works or does not work within services, and their emotional experiences of this. As Life Mapping is a creative approach it can help to get past the usual 'service stories' people may offer in an attempt to access relevant support. Asking people to tell their service story may further reveal a very different experience than outcomes may indicate, such as a child staying in the family home or an individual successfully engaging with drug or mental health services. Life maps could then help inform service practice or even the environments they are operating in.

To give an example, a form of Life Mapping has been used to show highs and lows of weight loss journeys throughout participants' lives. Life Mapping is especially valuable to explore topics that contain a sense of scale, such as weight loss (Sheridan et al., 2011), as participants' weight can be plotted visually to provide both an overarching trajectory and more detailed variation over time. In this example, one participant identified a period of fluctuating weight she had not previously noticed, which represented challenges to maintaining her weight and served to reinforce her ongoing motivation to 'keep that nice steady line'. In this example, photographs were incorporated within participants' timelines to ground and illustrate their weight over time.

Top tips

1. Remember to be sensitive. Even if you are exploring a particular theme, when discussing someone's life, you can never be too sure what will be disclosed.
2. Patience is key. Remember you are talking with participants about long periods – sometimes their entire lives – and that this is likely to take longer than a standard interview.
3. To avoid confusion, provide a clear explanation of what Life Mapping involves before you begin researching.
4. Be flexible. Different participants will be more, or less, willing to talk and draw than others.



Further reading

- Mobility Mapping and Flow Diagrams: Tools for Family Tracing and Social Reintegration Work
- Timelining: Visualizing experience
- Homelessness in Oxford: Risks and opportunities across housing and homeless transitions.
- How to make a mobility map

To reference: Garratt, E., Flaherty, J., Barron, A. (2021). 'Life Mapping' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



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