# Methods for Change:

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# Methods for Change:

## Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems.

*Edited by:*
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# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

## About the Methods for Change project and collection

*Change defines the contemporary world. As social science researchers we are often interested in investigating various forms of social, environmental, economic or political change, but we rarely directly explore the ways that the research methods we employ themselves create change. Given the complex and interconnected problems the world is currently facing, this is an important moment to mobilise the potential of social science methodologies with non-academic stakeholders to invoke transformative socio-ecological and political change.*

The Methods for Change project arose out of a recognition that the robust methodologies developed within the social sciences – qualitative, interpretive or creative – could be more widely shared with non-academic sectors. Change does not always have to be dramatic or large-scale to make a difference to peoples' lived experience. This collection therefore focuses on a range of methods that invoke change at a variety of scales – from large-scale environmental, social or economic changes through to organisational, community and personal change.

Herein you will find a unique compilation of 30 'how to' guides about innovative methodologies from across the social sciences. Each guide is led by, and based on the research of, academic colleagues working within one of the Aspect network institutions, co-authored with members of the Methods for Change team. The guides cover the depth and breadth of interdisciplinary qualitative social research, across multiple perspectives and topics. All the guides are free to use and open access – so please do share widely.

Interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral working is commonplace within the social sciences, with growing interest across academic, policy-maker and practitioner communities as to the possibilities of method for deepening understandings of societal, environmental and political problems. These sectors already engage with a range of social science research methods, and there is increasing recognition of the value of creative, participatory and visual methods to enliven understandings of social and material worlds. There is still so much more to learn across practitioner and academic communities around ways of collaborative working including how we might more fully utilise social science methods across various sectors to create change. Not least, we are mindful of the often resource constrained environments in which academic research, policy research, and practice takes place. Therefore, these how-to guides are a way of sharing methods to create and understand transformative change in research across sectors.

# Introduction

## Using the collection

All the guides in this collection are written in an accessible, jargon-free style. Each chapter provides a bite-sized overview of a method used in the social sciences, case study examples from real-world research, and ideas for how these methods could be used in future. The guides aim to equip the reader with an understanding of how to use the method in practice, in a range of settings. Step-by-step guidelines are included to give a sense of the types of practical and ethical considerations as well as activities and equipment to consider when using each approach. These guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive, but instead invite the reader to think about how the method could be reinterpreted in different contexts.

We envisage that these guides will be useful to researchers and teams working in a variety of ways, including in research projects, policy research and design, programme monitoring and evaluation, staff training, and in teaching research design and methodology at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

This collection therefore has two key functions. First, to introduce readers to new and exciting methodologies for researching social, environmental and political change, and second, to inspire readers to innovate with these methodologies themselves.

## About the guides

Each how-to guide follows a similar structure. A short introduction to the method is first provided, followed by a consideration of how the method creates or contributes to change. Next, the ideas and concepts that influence the method are discussed, before highlighting why the method is particularly useful. This is followed by a step-by-step guide outlining how the method might be used in practice. Examples of how the method has been used in social science research and where else the method could be useful in future are then discussed. The guides close by offering 'top tips' to keep in mind when using the method and a list of further reading.

Each guide is also accompanied by a creative output that communicates the value of the approach. These include illustrations, booklets, animations, videos and more. The how-to guides and creative outputs can all be found on the *Aspect website*

# Contributor Biographies

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Jenna C. Ashton is an artist and curator, and Lecturer in Heritage Studies, at the Institute for Cultural Practices, University of Manchester. Jenna's research contributes to the evolving multidisciplinary area of "heritage studies" theory and practice. Her expertise concerns feminist social practice and creative methods for a critical understanding, construction and analysis of heritage, where it intersects with social and ecological (in)justice.

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Fraser How is an independent consultant in the areas of design, communication and effective collaboration. He is a trainer and facilitator in Ketso, co-developing many of the approaches used with the toolkit. His interests include regenerative systems (particularly the RoundView project with Joanne Tippett), and sensemaking.

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Methods for Change

# Photo go-alongs


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# Photo go-alongs

*Photo go-alongs involve undertaking a journey with a participant whilst talking and taking photographs. The walk or journey may follow a predetermined route designed by or for the participant, perhaps visiting significant places or a site of interest.*

Alternatively, the photo go-along may take the form of an unstructured wander around a place, such as a town centre. It could also involve accompanying a participant on an activity, perhaps one they usually undertake like a walk to the shop or walking a dog. Whilst moving, participants are encouraged to photograph and discuss anything of significance to them. This could be anything from litter on the street, to renowned buildings, and everything between. The combination of movement, talking and photography allows participants to think about places and events critically, as they consider which route to take and what to photograph and discuss. Photo go-alongs are particularly useful for researchers who are interested in understanding the complex lives of participants in order to bring lived experiences to light. Like other arts-based and participatory approaches, photo go-alongs allow researchers to understand the world from the perspective of participants, provide rich insight into how participants make sense of the world, and illuminate the dynamics amidst people and place.

## How do photo go-alongs create or contribute to change?

Arts-based methods (which include photo go-alongs, video, collaging, mobile and other participatory approaches) recognise how positive change can happen in the process of researching rather than just from research outputs. While the material created using photo go-alongs can have a measurable impact by feeding into the development of policies, change can also be subtle, shifting and emotional, taking place at an individual and group level. Participatory and arts-based methods can provide an opportunity for capacity building for participants which can take the form of new social connections or by simply providing a space for participants to talk about their lives and interests. For example, participants may use their involvement in the research project to introduce themselves to others and discuss the activity, where they visited and what was photographed, allowing new connections to be forged.

While arts-based methods can be used to generate material, they can also assist in creatively communicating and disseminating research findings. The photographs and narratives gathered might be used to create an exhibition or a photo and story collection to share with different audiences. The material generated using photo go-alongs can be used to influence policy and businesses by providing reflections on local policy decisions, or to get at the lived experiences of certain policy areas. For example, photo go-alongs can be used to understand areas and services that need improvement, such as waste and transport infrastructure; to provide insight into the experiences of under-represented groups, such as older people, ethnic minorities and children; and to shed light on those facets of experience that are often obscured in policies in favour of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches. Sharing the photographs and narratives also creates space for people to talk about themselves and their lives.

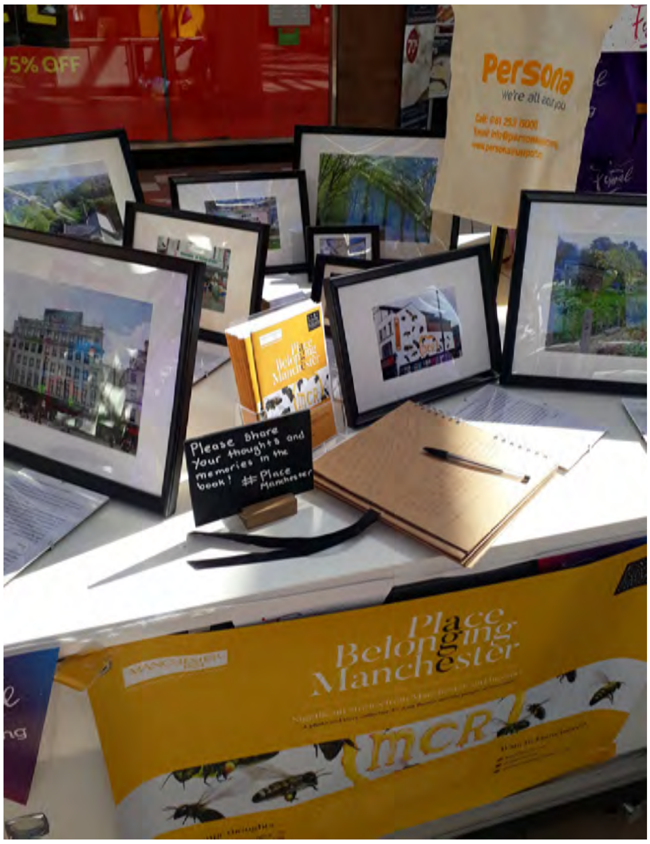
## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Photo go-alongs might be understood as a participatory and arts-based method. Like the creative arts, photo go-alongs can be used to facilitate imagination, discovery and exploration. They are concerned with the process of researching and knowledge creation as much as the product of research. They are usually less concerned with the number of participants engaged with than the depth and richness of the material created. Photo go-alongs might also be influenced by participatory approaches in that participants can be invited to interpret and lead on how the method is used. For example, while one participant may prefer to drive, pausing and walking at significant places; another might invite the researcher to go-along to an activity they usually take part in, such as an exercise class or shopping trip. While one participant may have planned a walking route on which several significant places are predetermined, another may prefer to wander around a place, pausing and reflecting when something piques their interest. Part of the participatory and arts-based approach then involves being flexible, responsive and adaptive to both the needs of the participants and the researcher as they arise. This ethos of openness means that it might be useful to use photo go-alongs alongside other approaches, such as object-oriented interviews, group discussions or video, to add depth to the material created.Participants are encouraged to share in the process of conducting research, from deciding where and how research encounters happen, to identifying research questions and problems that need investigating.

# Photo go-alongs

## Why might I want to use photo go-alongs?

- Photo go-alongs help to see the world from the perspective of participants. They create detailed material which can provide insight into the lives of participants, foregrounding what matters to them.
- They get at the messiness of life. While participants may have selected specific places to visit, it is likely they will vocalise thoughts and feelings as they move through landscapes. A fleeting smell may momentarily connect a participant with their childhood, or a glimpse of litter might encourage a participant to photograph it before reflecting on societal change.
- Photo go-alongs encourage mindfulness. Rather than skimming across the surface of things, they encourage participants to reflect: What is significant? What shall I choose to photograph?
- They allow the researcher to see the decision-making processes of participants as they decide what is significant to them and what to photograph. Sometimes observing this process can reveal more interesting dynamics and provocations than the photographs themselves.
- Photo go-alongs can add depth and richness to policy. While it is often necessary for policies to reduce the complexity of people's lives to simple action points in order to get things done, it is equally as important to understand everyday lived experiences, as a reality check for what policy is doing. Photo go-alongs make it possible to tailor policy to the lives of people that it affects.




*The Place, Belonging Manchester photo and story collection at the Festival of Ageing*

- Photo go-alongs can be enjoyable. Often, participants really engage with the creative nature of the task, using it as an opportunity to reflect and learn about their lives in relation to different places, generating a wealth of material.
- The photographs and narratives shared can be used to creatively communicate research to different audiences, whether this be through websites, presentations, exhibitions or to accompany more traditional policy briefs and reports.

# Photo go-alongs

## Step by step guide to using photo go-alongs:

1. **Think about why you want to do the photo go-alongs.** What are you trying to find out? Try to come up with a broad aim for your research and supplement this with two to three research questions which get at specific dimensions of this aim. Research questions might focus on the population, community, context or place you wish to better understand, for example.
2. **Recruit participants and provide information on the project.** You could recruit participants by contacting an existing group (such as a community group); by going through an individual or gatekeeper; by spending time in a place and approaching people; or by placing adverts in a local newspaper or online.
3. **Approach participants to meet for a walk or journey.** If possible, let the participant lead on what form the journey might take and its length. Perhaps they may choose to devise a specific route with points of interest or maybe they prefer to wander around one place of significance.

*Photo go-alongs may be usefully adapted in relation to different needs. If a participant is unwilling or unable to walk, why not accompany them on a drive, pausing and walking at significant locations. Perhaps you could join them on a bike ride or accompany them on a bus journey. If they cannot leave their home you could undertake a virtual journey online.*

4. **Be flexible to the needs of the participant.** Before you set off, show the participants the camera you have and ask whether they would like to use it or if they prefer to use their own. Explain that they can take the photographs themselves or they may prefer you to do this. The aim is to make the participant feel comfortable. If the participant does not wish to use a camera, why not ask if they are able to share some photographs they already have or to point you to online visual materials and resources. Be clear about where the photographs will be stored and for how long. Repeat this process with all participants.

*Photo go-alongs can also be used to generate quicker outcomes over shorter timescales without the researcher needing to be present. To do this, participants could be equipped with a camera and asked to follow a predefined instruction. A follow-up meeting could then be arranged to discuss outcomes.*

5. **Record the conversations while walking and talking.** If the participant does not want to be audio-recorded then make notes afterwards about the photo go-along and what was discussed. Some participants may be more comfortable using a more discrete recording device such as a mobile phone. If the participant is happy to be audio-recorded, recordings can provide another layer of sensory material to analyse alongside the

photographs. Moreover, do not forget about sounds other than the participant's voice. Can you hear birds, cars, talking? Is the participant commenting on the sound or smell-scapes? You might also take notes on other senses that came into play in addition to aural and visual senses.

*Why not arrange to meet participants on more than one occasion to do another go-along in a different way? If the participant had planned a route for the first photo go-along, why not ask to accompany them on an activity next time? Would the photo go-along be very different at another time of day, week, season, or year? This might provide insight into what the participants understand to be significant changes over time and in relation to different contexts.*

6. **Safely store the photographs and audio material on a computer and transcribe the recordings.** Read the transcriptions on several occasions, highlighting recurring topics and points of interest. The photographs should be analysed in conjunction with the photo-walks and on-going conversations rather than independently. Understanding photographs as situated within the go-along can help to tease out nuances between different participants.

*Given the immersive nature of photo go-alongs, it is important to remember that the material generated will not be representative of the experiences of all and to consider the diversity of experiences that might fall outside of the individuals engaged with.*

7. **Use the photographs and accounts collected to creatively disseminate research findings.** Think about how to communicate these findings to diverse audiences. The photographs and narratives could be used to tell a story about the community, individuals and places engaged with. Why not create an exhibition or use some of the photographs and narratives to punctuate a report or presentation? Can they be used as a provocation to open further areas of research?

*Sharing the material created can be a good way of bringing people together, celebrating the project and thanking participants for their time and participation.*

## Examples of using photo go-alongs in social science research

**More-than older age: making sense of place**

**Researcher: Dr Amy Barron, The University of Manchester**

This research used photo go-alongs whilst researching with thirty-two older people from Prestwich, Greater Manchester. One aim of this research was to foreground the lived dimensions of older age against the policy backdrop of creating what the World Health Organisation call 'age-friendly cities'. Policies targeted at older age have a tendency to focus on common medical and/or mobility needs, overlooking the rich diversity of what it means to be an older person. As such, this research sought to highlight the social and cultural components of being an older person in Prestwich. Photo go-alongs were used alongside a suite of other creative and participatory approaches to understand the city from the perspective of older individuals. This flexible combination of methods shed light on those often-overlooked aspects of life (memories, emotions and practices) which are obscured in policy agendas geared toward older people in favour of a top-down approach. In this project, photo go-alongs:

i) Demonstrated the importance of creating spaces in the city that are welcoming and a space of respite.

ii) Foregrounded commonalities amongst a diverse group, such as the importance of specific buildings, monuments or statues as way-finders and memory-joggers.

iii) Highlighted how individual life histories shape the ways people understand and engage with a place.

iv) Showed how the experience of the city can vary greatly depending on the other practices and events that are encountered.

v) Revealed how age, disability and the urban landscape combine to effect feelings of safety and belonging. For example, points where being a wheelchair user might be challenging.

The photographs and narratives created by participants were used to collaboratively assemble a photo and story collection called 'Place, Belonging, Manchester' which was shared at different venues across Greater Manchester for the region's 'Festival of Ageing' which was part of the age-friendly initiative. The focus of the event was not about the number or quality of the photographs, nor on the composition of the collection. Rather, the collection i) offered a way of disrupting reductive representations of older age by showing the diverse ways participants led their lives and ii) provided a place for visitors to discuss and share their own opinions and perspectives. The collection served to open conversation between policy makers, older people and academics about what 'older age' means whilst also sharing it with the communities who had shared their time and thoughts.

## Examples of using photo go-alongs in social science research

**Age-friendly seating and sense of place**

**Researcher: Dr Amy Barron, The University of Manchester**

This research explored how older people understand and experience a variety of seating in five different city-centre areas in Manchester. The study focused both on the design of seating and the more complex aspects of place, from an age-friendly perspective. The relationship between design, people and place was explored through surveying the number and style of benches available and semi-structured walking interviews in which participants photographed different seating and places used as seating, such as walls. These photographs were then overlaid onto a map to create a picture of feelings associated with the variety of seating available in the city. The photo go-along highlighted the importance of developing a place-based understanding of seating, based on the perspective of older people going about their everyday lives. A report was then written for Manchester City Council which was shared with the Age-Friendly Manchester Design Group, The Older People's Board, Age-Friendly Bristol and the Intergenerational Design Symposium. This report is available on Manchester City Council's website and is used to inform policy decisions on how to make cities more inclusive and accessible for older people.

# Photo go-alongs

## Where else could photo go-alongs be used?

The diversity of ways photo go-alongs can be used makes them suitable for researching a range of topics. For example:

- Photo go-alongs might be usefully incorporated into urban design or place-making decisions and policies by providing insight into how different people use, interact and relate to a place. The combination of movement and photography can reveal patterns of interaction between different people, shedding light on how communities and places come into being. Photo go-alongs would highlight how depth and meaning emerge through everyday practices, showing what is important to those who live there.
- History groups, museums and other cultural venues could use photo go-alongs to document the living memories and histories of places and communities. The mobile and mindful nature of photo go-alongs means participants reflect on things that are part and parcel of everyday life, foregrounding accounts that might otherwise be forgotten or overlooked.
- They might be used to foster dialogue between different stakeholders, particularly in diverse communities. For example, individuals from different backgrounds could be asked to photograph what is important to them in their neighbourhood in relation to a proposed redevelopment or initiative. The photographs taken could then be used to engender conversation, build understandings of difference and enable a decision to be made that will best serve the community as a whole.

### Top tips

1. Be clear about the flexible, open and participant-led nature of this method. Sometimes the freedom provided by this approach can be unfamiliar to participants who might expect a more defined set of instructions.
2. Let participants lead on deciding how the research will unfold by being open and responsive to needs and suggestions as they emerge.
3. Immerse and engage in the process. Too often research is presented as a neat and definitive activity in which a 'researcher' extracts information from a 'participant' to then 'accurately represent' it back to the world in the form of statistics and facts. The reality is that the world is much messier than these categories allow. Trying to confine the messy and evolving world into pre-defined boxes not only undermines how life takes place but can exclude interesting and important aspects of life.

# Photo go-alongs

## Further reading

- More-than-representational approaches to the life-course.
- Seating and sense of place report.
- Checklists alone cannot create age-friendly places: lived experiences matter.
- Beyond 'older age': a photo and story collection to illuminate the individual.
- Pluralising the walking interview: Researching (im)mobilities with Muslim women.

**To reference:** Barron, A. (2021). 'Photo go-alongs', 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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# Participatory Activist Research


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# Participatory Activist Research

*Participatory Activist Research requires the researcher to participate in the thing that they are trying to understand. This approach can be useful for exploring the workings of communities, groups and organisations, and contributing to their goals in the process.*

It is premised on the researcher spending time in a place, observing and experiencing what happens in the daily lives of individuals involved in that setting. The type, duration and level of participation may vary depending on the needs of the group and the wishes of participants. In some contexts, the approach may be based primarily around observing what is taking place in an organisation and reporting back. In others, the researcher may play a more active role in shaping what happens in the scene in which they are working. It builds upon Participatory Action Research and other ways to describe this more activist oriented participatory approach are ‘scholar activism’ or ‘doings in place’.

## How does Participatory Activist Research create or contribute to change?

Participatory Activist Research is a method that supports organisations and communities to meet their own objectives, which may include social or environmental transformation of some kind. As such, the types of change that this approach facilitates tend to be led by the individuals and groups involved. While change is often assumed to occur when a research project is complete and recommendations are published, in participatory research change can begin from the moment the researcher starts asking questions. The initial dialogue between researcher and participants provides an opportunity for reflection that may not ordinarily take place. By offering an outside perspective on day-to-day activity, Participatory Activist Research can provide fresh insight for participants into practices and ways of working that they may otherwise take for granted. By documenting activities and achievements and presenting them back, Participatory Activist Research can often validate and encourage organisations in their work.

*Tao teaching Jenny carpentry as he builds his house at Lammas Eco-village*

## What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

Participatory Activist Research is influenced by feminist and postcolonial frameworks, which ask us to read the world for difference, and to notice the mundane and the everyday. Ethically, Participatory Activist Research is committed to going beyond extracting knowledge from communities, by instead actively contributing to the goals of the individuals and groups involved in the research. Like other participatory and ethnographic approaches, it looks beyond surface explanations and verbal accounts. It is based on the idea that the researcher needs to be involved in the detail of what participants do, as well as what they say, to really understand what is happening within that community. It builds upon earlier notions of Participatory Action Research in its explicit call for researchers to not only participate but to actively work with communities to help them achieve their goals.

## Why might I want to use Participatory Activist Research?

- Participatory Activist Research can be used when working with organisations of various sizes, including activist groups that have a strong intent and clear idea of what they are trying to achieve. It can be used to help organisations, groups or communities check that their work is meeting its aims effectively, and to point to problems, opportunities or questions they may otherwise overlook.
- It works with participants as equal partners in the research, to identify the questions or issues they wish to explore. As a result, participants may feel more invested in the research and be able to recognise a tangible benefit from their involvement.
- By working to support the aims of participants, it is useful for researching communities and groups that are busy, focused on campaigning, or with limited resources or time to devote freely to a research project. Designing research around the needs of participants and offering to volunteer in the day-to-day work of the organisation can support the researcher to gain access, and can make the process of research more meaningful and useful for those involved.
- This is an approach that requires patience and often intensive, long term participation, but it can yield surprising results. Spending time observing and listening carefully can expose complex issues, around, for example, race, gender or income that participants may be less inclined to talk about in an interview. Taking part in mundane, everyday activities can help identify the barriers that may be stopping a group reaching its goals.
- As well as exploring particular questions or issues, Participatory Activist Research can benefit participants by describing and documenting their activities, achievements and journeys, and presenting these observations back to them. It can play an important role in validating the efforts of groups or organisations, encouraging and raising awareness about their work.


*Hoppie cutting old wine bottles into glass bricks for use in the construction of a wall in her eco-house*

## Step by step guide to using Participatory Activist Research:

1. **Learn about the organisation and context:** Start by doing some background research to understand the organisation involved in the research. This may include reading online materials or reports, or perhaps some light touch observation in the space where this group comes together. This is important for developing a base of knowledge before discussions begin and for establishing rapport with participants.
2. **Connect with key individuals:** Arrange a meeting with key individuals to talk about the issues or questions they may be interested in exploring through the research. Ask the group what they would like to achieve, what is preventing them reaching this goal, what are they struggling with, or what would they like to know more about?

*The aim of initial conversations is to reach an agreement about what the research will explore. This dialogue is not completely participant led - the researcher will bring their own questions and ideas, but should approach these discussions with an open mind and aim to build the research around the needs of the participants.*

3. **Make a research plan:** Write down an outline of the research, including its focus, duration, methods involved (e.g. recorded interviews, taking photographs, writing field notes), and outputs that will be produced (e.g. a summary, a report, articles). Give the group time to reflect on this document when the researcher is not present, to ensure everyone agrees on what has been proposed. Provide participants with options for how they will be identified or anonymised, both individually and collectively, and expect consent to be an ongoing process that may be revisited and renegotiated over the course of the research.
4. **Articulate the value of the research:** Participants may be busy, with limited time or resources. Work with participants to understand what the researcher can do to support their aims and day to day activities. This may mean volunteering for an agreed period of time.

*If you are staying with a community, be clear on whether you will be paying for accommodation or food, and if there are any rules you are expected to follow while on site.*

5. **Spend time with participants:** This could include volunteering on specific tasks (e.g. gardening, building), joining in with meetings and communal activities (e.g. cooking, eating together, washing up), and carrying out some core methods such as semi-structured interviews, filming, or writing observational notes. It can be useful to present yourself as an enthusiastic novice, rather than an expert, to encourage participants to explain what they are doing or working on.
6. **Be present and stay on track:** Pay attention to what happens in the moments between these more structured activities. Something as mundane as sharing a cup of tea can give both researcher and participant a chance to relax and reflect, often yielding rich insight. Make time for breaks, and remember to write up field notes at the end of each day while they are still fresh.
7. **Share findings diversely and creatively.** Plan to produce a range of different outputs, with differing timescales, considering what would be most interesting and useful for participants.

## An example of using Participatory Activist Research in social science research

**Affordable eco-homes: low-income environmental solutions**

**Researcher: Prof. Jenny Pickerill, The University of Sheffield**

This research project aimed to understand the approaches and practices that make affordable eco-building possible, in order to identify how we can create more opportunities for people to self-build their own eco-homes. It focused on working with successful small-scale, community-led, self-built eco-developments targeted at low-income residents in England, Spain, Thailand, USA and Argentina. The researcher worked with organisations who advocated for more self-build or eco-homes.

It involved the researcher staying with the community, paying for accommodation, joining with communal activities such as eating, washing up and cleaning. Other methods included interviews (with builders, architects and residents), writing observations, and taking photographs. In the process of writing up the research, new themes emerged. These were then taken back to the community and discussed in communal conversations. The researcher produced a short, descriptive report about the place which was shared with participants, and then published in a blog. Academic articles and a book based on the research were drafted between 6 and 12 months later, and shared with the community for feedback. When complete each case study was sent a hard copy of the book 'Eco-homes'.

The Participatory Activist Research approach was particularly useful in this context as residents initially struggled to articulate what was different about how they built their homes or how they lived because it was normal for them. It often took doing things with them, and for the researcher to ask why something was done a certain way, for interviewees to then explain and reflect on a process that to them appeared obvious and mundane.

This work has been impactful in how it has shared the possibilities of self-build low-cost housing practices, has been used to support planning applications, and has resulted in productive conversations with planners and architects. Participants have also noted how the research helped them feel validated and enabled further conversations in their communities about some of the issues raised.

## Where else could Participatory Activist Research be used?

Participatory Activist Research has great potential to be used in settings where it is helpful to build up a systematic picture of how ordinary everyday action is making a difference to the world. Charities, third sector organisations, community groups, global activist organisations and start-up companies all engage in a variety of practices that build a sense of purpose, trust and action. Some groups have a specific vision of how to move forward; other groups may have less of a clearly defined purpose. Whatever the structure of your organisation it can sometimes be helpful to stop and reflect on how things are actually working, in practice, and whether this aligns with overall goals and the change a group wants to make in the world.

While monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks may help to assess what is working; Participatory Activist Research is useful for organisations who are interested in demonstrating how the 'mundane' activities build up to create organisational culture and wider societal and environmental impact. It is sometimes helpful to bring in an external person (researcher) to do this, and there are often students, academics and other researchers who might be interested in participating in your organisation to create change – reach out to your local university! Alternatively, this can be done within the group, by setting up a framework for the research, creating space for conversation and analysis, and noting the small details.

### Top tips

1. Start slowly. Take your time to get to know the place and the people.
2. Write everything down, including things that seem irrelevant at the time. The smallest observation can turn out to be the most interesting.
3. Listen very carefully if people tell you there is an area they do not want to discuss. The aim is not to understand every detail of a person's life, but to explore a topic, issue or question.
4. Make sure you do your bit and participate fully. This may mean doing the washing up or the cleaning. Make sure you are contributing and pulling your weight!
5. Always provide feedback. If you just disappear, participants can be left feeling confused and disappointed, and it can damage any potential future research in that space or community (for yourself and other researchers).

## Further reading

The following bibliography is a good starting point for resources on activist research methods:

- Activist Research Methods

These academic journal articles are also useful further reading on Participatory Activist research and related approaches:

- Doings with the land and sea: Decolonising geographies, Indigeneity, and enacting place-agency
- Feminist geographies and participatory action research: co-producing narratives with people and place

**To reference:** Pickerill, J., Pottinger, L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Participatory Activist Research' 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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# Gentle Methodologies

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# Gentle Methodologies

*A Gentle Methodology offers an approach for designing research that is sensitive, collaborative, and careful, and which can attune to small-scale, mundane and non-verbal detail. Gentleness is understood as a particular orientation towards participants, materials and oneself in planning, carrying out and representing research with individuals, groups and environments. It can be useful to think about Gentle Methodologies as bringing together three key components: 1) the body; 2) pace; and 3) sharing.*

As a methodology (rather than a method) this approach offers a particular way of thinking about or framing participatory and ethnographic research. Gentle Methodologies can therefore bring together an array of different methods. These are often focused on doing activities (which will vary depending on the research context) together with participants, over an extended timeframe where possible. Gentle Methodologies have an ethical commitment to treating research participants, places and materials with care, minimising disruption, and contributing in a meaningful way to the objectives and priorities of those involved in the research. They are particularly useful for shedding light on lived experience and subtle detail, and for understanding what is important to people in their everyday lives.

## How do gentle methodologies create or contribute to change?

Gentle Methodologies can lead to powerful change. As well as generating new understandings and theories about the topic under investigation, Gentle Methodologies, like other participatory approaches, provide opportunities to directly support the transformative objectives of those involved in the research. This could happen in a number of ways, such as: working with members of a community group to understand and raise awareness of a particular local issue; volunteering at an event or as part of the daily activities of a charity or service provider while observing what is taking place; or producing written or photographic material to document and evaluate a project, which could be used to secure future funding. As such, they are particularly useful in research that sets out to work *with* (rather than *on* or *for*) communities, groups, organisations or institutions as co-researchers or partners.

At an individual level, participants involved in gentle research may value the process of talking about, showing, or reflecting on things that they view as important. A gentle approach extends to the process of presenting and sharing research findings, and using them to galvanise change. Sarah Corbett's work on 'craftivism', for example, highlights the disarming effect of presenting decision makers with crafted items featuring activist messages. These gently rendered, often hand-stitched demands can provoke a powerful response in the receiver. By attuning to and amplifying small, subtle details, Gentle Methodologies can make the mundane matter. They draw attention to and make a case for actions, concerns, or connections between people that are important, yet often overlooked.

## What ideas or concepts are connected with this approach?

Gentle Methodologies are closely linked to participatory and ethnographic approaches, which involve taking part in, observing and going along with participants either in their daily activities, working environments or as they perform a particular task. They are influenced by feminist approaches that foreground mundane, embodied experience and care, and are informed by recent writing about 'humble', 'slow' and multi-sensory approaches in geography and the wider social sciences.

A Gentle Methodology is formed of three elements: the body, pace, and sharing. Research adopting this approach pays attention to the bodies and bodily conduct of researcher and researched, and is concerned with small details, emotions, and materials. It aims to be responsive and is often slowly paced, involving repeat engagements with participants over an extended duration or activities that encourage slower ways of moving, working or reflecting. Participants are encouraged to share in the process of conducting research, from deciding where and how research encounters happen, to identifying research questions and problems that need investigating.

## Why might I want to use a gentle methodology?

- Gentle Methodologies aim to document, analyse and understand embodied detail: what is done by and felt within the body of both researcher and participant, including emotions and sensations, as well as what is verbally spoken or written.
- The slow pace of gentle approaches enables meaningful, trusted relationships to be developed over time. It allows space for researchers and participants to reflect, to return with new questions, and to build theories that can be tested.
- Gentle Methodologies can complement the agendas of individuals or groups, by working alongside participants towards shared goals and by amplifying quiet or overlooked aspects of their activity.
- They are well suited to understanding motivations, enthusiasms and practices. They ask what is meaningful or important to people, by looking closely at, for example, where participants' time and energies are focused, which actions are repeated, and the material and immaterial things that are shared in the course of the research. Like other participatory and ethnographic approaches, they are interested in what people do, as well as what they say.
- Gentle approaches can shed light on the things, relationships or causes that participants care for and about. They can illuminate how care is expressed and performed in mundane, material and interpersonal forms.

*Going along with practical, seasonal tasks:removing seeds from ripe tomatoes with participants during a research encounter*

## Step by step guide to using gentle methodologies:

1. **Identify research participants:** This may mean working with an existing group or organisation, or locating a collection of individuals connected by a shared occupation, interest or practice. Start conversations about how the research could be valuable to participants. Are there questions they want to investigate, concerns they wish to amplify or resources that could be developed as part of the project?

2. **Locate the spaces of research:** Find out about where these groups or organisations get together, or the types of spaces where shared activities take place. Understanding the places that make up the research field will help with designing appropriate methods. E.g. is there a key location or multiple research sites? Are they indoor or outdoor? Who else uses the space?

3. **Timing and pacing:** a gentle methodological approach works best when carried out slowly, over an extended timeframe that allows for seasonal variations in activity and long-term immersion in a place, community, or practice. This is not always possible, however! To make the most of available time, think about organising several separate encounters, at different times of day, days of the week, or points in the year. Are there key events or activities that are important for you to join? Try to make space in the research for activities that go at a slow pace – gardening or crafting together are a few examples. Build in opportunities during research encounters for quiet and reflection – this can be effective where the research has a shorter timeframe.

4. **Get involved:** The process of deciding on methods for collecting data is likely to be ongoing and evolving. Think about what ordinarily takes place in these groups or communities and find activities you can go along with. Can you volunteer in a way that supports their work? Perhaps cook or eat a meal together, or take part in building or making something? You could ask participants to design an experience based on the topic of the research, or you could facilitate a collective writing or filming session to document their priorities or interests. The conversations around this process can be illuminating – notice what is included, what is cut and how decisions are made. You may also wish to introduce new methods such as photo go-alongs, interviews, or object oriented methods, each of which will generate different insights.

*Continual reflection on the practical and ethical issues raised by the research is part of this process. Remember to check in with participants throughout, develop mutual understandings about what participants are consenting to and what activity is included within the research.*

5. **Collect data:** Record some conversations, take notes, take photos, and pay attention to the material and immaterial things that are shared with you in the course of the research. Observe what participants are doing with their bodies – where do they congregate, how long do they linger, what activities are they immersed in, what do they handle? What practical or physical tasks can you experience yourself? Draw on as many senses as possible, and note what you feel, smell, taste, hear and see. Notice emotional responses, both your own and those of participants.

6. **Share findings:** Again, you don't need to wait until the end - there may be insights to share at various points in the project. Participants can play an active role in this aspect. Think about how you can work together to persuade, raise awareness, celebrate, or create change. Methods for sharing findings could include an exhibition, a workshop, a co-written blog or article, or an online resource. This depends on research context, participants' priorities and what you want to amplify.

7. **Analyse data:** Approach analysis as a process that happens throughout the research, not just at the end. Build in time to look for patterns and themes across your data as you go. This may generate new questions or topics to introduce to participants. Seek out their reflections, ideas and questions too.


*Seed swap table at Seedy Sunday Brighton, an annual seed sharing event*

## An example of a Gentle Methodology in social science research

**Cultivating alternatives: crafting, sharing and propagating seed saving practice in the UK**

**Researcher: Dr Laura Pottinger**

This research examined the practices of "seed savers" - gardeners who cultivate fruits and vegetables, then select, process, and save seeds for themselves and other growers. It explored the relationship between the mundane dimensions of seed saving and gardeners' broader experiences of environmental activism. With fieldwork carried out over fourteen months, the research took place in gardens, allotments, and seed exchange events with seed savers identified through an annual seed swap event, Seedy Sunday Brighton, and Garden Organic's Heritage Seed Library.

Rather than setting out with a clear set of research questions or hypotheses, it instead began through a process of going along with gardeners in their everyday activities with plants and seeds. Practically, this included helping out with garden jobs like weeding or tying in tomatoes, putting seeds into packets ready for a seed swap event at which the researcher then volunteered, and generally spending time with participants in their growing spaces. The research was organised around repeat encounters with participants spaced across a full year, or 'growing season', in order to gain insight into the different seasonal practices they performed. Themes and questions developed throughout this process, with each new visit enabling fresh questions to be explored together with participants. The methods used also evolved as the project progressed. Participants often initiated a guided walk as part of these encounters, as well as building in time to share food or a cup of tea. Eating, walking and working became important methods in themselves, allowing for multi-sensory observation and participation.

Though gentle, these methods are highly significant to understanding important local to global challenges including biodiversity loss, climate change, local urban greening to mitigate heat islands, food sovereignty and more. Paying attention to the different things that were shared across the research – seeds, plants, recipes, advice, time, crops, stories – helped shed light on the ideas, principles and material things that were important to participants in practical, often non-verbal ways. Using Gentle Methodologies here highlighted gardeners' everyday and embodied contributions to preserving biodiversity, keeping cherished varieties in circulation, and avoiding commercial transactions in favour of community seed production. They helped to shed light on practices that were often performed quietly or at a small scale, yet were widespread within this community. Understanding these dynamics can benefit community organisations and interest groups working on complex socio-environmental challenges by identifying, drawing together, and amplifying attitudes and behaviours that may otherwise be under-acknowledged, and they therefore hold the potential to galvanise further action.

## Where else could a gentle methodology be used?

This approach can be used to research spaces already considered gentle, where care is performed, or where things happen at a slow place or low volume, as in the seed saving research outlined above or other community settings. It would also be well suited, for example, in research into everyday experiences of mental health or related care settings, for investigating arts practice and for evaluation of the wide-ranging impacts of mutual aid or community projects. Elements of a Gentle Methodology could also be introduced into many different aspects of policy research or other institutional processes. A gentle approach can be adopted in these settings by ensuring that time, space and reflection is embedded in research or planning processes; by creating fun and creative moments in teams to foreground embodied practices, the sharing of knowledge and material things; and by paying attention to the pace of activity and whether moments of calm and creativity may be conducive to building new ideas or cultivating trust in teams. Gentle Methodologies can also offer fresh insight into places or practices less often associated with gentle qualities, where quietness or tenderness may be undervalued or glossed over. As such, gentle approaches could be used to research the working practices of activist groups or corporate organisations, or for understanding the impacts of national and regional policies on local communities.

### Top tips

1. As well as paying attention to what is tender, quiet, careful, and subtle, notice things that are not gentle too. Observe where they contradict or collide with gentle ways of being or doing, or can be expressed in the same actions.
2. Try not to edit out uncomfortable sensations and emotions that arise in the process of research. Though they are often discounted as trivial or even unprofessional when it comes to writing and representing findings, they can point to what is important.
3. Build in time to pause. Taking a break from the field or changing the pace can be a useful strategy, allowing time for ideas to percolate and for the researcher and participants to reflect, return, and revisit the research afresh.

## Further reading

- Craftivist Collective. BBC Radio 4 Four Thought: Full Script.
- Treading carefully through tomatoes: embodying a gentle methodological approach.
- Planting the seeds of a quiet activism.
- Towards humble geographies.

**To reference:** Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Gentle Methodologies' 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.

The University of Manchester

Methods for Change

# Object-oriented Interviews

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# Object-oriented Interviews

*Object-oriented Interviews involve talking about and with objects to learn about the everyday lives of different people. The interview might happen around objects which have been deliberately selected by the participant or interviewer, or it might unfold in a more ad hoc way, talking around a loose collection of objects.*

Either way encountering objects happens as a result of a participant-led tour of their space or when undertaking a task together, such as sorting or cleaning. Object-orientated interviews may take place in a participant's home, at their workplace, or even in a self-storage unit, in order to see the objects in-situ and allow for opportunities to handle them.

Rather than being determined by a list of questions, object-oriented-interviews are often concerned with the journey that more open discussions about objects might take us on. Participants are encouraged to reflect on their relationship with their objects, how this may have changed over time, and is revealed by where the object resides. Approaching the interview from a recollection of memories or feelings associated with an object(s) leads organically to narratives of an individual's personal or family biography, including discussion of responsibilities, challenges, hopes, and fears.

# Object-oriented Interviews

## How does this method create or contribute to change?

As with many social science research methods, a lot of change occurs in the process of undertaking Object-oriented Interviews. This can vary from a participant having a realisation or expressing emotion, to being a subtle thought or feeling that 'sticks around' with a participant for a while after the interview has finished. Often these moments of change occur because participants are engaging with objects that they had stored away or forgotten, which may signify an important person, place, or event in their life. Participants have described object-orientated interviews as being cathartic, as they have provided the opportunity to share and reflect in-depth on their experiences, such as bereavement, instability, or strains on relationships. Throughout the interview, the researcher takes on the role of a supportive listener and is equipped with information about advice and support services should the participant need them.

Object-oriented Interviews can also contribute to the creation of change in a broader sense, for businesses, charities, or organisations. The material collected from Object-oriented Interviews provides an in-depth insight into people's lived experiences of using particular services or ways in which their daily needs are being met or not. This information can be used when building the case for funding or investment in services, such as domestic support, highlight ways in which these services can be improved to better support clients, and also be used in the lobbying of councils and national governments.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Object-orientated interviews are a form of object elicitation which became popular in the social sciences during the 'material turn' of the 1990s. This shift led researchers to focus on other parts of consumption, other than acquiring an item, to include using, keeping, and disposal. Research in this area worked to better understand the mundane and everyday interactions we have with our things, which are fundamental to our identities, homes, and relationships. A number of approaches were developed to understand objects as parts of networks or assemblages, or focusing on their 'affective' qualities, but object-orientated interviews take the approach that objects are 'biographical'. This means that they are enlivened by the memories and emotions endowed upon them, and therefore become an extension of the self.

The object-orientated interview combines the method of using objects to elicit responses from participants with home tours or 'go-alongs' and/or hands-on tasks such as sorting or cleaning. The tactility of picking up and viewing objects as part of a tour or task, means that objects can be examined, touched, and even smelt by the participant if they want. Unlike traditional object elicitation methods, object-orientated interviews also allow for instances when objects are not visible but can be talked about in a general or collective sense. For example, a participant could gesture to a box and talk about the contents belonging to their child and this would generate discussions around parenthood and care. The box could be opened during the interview to look at specific items, but it is not necessary for the method to work.

# Object-oriented Interviews

## Why might I want to use Object-oriented Interviews?

- Object-oriented Interviews are a great means to talk about the mundane things that make up our everyday lives, but we rarely pay much attention to. In particular they are well suited to research about people's homes, as this is where we keep most of our things.
- They can provide rich insights into an individual's life course. Talking about and with objects can be used to discuss significant life events such as divorce or bereavement, or transitions including becoming an adult or ageing.
- Object-oriented Interviews help participants to untangle complex processes that make up their lives. The tactile nature of this method helps participants to talk about emotions, feelings, and memories to a greater depth than in a more traditional interview.
- Participants have a large degree of autonomy in choosing the direction and content of the interview, so can decide what they would or would not like to talk about. As a researcher noting which objects are ignored or avoided can also be revealing.
- Object-orientated interviews provide large quantities of rich data as participant's recount their everyday experiences, as well as their reflections on how these relate or are significant to broader issues or concerns.
- Taking part in object-interviews can be cathartic for participants, as they have the opportunity to share and reflect in-depth on their experiences in a supportive environment, and with someone outside of their immediate networks.

## Step by step guide to using Object-oriented Interviews:

1. **Recruit participants.** This can be done through gatekeepers, advertising on social media or specific community platforms, or word of mouth. Working with gatekeepers can help you get in touch with people who might not be reachable in other ways, such as service users or marginalised groups.

*If you are working with a gatekeeper, you might need to come up with a partnership agreement together. This would cover issues such as the sharing of data, which may be important for participants to know before they agree to take part.*

2. **Meet your participant.** Whilst this step isn't totally necessary, do consider meeting your participant in a public place, like a café, before the object-orientated interview. This allows you to build rapport in a safe environment before meeting in a private or more secluded place. During this meeting you could conduct a more traditional interview if that provides useful background information to the object-orientated interview.

3. **Conduct the object-oriented interview.** Keeping the tone conversational and begin the interview with broad questions to put the participant at ease. Then ask your participant to discuss the things in the room/cupboard/box. Some participants won't need much prompting, but if you need to you can direct their attention to different objects. Although you may have an idea of the type of things you hope to discuss, have the confidence to let the participant lead and observe their reactions to particular objects only asking follow-up questions to tease out their significance if needed.

*Think about how you record the interview. Object-oriented interviews often involve moving around a space or undertaking a hands-on task, so holding your recorder or setting it up in one place might not be convenient. Instead wear the recorder around your neck or wrist.*

*It is worth paying attention to how the participant is interacting with the objects. Are they picking it up and inspecting it? Are they holding it close? Where do they put it afterwards?*

*Remember that object-oriented interviews may unexpectedly unearth sensitive topics and memories. Check-in with participants regularly to see if they are comfortable, would like to change topic, take a break, or stop.*

4. **Take photographs.** Having a photographic record of the objects discussed can be really helpful in the analysis process, to remember or contextualise what is being discussed in the transcripts. If you have permission from participants, you can also use the photographs in outputs.

5. **Tidy and finish up.** If you have got things out or made a bit of mess during the interview, help your participant tidy up or put things away before wrapping up and ending the interview.

*If you have been undertaking a task as part of the interview, such as decluttering, you might need to do things afterwards – like take the bins out or make arrangements for objects to be taken to a charity shop – which have been agreed in advance but go beyond the scope of the interview itself.*

6. **Write down fieldnotes**. Since you'll have been busy during the object-orientated interview you will need to find a time as soon as possible afterwards to write down any reflections or immediate thoughts. These notes may form the basis of your analysis or future writing.

7. **Back at your computer.** Be sure to back-up recordings, photographs, and fieldnotes securely, and transcribe interview recordings. Analyse your collected data by identifying reoccurring or significant themes; an analysis software such as NVivo can be helpful here.

## Examples of using Object-oriented Interviews in social science research

**Getting your stuff together: The role of decluttering services in the management of domestic materiality over the life course**

**Researcher: Dr Jennifer Owen, Cardiff University**

The Attic Project, between Care & Repair Cymru, Safer Wales, Care & Repair Cardiff and the Vale, and Newport Care & Repair, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. The project supported older people to sort through accumulated things in their homes which were preventing adaptations, repairs or downsizing, and therefore impacting on their quality of life in several ways.

The researcher worked as a volunteer on the project to assist older people to declutter, and in the process reminisce about the objects in their home. This decluttering took different forms, depending on what the older people needed and on their physical capabilities.

This project adopted a more participatory approach to object-orientated interviews where decluttering was the primary task and the ethnographic conversations came about organically from undertaking the process. Topics which emerged from conversations included support needs, family disputes, fears about health and growing older, independence, and loneliness.

The report generated from this research is now being used as a means to promote the importance of decluttering as a service that sits between housing, social care and health provision.

## Examples of using Object-oriented Interviews in social science research

**'Out of sight, out of mind' - The place of self-storage in securing pasts, ordering the present and enabling futures**

**Researcher: Dr Jennifer Owen, Cardiff University**

The researcher worked with self-storage companies to recruit participants who rent storage units of various sizes, for different durations, and for a range of different reasons including moving to a new house, following a bereavement, hiding an activity from a partner, and making space at home.

After an initial interview at a nearby café, the researcher went with the participant to their storage unit. Here participants were confronted with things they had not seen for a long time, and talked through their memories, feelings, and attachments to their things and how this had changed as a result of them being distanced from their homes for a period of time.

Conversations often unfolded around collections of sealed boxes which participants were reluctant to open, because they were difficult to access in the tight and not completely private space of the self-storage facility or because they did not feel ready to see their contents. The object-orientated interviews nevertheless provided interesting insights because participants could talk about the process of moving their things to self-storage when reminded of how they had placed things into the unit for example, and discuss what they remembered or had forgotten about what was stored within.

*Emma's rejected things from her self-storage unit, visiting it for the first time in 3 years on return from working abroad*

*Myles's storage unit, keeping things out of harm's way during major home renovations*

## Where else could object-Orientated Interviews be used?

The diversity of ways Object-oriented Interviews can be used makes them suitable for researching a range of topics. For example:

- This method could be usefully applied to business, charity and other organisational contexts where domestic possessions are foregrounded, either temporarily or permanently, in people's lives and are linked to wider issues or challenges they are encountering.
- For example, object-orientated interviews could be used by homeless or refugee charities, or elderly care facilities, to understand how to support people moving between different between home environments, by identifying what is important to them in their daily lives.
- Housing Associations may come across residents who need help with dealing with accumulations of things. Using object-orientated interviews could help them to better understanding of why things have been held on to or are meaningful and then make personalised recommendations.

### Top tips

1. Go with the flow and don't not expect a linear timeline from interviews. Allow the participant to take the lead, open boxes, and the conversation to meander around different objects, topics, and times. The way the interview unfolds will match how the participant makes sense of their things and circumstances.
2. Don't worry if you can't see or touch any objects. Objects can be talked about in a collective sense and seeing things boxed up and put away can be just as emotive as engaging with single objects.

## Further reading

- Object interviews: getting participants to encounter and/or connect with things
- Object interviews, material imaginings and 'unsettling' methods: interdisciplinary approaches to understanding materials and material culture
- Sensory Methods
- The Hidden History of the Mantlepiece
- Enhancing Meaning-Making in Research through Sensory Engagement with Material Objects

**To reference:** Owen, J., Barron, A. and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Object-oriented Interviews' 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

Methods for Change

# Oral Histories and Futures


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# Oral Histories and Futures

*Oral Histories and Futures involve the recording of people's experiences and opinions about their pasts, present and futures. They adopt a detailed and comprehensive approach to thinking about an individual's life, as situated within a particular economic, social and political context.*

Typically used to research, document and preserve the unique life trajectories of marginalised groups, they move beyond collecting and recollecting life-courses to consider the present and the prospective. Oral Histories and Futures are about accessing imaginaries – thoughts, hopes, dreams, desires, possibilities – and understanding how the person we are today is shaped by the person we might want to become at some other point in the future. Participants are encouraged to talk about what they wanted to happen that has not, as much as where they might like their lives to go, thereby providing narratives that are multidirectional and multitemporal. While interviewing is the primary means of gathering data, Oral Histories and Futures can also incorporate a participatory component. This might involve asking participants to map their biographies on a timeline or asking them to write a note to their future self, and to reflect on these activities as part of the interview.

## How do Oral Histories and Futures create or contribute to change?

With Oral Histories and Futures, change does not have to be extravagant, grandiose or overtly transformational. Rather, change can be minor, subtle and something that is induced collectively. Through listening to the stories of individuals and understanding them as situated within particular contexts, Oral Histories and Futures can capture experiences of change surrounding culture, choice and preferences over time. Change can also come from unearthing and sharing often overlooked and marginalised experiences. Simply taking the time to listen to someone's life story can change how the participant and the researcher feel about themselves and their place in the world. If an interview has the potential to change someone then the researcher also has a responsibility to make sure they signpost to available support or counselling, and to recognise that the change might not always be positive or expected.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Oral Histories and Futures build on the Oral History tradition by using interviewing techniques to record, document and preserve marginalised experiences. The innovation comes with the incorporation of the 'Futures' or prospective component. Building in a futures-oriented element is based on the premise that the narratives participants offer about their past and future imaginaries are always crafted in relation to what participants imagine for themselves in the future. This future might be immediate or further afield. In Oral Histories and Futures, participants are also encouraged to discuss how present experiences are shaped by their past. To miss out these imaginaries of the past and future would therefore provide an incomplete account of everyday life. Driven by a curiosity to gain rich insight into people's lives from personal perspectives and in the round, Oral Histories and Futures also take inspiration from participatory approaches by incorporating an interactive element. The participatory component is optional (see below) but insightful for how it encourages reflection, engagement and deeper consideration on the part of the interviewee.

## Why might I want to use Oral Histories and Futures?

- The storying of biographies, as the key purpose of Oral Histories and Futures, can encourage participants to understand all elements in their lives together in novel ways, by enveloping in reflections on past, present and future selves. As such, the method facilitates a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the lives of individuals and how they relate to particular contexts.
- Oral Histories and Futures can be used to bring marginalised voices and experience to the fore. Marginalised does not only apply to a particular social group (such as women or older people, for example). This method could also be used to shed light on an industry, a place, or an event, or to document a particular cultural, economic or political moment, such as a music genre or sub-culture, protests or elections, or economic crises.
- Oral Histories and Futures are also flexible methods that can be enrolled with other techniques, such as participatory life mapping or photo elicitation.
- Oral Histories and Futures provide rich material and often vast amounts of data – interviews are usually 60-90 minutes, and when accompanied by a task this produces a transcript and additional materials. By providing a space for participants to openly reflect, this method produces a mix of detailed day-to-day accounts and experiences as well as thick description of the life of a participant in the round.
- This method respects participants' narratives and can provide an open reflexive space for interviewees. Participants often feel better having spoken about something with an uncritical stranger and tend to leave understanding that their story matters. The space of the interview is also often used to work through ideas which the researcher is simultaneously considering.


*A hand reaching for a recorder, produced by Tom Young.*

## Step by step guide to using Oral Histories and Futures:

1. **Who and what to research?** Before you start collecting data, make sure you know what marginalised experiences you are trying to capture and what will be done with that data. If the data will be used for an archive or in a public capacity, you will need to make sure that you draft recording agreements beforehand.

2. **Recruit participants.** You can recruit participants in different ways including through gatekeepers, word of mouth, advertising on social media or through specific platforms to target people in an area or community.  Once research has started, you could also ask participants if they know of anyone who is experiencing similar things who might be interested in being involved.

*Make sure participants are aware that an Oral History and Future is different to an interview in that they will be talking about details of their personal biographies, and to only answer questions that they are comfortable with.*

3. **Arrive equipped with a very simple sheet of questions and prompts.** These questions should be a mixture of broad questions and generic prompts. You should start with questions that give the participant the chance to talk freely. Perhaps ask why they wanted to take part in the project. If the participant opens up at the start, this might provide a hint into something in their life that you can pick up on later.

*Remember that Oral Histories and Futures are a conversational tool. You should try to keep as quiet as possible, rather than aim for a dialogue, giving the participant the time and space to talk and offering an interested, empathetic ear. As you move through the questions, work at a pace that matches theirs, so the participant does not feel rushed.*

5. **Introduce a participatory task.** The participatory element can happen in any part of the interview, but experience shows it works well when embedded later into the interview.  If you are incorporating a participatory element, be sure to let the participants know beforehand.  You could, for example, ask participants to reflect on what one piece of advice they would give to their future self and ask them to write it on a postcard.

5. **How to end?** When you feel you have addressed all questions let the participant know in a gentle way to avoid an abrupt end to the interview. Ask the participant if there is anything that you have not asked that they think you should know, or whether there is anything about their situation that you might be interested in.

6. **Checking in.**. At the end of the interview, check that the participant feels okay and that they are still happy with what they have agreed to. If you are worried about somebody's wellbeing or the impact the interview has had on them, ensure they have somebody with them, in person or on the phone. You can also ask them to contact you later in the day, or you can contact them the next morning to check they are okay. Remember to signpost them to support or advice channels where necessary.

## An example of where Oral Histories and Futures have been used in social science research

**Lived experiences of reproduction in austerity**

**Researcher: Dr Sarah Marie Hall, The University of Manchester**

This project is based on decisions around 'reproduction' – namely, having children or more children – within the context of austerity. The project took place with participants in the North East of England as this area has been hit particularly hard by austerity cuts and also has some of the lowest birth rates in the UK. Oral Histories and Futures were developed in this project to look at the experiences of people between the ages of 18 and 45 to talk about and understand why they have not had children, or as many children as they may have wanted, because of concerns about income, living arrangements, childcare costs and other factors.

In previous ethnographies of everyday life in austerity I had integrated biographical life mapping into discussions with participants, and the Oral Histories and Futures methodology evolved from here. The Oral Histories and Futures interviews ask about personal biographies, expectations of having their own children, present circumstances and future imaginaries. They also involve participants giving advice to their future selves, in the form of writing (or imagining writing) on a postcard. By experimenting with Oral History and Futures methods, the project has transformative potential for interdisciplinary understandings and real-world applications concerning socio-spatial economic inequalities.

Many policy and charity organisations working on issues related to the focus of this project (poverty, welfare, family life, gendered inequalities etc.) recognise that policymaking processes need room for experimentation. There is also a wide appreciation that research which feeds into policy should go beyond shallow or anecdotal accounts. Policies which have an impact on people's lived experiences need to be informed by data that comes from people's lived experiences. The depth of Oral Histories and Future can provide such richness and detail, by investigating how people situate their lives and experiences in broader contexts.

## Where else could Oral Histories and Futures be used?

In capturing biographies in their fullest sense (memories, present experiences, imagined futures), Oral Histories and Futures can be applied to the study of people, things, institutions and places, and how they have changed over time. Oral Histories and Futures could be useful in research interested in the particular histories of a community, place or event, and they could also be used to explore different generational experiences or sub-cultures.

They can be useful beyond academia, and apply well to policy, third sector and industry; e.g. to explore the histories and futures of institutions, the formation or dissolution of community organisations, consumption and brand identities, or policy processes and adaptations. Some examples of organisations that could find this method particularly valuable include social housing providers, activist groups, and organisations that provide welfare support, who may be interested in exploring Oral Histories and Futures with service users, group members or other stakeholders.

The method can also be repeated over time, such as in projects with a longitudinal focus. Oral Histories and Futures can be incorporated into a broader research design, and match well with archival methods, ethnographic research and discourse analysis. They can also be integrated with secondary analysis and quantitative data, such as local and national demographic and economic statistics. The inclusion of Oral Histories and Futures can help to ensure that real world experiences are incorporated into policy-making in these various arenas.

### Top tips

1. Be patient. Don't push participants to respond if there is a silence or a pause.
2. Be flexible. Respond to the needs of the participant and adapt the method in a way that suits you.
3. Be comfortable with silences. A gentle prompt can encourage participants to speak further, knowing that you are interested in what they have to say.

## Further reading

- The Oral History society have a fantastic website and set of resources, including information on training in Oral History methods
- The US based equivalent, the Oral History Association, also have a very useful website
- The UK-based Scouts and Guides have some information on their website about activities and reflection on writing to future selves

**To reference:** Hall, SM., Barron, A. (2021). 'Oral Histories and Futures' 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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# Methods for Change

# Sociological Discourse Analysis

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# Sociological Discourse Analysis

*Sociological Discourse Analysis provides a lens to analyse writings or speeches as 'social texts'. This approach is designed to reveal what we take for granted and the boundaries of what we consider relevant and possible as we talk about issues.*

By studying the 'common sense' meanings, forms of knowledge and cultural conventions that people share in conversations, people's actions can often be better understood, than by directly asking people to share their attitudes and experiences. Understanding socially shared meanings can help to better understand practices and ways in which things are routinely done, which can hold environmental or social challenges. This approach can combine different methods and is most commonly applied to forms of text available and shared within and between communities and institutions, such as business or governmental reports, newspapers, websites, speeches or advertisements. However, researchers also use Sociological Discourse Analysis to analyse texts produced in research settings, such as interviews or written narratives. Methods to observe customs and habits have also been proven to be well suited for this approach.

## How does Sociological Discourse Analysis create or contribute to change?

In this particular form of discourse analysis, culturally shared forms of knowledge – assumptions and associations about how the world works – are identified. These forms of knowledge are also inherent in debates, speeches and other forms of communication about contemporary challenges and the solutions that are regarded as possible. Investigating these shared forms of knowledge can help to identify the constraints that they impose on the type and extent of change that is considered possible within communities, such as policy makers, businesses, interest groups or the general public, as to how societal or organisational challenges, for example gender equality, access to education, pollution or workers' rights, are approached. In this way, discourse analysis can be understood as a means to study limitations to social change: it enables us to see implicit assumptions about what we take as a given in society. By illuminating limitations as to how social problems are debated as well as barriers to how agendas for change are formulated, this method can highlight avenues for change in society and within organisations, communities and institutions.

## What ideas or concepts are connected with this approach?

Discourse analysis emphasises the role of language in the ways we see and organise social reality. It is applied in many disciplines, including linguistics, communication and psychology. Discourse-analytical approaches from sociology and related disciplines are influenced by the work of Michel Foucault and their focus is less on the rules and conventions of conversations, but on accepted, institutionalised, power-constituting forms of knowledge that are present in conversations. This does not mean that the people or organisations who are the speakers or writers of the texts analysed are privileged and powerful. Rather, texts are studied as examples of 'naturalised talk' within social contexts, regardless of the roles and positions of the participants. While privilege and power play a key role in how these interpretative practices affect different peoples' lives, they all communicate based on the same unspoken agreements on what is 'naturally' taken as a given, considered possible or impossible, and seen as relevant or irrelevant.

The sociological discourse-analytical approach, in which texts are analysed as 'social text', suggests that instead of being individual or universal thinkers, human beings subscribe to 'thought communities' - communities of differing interpretations of how the world works. Such 'communities' could include, for example, expert circles, generations, nations or interest groups. In this sense, this approach is also inspired by contemporary philosophical theories of intersubjectivity according to which individual experiences are developed and maintained as a 'common sense' which is shared with the wider social community.

## Why might I want to apply Sociological Discourse Analysis and what do I have take into consideration when choosing this approach?

- Sociological Discourse Analysis is designed to identify the various ways in which communities and institutions identify social phenomena and the problems associated with these phenomena. In doing this, it illuminates also perspectives that are marginalised or overlooked, and paths that have not been taken.
- This approach, rather than trying to solve pre-defined problems, seeks to identify ways in which problems could be framed differently. Research findings open up alternative ways to approach problems faced by communities, organisations and society as a whole. These can concern wider social structures, the ways in which institutions work and also the roles played by different actors.
- This approach is particularly suited to study social problems where the previous interrogation of people's attitudes and experiences has not been fruitful. For example, it might be useful when behaviour change policy repeatedly leads to the identification of a gap between people's attitudes and behaviours related to types of interventions.
- Analysing text through the lens of Sociological Discourse Analysis means that what people say or write is not taken at face value. Research results are therefore not descriptions of a social phenomenon or problem, but rather descriptions of the possible ways in which such phenomena or problems are seen or interpreted by people within a particular cultural context. This approach captures what is assumed as obvious and 'natural' to the extent that it is often not spoken about. In this way, a study does not become valid and reliable based on the selection of participants and the interaction between researcher and the researched. Rather, it is the researchers' interpretation of the text, which must be consistent and comprehensible.
- It is not the individual person or group who is analysed, but what they say and how they say it. It is based on the idea that when people communicate, they may express their own intentions or viewpoints, but have to formulate their thoughts based on the background of 'common sense' understandings shared by the community they are part of or speak to. Unlike behavioural and cognitive approaches, for example, this approach does not consider the contents of documents or interview answers as the product of the person or group who wrote the document or answered an interview question. It is thus not suited for projects which seek to capture individual peoples' authentic attitudes, experiences and intentions, as it inherently breaks with the view that this is what social science does.

## Step by step guide to Sociological Discourse Analysis:

1. **Identify text material that is well-suited to studying the research problem:** Depending on the research question, discourse analysis can be applied to large volumes of text material as well as to a small selection of samples. It can cover a range of origins (i.e. different 'producers' of text), formats (i.e. different forms of written or spoken texts, even images), contexts (i.e. audiences and general reach of text) and timescales (e.g. in and around a certain event or over a longer time period). Specifying the research question(s) will help to select an appropriate range of material.

2. **Identify the sources and context of production of the collected text material:** What is known about the socio-political and historical context in which it was produced and how does it fit into the 'bigger picture' of the research problem? When were they produced, by whom, and for what purpose? Were they related to any major events, how do they tie into broader debates? If the materials were generated in the research process, what was the setting and context in which these texts were created, how were participants selected and what were they asked to do? What genre does the text material belong to?

3. **Identify the patterns of variation:** After making yourself familiar with the material to identify thematic contexts raised, organise text by (sub-)topics and recognise the kind of descriptions and accounts of a topic that come up. What are the different versions of the topic that can be found within and across texts? What statements about the social problem/phenomenon are made in this text? What are the different 'angles' from which the social problem/phenomenon is approached? The aim of this process is to establish how these topics are brought up and connected in communication, rather than to identify topics in themselves. While it can be helpful to identify a big set of topics, the aim is not to produce an accurate account on the range of topics that come up, or the frequency/depth to which they are discussed.

4. **Identify internal contradictions:** Scan individual texts for various descriptions and accounts and look for inconsistencies within this text. Is there a variation to the ways in which the topic is approached within one text? Argumentative inconsistencies in the speech of one person are normal in communication, as the interpretations and arguments that are considered acceptable are dependent on the context of the conversation. At the same time, two people might express divergent opinions, but derive them from the same interpretation. The aim of this process is thus not to 'catch out' speakers for contradicting themselves or speakers of their community, but to further establish variability as to how a topic can be interpreted in different contexts. The same speaker/document taking more than one viewpoint on a topic without making an effort to resolve tensions between these viewpoints is an indication that these different interpretations exist in the wider discourse – studying additional material is helpful to verify this.

*Texts are not studied as descriptions of the research object, rather they are the research object in themselves. Text is viewed as a representation of the culturally shared 'common sense' ideas available to people in the community in and for which this text was produced. In this way, the discourse analytical approach illuminates the common contextual backgrounds and culturally shared ideas which are at the basis of the varying attitudes and aims that different individuals and groups express. Interviews are, for example, not analysed to find facts about how people think or behave, but are seen as linguistic expressions of shared understandings of how the world works. Therefore, in an appropriately executed study, questions on the speaker's political views or trustworthiness are irrelevant. Regardless of their intentions, speakers make themselves understood by referencing culturally shared interpretations of social phenomena or problems – and this is what we want to capture when we study writings and speech as social texts.*

5. **Identify basic assumptions:** Establish regular patterns, repeatedly occurring descriptions, explanations, and arguments across different texts to illuminate the particular ways in which social problems and phenomena are talked about. Does the text contain references to sources of evidence, or does it imply facts or knowledge on a subject matter?

6. **Identify the rules of the discourse and the ways in which they are interrelated with problems and possibilities:** In this final step, the findings of the text analysis are placed in the broader context that was established at the beginning. How do the basic assumptions provide starting points to speak about a topic in a specific way? How do they contribute to commonly accepted knowledge? What is the 'state of things' that these assumptions imply and how might this reflect and shape societal and institutional practices?

## Examples of Sociological Discourse Analysis in social science research

Much discourse analysis is concerned with texts that address social challenges and ideas of social change. The projects presented below represent two such examples.

**Environmentally and socially responsible consumption?**
**A study on food sustainability discourses**

**Researcher: Dr Ulrike Ehgartner, The University of Manchester**

This PhD project aimed to explore tensions within the wider agenda of sustainable food consumption and production in the UK. To meet this aim, the language of those who arguably have the power to influence food consumption to become more sustainable was analysed: professionals involved in matters of food distribution, retail, consumption and waste. The data used was a combination of policy documents, journalistic articles and interviews with practitioners who occupy senior roles in the field. Using Sociological Discourse Analysis, the projected assessed how these people speak and write about sustainability in the food system between 2005-2017.

One finding that came out of this research was that 'common sense' understandings about what is or is not 'sustainable' change over time, causing issues to come in and out of focus. One such dynamic concerns 'ethical premium' consumption, meaning consumers' willingness to pay a premium for a product communicating ethical information. Ethical consumption was an important way in which experts talked about food sustainability during the time from around 2006 to 2008, but was subsequently excluded from sustainability debates. While some food-industry related issues have profited from this development and gained prevalence to sustainability policy, it caused other concerns to fall off the sustainability agenda.

One such concern is organic farming. While an increase in consumer demand for organic produce in the 'early days' was considered a key evidence for progress towards a more sustainable food industry, organic consumption is barely mentioned in most expert accounts of sustainability. The experts focussed on eco-efficiency and arguments around global food security and thought organic farming to be irrelevant and a 'misnomer' to the sustainability agenda. Professionals had internalised these contradicting views to the extent that when they were formulating an agenda for food sustainability in the research interviews that were conducted in 2017, they would argue for conventional farming over organic, based on the argument that the former would be more 'eco-efficient' and therefore more sustainable. However, when thinking back to what had been achieved over the past 10-15 years in the same interview, they would refer to the organic movement as a positive example of progress towards sustainability. The organic chicken represents the symbolic object of this tension. In the years from 2008 onwards, experts have continuously referred to it for its low energy performance in comparison to the conventional chicken by the experts interviewed.

The analytical approach taken thus illuminated not only that there are contradictions to the ways in which 'sustainability' is tacitly defined, but it also allowed the tracing of the historical, political and economic background and context of competing interpretations. The findings can help practitioners in the field of organic production and consumption and the wider agri-food system to consider their positioning in relation to their contribution to a sustainable food system.

**Imagined Futures of Consumption**

**Researchers: Dr Daniel Welch & Dr Ulrike Ehgartner, The University of Manchester**

TThis project on ‘Imagined Futures of Consumption’ explores how the general public imagines the future of consumption, and the opportunities and limitations that come with these ‘imagined futures’. For this purpose, an empirical study was set up to identify the varying ways in which the future of consumption is interpreted in the public domain. This was realised through a collaboration with the Mass Observation Project at the University of Sussex, which involved a panel of volunteer writers, known as Mass Observers, writing descriptions of how they imagine ‘the future of consumption’.

Applying Sociological Discourse Analysis showed that the idea of a future in which we are all consuming less is not only ‘out there’, as an ‘interpretation’ of the future that is shared amongst the general public, but many also attach positive values to this idea, as well as a sense of agency and responsibility. Most strikingly, however, it showed that as opposed to other types of imagined futures (i.e. one dominated by technological innovation, which was vividly described with accounts of a re-organisation of everyday life around technological trends such as artificial intelligence, automation at work and at home, medical advances, human enhancement, artificial foods, advanced transport and renewable energy), imaginations of a future in which we consume less or in simpler, more considerate and slower ways, lacked ideas about what people would do on a day-to-day basis, i.e. how they would work, learn, socialise and enjoy themselves.

From a sociological viewpoint, these findings matter because they reveal the dominance and influence that technology-based storytelling has on how the future is imagined in the public domain, as opposed to accounts of environmental and social justice. Taking a discourse-analytical lens was absolutely essential to identify this. If, in contrast, a content analysis-based research approach had been taken, ideas of constrained consumption (both positive and negative) would have appeared much more prevalent than technological accounts. This would have led to the conclusion that the general public is highly concerned about the unsustainable impacts that our consumer culture has on society and environment. Having applied discourse analysis, this critical perspective on over-consumption could be observed, but it also revealed our lack of ability to imagine alternatives to the mass- and over-consumption that defined much of our day-to-day lives over the past century, illuminating limitations and challenges for social change. Practitioners who seek to establish more sustainable lifestyles across society might find this observation helpful and adapt their strategies accordingly, for example by working towards building stories of alternative lifestyles, rather than focussing on campaigns to convince people that consumerist lifestyles are not desirable.

## Where else could Sociological Discourse Analysis be used?

Taking a radically different perspective to study the experiences and motivations that people express, this approach is suited to investigate social phenomena and problems for which previous research and intervention has not led to the desired change. Applying this approach to analyse discourses in the public domain could help public and private sector organisations to better understand the shared meanings behind what appears to be polarised public opinions. Organisations could benefit from this approach to gain insights on how different causes that they stand or campaign for are framed and contextualised by the public or the scientific community. Gaining a different perspective in identifying problems associated with phenomena, policy makers could develop forms of interventions that have been not taken before. Activists, charities and those pushing for more radical change can use analysis to help build positive stories of alternative lifestyles.

## Top tips

1. Start with a small sample. Although the process of analysis can be labour intensive, the point where no new possible interpretations of a topic can be identified can be reached relatively quickly. Even a small sample text may suffice to indicate patterns of variation and what kinds of interpretations are possible. Once the statements and angles taken to talk about a social problem/phenomenon start to repeat themselves, the researcher is close to completing their analysis. The smaller, thoroughly analysed sample can then be tested against a larger set of data.
2. Combine different types of research material. In many social science approaches, the quality and generalisability of research findings can be increased by combining multiple data-gathering methods (e.g. observations, interviews and questionnaires). The study of speech as interpretations of how the world works can be enhanced by combining different types of research materials which were produced in different contexts of communication (e.g. websites of organisations, interviews with affiliates and social media engagement of members of the public).
3. Always remain critical of your own work. Make sure you only make claims that your material supports. Always have in mind that the aim of this method is not to show what people think or believe.

## Further reading

- The discursive framework of sustainability in UK food policy: The marginalised environmental dimension
- Imagined Futures of Consumption. Lay Expectations and Speculations. Discover Society

**To reference:** Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Sociological Discourse Analysis' 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.

Methods for Change

# Participatory Mapping

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# Participatory Mapping

*In this method, a map is understood as 'a space to work in' that can reveal new possibilities and potential, rather than as a tool for representing data about a place. It involves the researcher working collaboratively with groups of participants to think about a neighbourhood, community or institution, and to locate the things that are meaningful to them within that place.*

Maps are created by participants, who may draw their own map of a place or add to an existing map with place markers, text, or drawings, in response to questions from the researcher. A map contains movement, processes, and relationships, it can illuminate the connections between people and place, and it can be seen as a space for interaction. Mapping approaches can help participants and researchers to see and use data differently, and to access types of data that may otherwise remain hidden, including perceptions, emotions and experiences. Through this method, participants are able to show the researcher and one another where they 'see' themselves and others on the map, to link different activities and feelings to places, to say where they go and with whom, and where they don't go and why. Participatory Mapping can therefore tell researchers something about the nature of a place, and can be particularly useful for understanding how various groups in an area or community may use, experience and value places in different ways.

# Participatory Mapping

## How does Participatory Mapping create or contribute to change?

Participatory Mapping can offer participants an opportunity to challenge current conceptualisations of a place. Maps produced in the course of the research are not viewed as static, but as open to the potential of being changed. Change can happen for participants in the process of carrying out the activity and discussing it afterwards. As a participatory activity, mapping can build individuals' confidence and foster understanding and connection between group members. Participants are encouraged to see the world from the viewpoint of others, as well as feeling that their own perspective on a place is recognised and valued.

An important aspect of this method is comparing maps that are produced by different individuals and groups. Involving participants in a process of comparison and discussion can lead to deeper understanding of the perspectives and values of different groups, as well raising awareness about challenges, exclusions or barriers that may be faced. This method therefore has the potential to contribute to the development of more inclusive places.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Participatory Mapping approaches draw on theories of relational identities, power and positionality; they are concerned with where we position ourselves in relation to others, and where others, particularly those in power, position us. Through this method, researchers and participants can ask what a map claims to represent versus what we and others see and experience. By facilitating deep interaction with varied data on perceptions, emotions and experiences, this approach can prompt critical reflections on traditional, officially produced data about a place. It can therefore be particularly powerful for research in places that are typically viewed in 'deficit terms' – i.e. in terms of what they lack, rather than their attributes. Like other participatory and relational methods, Participatory Mapping research is seen as a process of 'doing with' rather than 'doing to'. It emphasises relationship building among and between different groups of participants, and aims to support the capacity of individuals and groups to develop leadership, decision-making and agency. The visual and artistic elements that are brought together in this method can enable participants to reflect on relationships and experiences and to make judgments about them.

# Participatory Mapping

## Why might I want to use Participatory Mapping?

- This approach is particularly useful in research that is interested in belonging. As well as looking at what it means to belong to a place, it can also reveal how particular groups are excluded from certain spaces and can support the identification of practical steps to overcome barriers to inclusion.
- Participatory Mapping can bring quantitative data to life. Looking at a map can make quantitative data or statistics feel more 'real' to the viewer, encouraging them to think more deeply and in a less detached way about the people that use that space.
- It can provide a rich picture of perceptions, emotions, and experiences of a place, in a way that survey data cannot.
- Participatory Mapping can help researchers and participants understand aspects of a place that are important to groups and individuals, but which may otherwise be hidden. It can therefore be useful in research that aims to change the way people or institutions see and understand themselves and their relationships with others.
- It can also raise awareness about unfamiliar places and help to demystify them. The maps created by participants can be used as a starting point for learning about a new place. In sharing their maps, participants are given the opportunity to tell a different story about an area or place than that which is usually presented.
- This method is engaging and interactive, and can be used with a wide range of groups with differing priorities or abilities. It can quickly and cheaply produce captivating visual artefacts, which provide an accessible way for participants to respond to data produced in the research and to play a role in its analysis.

## Step by step guide to Participatory Mapping:

1. **Get some maps.** This method can be used at a range of different scales. The map(s) you use could be an Ordinance Survey map or Google map of a city, neighbourhood, university campus or hospital, to name a few examples. You could also use internal floorplans of a building such as a school or shopping centre. You may want to print multiple copies of large maps, depending on how many people you are working with, or you could use virtual maps.
2. **Engage with the map.** Look at the map together with participants. This activity may be repeated several times with different groups of participants who use a space in different ways, for example teachers, students and parents within a school. The first question could be: How do you feel when you see this map? What is your first reaction?

*It's important to build a trusted relationship with participants before starting the mapping activity so that they understand the purpose of the research and feel comfortable sharing their ideas and perspectives with you. This could involve focus groups, informal meetings or chats, which will also help develop your research questions and understand what areas or issues may be important to explore.*

3. **Ask directed questions.** The aim is to find out about relationships, activities and connections. The specific questions asked will depend on the group and the overarching research questions, but some examples include:
   - Where are you on the map?
   - Where do you go? How do you get there? Who do you go with? How often?

## Step by step guide to Participatory Mapping:

- What do you do there?
- Where haven't you been?
- What are the assets in this community? What makes this place great?
- Where do you go to have fun?
- Where are the important people in your life located? Where are the people who hold the power?
- What emotions do you associate with different parts of the map?
- What would you like to change?

This is likely to generate lots of discussion, including around why participants do not go to certain places. You can also ask what is missing, or what don't they see represented in the map.

4. **Use different materials to redraw the map.** Participants can be invited to answer these questions in creative, practical ways. Pins, coloured dots, or post it notes can be used to mark important places. Participants can draw or write on the map. Blue tac and string can be used to show connections between people or places. At this point the activity can become a little chaotic and confusing! You could also ask participants to draw their own version of a map or a place, then compare this with an 'official' map. How does it differ?
5. **Record everything that is produced.** Audio recordings and notes can be useful for documenting the conversations that take place around the mapping activity. It is also important to photograph the maps – these can then be compared later on to demonstrate visually how different groups have responded to the activity.
6. **Use complementary methods.** As well as recording the conversation that goes on around the mapping activity, you could carry out interviews, focus groups or other complementary methods to gather in-depth responses from participants.
7. **Compare the maps.** Participants involved in the research are invited to share the things they have produced with one another, and compare similarities and differences in their maps. Word clouds can be made to display the things that were said about places alongside images of different maps. This begins the process of analysing the data (the maps themselves and conversations taking place around them) and it can also generate additional data as participants talk through their ideas and compare perspectives.

*It is important that it is not just the researcher who gains an understanding of how groups experience a place differently, but for the groups and individuals involved in the research to see this too.*

8. **Identify what happens next.** Ideally, tangible change should result from this activity, and it has the potential to support the formation of more inclusive and collaborative places, communities and practices. It can highlight how there are multiple experiences and understandings of a place that are important to take into account in decision-making, such as the different perceptions of assets in a community by policymakers, members of different communities, or people of different ages, for example.  To make the most of this potential, the researcher may wish to facilitate a discussion between different groups as they share their maps, perspectives and findings, with the aim of identifying practical steps that can be put into action. Think about how the maps and any other artefacts produced can be used in the future to illustrate reports, in an exhibition, or to introduce a place to newcomers.

## Examples of Participatory Mapping in social science research

**Filling in the Blanks: Looking Inside Blakemore School**

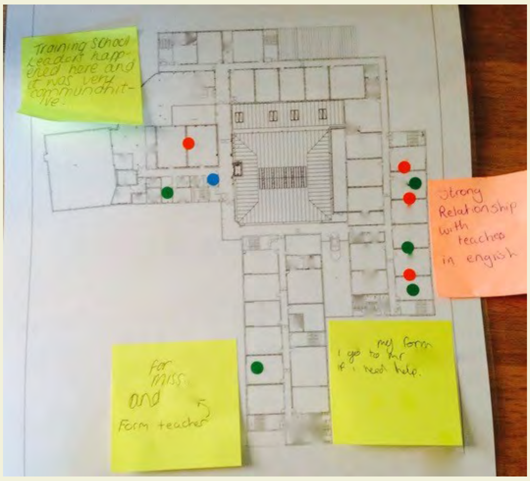
**Researcher: Dr Deborah Ralls, The University of Manchester**

This research project, funded by The University of Manchester, aimed to find examples of where a school and its students, parents and community members were moving towards a more 'relational' model of engagement. A Participatory Mapping activity was carried out as this research focused on the forms of interaction and engagement taking place in a large urban state secondary school, Blakemore School (pseudonym).

School floor plans were used to explore lived day-to-day experiences within the school, identifying the school spaces where participants understood there to be possibilities for engagement as 'doing with' others. Having already conducted research activities using photographs of the outside of the building, floor plans were used as a way of going inside the school, asking students, parents and community members about the relationships and activities that they had experienced within the four walls of Blakemore School. Teacher interviews had already revealed the ways in which teachers associated strong feelings of belonging with particular spaces in school, and spaces that were linked to participatory and collaborative activities like the drama classrooms and school theatre, and certain team staffrooms.

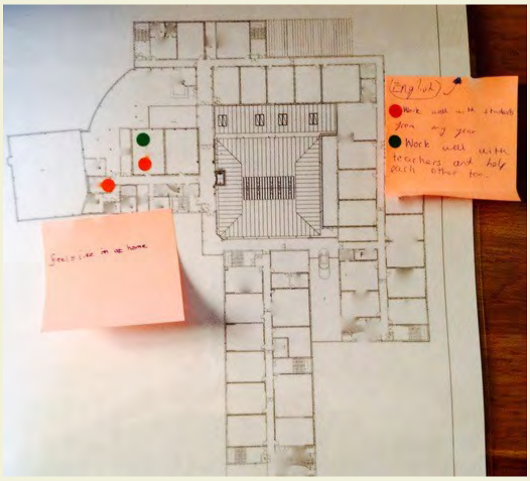
Each stakeholder group including staff, parents, students and community members was supplied with laminated copies of the school floor plans and asked to put colour-coded stickers on the plans to indicate where in the school they felt that they were working together with others. Participants were asked 'where have you been?' and 'what did you do?' and were encouraged to use post-it notes to provide explanations, in order to gain an insight into their lived experiences of the spaces within Blakemore School. The Participatory Mapping approach proved helpful in enabling stakeholders not only to look at those spaces (in the form of school floor plans) but also to deconstruct, or read beyond the lines of the school floor plans generating new data that populated the plans with evidence of dynamic social relations, or relational engagement.

The findings showed that students identified particular spaces in school with activities and interactions that generated supportive and collaborative relationships, and provided some description about the detail of these engagements. Parents and community members, however, were far more restricted in their access to time and spaces in the school, allowed into the building by invitation only. As such, their responses to the floor plan were limited to naming an activity or person, rather than describing emotions and relationships. Using Participatory Mapping highlighted the diversity of previously unknown formal and informal lived experiences and social interactions that had occurred within what appeared, physically, to be the same space.




*Student responses to the floorplan. Red stickers show where in the building students work on engagement activities with other students from their year, green stickers show engagement activities with teachers and blue stickers for other staff. Students also had the option of choosing a yellow sticker to show where they worked with students from other years, orange for parents and a blue square for community members.*

*Post-it notes added by students from top left clockwise, read: 'Training school leaders happened here and it was very communicative', 'Strong relationship with teachers in english', 'My form. I go to Mr [...] if I need help', 'For miss [...] and [...] - form teacher'.*



*Student responses to the floorplan. Red stickers show where in the building students work on engagement activities with other students from their year, green stickers show engagement activities with teachers.*

*Post-it notes, from left to right, read: 'Feels like I'm at home', 'English. Work well with students from my year', 'Work well with teachers and help each other too'*

After the Participatory Mapping activities were completed, a final focus group was organised to bring together teachers, students, parents and community members to evaluate the maps. Using Participatory Mapping techniques and sharing the results in this way led to a discussion about the unseen experiences and the very different perceptions of school 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.

It also highlighted what the school could do to build a sense of familiarity and belonging for parents and community members, as well students and teachers. This resulted in several tangible changes within the school. The senior leadership team invited parents and community members on an open access tour of the school during teaching time to experience a normal school day. Teachers, students, parents and community members identified the need to jointly conduct a 'welcoming walk through' audit in school, to look at the school through the eyes of insiders and outsiders and to develop a plan to identify where and how school spaces could be made more welcoming for parents and community members.

## Where else could Participatory Mapping be used?

Participatory Mapping is particularly useful for understanding how different groups experience a place, building or service in different ways. One example where Participatory Mapping would be well suited is in research aiming to understand the perspectives and use of university campus space by local residents. Activities could be carried out to map: the university campus spaces that local residents have visited formally such as the museum, gallery, other spaces where they have attended organised events; the spaces they feel they are allowed or not allowed to use; and where they would like to go and why, for example. The researcher might prompt participants by asking: What's inside this building? Who have you met there? What have you done in these spaces? What would you like to do? Responses could then be compared with other groups, such as university students and staff.

Another example where this approach could be effective is in research addressing food sourcing and consumption in low income areas or 'food deserts'. Activities could be undertaken to identify different types of food available on the map (e.g. fresh fruit and veg, bread, daily groceries, fast food), where these foods are located, the time taken to get there and costs of travel, as well as mapping the different emotions or experiences that people attach to different types of food. Responses could be compared with maps created by residents in high income areas, with a view to identifying possible solutions such as planning changes or new business ideas. Participatory mapping can be used to explore similar dynamics in many areas of material resource use (consumption, production) in institutions, cities and regions: water, sanitation, waste, energy, transport and more.

### Top tips

1. Think about the map as a space to explore, to be explored, to ask questions and enable people to share their experiences.
2. It's important to have an established and trusted relationship with the group before you start the mapping activity, so that participants feel comfortable to say what they really think.
3. Remember to encourage discussions while people are interacting with the map.
4. Remember to take photos of your maps as you go. Blue tac and post it notes can fall off easily, and your map often won't look the same by the time you get it home!

## Further reading

**Participatory Mapping web resources:**

- Mapping the City
- Mapping for Change: Community Maps

**Online articles and blogs about participatory mapping and digital placemaking:**

- Mapping young lives: what are the spaces and places that young people use in coastal towns?
- How Digital Placemaking Supports Young People to Shape their Neighbourhoods

**Academic journal article:**

- Mapping the City: participatory mapping with young people

**To reference:** Ralls, D. and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Participatory 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

Methods for Change

# The Change Points Toolkit:

## A method to design interventions that unlock sustainable practices

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*Change Points is a workshop process that enables participants without prior social science training to develop creative sustainability interventions that use ideas from social practice theories. Rather than focussing on individual behaviours or technological innovations, Change Points aids workshop participants to explore forms of intervention that engage with the social and material dimensions of everyday life.*

The Change Points approach and workshop methodology was developed with a range of government, NGO and business stakeholders in order to assist them in bringing social practice theories to their analysis of sustainability challenges. It aids the reimagination of complex social and environmental challenges, and enables the recognition of how diverse everyday practices relate to wider social, cultural, infrastructural and environmental conditions. The toolkit was created to offer a new way of thinking through patterns of consumption, how they emerge, and how they may be changed.

As a workshop process, Change Points is deliberately provocative. Participants work through a co-design process that questions the assumptions that underpin existing strategies to encourage sustainable consumption. Change Points invokes conversations that enable participants to extend the breadth of research, strategy and intervention design. This approach is useful for any organisation that deals with social and environmental challenges that intersect with everyday practices and behaviours. The workshops work best when they include participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and sectors, including government departments, NGOs, activist groups and the general public.

## How does the Change Points Toolkit create or contribute to change?

Change Points workshops impact on professional practices involved in the design and planning of initiatives (for example: policy research; policy design; behavioural intervention design; changing socio-technical systems). The workshops are designed to start different conversations about planning and data management, helping people in professional settings to realise the limits and possibilities of the evidence that they gather. Change can be observed in the workshops as a direct consequence of the method taken. Participants are encouraged to re-think the research that they use to provide evidence for action, which will then also help to design more meaningful interventions.

Change Points also helps participants to think differently about the ways in which research contributes to sustainability. The combination of practice-oriented thinking with design-focussed ideas shifts the focus from thinking critically about what has been done to date, towards thinking about how a sustainable future can be created (see Hoolohan & Browne, 2020).

## What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

The Change Points Toolkit emerged from a series of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded projects conducted in collaboration with partners in a range of sectors including government, NGOs and businesses. The Change Points toolkit takes its conceptual basis from social practice theory and ties into a broader network of relational and design theories and methods. This approach encourages a focus on socially shared practices – routine patterns of action – rather than on individuals and their behaviour. This gives different insights into how what we do is shaped by social relationships, the materiality of the world around us, forms of knowledge, cultural meanings and more. Research partners identified that, while they understood the value of social theory in helping to 'reframe' understandings of social and environmental problems, academic research on these topics often had less to say about how to bring this type of social science thinking into policy research, policy design, interventions, and other types of professional practice. It is this challenge that the Change Points Toolkit seeks to address: to identify a way for non-academic researchers and practitioners to apply sensitivities that social scientists working with practice theories take for granted. Insights from design studies vitally contributed to the development of the toolkit, to make concepts from a complex strand of social theory practicable for intervention planning.

## Why might I want to use the Change Points Toolkit?

**Systemic thinking:** The workshops encourage participants to reflect on what has been done before to tackle a particular issue, in order to identify approaches that grasp the complexity of social practices and the complex web of actors and circumstances that are involved. In this way, participants can recognise limitations to interventions made in the past and identify ideas that have been excluded from intervention so far.

**A shift in professional practice**: Change Points aims to enable departure from familiar education or incentive-oriented forms of intervention to engage in the cultural, material and political fabric that holds unsustainable consumption in place. Questions provided in the toolkit are carefully and intentionally worded to stop people from having conventional conversations and to encourage reflection on ordinary day-to-day practices such as eating, hygiene or going to work. For example, participants are prompted to explore how factors such as time and infrastructures (rather than attitudes and desires) shape what people do on a day-to-day basis. Participants are also prompted consider who or what influences peoples' behaviour, and also whether existing interventions have unintentional impacts based on gender or other inequalities.

A Change Points workshop pushes participants to work outside their professional habits by going beyond tested approaches to innovate new approaches to mobilise change. People who design sustainability initiatives as part of their profession benefit from Change Points as habitual ways of using data and developing intervention are challenged. In this way, Change Points workshops prompt professionals to critically reflect on their professional practice and to strengthen their creative potential to develop avenues for intervention.

**Workshop format:** Alongside the facilitator, who is working committedly with the toolkit, a functional Change Points workshop has one or more groups of between five and eight participants. The group is required to shift into a different way of working, learning to trust the process and each other in order to talk openly about a problem. It is therefore necessary for (a) the facilitator to have a strong understanding of the *concept* of Change Points and its focus on practices rather than individual action and (b) the workshop to take at least a full day or a succession of meetings over more than one day.

**Workshop Participants:** Whilst Change Points workshops can meaningfully enhance conversations in existing workgroups, it can also be a useful tool to bring together participants from different industry or work areas, or those who are not used to routinely working with each other. It can also be helpful if there are attendees from groups that are associated with work in the problem area but are typically excluded from policy conversations. Participants are usually chosen by the organisations taking part in the workshop, rather than by the facilitator. To develop the ideas discussed in 'developing plans for change', which is explored below, it is important to include participants who know which actions are within the possibilities and capacity of the organisation(s) involved.

## Overview of the Change Points method (adapted from The Change Points Toolkit)

Before the workshop commences a 'challenge' needs to be identified, one where everyday routines contribute to social and environmental crises, and the following process is undertaken.

**I. Visioning Phase**

**Activity 1. Problem Scoping:** The first step is to develop shared understanding of the problem and a vision for the future that all participants are invested in achieving. The facilitator guides participants to consider the various ways in which their problem is connected to present consumption-production systems and to outline the nature and the extent of change needed.

**II. Expanding understanding**

Three separate exercises are then used to explore the diverse and relational qualities of the problem at hand. Participants are guided in exploring the connections between personal practices and wider cultural, political and technological developments.

**Activity 2. Understand relations:** Sequences of everyday activity which lead to sustainability problems are charted through different spaces and times to reveal the connections between peoples' routines, the actions of others, and wider cultural, political, and technological factors. These are used to identify potential spaces for intervention, called Change Points.

**Activity 3. Recognising diversity**: Identify variations in everyday practices related, for example, to working situation, household structure, gender, or physical ability, and consider how and why these variations occur to identify possibilities for intervention and also to recognise potentially vulnerable practitioners.
Activity 4. Mapping influences: Participants map the network of social and material elements that enable (un)sustainable practices to persist, and consider the distributed agencies and responsibilities involved in maintaining this network to establish opportunities for intervention.

**III. Developing a Plan for Change**

Activity 5. Reframing: Here the materials from previous exercises are revisited to identify ambitious new avenues for intervention. Workshop participants identify where priorities lie and the scope of intervention within their organisation(s). In this step lots of working ideas are developed and filtered down to identify key ideas that participants are committed to.

**Activity 6. Pragmatic planning:** Prepare ideas for implementation by establishing constructive and coherent project plans and methods for actions to be taken.

## Examples of using the Change Points Toolkit in social science research

**Unflushables Workshop**

**Researchers: Cecilia Alda-Vidal, Dr Claire Hoolohan & Dr Alison Browne, The University of Manchester**

The Unflushables workshop was a two-day design-based workshop with 30 different multi-sectoral actors – from water and sewerage companies, government agencies, consumer goods manufacturers etc – to work out a 5-year plan on action on the issues of 'unflushables'. The aim of this workshop was to establish an action plan to eradicate "unflushables" - products such as plastic waste that often cause problems in sewer systems after being disposed of via the toilet. The workshop was sponsored by Anglian Water and was connected to a wider body of academic research by the project team.

The Unflushables Change Points workshop led to development of a far-reaching agenda of a few big ideas for eradicating unflushables in the next five years that focussed on redesigning policy, redesigning bathrooms and changing social and cultural conceptions. For example, plans were established on how to design school bathrooms to accommodate a different form of waste disposal effectively at the stage of early practice formation at schools. Plans on how to break taboos about incontinence as a problem of not only women but also men were also made. The workshops demonstrated to the participants that the location of 'change' is not just with households or consumer practices; and the responsibility for change is not only held in the remit of water and sewerage companies. Throughout the workshop process participants realised that the responsibilities for changing the socio-material systems that lead to products being flushed down the toilet is distributed across a wide set of stakeholders and actors; and that systems change requires the coordinated efforts and commitments for change across this set of stakeholders.

## Where else could the Change Points Toolkit be used?

The Change Points toolkit is useful for anyone interested in understanding the complexities and patterns in everyday life or sustainable consumption, how these practices emerge, and how they may be changed. It may be particularly useful in situations where there are 'attitude behaviour' gaps observed in pro-environmental behaviour, or in situations where the range of existing interventions does not bring about the scale of behaviour change expected. It is also useful for exploring complex systems such as systems of sustainable consumption and production, and in contexts where 'user behaviour' is stated as important but not well understood. The approach has found to be useful in the following settings, with the best workshops bring new combinations of these stakeholders together:

1. Government and government agencies
2. Non-governmental organisations and the third sector
3. Businesses including SMEs and larger companies
4. Citizens groups and community organisations

### Top tips

1. Trust the toolkit. The questions in the toolkit have been carefully worked and selected to encourage practice- and design-oriented discussions.
2. Bring post-its. Change points is a massive post-it fest. It generates masses of post-it notes. While you are at it, think creatively with coloured pens, flip charts and other stationary.
3. Invite people with different types of expertise and backgrounds.
4. Allow at least one full day for the workshop. Establishing radically different ways of thinking and discussing takes time.
5. Revisit different parts of the workshop to help further refine aspects of your policy research, policy design, or intervention approach further.

## Further reading


- Change Points Website
- Hoolohan, C. et al. (2018). Change Points: A toolkit for designing interventions that unlock unsustainable practices
- Browne, A. et al. (2020). 'Unflushables 2030? Mapping Change Points for Intervention for Sewer Blockages'
- Watson, M. et al. (2020). Challenges and opportunities for re-framing resource use policy with practice theories: The Change Points approach
- Hoolohan, C., & Browne, A.L. (2020). Design thinking for practice-based intervention: Co-producing the change points toolkit to unlock (un)sustainable practices


**To reference:** Hoolohan, C., Watson, M., Browne, A.L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'The Change Points Toolkit: A method to design interventions that unlock sustainable practices' 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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# Methods for Change

## Open Interviews

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# Open Interviews

*Open Interviews are about developing a transparent and collaborative approach to interviewing that works for your participants. Power is a critical dimension of the research encounter in conventional interviews, as even in more relaxed, semi-structured approaches it is the interviewer who 'holds' the interview schedule and strongly influences the encounter.*

Rather than the interviewer directing the interview by asking questions, Open Interviews are designed to disrupt the conventional encounter; while you identify the key topics and questions that you would like your respondent to discuss these are ultimately navigated and explored by the participant in the interview.

In advance of the interview, participants are sent, or given, a one-page topic guide created by the researcher which clearly outlines the areas of interest to the research study. This summary can be presented in writing, pictorially or a combination of these depending on the audience. It is used to ease the participant into the research by giving them time to reflect how they might want to respond to a particular question and so make them feel more comfortable and prepared before the interview. In the interview, it is the participant who 'holds' the interview schedule, and it is up to the participant where they would like to start the conversation, in what order they cover the different points and how long they spend talking. While you can respond to any questions from the participant or give prompts if you deem that to be essential, your role during the interview is essentially to listen. It is important for you to explain the format of this kind of interview in advance and to reassure participants that there are no right or wrong answers, that they can choose to talk around the topics and questions and to ignore any topic areas that they prefer not to cover.

This approach is designed to enable participants to set the agenda within the broad parameters of the topic guide as they can foreground issues and talk longer on the topics they deem to be of interest compared to others listed. While Open Interviews can be conducted face to face, via email, telephone or on online platforms, it is important to remember that these mediums produce qualitatively different material. The point is to be open to what option works best for the participants and try to be consistent in your approach (email, phone, face-to-face) throughout your study.

# Open Interviews

## How does this method create or contribute to change?

Change happens in the way the interview itself unfolds. Indeed, this is a method that is designed to be flexible and open to change as the prompts are inevitably interpreted by the different participants with new information introduced during the interviews. The topic guide can be re-worded and developed between interviews if participants find some topics hard to relate to, or the phrasing hard to understand, and new topics can be included in the schedule as your thinking and analysis develops throughout the study. As participants are likely to engage with the order of topics/ questions in a different way, this is likely to generate interesting insights into the areas that (some) people engage with some topics and ones that they spend less time on, or omit.

Open Interviews can produce change in a variety of ways. They can function as a form of intervention into the lives of participants (and researchers) as through talking, participants often come to reflect on something to do with themselves, their community or whatever else is being discussed. Sometimes the interviewees' opinions and beliefs about things can change during the interview process as they reflect on their experiences and articulate their views

Interviews from commissioned research are designed to reflect a specific need that organization has identified, and therefore the findings will inform the desired change in policy or practice. The anonymized findings from an open interview study, for example, would be shared with partners and circulated to other organisations, used in advertising campaigns and used to instrumentalise change on a broader project goal. The findings may be used to raise awareness of an issue or to positively influence behavior change.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Open Interviews draw inspiration from feminist approaches in that they are designed to empower participants and to support them to lead the discussion. Rather than a prescriptive interview in which the researcher is in control of the type and order of questioning, Open Interviews are concerned with the co-construction of knowledge and consciously try to dilute uneven power relationships between the interviewer and interviewee. Open Interviews are inspired by ethnographic approaches; each encounter occurs within a unique social, temporal and physical context and accepts that this affects the way that topics and/or questions are interpreted and responded to by each participant. This method also draws influence from narrative theory and recognizes that people often enjoy telling stories, that they need to tell their story their way, and so start where they feel comfortable and extrapolate as they see fit.

# Open Interviews

## Why might I want to use Open Interviews?

You might want to use Open Interviews if you hope to create a collaborative and comfortable interview experience for researchers and participants alike. This method aims to shift the position of power away from solely the researcher by granting participants the flexibility to decide how and in what order they would like to narrate their experiences or thoughts on a given topic. This helps to cultivate an organic and conversational flow meaning you are more likely to cover a wider range of interesting topics than a more prescriptive approach would allow. They can also be used for interviewing people about sensitive topics, or for people who may feel vulnerable, as participants may be apprehensive about what they will be asked, and how much they will be expected to disclose. Open Interviews can take the uncertainty out of interviews by giving participants more time to consider their responses and complete control over what is raised and how.

While interviewing is a commonly used social science research method which can be used in many different sectors, Open Interviews can work particularly well with participants who are time pressured and who would like the interview to unfold on their own terms. They are particularly good in contexts where you are relying on people's good will to partake in research (i.e. where there is no reward for participants' time) as the interview can unfold as they desire. Equally, Open Interviews can be a great method to empower participants, allowing their voices to come to the fore.

## Step by step guide to using Open Interviews:

1. **Ask yourself, who is it I want to talk to and what would I like to know?**
2. **Then ask yourself,** how can I communicate to these participants everything that I would like to know in a one-page document, in a way that will not overwhelm or deter them. If you are researching with children, for example, perhaps it is more appropriate to explain the purpose of the interview using images, photographs or simple diagrams as opposed to all text. This can also work well for adults too as pictures can help to break down power relations and avoid jargon ridden language that often accompanies procedural ethics.

*Clearly communicating what the interview might look like in a one-page pictorial or written document to participants beforehand can help to create a 'road map' for the interview while providing participants the freedom to decide how to navigate the journey. Using pictures, photographs or text to introduce the project provides the sense of a menu of things to discuss rather than a set of separate tasks that the participant must 'know' about. This can help to dilute power relationships, creating a comfortable atmosphere.*

3. **Design a topic guide for the interview.** Create a long list of all the topics and/or questions you think you might like to ask participants in a document. Be sure to take a step away from these initial thoughts and begin an editing process where you look for repetitions or where a few areas could be condensed into one. Try to thematize the

## Step by step guide to using Open Interviews:

questions into different sections or areas that you would like to cover in your interview. You can keep this (or the longer version of the topic guide with more detailed questions) next to you while you are interviewing in case there are prompts you would like to introduce but don't share this with your participants as a long and detailed list of questions could risk overwhelming them.

*Ask yourself: do the types of questions I have allow me to access the type of information I am interested in finding out? For example, if you are interested in understanding someone's embodied experience, you might want to ask questions which encourage reflection on a particular moment, memory or encounter.*

4. **Decide how you would like the interviews to take place for your study** (phone, online, email, face-to-face etc.). Try to use a single approach that will work for all participants as different approaches will produce qualitatively different data. For example, responses emailed to you are likely to have been reviewed and edited by your participants before they send them to you, whereas more personal and immediate methods (phone, face to face) do not offer participants this opportunity.

5. **When arranging your interviews,** be sure to share the one-page summary with an overview of the interview process well in advance to allow time for participants to ask any questions about the process and to think about their responses.

6. **Now it's time to do the interview.** Always take printed copies of the topic guide with you for face-to-face interviews or have them ready to email/ send in case your participants have lost their copy/ files. To get the conversation started, it is a good idea to briefly introduce the project and perhaps a 'context setting' question for them to introduce themselves. Starting in this way can help to build rapport and enable participants lead from this point onwards. Participants will have the topic guide in front of them and so they can start wherever they like. Once the participant concludes their responses, ask them just to look down the list of topics/ questions again in case they have missed any points that they would like to talk about. However, if they have decided to omit a topic do not prompt for it directly. Remember to take fieldnotes and note any points you would like to clarify with them, as these can be asked at the end of the interview. If your interview was face to face or online with a camera, note if anyone else was in the space and how did this affect the dynamic? How did the room look/ feel? How did you feel? How might you describe the mood? Remember to consult your field notes when listening back to audio recordings.

*Remember to build flexibility into how the interview schedule might unfold. Though you might think it makes sense for the interview to follow a particular narrative structure, encourage the participant to decide where they would like to start, and how long to spend talking about different themes.*

## Examples of of where Open Interviews have been used in social science research

**Playing at Home: Researching the In Harmony initiative with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic (RLP) Orchestra, Liverpool UK.**

**Researcher: Prof. Jude Robinson, The University of Liverpool**

This research was commissioned by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic (RLP) in 2013 as part of a broader programme of research to evaluate the In Harmony project, which is part of the El Sistema family of musical initiatives designed to help children in low income households learn to play a musical instrument and to appreciate classical and modern orchestral repertoires. RLP based its activity in with one local primary school with a nursery in a low-income community in Liverpool, West Everton, later expanding to others in the local area. Playing at Home was designed to engage with the families of the children aged 5-11 years, to explore how learning to play an instrument at school impacted on their home life and their families' and communities' engagement with classical music and the RLP. The research took place over 6 months with repeated visits to 10 families in their homes and used an ethnographically informed approach to carry out Open Interviews, observations, some mapping tasks, the compilation of a personal playlist, photography and sound recordings with the different family members.

The idea for the open interview format here came from initial meetings to tell families about the project and encourage them to join (informed consent). I had created a one-page Information Sheet for the younger children using just key words and images to explain the different elements of the project, and a written prompt sheet for the older children and adults. However, the older children and adults tended to refer to the children's Information Sheet rather than their own, and for later meetings, I relied on this to explain the project, although the written versions were still given to the adults for reference. Using this experience, I used the simplified, one page, children's interview schedule for all of the interviews with family members, which enabled them to cover all of the different topics, with minimal prompting from me. The project shows how open interviewing can be used with a combination of other methods to support people to identify and foreground the issues that are important to them, and to create an interrupted narrative of their engagement with music, playing instruments, listening to music, and what music meant to them.

## Examples of where Open Interviews have been used in social science research

**Evaluation of a GP Fellowship Scheme in Public Health, UK**

**Researcher: Prof. Jude Robinson, The University of Glasgow**

I first used open interviews whilst researching with General Practitioners (GPs) who were undertaking postgraduate training in public health. The pilot scheme was funded by the then Manchester Deanery, now part of the North West School of Public Health, and they wanted to understand the value of the course to the GPs and how it might influence their medical practice. I designed a project to span their year of study, involving one initial face-to-face interview with each participant soon after the start of the course, to be followed up by 4 interviews that could be face-to-face or by telephone.

Open interviews were used as the GPs had already indicated that there was little time in their working days for any additional tasks, and we agreed that I would design an interview schedule that would require no more than 30 minutes for them to complete and send it to them in advance via email so that they could reflect on their responses. To use the time efficiently in the first interviews, I asked them use the interview schedule as a guide and to talk about the issues that were the most important to them in the time they had, and I just listened and audio-recorded what they said. The goal was to ensure that the limited time was spent on their responses, rather than my asking questions. Despite their concerns over time, all the GPs became absorbed in the topics and spoke for nearly one hour. From this I learned that spending time editing down the number of topics to allow for a shorter 30-minute interview meant that each point was covered in more depth over an hour, suggesting that a less crowded schedule was conducive to reflection. I was also aware that concerns over time could be a way of expressing concerns around other issues: that the GPs didn't want to commit an hour of their time to talk about things that might not be of interest to them. By streamlining the encounter to focus only on directly relevant issues and allowing them time to speak, they became committed to their narrative and spent longer than they had anticipated discussing the issues.

It became increasingly hard to schedule the follow-up telephone interviews with GPs, and those telephone interviews that were arranged were often cancelled at late notice. I didn't want to run the risk of doing short interviews with little depth and meaning or missing interviews with some respondents, so I decided to go back to the original design and ethical approval to work out how I could be more responsive to their working lives. With their agreement, I sent an email with the questions embedded in the text and attached as a Microsoft Word Document. They were asked to print the questions with their typed or written responses and post them back to me using recorded delivery. However all but one of the GPs decided to respond directly to the email, writing their responses under each question, and emailing it back to me. Only one took part in a telephone interview at this stage. As the questions were about their working lives there was no confidential or personal information in the emails, and so for the next round of interviews, I offered them the flexibility to decide whether they would prefer to complete the next interviews via email, telephone or face to face. All elected for the email option and responded within three days of my initial request. The additional advantages were that the responses were typed and so did not require transcribing. The difference was that all the GPs wrote in complete sentences and had probably edited and refined their accounts, perhaps over time, to arrive at the final, detailed and highly articulate versions they had sent to me. While these are different data from naturally occurring speech in real time, and require careful reporting to ensure that the readers understand how the account was produced, it did enable the respondents to say exactly what they wanted to say, and reflect on the words and phrases that best conveyed their meaning, and in this way it was empowering.

## Where else could Open Interviews be used?

Time is a precious commodity for many research participants and open interviewing can be used in many different situations with varied populations. They have been used successfully for interviewing people in professional contexts; the disclosure of questions in advance as part of the process of informed consent is believed to reassure potential participants of the nature and line of questioning and allays any fears that they could be 'tricked' into responding to questions that could damage their or their organisations' professional standing.

The topic guide also can be shown to line managers or others who may act as gatekeepers to others' participation in organisations to reassure them of the line of questioning, and that the participant will have absolute discretion and control over their responses. The limitation of the method is that it does rely on the ability of the participants to read and understand the topic guide you produce and so may not be suitable for people with visual impairments or people who have difficulties in reading, unless designed with visual accessibility in mind.

## Top tips

1. Clearly communicate the purpose of the interview to participants. Open interviews are a deceptively simple method but they require a lot of thought and planning. It is particularly crucial to make sure you clearly communicate the purpose of the interview to participants beforehand, using a one-page summary.

2. Allow for flexibility. Be sure to allow yourself the flexibility to adapt your approach if it does not seem to be working. Perhaps you need to change the medium through which you are conducting your interview, maybe communicating the purpose of the researching using photographs and pictures might be more appropriate than text alone.

## Further reading

- Article on the *In Harmony* project: The use of Participatory Methods
- The End Is Where We Start From: Communicating the Impact of a Family Music Project to Wider Audiences
- Understanding pressures in general practice
- Emancipatory Research

**To reference:** Robinson, J., Barron, A. and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Open Interviews' 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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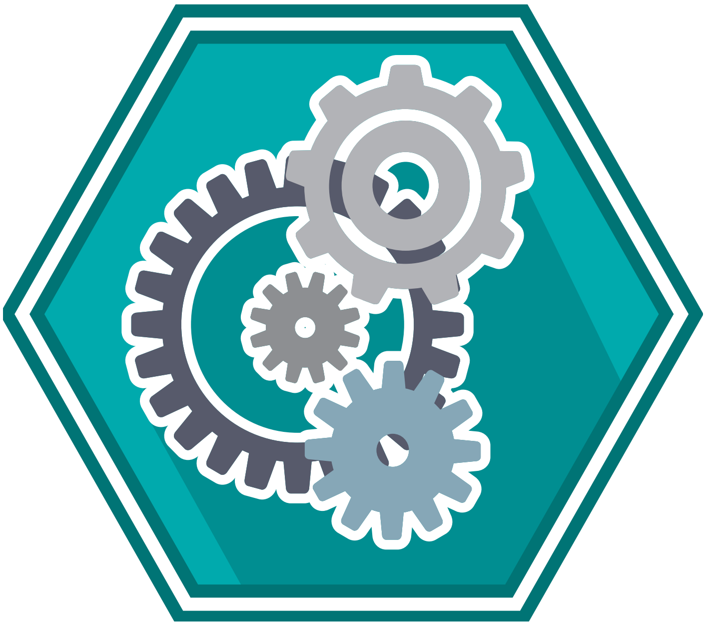

Methods for Change

# Playing Games as Method

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# Playing Games as Method

*Used to both collect and communicate data, games, or playing games, is becoming an increasingly popular social science research method.*

Games can be used to bring into view often overlooked aspects of the environment, to bring together different stakeholders, and to understand complicated concepts and processes, amongst other things. The informality and playfulness of games can help to breakdown conventional communication barriers, encouraging participants to interact freely to discuss what might otherwise be complicated or sensitive topics. Games, particularly fun ones, can draw participants in and get them to think about subjects which might not usually be understood as particularly engaging, such as infrastructure. They can cultivate a sense of curiosity and wonder into what might otherwise be overlooked aspects of life and help to create an emotional connection and response amongst participants which may have long lasting effects.

## How does Playing Games as Method create or contribute to change?

Change happens with this method by encouraging people to think differently about problems. Change can happen at all stages of the process of using Game as Method: design, play and the discussion of findings. The degree of change will vary depending on the purpose the game is used for. Change might occur through the process of bringing together different stakeholders to talk about a topic or theme and providing an engaging platform for sharing different opinions and perspectives. Playing a game may shape or alter the way a group of people or an individual thinks about or relates to a particular thing. Often the playful nature of games, which can sometimes involve presenting different and other-worldly scenarios to participants, can move participants to change conventional ways of thinking and making sense of the world, prompting them to see the world from a different perspective. For example, playing games might encourage participants to envisage alternate futures or come up with creative solutions to everyday challenges. Such solutions may instigate change in a range of ways. For example, they may be shared with interested stakeholders who might use them to inform the way a product or place is designed.

## What ideas or concepts influence Playing Games as Method?

There is a long history of using games as a method in the sciences and this is often referred to as gamification. Gamification is the application of game-design elements and game principles (such as such as scoring, competition with others, rules of play) in what have traditionally not been thought of as 'gaming' contexts. For example, serious games, such as games built from Agent Based Modelling are used to model and develop different scenarios, and are popular with policy makers and researchers. Games can help researchers to 'tell a story' or develop a narrative about an often 'hidden' experience with or aspect of infrastructure. Playing Games is all about engaging, inspiring, collaborating, sharing and interacting through participation. Often, the hands-on approach cultivated through Playing Games allows people to better internalise content or to engage on a deeper level with a scenario, environment or concept. Games can be predefined, set around particular questions or scenario cards. Equally, they can evolve around a loose set of instructions, giving participants greater freedom to decide how they interact with a place.

# Playing Games as Method

## Why might I want to Play Games as a Method?

- Games can be used to introduce different playful dynamics into everyday thinking. This can involve playing games as an icebreaker, as part of a team building exercise, or in teaching. They are particularly useful for groups of multiple stakeholders coming from very different perspectives such as policy makers, citizens, business, and students because they encourage different perspectives to play out around a particular theme.
- Games can encourage people to think and interact in different ways. They do this by getting participants to step into a specific narrative or scenario and imagine or be mindful of particular conditions and experiences that they could have.
- Games are a fun way to engage a range of people in decision making processes, bringing different values to a field or theme of discussion.
- Designing a game could present an opportunity for co-design with a partner or stakeholder. Co-designing a game in this way may enhance connections and collaborations between different stakeholders and improve understanding of the issues for both the researcher and the participants. They can then be used in collaboration with different organisations as part of a programme of learning and engagement.
- Games can be a great method to get people to discuss and understand complex systems and concepts. They do this by giving an opportunity to learn through doing and by providing practical examples and illustrations of complex and more abstract processes and ideas.
- Games can be good for positive publicity and can help engage people with environments and ideas which may conventionally fall outside the scope of public interest. Infrastructure is a perfect example of an issue which becomes visible and enters the public interest only when it fails.

## Step by step guide to Playing Games as Method:

1. **Identify potential participants to play the game.** Depending on the purpose of the game, the pool of participants might be intentionally similar or diverse. Participants might include different businesses, policymakers or organisations who have a stake in the topic you are discussing. They might also be the general public, or a group of people who live in a certain area. The participants who are involved in the game will depend on the purpose of the game you are playing and what you intend to better understand or find out about.

*It can be very hard to navigate a large group of people playing games so good facilitation is key. If you are hosting an event involving a game, make sure you have a partner who is well versed in the purpose of the game to help you and keep things on track. Take time to play the game or 'walk through' the game with any facilitators to make sure that they fully understand the what, the how and the why. Take time to clearly explain the purpose of the game to participants before you begin.*

## Step by step guide to Playing Games as Method:

*It is important to design the game in an engaging way to make sure even participants who have no prior or specific interest in the subject being discussed will be able to join and stay engaged throughout the game. It is also best if your participants are involved in the game by choice.*

2. **Identify a suitable space for the game.** This could be a unique single place or could include multiple locations and asking participants to walk or run through from one area to another. The space for the game is an important dimension to how participants experience the game and engage with it. Asking participants to move through familiar spaces looking for specific things (themes, places, objects, trees, sculptures) enables them to change their perceptions and 'see' things that are usually hidden in everyday interactions.

3. **Set the purpose of playing the game.** This step is usually negotiated alongside steps 1 and 2. Lack of access to suitable spaces for playing the game could lead to redefining the game's purpose, or the intended participants, for example. In a game designed to engage infrastructure policy makers with the specific experiences of people who are on the periphery of policy, this method would work best where participants are taken out of their comfort zone, which could include offices and conference venues, and locating the game somewhere less familiar.

4. **Play the game.** How the game unfolds will depend on its purpose, available spaces and the audience for the game. Games can be played successfully with up to 40 participants, however, they are most successful where for at least part of the activity they involve working in small groups of five to eight people. Larger groups are harder to engage with and move through space. For example, in one game for the Infrastructure Project discussed below it took 10 people over 30 minutes to climb out of an overflow underground chamber through a very steep and narrow set of stairs. Had researchers known that the exit would take this long they would have split the group in half. Games which put people into smaller, separate groups to focus on specific issues or spaces and then bring them together to interact with each other and debrief are well accepted by participants, even if they tend to take longer.

*Each group needs at least one facilitator who understands all aspects of the game and its purpose. If relying on facilitators to work with multiple groups it is important to have a formal script with key details such as timings for reference. Games can take multiple forms, with varying degrees of input from facilitators: from guided group walks and tours to virtual guides completed in participants' own time, with thoughts and experiences recorded on mobile phones and notes then uploaded on a shared platform.*

## Step by step guide to Playing Games as Method:

5. **Identify break-out groups.** Remember to be sensitive to the different needs of participants. This might involve considering what different participants might want to get out of their time spent playing the game, or more practically considering the different physiological abilities of participants. If your game involves walking around outside for a long period of time, remember to ask participants to wear appropriate clothing. Be sure to make clear whether or not the game is suitable for those with impaired mobility, sight or hearing. Are there ways you could diversify the game to make it more inclusive? This consideration might involve working with industry and organisations who can help you to set boundaries for health and safety.

6. **Allow participants to capture different aspects in ways which are meaningful to them.** This can be easily achieved through incorporating active ways of capturing and engaging different parts of the game, such as taking photos, short videos, voice messages, drawings or collecting objects and artefacts such as leaves, stones or brochures. Participants can be asked to photograph something on their phones based around a theme they are following as they are moving through a place.

7. **Provide an opportunity for the game participants to debrief.** Reflecting on and sharing experiences are important parts of the process of learning and engagement within the game, and sufficient time should be allocated to these elements. This can be done by bringing the participants back together into one group and facilitating a discussion around a theme or set of questions (e.g. ask them to convince other groups of a particular point of view). Allow people to come to their own conclusions and opinions.

8. **End the game, until next time.** Games can be a useful means of engaging people on a specific topic and specific objects, which might otherwise be considered hard to engage. They can also be powerful ways of collecting important data about people's opinions, interests, and drivers for change. As such, they can lead to meaningful change by generating impact that continues beyond the game itself. It is important, as a researcher, to share with participants what you and your team have learned from the experience and how you intend to use it.

*It is useful to allow people different ways of leaving feedback. These could include asking people to drop the pens/maps/badges in one of two buckets (one for feeling overall positive about taking part and another for people left with negative impression), to tweet their feedback or to draw or write what they would change on the back of maps or sheets of paper stuck to the door through which they are leaving.*

## An example of Playing Games as Method in social science research

**The 'Infrastructure game'**

**Researcher: Dr Ralitsa Hiteva, Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex**

*Poster of Brighton for the Infrastructure Game, September 2017. Image credit: Charlotte Humma*

The infrastructure game was designed for, and played, as part of the British Science Festival in Brighton. The purpose of this game was to help the general public to understand the complexity of infrastructure interdependencies. The game was used to convey an understanding of complex processes and systems that underpin the way we live, but which are often overlooked and invisible in everyday life, unless something breaks or goes wrong.

The participants included 36 people from the general public who were living in or visiting Brighton during the festival weekend, between the ages of 19 and 76. Participants were put into three equal groups based on the maximum number of people that were allowed to be in the underground overflow chamber operated by Southern Water which is one of the key spaces for interacting with water infrastructure in Brighton. Game participants were asked to express preference for one of three types of infrastructure: water, energy or digital and based mostly on their preferences were allocated into three groups, which were given three separate sets of instructions and starting points for the game.

Each group followed a route which involved learning about the history and future of one specific type of infrastructure. The water group went through an underground overflow chamber, the energy group walked through the Brighton seafront learning about gas and electricity lighting, and the digital group visited a 5G test area. The game was set up to engage and appeal to people's emotions. The scene was set in a post-apocalyptic environment where resources were scarce and survivors had to make decisions about what infrastructure they should develop. Connecting to the game on an emotional level draws participants into the narrative and enhances their involvement and connectedness with the game.

After starting at three different points and covering three very different routes the groups were then brought together in a large room where they were asked to prepare convincing arguments and win votes from other groups to invest in their chosen infrastructure. The group which converted the largest number of players was to be the winner. The groups attempted to convince each other in the merits of investing in either water, energy or digital infrastructure. Asking different groups to negotiate and decide between them resulted in them debating and negotiating which infrastructure was integral. One group came out on top. At this point I introduced the groups to the concept of infrastructure interdependence and explained that we do not need to invest only in energy infrastructure in order to solve energy problems. The groups understood that the right answer was not one type of infrastructure or another and that thinking across interdependencies can have a significant impact on the environment and resilience. At that point the participants took over the discussion of how this might work in practice and started to imagine what investment in infrastructure could look like in the future.

Although participants in the game were guided throughout every step by the facilitators and the lead researcher, they were given an opportunity to express their vision of the concept of interdependent infrastructure and how it could be applied to the infrastructure they had just learned about. The whole game took two and a half hours and did not involve any breaks. Participants walked through different spaces in the first hour and spent the rest of the game in a large room. The facilitators for each of the infrastructure groups were representatives of local utility companies which managed the said infrastructure and could provide significant detailed information about it. At the end of the game the lay participants were able to provide their own examples of infrastructure interdependencies that they had observed and/or experienced and were able to discuss the complexities of decision-making about infrastructure, such as what type of infrastructure to prioritise in protecting the environment and why it was important for the general public to be engaged with infrastructure decision-making.

## An example of Playing Games as Method in social science research

**Using games to explore healthy ageing in urban spaces**

**Researcher: Dr Ralitsa Hiteva, Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex**

This game was designed for an infrastructure workshop involving academics and utility companies, and was held in the city of Leeuwarden which at the time was a culture capital of Europe. In designing the game, I was asked to showcase and make use of as much of the city's built environment as possible. The first part of the workshop was dedicated to presentations about healthy aging and urban space from an academic and planning perspective.

The participants in this game were not older people, but utility providers who were interested in seeing the world from the perspective of an older person. The game involved splitting people into two groups and giving each group a map with places, locations and objects that they had to find walking through a specific route. Most of the workshop participants had never been to this city before but they took the maps and walked the routes for two hours.

The routes prompted people to experience the built environment from the perspective of an older person. A few were given special assignments, and were told that they had to rest every 10 minutes for five minutes or that they couldn't climb stairs. Others were given a walking stick that they had to carry with them everywhere. Playing the game in character allowed us and the participants to see how some of the everyday assumptions that they use in their work and everyday life were restrictive and exclusionary for elderly people.

Participants were then asked to come back to the workshop venue and tell the group how their character spent the two hours and what they found difficult and useful about the urban spaces that they experienced and saw. During the discussion the game shifted beyond the city in question as people started to draw on examples and anecdotes from their own lives, work, friends, family and neighbours.

Playing the game allowed participants to understand and experience for themselves how different urban spaces had evolved or failed to evolve to suit the needs of an ageing population. The game was useful for me as a researcher as it provided valuable insight into the difference between providing access to a space for elderly people and thinking through how to remake urban spaces to make them suitable for healthy aging. Participants reported that the game was useful to them in better understanding how even mundane aspects of their work might create barriers to elderly people in their daily lives, and that elderly infrastructure services users should be considered throughout the entire supply chain of urban infrastructure, rather than just at the point of consumption.

## Where else could Playing Games as Method be used?

Playing Games as Method could be used in many different contexts across a range of different sectors. For example, it could be useful for industrial organisations involved in a variety of infrastructures including transportation systems, sewage and water systems, communication networks or power plants who are interested in generating increased understanding about the work they do amongst the general public, or to understand how different groups relate to, use or experience these infrastructures.

Playing games is also used in disaster planning by the emergency services. For example, representatives from different emergency services would play a game to imagine the different ways they might respond to an earthquake. They would respond to different scenarios and events thrown in by the facilitators. Similarly to the Follow The Thing method in which Stephanie Sodero talks about following blood donations to expose the blood infrastructure, Playing Games can be useful for shedding light on processes that are typically unseen, perceived as mundane or even boring.

In this sense, this method could be useful to a range of different organisations or groups involved in providing services such as in healthcare. It could shed light on the use of Green Spaces amongst different groups, the engagement with different environments or the functioning and use of different food networks.

As discussed in the guide on Digitised Ethnography by Andrea Pia. Games are useful for encouraging diverse groups of people to understand the lived experiences of others that they might not otherwise consider, such as migration processes.

### Top tips

1. Remember to adapt your game to suit the audience and the context you are working in. Different audiences have varying capacities to engage with particular topics and technologies. Playing games which unfold within physical space (or multiple spaces) can be restrictive for some participants, such as people with disabilities, mobility difficulties and those with small children. The best way to ensure that the games are as inclusive as possible, is to try them during a dry run using as diverse group of participants as possible. If these are impossible to secure, you can assign certain characteristics to some of the pilot participants (for example, a restriction in height) and ask them to report what they found difficult, impossible and what could work for them instead. Then change the game!
2. Be clear on what the purpose of your game is and communicate this to participants. Ask yourself, is the purpose of this game to shed light on complex problems? Is it to bring different groups of people together to discuss a common theme?
3. Try to work with diverse groups of people. Often, working with people who have different identities (age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and the like) can elicit interesting discussions.
4. Try not to prescribe too much how the game should unfold or to pre-empt the conclusions the participants might come to. The purpose of this method is discovery.

## Further reading

- Changing methods and pathways for engagement with infrastructure services
- Playfuel
- Hastings is on a journey to net zero

**To reference:** : Hiteva, R. Barron, A., and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Playing Games as Method' 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.

Methods for Change

# Geographical Biography

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# Geographical Biography

*Geographical Biography involves using the techniques from different forms of biography and archival research to uncover lives with a geographical sensitivity. While the aim of traditional biography is to understand the life of someone or something, the aim of a Geographical Biography is to uncover the sites, spaces, and places of their worlds, paying attention to the objects and materials that become enmeshed with their everyday existence.*

A Geographical Biographer is less concerned with producing a sequential narrative of a life (as might be the case with traditional Biography or Life History) but more with foregrounding the messiness and complexity of a life through its geographies. Attention to the spaces of a life leads to the excavation of different kinds of archives, from buildings to people, from objects to artefacts. Human and non-human worlds collide in the reconstruction of lives lived and lost. Engaging with such a worldly archive approach has the potential to resurrect in new forms past lives and narratives, reintroducing them into the present. Geographical Biography therefore works in the margins of places and is particularly attuned to the voices and experiences of individuals lost and forgotten in other forms of historical writing.

## How do Geographical Biographies create or contribute to change?

Geographical Biography is a process that encourages collaboration between people, objects, and place. Meaningful collaboration involves an exchange of ideas and this method enables opportunities for sharing to take place. Stories can be told in varying different contexts and formats, from prisons to museum tours, enabling a wide range of voices to be included.

The method's ability to promote understanding of individuals' worlds through the sharing of life stories becomes a strategy of empowerment.

Through sharing stories that have been overlooked or forgotten, it is possible to cultivate understanding about people, their lives, and their experiences and encourage others to share their stories too.

Geographical Biography is an accessible way to develop skills. There are multiple ways to tell the story of a life and encouraging the development of these narratives in collaboration is a fun and inclusive way of turning people into researchers. In this way, this method can encourage confidence in individuals and groups and inspire new ways of working in partnership, such as putting on exhibitions or creating artwork inspired by the lives investigated.

## What ideas or concepts influence Geographical Biography?

In the social sciences, there is a tradition of using biography to rehearse how a life has been lived. This often involves recounting an individual-centric narrative which follows a chronological arc. More recently, biographies have been paired with geography to understand how lives interrelate over different times and spaces, calling to attention the importance of life-paths. Pairing biography with geography in various guises has helped to shift the focus away from the notion of a unified life, to understand instead the multifarious nature of lives lived and worlds encountered. In doing so there has been a shift in the narration and presentation of such lives, sparking an array of creative approaches.

There has been a tendency in social scientific research to focus on what is present, what can be found or easily visited. However, in line with increased attention to more creative ways of researching and (re)presenting lives, Geographical Biography tends to work within the realms of absence, thinking about the gaps, shards, and fragments of what remains. In doing so, Geographical Biography can allow us to understand unseen (historical) subjects that might have been forgotten, overlooked, or be less obvious.

This method can be used in a variety of ways. Geographical Biography is an adaptable and creative method, reaching from traditional archival practice of working with documents, objects and photography, to working with landscape. Often it can include using objects to facilitate discussions about a life. Objects, such as artworks, can be used as tools for following the geographies of a life through the different sites, spaces, and places of their own existence. From homes to hospital gardens, objects can help to illuminate new biographical stories that tell us often unheard stories about where people go, what people do in certain spaces, and what places really matter to them. Objects and their geographies can also enable new lives to come into view. Through sharing the objects and their stories with others, conversations that transcend space and time can be found with individuals finding connections between their lives and others through object biographies.

## Why might I want to use Geographical Biographies?

- Geographical Biographies can be used to research a range of phenomena, from individual experiences to collective understandings of people, places, and encounters.
- They provide people with the opportunity to create, share, and tell their own stories. They can be good for encouraging people to see value in their own lives. Through the process of sharing, people can understand that their story matters in the world and that it has agency and vibrancy.
- By paying attention to the everyday geographies of a life, Geographical Biographies can help to unearth hidden or often overlooked stories.
- This method can be used to reveal stories which might help to break down assumptions or stereotypes about certain groups of people or places. For example, in relation to the experiences of mental ill-health, institutionalisation, and incarceration.
- Geographical Biographies can be great at uncovering different kinds of worlds that are present and absent, all at the same time. While the focus of conversation may be around one individual life or the life of an individual object, this method facilitates an understanding into how individual lives intersect with other lives and places.
- Creating Geographical Biographies enables stories to be collectively shared with others in different and collaborative ways. They can be used to bring a group of people together to talk about a common object, person, or place. Such stories have the ability to spark new conversations and to enrich understandings of complex experiences.
- Geographical Biographies can be political tools to enable the voices and experiences of marginalised groups and individuals to be heard and valued.


*Working collaboratively with the Art Extraordinary collection.*
*Image credit: Glasgow Museums*

## Step by step guide to using Geographical Biographies:

### 1. Creating Geographical Biographies

- Have a clear aim and identify who and what you need to engage with to achieve this aim. This could include the types of themes you would like to explore, such as mental ill-health, and/or the communities connected to this that you would like to talk with.
- Source the people you would like to talk with and get them together to talk about the object or person you are interested in.
- In these conversations, begin to map out what you know and what you do not know about the object or person. It is though this mapping exercise that you will begin to realise how the geography of an object really matters to the conversations that unfold about life.
- Bring in archive sources to build up a richer understanding. These might include photocopied resources that relate to the object or individual, such as diaries, letters photographs, journals, committee minutes, films or objects.
- Think about how you can use these sources to find out what you do not know about the object or person and start to ask questions about that.

### 2. Sharing Geographical Biographies

- The stories you have shed light on could then be shared as an exhibit and shared with interested stakeholders.
- Think about where you might like to share your stories and be creative with this. This could be in a community centre, a walking tour, a museum, a prison, or a graveyard – anywhere that connects you to people that might be interested.
- Consider how to share these stories in relation to your audience. These could be written, sung, or performed. Working with others could help to develop your sharing potential, such as collaborating with storytellers.

*Working collaboratively with the Art Extraordinary collection.*
*Image credit: Glasgow Museums*

## Examples of using Geographical Biography in social science research

**Creating Geographical Biographies: Adam Christie**

**Researcher: Dr Cheryl McGeachan, University of Glasgow**

It starts with a stone sculpture of a head located in a collection called Art Extraordinary housed by Glasgow Museums. The sculpture is part of a collection of Scottish outsider art, compiled by one of the first art therapists in Scotland, Joyce Laing. Many of the items in the collection were salvaged from the wards, gardens, and rubbish bins of old asylums and psychiatric facilities in the North-East of Scotland during the 1970s. Many of the unnamed artists were patients of these places yet their stories and experiences remain unknown, the only remaining remnants of them to me is the pieces of artwork held carefully in museum storage. These pieces speak to marginalised histories of mental ill-health and institutionalisation and therefore become ripe for Geo-Biographical investigation.

I started with the stone head. What clues could the sculpture tell me about its maker and where it was made? I spent time looking, feeling, and pondering over the stone in the museum storeroom. The closeness to the object was important, it helped me to think about its making. I began to compile questions about the object: who made it? Where was it made? How was the face created? Where was it found? Were there other stones and are they the same? Why was it made? Initial inquiries within the museum archive led to me to find out the artist's name: Adam Christie. The catalogue told me there were other stone heads in the collection and so I went to see them all. Further archival research led me to uncover that he had been a patient at Montrose Asylum in the early-twentieth century and that the heads had been found there long after his death. Adam's life was largely unknown and uncovering his experiences had the potential to shed light into asylum worlds.

I decided to follow the stories of the stone. I visited Montrose Asylum, now an abandoned hospital facility, in the North-East of Scotland. I wanted to put the stone back in its place to see what new stories about Adam and asylum care would emerge. I walked through the gardens and passageways of the old hospital site and saw evidence of Adam's existence. On crumbling walls carefully carved words and faces emerged, left by Adam over seventy years ago. I walked through the local town and talked to its inhabitants. I was invited into homes and pubs to see some of Adam's sculptures that had been found over the years and told stories of their discovery. I was taken to his grave site in the hospital grounds and met members of his family. I visited local archives and accessed hospital records and files. I found a photograph of Adam on his first day at Montrose, after an overnight journey from his home in Shetland. I stood on the hospital carpark where Adam's stones had been made into concrete and destroyed.

The process of working with the stones to trace Adam's life led me to create a number of geographical biographies about his asylum worlds and beyond. While these are too multiple to note here, key stories emerged about his unusual art making practice. Adam began to sculpt with stone twenty-two years after arriving at Montrose asylum. He used discarded materials from the asylum grounds to make his pieces, including a nail and a piece of glass to slowly carve the face into the stone. Once complete he would place the stone back where he found it – in a wall or on the ground – and begin carving something new. By following the stone heads we follow Adam's life through the asylum, from the hospital gardens to various community spaces. We trace the stones back to his familial home in Shetland and to the intimate spaces of grief for his mother. We gain insights into the unusual spaces of asylum, such as a storeroom used as a workshop for creating art. Although we find no trace of Adam's own reflections on his experience, we still manage to hear something of him through the stones he left behind.

## Examples of using Geographical Biography in social science research

**Sharing Geographical Biographies: Exhibiting Mental Ill-Health**

**Researcher: Dr Cheryl McGeachan, University of Glasgow**

Creating Geographical Biographies is one element of the process, but the method can be further utilised through the sharing of these stories in different contexts. Collaborating and working with these Geographical Biographies promotes the understanding that these are not static and complete portraits of individuals, but living and adaptable stories that are open to re-interpretation and change.

The Art Extraordinary collection is held by Glasgow Museums and therefore I wished to make the museum a key partner in the research process. Archivists and curators make great collaborators. Working in partnership with the collection we sought ways in which we could share the Geographical Biographies with different communities. Due to our shared interest in mental ill-health we saw this collection as a way to further the museum's engagement with mental health and creativity and sought out potential partners that connected with this theme. One long-standing partner with the museum was Leverndale Hospital, a psychiatric facility on the edges of Glasgow, and they agreed to collaborate with us using the collection.

To highlight our shared interests in the collection we invited staff and patients from Leverndale Recreational Therapy to join us in the museum storeroom to look at the collection. As everyone looked, touched, and talked through the collection we shared aspects of the Geographical Biographies for each object and shared our experiences of them. After the session we collaboratively compiled a project plan based on the collection, noting that we would work together over a period of a year to create an exhibition on Art Extraordinary. During this project objects from the collection were taken to Leverndale to be handled and seen, stories were shared and written, and new artworks produced. Participants from the project selected the objects they wanted in the exhibition and wrote accompanying texts for them: they started to create their own Geographical Biographies about the objects. Individuals shared their own experiences of mental ill-health, writing these into the stories of the objects and artists from the collection. An exhibition was produced and displayed in a local community space, and a one-year programme of community events accompanied this, using the geographical biographies as a foundation to encourage further conversation about mental ill-health and creativity.

Sharing the stories enabled a space to discuss mental ill-health in its multiple formations. Throughout the process we all learned new skills, heard different voices, and gained insight into the worlds of others. The process itself was transformative. Participants noted that they gained in confidence, felt included and empowered, and enjoyed hearing learning about the lives of others. The collection too was changed by the process. New information and insights into the collection and its meaning was generated and for the first time the collection went on display in a museum setting. The collection became more known and the artist's stories for the first time were starting to be heard.

## Where else could Geographical Biography be used?

Geographical Biographies are useful in any setting where understanding individual lives (of objects or people) is desirable. They have successfully been used in prison settings, psychiatric facilities, community groups, school classrooms, care homes, and many other places that involve human interaction. Their adaptable quality makes them a malleable resource and the approach can be easily adjusted to suit the nuances of the group and setting.

### Top tips

1. Creating Geographical Biographies takes time and patience. Lives are often dispersed through places, and so are the stories about them. It is therefore important to take some time to consider where you want to start looking and try not to go everywhere at once.
2. Try to focus on one life, object, or place at a time and follow this through multiple terrains. Always take note of where you encounter things, be this archival materials, marks in the landscape, or stories heard.
3. Creating different versions of the Geographical Biographies that can be shared in different contexts is useful. For example, creating materials for a museum tour has different requirements to a workshop setting so try to think about the varying ways in which you can produce these stories to be shared.
4. Never try to know everything and always remain open to the possibilities of finding out new and exciting things about the lives under investigation.
5. Importantly, always remember that these are human lives and their stories that are being re-created and re-told. The ethics of telling is crucial to the enterprise of Geographical Biography and respecting the humanness of experience must always be considered.

## Further reading

- The Head Carver': Art Extraordinary and the small spaces of the asylum.
- Researching art extraordinary: a fieldwork photo-collage essay.

**To reference:** McGeachan, C. Barron, A. Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Geographical Biography' 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.

The University of Manchester

Aspect

# Methods for Change

# Systems Origami

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# Systems Origami

*Systems Origami has its origins in 'Business Origami', used by designers to rethink how goods and services are created and delivered. It is a playful, hands-on, intuitive participatory method and design tool, to explore how objects and infrastructures shape what we do in our day-to-day life, and how we might do things differently.*

The aim is to explore our social lives through particular goods and services, with the goal of redesigning and rethinking why and in what ways we make use of them, to enable change. In collaborative workshop settings, participants physically map out the material and social 'lives' of the goods and service under investigation, using hand-made drawing or pre-printed pictures to represent different parts of the life cycle in question, drawing lines and arrows to visualise their relationships, to both understand existing systems and to develop a vision of an alternative. This method is particularly useful in settings where different stakeholders are brought together to envision alternatives to complex problems. It is different from some other sociological participatory approaches as it focuses less on understanding, sharing and shifting peoples' values, and more on how the material world shapes how we put desired change into practice. The discussion in these workshops is thus not about how we can engage with goods differently, but what these goods are, where they come from, and what they do to/with us.

## How does Systems Origami create or contribute to change?

This approach focuses on the institutions, purposes and boundaries goods and services are set within. It aims to develop strategies for feasible interventions that facilitate transformations of our day to day lives. The discussion focuses on ordinary goods and services, and the complex social, cultural and economic relationships they form. In this way, it aims to avoid the recycling of past interventions that have been tried unsuccessfully around complex environmental issues such as public information campaigns, instead acknowledging the ways in which materials, cultures and shared practices are key to understanding the worlds we inhabit. As well as workshop outcomes, the process itself is affective as it encourages participants to focus on and further understand the wider social context goods and services are embedded in. In this way, a mutual understanding of the system is established in the process.

## What ideas and concepts does Systems Origami relate to?

This method combines corporate design and human-centred perspectives from human geography. Business Origami is a recognised method within sustainable design research. It was developed by the Hitachi Design Centre to improve products and services by mapping and examining the system they are embedded in. When products are redesigned, the goal is not only to make them more efficient in their materials and/or energy use but also to meet users' needs in ways that are appealing to them, for example being easy to use and durable. The pairing of the product design and human-centred perspectives invites members of the public into these conversations, taking the original Business Origami method out of the design studio and into a public space. This adaptation allows researchers and participants to explore enablers and barriers for changes to shared practices around services and goods, which are often problematic from an environmental or social equality perspective.

## Why might I want to use Systems Origami?

- It is playful. The method allows for a thorough exploration of our socially and environmentally problematic material culture, facilitating deeper understanding of the complexity of different value and physical systems. Following a playful approach, it offers a way to investigate complex research problems. Through drawing, mapping, discussing and redrawing, participants collaboratively develop a physical output, engaging with serious questions through a creative and lively process. As such, it takes participants slightly out of their comfort zone. It is therefore key to prepare, introduce and direct the session in a well-considered and clear manner. If the facilitator achieves that, this method allows for rich debates and detailed insights.
- It interrogates objects, rather than people. Rather than asking participants to report on their values and attitudes, this method allows us to understand our practices by focusing on our day-to-day engagements with objects. This approach enables researchers to understand what participants value and why, in the context of the complex ways our material and social environments intertwine. It avoids interrogating workshop participants, which often poses a challenge in other research methods such as interviews, where interviewees might feel they are exposing part of their psyche' or are being morally 'tested'.
- It values existing knowledge. This approach helps to uncover possible alternatives to practices by starting with the current norms, needs and concerns of participants, and working through their visions of how things might be done differently. This does not automatically imply radical change or 'disruptive innovation'. Indeed, solutions that arise may be quite simple and available to many, but are currently not considered feasible, desirable and/or acceptable. Applying this method in workshops with a wide range of non-specialist participants allows researchers to bring discussions on existing and simple things back into focus.
- It can be flexibly applied to different types of research objects and issues in a variety of ways. The workshop could focus on a specific object, such as a pen, with the understanding of the object's physical and social life cycle being explored by the participants. It can also be used to examine concepts currently brought to life via complex systems with many connections and challenges such as mobility or thermal comfort, asking how these are currently achieved, and how we might do things differently.
- Its organisation is also flexible. The workshops could be conducted in as little as two hours, with the mapped system becoming a framework around which further conversations can take place about creating specific policies and interventions. Alternatively, ongoing workshop sessions can be spread out over successive days or weeks, particularly when exploring highly complex issues such as mobility. Whilst the method is not suitable for use with large groups of participants, the workshops can vary in size, from one-to-one sessions to a larger group of 50 that is then subdivided.

## Step by step guide to using Systems Origami:

1. **Prepare the materials that you need:** once you have decided that Systems Origami is the right method to explore your chosen topic, get the practicalities organised. How much time do you have? How much room? What resources do you have and do you need? If you do not want to draw the symbols by hand, you can print out icons from the internet and then cut out the shapes yourself.

2. **Introduce the method to the participants and agree on boundaries of the exercise:** what you are looking at, and why. It is also good to talk a bit about group dynamics and roles. For example, while some people are happy to draw in front of colleagues or strangers others may not be, so it is okay if groups want to differentiate roles amongst themselves, or for groups to proceed at different paces.

*This is a gradual process of developing an understanding of the physical representation of the system to explore the values created and the relationships involved. As such, it is not a pure a mapping process, but an unpacking process!*

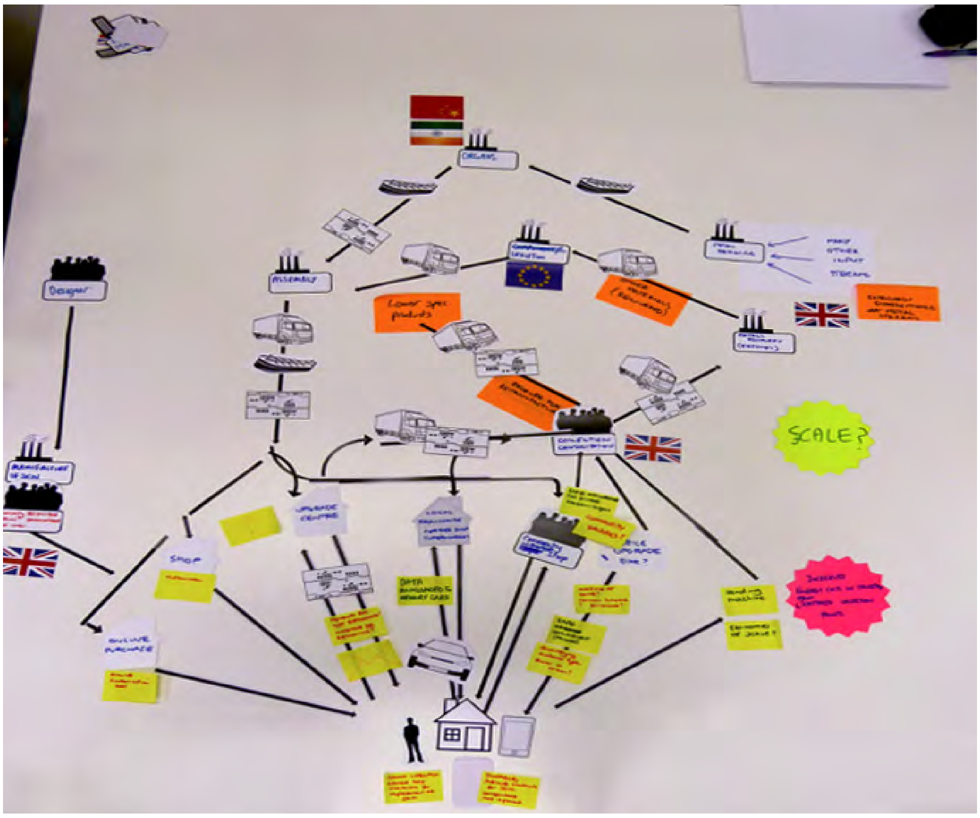
3. **Map out the system:** Start the activity by focusing on a particular point in the life cycle of the good or service in question. For example, if you are thinking about how to create more sustainable systems around food delivery services to the elderly ('meals on wheels') you could start with the householder receiving the food, and consider: what did they receive; why did they receive it; how did it get there; and what is the experience like? You can draw or use pre-printed pictures or symbols to represent any of these aspects, and write key points down on post-it notes. You can then think about the next link in the chain e.g. who delivered the food; and from where, again using pictures, notes and connecting arrows to build up a map of needs, experiences, values and context as you go. Over time, this will turn into a large, messy piece of work that may take up a lot of space. After some time of engaging with the system mapping exercise, the facilitator will guide a discussion about what has been produced. After the discussion, participants go back to the map and continue the process. This process is iterated for a number of times.

*Allow for assumptions, but question them. At some point in the process, assumptions about "simple fixes" such as information campaigns may come up. It is the role of the facilitator to pick up on such assumptions and invite participants to question and reconsider them. This is about slowing down the process to explore different elements and to invite some fresh thinking about how to do things a bit differently.*

4. **Look at the map and express thoughts and reactions:** does it look similar to how they had imagined it? Are there any surprises? It there anything missing? What was their experience of doing this exercise?

5. **Closing discussion:** this may include conversations on what will happen next, or how the findings could be taken forward for intervention, including how work on this can be divided between different individuals and organisations, and next steps to be taken.

*Encourage messiness! The collaboratively produced map may look like a bunch of five-year-olds have gone crazy with the pens: this is not only okay, but actually desirable. When there is a mess, everyone feels a bit more empowered to contribute rather than thinking "Okay, I couldn't, I'm not touching that, it is too pristine!" Also, not everyone is comfortable making drawings or convinced that they are capable of doing it. While drawing is encouraged to awaken creativity and work with visualisations rather than words, participants should also know that it is okay to just write down keywords, to foster an inclusive environment where all can contribute.*




*CLEVER Research Project Team's initial 'brainstorm' product service system. Image credit: Dr Ben Bridgens, Newcastle University*

## Example of where Systems Origami has been used by social scientists

**The Closed Loop Emotionally Valuable E-Waste Recover (CLEVER) project**

**Researcher: Prof. Janet Scott (University of Bath), Dr Kersty Hobson (Cardiff University), Dr Ben Bridgens (Newcastle University), Dr Debra Lilley (Loughborough University), Dr Jacquetta Lee (University of Surrey)**

This research project was funded by the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and aimed to rethink the fundamentals of the product service system for mobile phones. It asked questions such as: Can we recover metals for recycling more efficiently? Can we design the phone differently? How can we change users' unwillingness to change their practices around mobile phones?

To help address the last question, the method explored users' social meaning around mobile phones as well as their experiences of having the phone as a key material object in their everyday life. The research found the phones were carriers of complex sociological and personal relationships and expectations around connectedness and convenience, as well as evoking concerns about distant others through, for example, 'sweat shop' labour used in making the phones.

Applying a different method, research participants could have also been asked directly about their knowledge and attitudes around, for example, the working conditions of people in the Global South, possibly creating defensive reactions, or making them feel they had to maintain a certain ethical stance. However, coming at it through the object of the phone, as the way in which we become linked to these concerns, participants were able to raise these issues themselves, and to explore their often-uncomfortable ambivalence e.g. 'It is terrible how workers are treated, but I have to have a smart phone for my job, so what can we all do about this'? This focus on the complexity of the economic, social and physical relationships mobile phones are embedded in thus enabled conversations with participants about how potential changes such as different business models, would both impact on them and others involved in these relationships.

## Example of where Systems Origami has been used by social scientists

**Exploring local food systems through Systems Origami as a teaching method**

**Researcher: Dr Kersty Hobson, Cardiff University**

Here Systems Origami was used in a higher education classroom setting, to explore a complex service system. Students taking a module on sustainable consumption and production were asked to consider the local food system, with a view to making it more environmentally and socially sustainable. Over a period of several weeks, small groups came back together during class to consider the drawing they had created collaboratively, continuously adding in things and taking things away, as issues around sustainable consumption and production were discussed in the module. The aim was to enable students to explore in detail the challenges and opportunities of creating social change, in a manner that departed from usual classroom-based discussions and that enabled them to more deeply grasp the complexities of social change

*Sample of CLEVER research participant's product service system.*
*Image credit: Dr Ben Bridgens, Newcastle University*

## Where else could Systems Origami be used?

Systems Origami offers an inclusive and creative way of thinking through how goods and services can be created and offered in different ways. This is not just useful for designers but anyone involved in forms of social enterprise service delivery, as well as those developing policies and interventions in connection with local governance institutions. In a research context, this approach has mostly been applied with members of the public and students, to think about interventions for system change. Here, solutions emerged that would require the involvement of a range of applicable institutions to put ideas into practice. Involvement of diverse stakeholders from a range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds relevant to the problem under investigation would facilitate buy-in to new interventions, and potentially create change within the institutions themselves, due to fresh perspectives and discussions around key issues.

### Top tips

1. Know why you are doing it.
2. Know what you want to achieve.
3. Think carefully about who is in the room.
4. Give yourself time.
5. Know that all voices matter.
6. Have fun!

## Further reading

- Business Origami: Learning, Empathizing, and Building with Users
- Systems of practice and the circular economy: transforming mobile phone product service systems
- Using the business origami technique to understand complex ecosystems

**To reference:** Hobson, K., Ehgartner, U. and Barron, A. (2021). 'Systems Origami' 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

Methods for Change

# Social Practice Art as Research

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# Social Practice Art as Research

*Social Practice Art as Research is a multi-disciplinary and political practice which places people at the centre. This method can be used with individuals and large groups. It aims to foster social or political change through collaboration with individuals, communities and institutions through the creation of art, together.*

Social practice encompasses a number of art mediums and methods, languages and forms of art. Social Practice Art as Research often culminates in public-facing installations or performance, with a parallel emphasis placed on the process of creating and doing, as much as an end work. It is precisely the uncertainty, unpredictability and spontaneity that comes from interacting and co-creating together with participants that makes this method an exciting approach. The social interaction component inspires, drives, or in some instances, completes the project (there is not always a final art 'object'). With an agenda for social change at its heart, this method has been used to engage and empower a wide range of individuals and groups including local activists, charities, various residents' groups, NGOs, government representatives and healthcare providers.

## How does Social Practice Art as Research create or contribute to change?

Social Practice Art as Research produces incremental change at all points in the research process. While the end output (an exhibit, film or a performance, for instance) might feed up to facilitate organisational change by bringing different stakeholders together, this approach is primarily concerned with the change that happens for individuals and groups in the process of creating. This change is often emotional because this approach provides a space for expression that enables participants to feel that their voices and stories matter. While such emotional change often occurs at an individual or group level, the platform and space that is provided to participants in this approach can lead to more transformative change across societies and be fed into policies. Emotional change can also occur for the researcher through the different stories, perspectives and experiences encountered. Moreover, the relationships developed with participants need to be nurtured and often become part of the reflexive practice of the researcher long after the project has ended in that it feeds back into future practice.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Socially-engaged models of practice - community arts, environmental arts and 'artivism' - make up a rich field, led since the 1970s by Indigenous, feminist and socialist practitioners. Engaged artists collaborate with scientists, planners, politicians and communities to creatively facilitate social change. Feminist driven arts practice specifically focuses on spatial inequalities and oppression, and how those most marginalised and excluded from policy making are impacted. Resonant of other participatory approaches, Social Practice Art as Research is not a means to an end, but an end within itself. It is the experience of experimentation and creation that matters, undertaken through the forms and languages of the arts. Participants are not research subjects but rather engaged practitioners.

## Why might I want to use Social Practice Art as Research?

- Social Practice Art as Research is useful when researching with marginalised groups to foreground their experiences, in order to drive action.
- It is particularly good at interrogating very specific research questions that matter to those it is engaging with. Because participants are engaged from the very beginning, the process of researching can be crafted around the needs of a group or individuals.
- This approach can open unexpected and contested dialogues. The process of creating together often takes individuals' thoughts down lesser-trodden paths, encouraging them to open up about topics they may not otherwise have thought to discuss.
- Social Practice Art as Research can enable participants to explore emotional, psychological and sensory experiences. The different ways of creatively engaging (conversation, installation, performance, photography, painting, curating, or film-making, for instance) can open diverse modes of storytelling and provide space for participants to express themselves in many different ways. Social Practice Art as Research, then, provides a means to release and discover and share knowledge and experiences.


*"Telling Tales" collage, used for exhibition booklet and banners*

## Step by step guide to using Social Practice Art as Research:

Though each project will be unique, there are several elements of this process that are important to consider in any Social Practice Art as Research project:

1. **Understand what your key issue or topic is:** You may have specific formulated research questions or an idea of a broader topic that you wish to investigate with participants.
2. **Decide how location and time will be used in the context of the research:** Will the project be site specific, with activity happening in a particular place, or will it be spread across a wider geography? What timescale does the project have, and how will this impact its structure and the type, frequency and duration of activities you are able to undertake?
3. **Research the socio-political context of the work:** This initial desk research into the background of the topic and location forms a crucial base of knowledge for the evolving participation and co-production with participants. It also enables an understanding of both the barriers and opportunities that might arise in the course of the project.
4. **Commit to ethical practice:** It is important for researchers to have an in-depth understanding of, and commitment to working collaboratively and sensitively with participants to ensure that co-production is meaningful and genuine across the project.
5. **Identify participants:** This stage involves asking who needs to be part of this project in terms of stakeholders and participants, and how will they be invited to join. Consider the inequity within the project, with regards to diversity and inclusion, and map how these issues will be mitigated or addressed.
6. **Map strengths and roles in the research team:** When planning research activity, it is important to have a clear idea of who will lead which aspects of the project, how different elements of the work interconnect, and if there are any skills gaps in your team. As an arts researcher, you will likely have a particular interest or strength in your own creative practice. Ensure you are flexible in thinking through appropriate art forms for the specific project and allow new approaches to enter into the process, drawing on complementary expertise where appropriate.

*Ensure you build in time within the project for reflecting on the process and for moments of meaningful exchange between the lead researchers. Enable this to inform and shape the work along the way.*

7. **Plan creative outputs:** Social Practice Art as Research always has creative outputs, but these can evolve in multiple ways. Think about what types of outputs will be most relevant for your project. What spatial access restrictions or opportunities will you have; and how will your outputs be in dialogue with your desired audience? Who is your desired audience? Consider the budgets you have for creative productions, materials, and expenses.

## Examples of Social Practice Art as Research in the social sciences

**Telling Tales (2014-2015)**

**Researcher: Dr Jenna C. Ashton, The University of Manchester**

This project sought to bring the perspectives of five young people who had speech and language difficulties into dialogue with speech and language therapy professional practice and research. The project also involved speech and language therapy researchers and professional therapists, teachers, and wider family members. The project aimed to explore how visual creative practice opened up storytelling opportunities for these young people, and what could be learnt from that process.

The researcher worked with a group of young people over a series of months and engaged them in various creative exchanges including workshops, conversations, or the sharing of artefacts, writing, and imagery, between each other, with herself, and also in the broader context of their families, speech therapists, or teachers. These young people had identified themselves as already interested in creativity.

The final output for this research was an exhibition held at Manchester Central Library. Each young person who was working on the project had one glass cabinet dedicated to them as part of the exhibition. The researcher worked with them to create an installation within each of the cabinets. The exhibit was driven by what the young people wanted to show, explore and display. The cabinets featured an assemblage of things including photographs, paintings and objects, each chosen by the young people to represent methods of communicating beyond speech, and what they wished to share with an audience. Each cabinet offered a unique visual 'tale' crafted between the young person and the researcher.

These tales, driven by issues relating to speech and communication challenges, focused on moments of experience, certain behaviours, aspects of imagination, or an obsessive interest.

The exhibition served to open conversation more broadly around speech and language therapy, the potential of visual arts, and it challenged perceptions of education and communication ability. The project provided further opportunities for the young people, in terms of self-development, and sharing their experiences beyond the project. Their participation contributed to official cognitive assessments.

## Examples of using Social Practice Art as Research in social science research

### Green Infrastructure and the Health and Wellbeing Influences on an Ageing Population (GHIA) (2016-2020)

**Researcher: Dr Jenna C. Ashton, The University of Manchester**

Social Practice Art as Research formed the key method of inquiry in one element of a large research project. The researcher was in consistent dialogue with researchers leading the other strands of this work, across health, geography, ageing, and psychology. The research led by Jenna (alongside a design activist and archaeologist, and later also involving students) sought to identify the barriers to engaging with green space and urban nature amongst older people. It aimed to better understand people's motivations for when they do engage with green space. Time was spent with older people in areas of high health deprivation who were already expressing actions of care and activism around urban nature. Participants showed the researchers what they were doing with the land, on their allotments, in their gardens, backyards or parks, and explored the motivations behind their activities, with a focus on who cares, and how they care.

Social Arts Practice as Research was used in this project to get beyond the spoken word and the rigidity of a traditional interview. This evolved across informal discussions at sites, group meetings, exchanges of photography and documentation, writings, objects, knitting, exhibition making, and public conversations. Conventional interviews would not show what participants were doing, their practices, or processes. The project was in-residence in the Manchester Museum, as part of the Heritage Futures Studio. This was an experiment to consider how active, contemporary 'living' urban cultures could utilise the Museum as a public space for creative and activist exchanges. It enabled the participating groups and their creative artefacts to come into contact with each other, and with other audiences. This project led to policy partnerships that supported the formation of new research, 'Community Climate Resilience through Folk Pageantry': AHRC, Met Office, UK Climate Resilience Programme. 2020 – 2022.

### Where else could Social Practice Art as Research be used?

This method could be particularly useful in contexts where there are concerns regarding sensitive subjects, or an interest to work with diverse participants in a range of community, institutional, and organisational environments. As an example, other projects carried out by the researcher were undertaken in collaboration with women from diaspora and refugee backgrounds. Another very different example involved supporting research into the training needs of young dentists to respond to domestic violence cases.

### Top tips

1. Social Practice Art as Research is highly interdisciplinary. If you are not an arts researcher, but want to explore a research issue via Social Practice Art as Research, then partner with an arts researcher who is located within a field of creative forms, language, and research. Social Practice Art as Research is not the same as using arts methods as an isolated form within an overarching social science methodology.
2. Do not underestimate the creativity that already exists within people, in their everyday contexts.
3. Learn to sit with uncertainty and be comfortable in 'mess' that is generated by the creative process, and is inherent in collaboration with people.
4. Keep focused on the social or ecological issue in hand; the arts practice is in service to that issue.
5. Make sure love, care and sharing underpin your practice.

## Further reading

- Jenna C. Ashton's website
- Suzanne Lacy's website
- The Pablo Helguera archive
- Common Ground website
- The Social Art Library website
- Art Util archive
- Actipedia: creative tactics that help bring about change
- FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism

**To reference:** Ashton, J. Barron, A., Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Social Practice Art as Research' 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.

# Methods for Change

# **Follow the Thing**

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# Follow the Thing

*Follow the Thing is a social science method that traces the journey of a given product, from donated blood to fair trade coffee. It involves thinking with, and through, a specific good and its supply chain. The method surfaces often-overlooked processes, dynamics, and connections between people, services, and infrastructures. In doing so, Follow the Thing is used to understand interconnections and to explore and expose complexities, vulnerabilities, and injustices.*

It can offer insight into the journeys of goods upon which we rely, but that are often invisible until there is failure, disruption, or crisis, such as shortages of personal protective equipment during COVID. It makes visible these unseen journeys, cultivating an appreciation for their surprising geographic extent and complexity. By shedding light on the journeys that different products take, Follow the Thing can expose unjust working conditions and environmental harms, encouraging more ethical consumer and corporate behaviour. Follow the Thing draws on a range of methods that can broadly be thought of being on a spectrum from direct to indirect ways of following. Direct following requires greater access to the field and might include barcodes and tracking tags. For example, a barcode can be used to trace the journey of a box of trainers or a tracking tag can be attached to a fish to understand its movements. Indirect following includes participant observations, facility tours, interviews, and document analysis.

## How does Follow the Thing create or contribute to change?

Follow the Thing, for the researcher and reader, transforms understanding of how the world works. In social science, this is referred to as opening a black box. When something functions well it is taken for granted or 'black boxed.' When there is a disruption, that black box is opened and its inner workings, good and bad, are revealed. For example, we turn on lights without thinking. But when there is a storm and the power goes out, it prompts some people to think about how the electricity grid works, in what ways it is vulnerable, and how it can be made more resilient. However, for research purposes, the thing in question does not need to be broken. Follow the Thing researchers can choose any 'thing' that piques their interest. Descriptive accounts, created by following things, shed light on larger dynamics and processes, illuminating what works well and what can work better.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

During the last two decades, 'following' emerged as a popular method in human geography. Geographer Ian Cook and colleagues helped pioneer the Follow the Thing method. Driven by the aim of promoting geographically informed and ethically aware consumption, Cook traced the geographies of everyday things, looking at who made them, where they were produced and under what conditions. For example, Cook and colleagues researched the supply chain of a papaya, which ranges from Jamaica to the UK, to understand the globalisation of food.

While early work traced consumer goods along supply chains, it now covers a wide variety of socio-political concerns including researching activist networks, energy, animals, chemicals, finance, policies, waste, and data. For example, Follow the Thing is used by commodity activists aiming to create a more socially just and environmentally sustainable fashion industry (e.g. Fashion Revolution).

The Follow the Thing approach is complemented by the mobilities paradigm, which emerged out of a recognition of the prevalence and importance of movement in contemporary society. These movements range from how children get to school to interplanetary tourism, as well as movements of objects, data, ecologies, and more.

Follow the Thing takes a 'more than human' approach. It goes beyond a human-centred perspective and instead, directly and indirectly, traces the complex journey of an object. The object, and the diverse networks of people, goods, regulations, and more, entailed in the journey of that object, are the focus. Moving beyond the human allows alternate perspectives to emerge that reveal connections, complexities, and contradictions that can inspire action on social and environmental issues.

# Follow the Thing

## Why might I want to use Follow the Thing?

- Follow the Thing exposes power structures that operate behind the scenes, revealing complexities, vulnerabilities, injustices, and even violence. The method does this by directing attention to areas that otherwise receive little media, policy, and academic attention because they are taken for granted, difficult to access, or hard to trace.
- The method sheds light on taken for granted processes and supply chains upon which people rely. It reveals diverse communities and environments working in often unseen and unappreciated ways, as well as how such overlooked processes are vulnerable to global environmental change, lack of labour rights, and more.
- Follow the Thing highlights unapparent connections between different people and infrastructures, such as a papaya farmer in Jamaica and a papaya consumer in the UK, as well as how connections are vulnerable to injustices and disruption, such as caused by the global climate emergency.
- It offers a flexible approach that captures dynamic timeframes, geographies, and rhythms.
- Depending on the target audience, Follow the Thing findings can be shared in diverse ways, ranging from news articles to fictionalised vignettes to graphic novels.
- This method allows the researcher to tell the story of a general or complex process through one specific journey. In this way, it takes a topic that is complex or mundane and weaves it into a compelling story that gives the reader an appreciation for a process about which they may have never given any thought.

## Step by step guide to using Follow the Thing?

1. **Identify what you want to follow.** Why this thing? What will following it allow? What are the start and end points of the journey? For example, in the case of blood donation, one possible journey is from the point of donation to the point of care. Remember that some things are more accessible than others - tracing a tomato from a local farm and following a bag of donated blood are very different projects.
2. **Brainstorm potential ways of following this thing.** What kind of journeys does it involve? How might you trace such a journey? What access do you require to engage with your research themes? For example, researching technical aspects of logistics versus labour rights are different, though not unrelated, entry points requiring different research approaches.
3. **Identify a starting point**. It is likely you will not fully appreciate the complexity of the full journey, as that is why you are undertaking this research. Therefore, identify a place to begin, such as a conversation with a key contact or a useful document, from which you can find out about different points in the journey, as well as if and how you might gain access.
4. **Pursue available leads to keep following the thing.** Opportunities to Follow the Thing might include conducting interviews with managers who can give an overview of decisions and processes, conducting interviews with workers who can provide details on working with and transporting the thing, touring facilities, observing people and processes, reading documents, and/or partnering with organisations to Follow the

## Step by step guide to using Follow the Thing:

Thing physically or virtually through video surveillance, tagging or barcodes. Identifying what to follow and how is an ongoing puzzle. It may take time to foster relationships with gatekeepers and there may be dead ends. Identify potential partners who can facilitate the research process.

*If the thing you are following is difficult to trace, you could use more sophisticated technologies, like barcodes and tracking tags. Barcodes are used to track product journeys from origin to end creating valuable data on 'out of sight' warehouses and shipping activity, for example. Alternately, for more local supply chains, you might ask the person who is handling the thing to take photographs at each stage of the process. By capturing images that they feel are illustrative and notable, a photo diary is created in the field providing access and insights that are not directly available to the researcher.*

5. **Think about what kind of story you want to tell.** When you have gathered enough data to trace a journey, think how best to tell the story given your research lens, data, and target audience. Different themes that researchers highlight include carbon footprints and other environmental impacts, consumerism and waste, fair trade, human rights, labour rights, supply chain resilience, and more.

6. **Work with your collected data to create a story, choosing a medium that will be accessible and compelling for your target audience.** For example, do you aim to educate the public or do you aim to change national policy? Look at everything you have gathered and take some time away to let the salient points rise and use those to anchor the story. Ground all points of the story in large and small details you gathered during research to create a picture that is representative of the dataset.


*The starting point for the Bloodscape scavenger hunt featuring a Blood Bikes volunteer.*

*Fictionalised vignettes can be used to tell this story by drawing out specific elements of the general information gathered about the journey of the thing; emphasizing specific dynamics and overlooked movements and processes. There is a risk when people hear 'fictionalised' that they think that the story is made up. These vignettes are grounded in research but with the added flare of telling a broader story through an engaging, specific example.*

*One option is to create a game that tells a story of following the thing. This interactive experience may appeal to a different and wider audience than written material. An example is a scavenger hunt. Bloodscape was a self-guided adventure that let participants experience Edinburgh, Scotland through the lens of blood. Bloodscape provided diverse experiences of blood through space and time, including changing trends, global campaigns, and Harry Potter (written in Edinburgh). The goal of Bloodscape was to broaden participants' understandings of blood as a vital good.*

7. **When you have drafted the story, share it with key informants.** This will ensure that it is accurate and reflects their experience and understanding. Based on participant feedback, refine the story as needed. Keep in mind that some stories are sensitive in nature and participants may not be keen for challenging issues to be shared. As a researcher, use your judgement to represent your dataset while being conscious of power imbalances.


*Another scavenger hunt stop exploring the links between travel, disease, and blood transfusion.*

## Examples of using Follow the Thing in social science research

**Blood mobilities**

**Researcher: Dr Stephanie Sodero, The University of Manchester**

This project used the Follow the Thing method to research vital mobilities, specifically how blood gets from the point of donation to the point of care.

As blood is a sensitive medical product, Stephanie could not physically follow it due to privacy issues. Instead, she traced the journey of an imaginary bag of donated blood in Canada by conducting interviews, touring facilities, and reading policy documents. Through these methods, Stephanie pieced together a picture of how donated blood travels from the point of donation to the point of care.

While blood donation is lifesaving, the behind-the-scenes details do not necessarily make for a compelling story. It is possible to tell a boring story about blood that focuses on technical details that are not of interest to a non-specialised audience. Instead of a dry report, Stephanie wanted to tell a specific, compelling story about a bag of blood drawing on the general information she had gathered. This story is not made up but grounded in research.

Based on her fieldwork, Stephanie developed nine fictionalised vignettes. The first started with the act of donating blood. The narrative used a fictionalised version of Stephanie and was based on her memory of donating blood. The narrative then follows the journey of the bag of donated blood.

In the narrative, four vials of blood are flown to a different part of Canada for testing to ensure the blood is safe. Once the blood is approved, it is processed into three components: plasma, platelets, and red blood cells. Each component goes to a different location, travelling surprising distances.

There are countless different routes blood can take, but Stephanie wanted to tell a specific story. A dramatic flair made the story more compelling. The narrative arc involves a car crash, an all too relatable event, with the vignettes showing the donated red blood cells being transported by an air ambulance and the patient waking in hospital to see donated blood being transfused. Fictionalisation of Follow the Thing permits researchers, stakeholders and readers to gain understanding of processes that are unapparent, as well as to explore and emphasize novel themes, such as climate mitigation and adaptation, lending a unique perspective that draws connections with broader societal issues.

## Where else could Follow the Thing be used?

The Follow the Thing approach is useful for organisations, such as businesses, charities, activist organisations and government departments that are interested in thinking through unseen dynamics in provisioning, the environmental impacts of everyday products, and how these processes link to social and material inequalities. As the example above shows, organisations might also be interested in the lives of 'things' that are recognised as difficult to follow due to ethical, safety, and privacy issues. In such contexts the Follow the Thing method can be adopted using creative research approaches to reconstruct journeys. Here are some examples of where else this approach could be used:

- **Disaster scenario planning**: What happens when a disaster, such as an ash cloud, pandemic, or hurricane, causes disruption in a supply chain? From face masks to vaccines to everyday household items, a Follow the Thing approach can help health professionals and government officials think through provisioning and contingency planning.
- **Climate change:** Severe weather events impact global supply chains. For example, Puerto Rico is a major producer of pharmaceutical supplies. When it was hit by Hurricane Maria in 2017, there were widespread impacts on local healthcare provision as well as pharmaceutical exports.
- **Fairtrade** How does your breakfast get to your table? Tracing the origins and supply chains of a meal can expose unseen carbon footprints, environmental impacts, and social injustices.
- **Waste:** What happens to an object, such as your smart phone, when it is no longer used? Just as the process of creating a good is complex and surprising, so too are processes of breaking down and disposing of waste.

### Top tips

1. Consider your target audience and the elements of the journey, such as time, speed, and location that you want to highlight. Develop a creative output tailored to these elements.
2. Ground all points in empirical evidence. While the specific journey may be fictional, it represents actual processes. It should be realistic, as well as being presented in a creative way.
3. Check in with your research participants to confirm that your depiction reflects their understanding of the 'things' journey.

## Further reading

- Blood: Vital mobilities: Circulating blood via fictionalized vignettes (academic article)
- Cotton t-shirt: My cotton t-shirt: From field to wardrobe (video)
- Fish Traceable Seafood Supply Chains (video)
- Mardi Gras beads Beads, Bodies, and Trash: Public Sex, Global Labor, & the Disposability of Madi Gras (book)
- Papaya Follow the thing: papaya (academic article)
- Pharmaceuticals Cradle to Grave (art installation)
- Refugee Rights What They Took with Them (spoken word poem)
- Dr Stephanie Sodero website

**To reference:** Sodero, S., Barron, A., and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Follow the Thing' 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.


# 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, adaptions 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.

*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.*

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.

*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.*

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.

## Step by step guide to using Life Mapping:

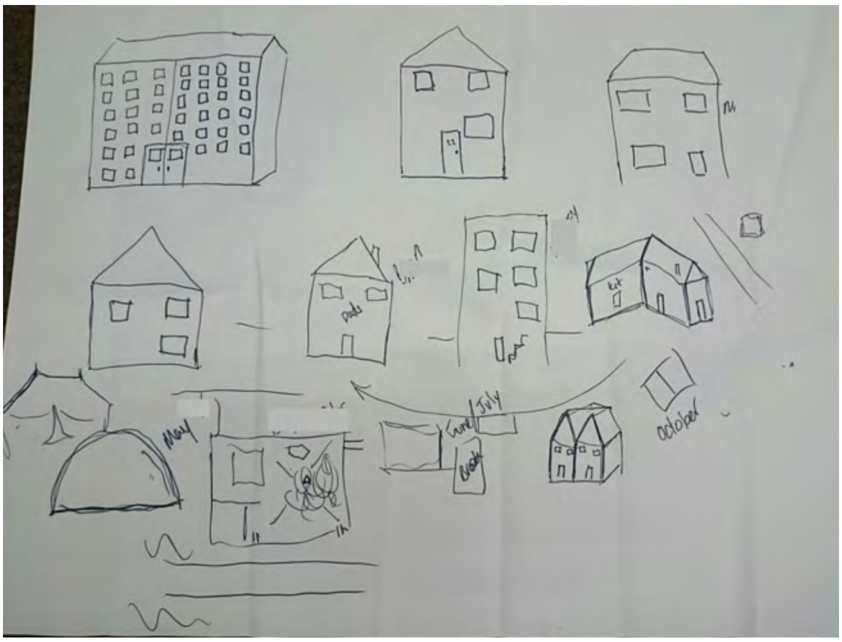
*Remember to pay attention to what the participant is drawing as well as to what they are saying. If the participant is spending a long time on a specific moment and drawing in detail, try not to rush them and instead ask about the drawing; it may be a significant moment for them.*

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.

Methods for Change

# Graphic Interviews:

## Graphic Elicitation and Sketch Reportage

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# Graphic Interviews:
## Graphic Elicitation and Sketch Reportage

*Graphic Interviews involve a combination of talking and engaging with visual materials. This guide considers two Graphic Interview techniques: Graphic Elicitation using architectural plans, and Sketch Reportage. These two techniques can be used independently, or can be brought together in a single research project to provide multi-layered insight into the world of the respondent by combining different visual registers.*

*Graphic Elicitation* entails the use of drawing methods in the context of an interview, with drawings either produced by the participant or researcher. Architectural drawings and layout plans, for example, can be introduced, with participants then invited to draw on and engage with the plans in response to prompts or questions. This can enable researchers to understand how participants experience, navigate, inhabit or work within a space.

*Sketch Reportage* involves a skilled artist joining the research team and visually documenting the content of interview discussions in situ, capturing and representing aspects of life disclosed by respondents. This method can result in the production of visually compelling drawings or paintings which may be valued by participants, and can also be useful for communicating research findings. Both of these approaches provide ways of concretising what has been said and give the described experiences a material form.

## How do Graphic Interviews create or contribute to change?

Graphic Interview methods can encourage self-reflection on aspects of daily life such as the way people move through and use buildings. Viewing and handling architectural plans – which are rarely accessible to building users – can be empowering and insightful for participants. The experience of being sketched, and then immediately presented with a beautifully crafted representation of oneself can be moving, and participants may feel that their experiences have been recognised and validated.

By disrupting assumptions about what people do day-to-day, these methods 'make the familiar strange' , and can therefore enable researchers and participants to access experiences that are not easily expressed in words.

Feeding back findings generated through Graphic Elicitation methods can lead to tangible changes in the building or space in question such as reconfiguring rooms or routes in response to participants' concerns. Such findings can also highlight organisational practices that could be reworked. When shared with architects and planners, this type of research can in the longer term also inform the redesign of existing spaces and the design of new spaces. Visual materials produced through this approach can be particularly useful for communicating the experiences of a particular group to the wider public or policy makers.

The method of Sketch Reportage can itself also be used as part of a strategy for sharing research findings. For example, inviting an artist or visual minuter to document a professional or academic conference where findings are presented could create a memorable experience and visual record for those involved.

## What ideas or concepts are connected with this approach?

Like other creative and elicitation methods that use visual or material stimuli to encourage participants to talk about their ideas, Graphic Interviews bring a participatory and embodied dimension to more traditional interviewing techniques. Visual participatory approaches often aim to disrupt power dynamics by giving participants the opportunity to lead aspects of the research through drawing, pointing, handling materials, or engaging with maps, for example. Research encounters aim to be interactive and meaningful for participants, including those who may struggle with verbal communication.

Sketch Reportage is particularly useful for communicating non-verbal and embodied observations which can be lost in a standard interview transcript, such as gestures, expressions, postures, coughs, or moments where participants pause or need to refresh themselves. While Sketch Reportage involves an artist rather than the participant leading the creation of a visual artwork, it can also work to shift the power dynamics of an interview. The artist introduces creative materials into the setting, and produces something that can be given back to participants as a recognition of their involvement.

Bringing Graphic Elicitation and Sketch Reportage together can be thought of as a form of 'triangulation', in that it allows researchers to consider the complexity of a particular research problem by studying it from various angles, using different forms of visual representation. Architectural layout drawings are abstract, flat representations of space, which can be quite unfamiliar to participants. Sketch Reportage methods, in contrast, are narrative, biographical and can capture the person as well as the space. Integrating these two very different visual registers can therefore be a powerful tool for understanding the world of the respondent.

# Graphic Interviews:
## Graphic Elicitation and Sketch Reportage

### Why might I want to use Graphic Interviews?

- Graphic Interviews offer a tactile, visually compelling form of engagement in which participants have the opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives and day-to-day practices in creative ways that go beyond verbal communication.
- Graphic Elicitation using architectural plans can be particularly useful for understanding how building users experience a place. They can show routines, pathways and movements through a space, as well as identifying participants' perspectives or feelings about particular areas of a building or location.
- After plans or maps have been drawn on, coloured in or annotated, they can be compared to show how different groups use or perceive a space in contrasting ways. In a hospital setting, for example, this could highlight how wellness or occupational hierarchy can influence routes through the building, as well as showing embodied repetitions and routines, or areas that are perceived as safe or risky.
- Sketch Reportage methods can provide a record of not only what is said in an interview, but also how it is said and other contextual details. They bring narrative and a sense of the person and place into conversation with the more abstract journeys and movements represented on an architectural plan. At the end of the interview, participants may value the opportunity to see their experiences reflected in a beautifully crafted work of art.
- Sketch Reportage introduces an artist and a creative practice into the setting of the interview, which may work to disrupt power dynamics and diffuse potential anxiety on the part of participants. It is important to be aware, however, that participants may find the process of being studied and drawn whilst talking unsettling. The researcher has an ethical responsibility to ensure participants understand and feel comfortable taking part, are aware of how the visual materials generated will be anonymised and used, and to make accommodations or adaptations where needed.
- Producing something visual during the interview encounter provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on the data and the experience of taking part in the research. Conventional interviews usually do not produce immediate outputs that show or feedback what has been discussed. In contrast, by the end of an interview using Graphic Elicitation methods, the participant can see their journeys and observations scribbled onto a layout plan as well as an aesthetically creative reflection of themselves.


*Sketch reportage of interview with 'Mike' (cystic fibrosis patient), by artist Lynne Chapman www.lynnechapman.net*

## Step by step guide to using Graphic Interviews

### Graphic Elicitation with architectural drawings and layout plans

1. **Prepare the plans or drawings:** Layout plans for public buildings are usually readily available and can often be sourced through the estates department or equivalent of the organisation in question. Detailed drawings need to be large enough (i.e. at least A3) to be seen easily and made sense of by participants. Architectural plans can be confusing, so the researcher will need to be prepared to talk through the plans and explain what different areas are to help orient the respondent.

*It helps to initially visit the site and ideally be given a tour by a member of staff, or to get someone to help identify areas of the plan by email. Before printing the plans, they may need some modification, such as cutting out and enlarging some aspects of the building or editing room labels to make them clearer.*

2. **Explain the method:** The reasons for using layout plans need to be clearly communicated to participants. It is important that they understand the purpose of the research, what they are being asked to do, and what will happen to the drawings subsequently. Some participants may need some encouragement to 'go for it' and to pick up a pen and begin drawing, or, in some cases it may work better if the researcher draws with instructions from the participant.

*Different interviewers will have different ways of resolving the reticence of interviewees to draw. It can be tempting for the interviewer to take over and do it for them. It is important to be aware and sensitive to the fact that drawing and writing in an interview is also a subtle and delicate question of confidence, control, delegation and even power.*

3. **Prompts and questions:** Participants are guided through the process of annotating and drawing on the plans through a series of prompts from the researcher. Initially, participants could be asked to describe their usual routes through the building, for example, by asking:

   *Could you walk me through what you did today? What do you normally do when you arrive at the building? Where would you go next? How long does it take?*

   Different coloured pens can be used for different types of prompts. For example, participants could be asked to use a red pen to highlight areas they see as risky, and a green pen to show things that they would like to change. Participants may need to be reminded to keep drawing as they talk through their answers.

## Step by step guide to using Graphic Interviews

*Care and consideration needs to be given to the fact that layout plans can be a 'give away' in identifying buildings and facilities that might be recognised beyond a specific site. In publications, reports and feedback to stakeholders there is always the possibility that a site could be identified, and respondents within the same site might well be able to identify one another. Removing text that names hospitals or departments and cropping areas of plans in publications can mean they are less identifiable, but does not remove the possibility of spaces being recognised. It is however, important to be aware of this possibility, and the sensitivities that may be involved.*

4. **Draw on the plans:** Multiple copies of the plans can be printed and then drawn on or marked with stickers or post it notes, for example. Another option is to use transparent acetate sheets which are overlaid on top of the plan or drawing, and attached with masking tape. Participants can then use permanent markers to write and draw on the acetate sheet. Multiple acetates from different interviews can later be placed on top of each other to compare one set of responses against another. Graphic Elicitation interviews could also be carried out online using the annotation option in the 'shared screen' or 'whiteboard' function of your preferred online platform.

### Sketch Reportage

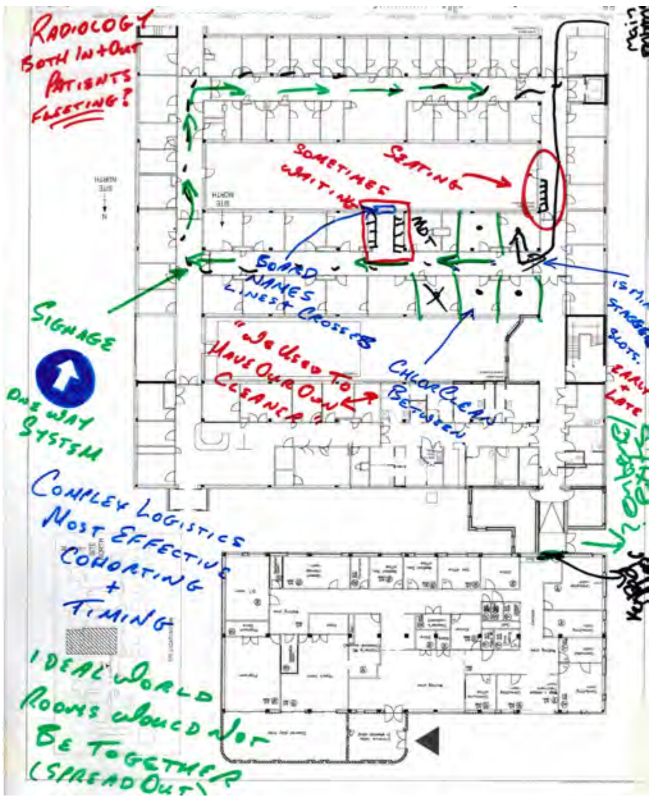
1. **Identify and recruit the artist:** The specific artistic and research skills required will vary depending on the research context and focus. Some styles of artwork – e.g. cartoons – may be appropriate in some contexts but not in others. If Sketch Reportage is to be a key component of a research project, the artist will be playing a significant role within the interviews. It is therefore important that they have a clear understanding of the method, the purpose of the research, and are able to work sensitively around the needs of participants.
2. **Plan the interviews together with the artist:** It can be helpful to involve the artist in planning meetings, and ideally they will be part of the research team from the start of the project, with involvement in designing the research. Discuss beforehand if there are particular things you would like them to document, such as gestures, expressions, written quotes, or elements of the environment. Sketching and writing down what people say at the same time can be challenging – it may be useful for the researcher to send selected quotes from the interview transcript to be added to the artwork afterwards. The artist may also wish to leave space to draw things or places that were mentioned in the interview later on.

## Step by step guide to using Graphic Interviews

3. **Think about space and positioning:** The space in which interviews take place needs to be private and big enough to accommodate the researcher(s), participant(s), artist and their equipment. The artist will need to position themselves somewhere they can see the participant, and it is important the researcher does not obstruct their view! Sketch Reportage can also produce interesting results when used during walking interviews, though this can require the artist to sketch at a very quick rate and to be able to multi-task.

4. **Introduce the artist and the method and carry out the interview:** It is crucial that participants feel comfortable, and understand why the artist is sitting in on the interview, what they will be doing and how the artwork will be used, including whether participants will receive a copy. The researcher can then carry out a semi-structured interview, following a series of questions or prompts, which may also be audio recorded. The artist will sketch or paint as the interview unfolds, and they may be involved in the conversation or add questions at certain points where appropriate.

5. **Use the visual data to share findings:** It is important to have a plan in place for how the artworks will eventually be used. The drawings or images produced using these methods can be used to illustrate reports or websites, and can be a powerful method for communicating research findings, such as featuring in a display stand at professional or academic events. The original artworks could also be displayed in an exhibition or in the settings in which they were produced - the 'art in hospitals' movement is one example.




*Graphic map of Outpatients Department by 'Rachel', a physiotherapist.*

## An example of using Graphic Interviews in social science research

**Pathways, Practices and Architectures: Containing Antimicrobial Resistance in the Cystic Fibrosis Clinic (PARC)**

**Researchers: Prof. Nik Brown, Dr Christina Buse, Prof. Sarah Nettleton and Dr Daryl Martin, University of York; Dr Alan Lewis, The University of Manchester**

**Wider project team: Prof. Mike Brockhurst, The University of Manchester; Lynne Chapman, artist; Prof. Craig Winstanley, University of Liverpool**

**Exhibition design: Hamza Oza and Jonathan West, Royal College of Art**

The PARC project compares different approaches to managing antimicrobial resistance in the design, practices and architectural layout of three cystic fibrosis clinics. Cystic fibrosis is one of many life-threatening respiratory conditions characterised by frequent infections and antibiotic treatment, giving rise to resistant cross infection between people with cystic fibrosis. Prevention increasingly depends on building containment and segregation of people and pathogens into practices and material design. And yet, there are significant variations in the way lung infection clinics perform segregation within transitional spaces of healthcare environments. Clinics have much to learn from each other, and much to offer the wider clinical community in limiting antimicrobial resistance.

The PARC Project used a range of qualitative research methods, including ethnographic and innovative visual approaches. Fieldwork took place across three cystic fibrosis clinics between September 2018 and August 2019. It included the development of a physical and virtual exhibition and the dissemination of findings in bespoke co-design workshops across fieldwork sites.

In the PARC project researchers used layout plans and architectural drawings of hospital environments, including respiratory outpatient clinics but also long-stay wards, as well as the wider hospital estate in which they are located. These are generally the routine everyday environments in which clinical staff work and in which patients are treated, and sometimes the environments in which patients will spend weeks in semi-isolation.  This Graphic Elicitation method enabled clinicians and patients to describe and document how they move around a building, their routes and pathways, their spatial routines and habits, to document things that they liked or things they were worried about. Some areas might be perceived to be potential hot spots of infection, cross-infection and contamination, such as toilets, lifts, sinks and basins, waiting areas, or canteens, and retail pharmacies. In this particular research, pens were a concern in terms of cross infection. The research team disinfected pens after use, and if interviewing patients on the same day or within a short period of time would always use new pens.

As part of this project, the team also employed the graphic artist, Lynne Chapman, a specialist in creating drawn and painted illustrations produced in situ during fieldwork and interviews. The aim was to document the journeys, both biographical and spatial, discussed by participants. Given this focus on journeys and pathways, Lynne used long narrow strips of water colour paper resulting in 'time-lines' that tell the interviewee's story of navigating clinical space and negotiating the practical aspects of cross-infection avoidance. Each painting is a colourfully vibrant and detailed medley of interview quotes, figurative portraiture detailing embodied gestures, and sketches of spaces and objects that feature in the interviewee's account. By the end of the project several dozen visually compelling Sketch Reportage drawings were produced.

The drawing-based methods were useful in capturing the embodied aspects of the interview which are often missed, including participants' gestures, or the fact that they were drinking water during the interview. Although the drawings were anonymised (e.g. changing hair colour, adding glasses), when drawings were shown at clinics some people still thought they could identify participants. While some participants may be happy to be identified, it is worth considering whether anonymity is possible or desirable, and communicating this clearly to participants at the outset.

The final phase of the project included detailed feedback to each clinic through clinic-specific workshops designed to create critical reflection on our findings, and to identify both modest and ambitious design interventions. Each of the workshops involved a combination of clinical, ancillary, estates and sanitary staff, and a patient representative. Each of these workshops led to a bespoke schedule of potential design changes, and a rationale for achieving them. A final stakeholder workshop brought a wider range of stakeholders including healthcare architects and microbiologists together to discuss the project's findings and strategies for embedding impact.

Our findings highlight how hospital buildings can constrain or enable practices of segregation and distancing – lifts, narrow corridors, busy waiting rooms and tight spaces make keeping a safe distance more challenging. Participants emphasise the importance of regular air change for the quick dispersal of 'bugs', but window opening in hospitals can be limited by window restrictors, or by issues such as people smoking outside of windows. Specialist mechanical ventilation is costly and difficult to retrofit into buildings. Findings also illustrate how flexibility is important when designing new hospital buildings, so that designs can be adapted to the changing requirements of infection prevention. Our findings are relevant for cystic fibrosis clinics, but also for infection prevention and antimicrobial resistance more widely, as has become apparent during the COVID pandemic.

## Where else could Graphic Interviews be used?

Graphic Interviews lend themselves to many kinds of questions and contexts. However, they are particularly useful in understanding experiences of the built environment, and in generating a sense of ownership for those who use, live and work in different kinds of buildings. In the research described above, this was particularly valuable for empowering both patients and clinicians. But this could so easily extend into other therapeutic settings including mental health settings, cancer care, and palliative care. Wider application of Graphic Interviews could include exploring the experiences of different groups in relation to public spaces, transport infrastructure, parks, shopping centres, libraries, schools, universities and other institutional settings.

The involvement of a Sketch Reportage artist has gained increasing popularity both within and beyond social science and humanities research, including their input into workshops, conferences and other events. This element of the research can be important in validating the experiences of interviewees, and has been used in a variety of settings, including in research by members of the PARC project team. This includes research on the work of architects and building contractors, who are involved in the design of buildings for later life care. Sketch Reportage methods were used when shadowing architects and building contractors on site, and also documenting project meetings and conferences, and Graphic Elicitation was used in interviews with architects. Sketch Reportage has also been used in research on the daily lived experiences of people with dementia. This method has also been used to capture the everyday practices of academics, in research by the University of Manchester.

### Top tips

1. When you initially access the plans and develop them for Graphic Elicitation interviews, if possible, ask for a tour of the building, or ask someone to talk you through the plans. Participants might need you to explain what they are seeing, and it can be difficult to do this if you are unfamiliar with the space.
2. Some architectural plans might be more workable for this method if they are slightly simplified or modified. This can be done with picture editing software. Or alternatively use health and safety layout plans if available instead of architectural plans.
3. Be flexible. Some people are less comfortable drawing in interviews, so it is important to think about how you will address this, and whether you could instead draw for participants if required.
4. When using Sketch Reportage methods, agree in advance of the project who will own the artwork and how it may be used in future. Most illustrators and graphic artists tend to provide high quality scans to clients, whilst retaining rights over the original, physical artwork. In most cases, scans are fine for dissemination, publishing and display, but if an art exhibition is part of the dissemination plan then an agreement will need to be in place to exhibit the work temporarily or to purchase the art as part of the contract. Make sure that the hourly and day rates of the artists and creatives involved are costed in the initial plans for the project.

## Further reading

- Reports from the PARC project
- Lynne Chapman, artist

**Academic articles:**

- Air care: an 'aerography' of breath, buildings and bugs in the cystic fibrosis clinic.
- The coughing body: etiquettes, techniques, sonographies and spaces.
- Pathways, practices and architectures: Containing antimicrobial resistance in the cystic fibrosis clinic.

**To reference:** Brown, N., Buse, C., Pottinger, L. and Barron, A. (2021). 'Graphic Interviews' 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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The University of Manchester

Methods for Change

# A Place-based Case Study Approach

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# A Place-based Case Study Approach

*In Place-based Case Study Approaches, research is framed around a particular place, which can take various forms: a ward, an island, a region or the geographical reach of an organisation.*

One aspect of Place-based Case Study research that is different from many traditional approaches is that research questions are not determined at the beginning of a project, but are developed in the process of carrying out research in a place. Researchers start with a broad view of a problem or topic and generate the important questions over time, as they become more informed. A Place-based Case Study Approach borrows largely from ethnographic research methods, studying 'doings' and 'sayings' of people within a defined geographical boundary. It thereby draws from a rich toolbox of methods, including informal, in-situ conversations, participant observation, archival research, and formal interviewing which can take different shapes – from structured interviews with local government representatives in their offices, to spending an afternoon partaking in conversations with a family in their living room. This approach often involves the collection of stories which complement systematically gathered data by illuminating the socio-economic and political complexities behind social and environmental challenges.

## How does a Place-based Case Study Approach create or contribute to change?

By entering the field in an exploratory way and avoiding the use of pre-defined research questions, this approach can reveal misrepresentations that lead to misunderstandings about problems or phenomena as experienced by those living with such concerns. While research that follows this approach does not necessarily set out to create change, change is inherent in a Place-based Case Study Approach because it generates data which can lead to problems being framed differently. Case studies look at structures, rather than individual motivations. Research into food consumption provides one example of how reframing a problem can lead to a change in perspective: it is often consumers, and women in particular who are blamed for bad nutrition, and many research approaches and research questions can as a result be framed around seeking to re-educate and nudge consumers, and especially women, towards better choices. Taking a case study approach, larger political and economic circumstances and changes that lead to poor nutrition can be explored, reminding us that there are forces at work outside of the sole control of an individual consumer. Unearthing alternative perspectives can open fresh avenues for intervention that avoid well-trodden pathways towards the same tired and ineffectual outcomes. Such pathways are usually familiar to the recipients of such interventions, and thus, focused conversations with research participants which become situated within discussion of the emerging findings, make for a holistic, iterative interaction that can prove therapeutic for participants.   Connections can be made between the social structures shaping their experiences and their roots in that place.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Taking the approach of "starting research in order to generate research questions", Place-based Case Studies are associated with the wider field of interpretative-qualitative approaches, which involve a degree of immersion and are inspired by grounded theory (an inductive approach where theory and concepts are developed during and after data collection). The approach is also underpinned by practice theory; focusing on observing patterns, actions, doings and sayings, which is different from approaches in which people are asked directly to share their experiences. While conversations about individual experiences may take place, in Place-based Case Study research they are contextualised within wider socio-economic and political structures, which are understood to shape experiences. The focus is therefore not on individual intentions and actions, but attention is instead paid to the interconnections between social structures, geo-political systems, and patterns of experiences, as embedded within a particular place.

## Why might I want to use a Place-based Case Study Approach and what do I need to consider?

- Place-based Case Study Approaches are useful for understanding social and environmental challenges and require the researcher to enter a wider social field with an open mind. Over time and after various unstructured forms of exploration - such as: informal conversations with locals; site visits; attending local events; diving into archives - it becomes possible to establish what constitutes the 'case' with regards to its spatial and thematic boundaries.
- Place-based Case Studies allow researchers to explore several avenues at once, and to look at an issue through the lens of multiple research methods. The areas of exploration will expand and contract throughout the research process, as connections with other fields come to the foreground, and at times, retreat into the background.
- Researchers might gather insights from short in-situ conversations as well as formal interviews, and then represent these as stories or narratives. These more informal, unstructured findings may be overlooked or regarded as invalid in other research methodologies, but they can provide rich detail and can work to shift perspectives on an issue or problem.
- Case studies are well suited to exploring under-researched areas or topics, or where problems appear to be stuck. By allowing the researcher to explore connections in-situ in a way that other methods may not, this method is useful for studying areas and places where misunderstandings of problems are prevalent, and for enabling counter-narratives to be identified and developed.
- Taking a Place-based Case Study Approach is time consuming! The researcher will be in a place for a sustained duration; spending time with people, getting to know them, the community, and become known to that community, too. Participant observation of related activities is at the heart of the research process, and involvement in these aspects can take a lot of time. Although these activities may not be directly linked to the research focus, they are vital to understanding the landscape in which the case is situated, and to the success of the project.

## Step-by-step guide to using a Place-based Case Study Approach:

1. **Explore.** Do whatever you can to immerse yourself in the field. Go into the field first, ask questions and observe what happens around you. Only then will you begin to identify the research questions which help to identify and shape the parameters of the case.
2. **Map Connections.** You might start with a large piece of paper, and think about all the different sites or spaces involved and connected with the problem and map them out. Ask: what individuals and groups are involved, and how do I access them?
3. **Set parameters and draw a boundary around the case.** Once you have taken the steps outlined above, and have an understanding of the research problem at hand, you can build a "fence" or draw a circle around a particular place or space that you will focus on. Make sure these boundaries of the research setting, whether you research a community, a ward, or an organisation, are only developed once you have immersed yourself in a place.

*Just because it is a case study of a particular place, you don't have to study everything going on in that place. At the same time, the boundaries that you draw as a researcher are permeable: connections and relations run in and out of your case study location. While interesting threads may be followed and investigated to a certain extent, creating the boundary helps to define the case, to retain a focus, and it stops the case from becoming too large and unwieldy! However, connections with larger processes outside of the fence of your case study will be part of the story. They may add flavour to the study or provide an undercurrent that sends ripples through the research, but without being fundamental to the analysis.*

4. **Build a methods toolkit.** Once the case is established, make a list of the methods in your toolkit and think of the tools that you need, such as a notebook, camera and/or dictaphone.
5. **Start applying the tools.** Figure out what you are comfortable with. You first need to build a picture of your case, so you might want to start with archives, oral history 'go-alongs', or informal conversations before you move on to interviews. Based on the background research, these informal encounters then progress into more formal one-on-one interviews, or group interviews. At this point, you might draw on the wealth of methods the social sciences has in its repertoire – both qualitative and quantitative – in order to develop a rich response to the research questions developed from the initial stages of case study research.

*Make sure you do your own preliminary research on the place in question. Look through archives, news and books before you start interviewing participants. This will not only help you to prepare the 'right' questions, but it shows some respect to the participants. It is your responsibility to build a picture before you ask for peoples' time, so that they are not presented with the task of doing this work for you!*

6. **Pull out one thread and follow it.** Follow material things and connections. It is normal for things to become bigger - if you are doing it right, things will grow! Place-based Case Study research is a constant process of reflecting on what you want to do and whether you are still doing what you want to do.

## Step-by-step guide to using a Place-based Case Study Approach:

7. **Collate and analyse.** Pulling on a thread and following it using such mixed methods will leave you with multiple forms of data that must all be processed, arranged, managed, and analysed. Interviews will need to be transcribed, fieldnotes written up in full, photographs stored – perhaps in connection with a fieldnote – and notes taken in reference to archival material referenced. CAQDAS (Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software) packages such as NVivo and AtlasTi work well as tools for data storage and management. They enable the coding of multiple forms of data, and allow you to keep a record of the connections between themes emerging across data. You can also file data in multiple places according to their relevance to the themes that arise. This marks an initial stage of thematic analysis that begins the process of getting to know your data. How you go on to analyse the data depends on how you collected it: did you elicit narratives through formal interviews? In which case, subjecting the data to narrative analysis would be appropriate. If naturally occurring talk was recorded in the field, a conversation analysis would better suit this data, and so on.

## An example of a Place-based Case Study Approach in social science research

**Understanding Food Insecurity Across a Small-Island Archipelago: A Place-based Case Study**

**Researchers: Dr Jessica Paddock with colleagues at the Sustainable Places Research Institute, Cardiff University, in collaboration with partner organisations including Department for Environment and Maritime Affairs (DEMA), TCI Red Cross, and the Department for Agriculture.**

This study began as part of an interdisciplinary project 'Biodiversity for food security: seagrass meadows in the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI)' but has evolved through relatively small injections of funding over several years into a case study informed primarily by a social scientific approach. The aim of the project, originally, was to explore the link between healthy seagrass meadows and food security at a local level.

**Context**

Through their provision of ecosystem services that support the development of a healthy fish community, seagrass meadows are thought to be valuable for their contribution to food security, yet, their status and role in such matters was not well known outside the scientific community. This project, in part, sought to change that. First of all, an understanding of the processes and institutions that were at work in the governance of the marine and coastal environment was established. Through elite interviews with key actors in this arena – from the heads of departments to local enforcement officers – a picture of the challenges faced in protecting the health of these biodiverse islands in the context of rapid coastal development for tourism was built. At the crux of the matter - from a social scientific point of view - was the need to understand the dynamics of the food system as pertaining to that particular place, and to understand how these systems of provision worked for different communities in different ways. Only once such dynamics were understood, could the role of seagrass conservation in addressing problems of food insecurity be understood in ways that could inform or inspire change for the better, or indeed to preserve favourable conditions for current and future generations.

**Methods used**

The social scientific methods employed across the duration of this case study (9 years so far!) include the analysis of archival materials such as photographs, maps and newspaper articles. They also include elite interviews, interviews with islanders while out in the field as participant observer - sometimes while volunteering in Red Cross Thrift Stores across the islands. These in-situ conversations, as opposed to semi-structured interviews, were essential in understanding the challenges faced by islanders as embedded in other routines central to daily life. Oral history interviews were employed later on in the research process, in order to get to grips with how social and environmental change was understood by elders across the islands, as were group interviews where appropriate. For example, where a community group of women regularly meet, it made sense to join them, and to allow the interview schedule to be subservient to the flow of naturally occurring talk, and the sharing of stories and memories were left to emerge through their own talk, propelled by their own concerns and interests.

**How findings were shared**

Findings were shared through multiple media. Academic articles were written, however, contributions were made also to local magazines and newspapers so as to contribute to the discussions abounding across the islands about the need to diversify sources of food in order to boost their resilience to environmental harms and food insecurity. The research conducted allowed the voices of several communities across the islands to be collated. This lent some weight to public discussions and policy developments that have since sought to reconfigure the food system in order to increase local production, and diversify their regional trade relationships.

## Where else could a Place-based Case Study Approach be used?

This approach is useful in every context where community development work is happening. Many practitioners might apply versions of Place-based Case Studies to their ongoing work already, without framing it as a research method. Long-term and ongoing engagement with and knowledge of a particular case may mean that case study research has been happening without it ever having been intentionally framed as such. By following the steps outlined in this guide, various practitioners and organisations might fruitfully reframe the work they are already doing as an ongoing process of research and to develop a more systematic process for collating various forms of community data as evidence within these programmes of work.

### Top tips

1. Just start – get out into the field and immerse yourself!
2. Find focus, but be flexible: It's important to map the field, and to draw a boundary, but don't be afraid of reframing or changing it again.
3. Don't get overwhelmed by the amount of information you encounter. Just because it is a case study of a particular place, you don't have to study everything going on in that place.

## Further reading

- What role for trade in food sovereignty? Insights from a small island archipelago*
- Changing consumption, changing tastes? Exploring consumer narratives for food secure, sustainable and healthy diets*

**If you are unable to access the full version of this article, please email the author to request a copy*

**To reference:** Paddock, J., Pottinger, L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021) A Place-based Case Study Approach 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.

Methods for Change

# Mobile Visual Methods

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# Mobile Visual Methods

*In this approach, participants visually record their journeys or document significant elements of the landscape as they travel or move around a place. As such, Mobile Visual Methods are particularly useful for understanding lived, everyday experience. Mobile Visual Methods often involve research participants creating visual data themselves, through photography, film, drawing or map making.*

They can also involve the researcher accompanying participants with a camera or other technologies as they move in or through a particular space, such as a city, a transport network, or institutional setting. The data produced is then used as a prompt for subsequent discussion. This approach can therefore be a powerful tool for highlighting elements of everyday mobility that may be difficult to access in a static interview, including 'embodied' dimensions - the ways that individuals experience and relate to places through the body. Visual data generated through this approach can also be used to collaboratively produce a creative output such as a film or exhibition, and therefore to create something tangible that gives participants a sense of ownership and achievement.

# Mobile Visual Methods

## How do Mobile Visual Methods create or contribute to change?

By foregrounding participants' individual perspectives, this approach can expose the variety of ways in which people engage in, and move around public or private spaces. They can therefore help to challenge assumptions that we all move and experience places and infrastructures in the same way – assumptions which often underpin urban and transport policy, for example. For research participants, involvement in such creative methods can be transformative, particularly in projects where visual data is used to develop a co-produced output. As well as recognising and validating under-represented experiences of place and mobility, working collaboratively on a film or exhibition can provide participants with opportunities to gain valuable vocational skills. Collaborating to edit film footage or curate images, for example, can also provide opportunities for participants to be involved more deeply in the research process and to actively contribute to the analysis and sharing of findings.

The outputs created can be used to raise public awareness around an issue, and they have the potential to highlight different experiences and reframe dominant opinions or perspectives. Research conceived collaboratively with a charity, public sector organisation or community group can also contribute to shaping policy and priorities by drawing attention to under-represented or under-explored experiences. Research using Mobile Visual Methods with visually impaired young people, for example, has shown how organisational policies aimed at 'independent mobility' for this group can be unhelpful. By illuminating the interdependent relationships and social interactions that often shape experiences of moving around a place, in this research Mobile Visual Methods highlighted that conversations about 'assistance' could be much more effective than aims to establish independence.

## What ideas or concepts are connected with Mobile Visual Methods?

Mobile Visual Methods combine elements of visual, ethnographic and participatory research. They can be understood as a form of 'go-along' in which the researcher takes part in and observes the everyday experiences and practices of participants, while they are on the move. Go-along methods have been applied by social scientists for decades. While accompanying participants as they engage in an activity is often an integrated element of participant observation in ethnographic approaches, mobile methods have been systematically applied since the mid-2000's, when the study of 'mobilities' became popular in Geography and related disciplines.

As a participatory method, participants are viewed as partners in the research who play an important role in the co-creation of knowledge. In addition to emphasising collaborative relationships between researcher and researched, Mobile Visual Methods also integrate a form of technology into the research. This could be anything from a smartphone app to a disposable camera or handwritten diary. Mobile Visual Methods often involve the participant producing audio-visual data themselves, by wearing film cameras on their body (e.g. chest or headcams), or taking photographs on their phone as they travel around a place. The creative and visual materials that are produced can be useful for examining non-verbal, emotional and sensory experiences of a place. Like other 'elicitation' methods, in which photographs, maps or objects are introduced into the research encounter to stimulate discussion and reflection, the researcher and participant then explore these audio-visual materials together to generate interview data.

## Why might I want to use Mobile Visual Methods?

- As a creative method, this approach can provide an enjoyable and meaningful way for participants to be involved in research. The rich, audio-visual data created are particularly useful for prompting discussions about practices, phenomena or social issues that would be less easy to access in a static interview.
- With a focus on experience in motion, Mobile Visual Methods can help to expose and challenge assumptions that we all move through and navigate space in the same way. By exploring mobilities from the perspectives of participants, Mobile Visual Methods can be particularly useful for understanding differentiated experiences – how different individuals or groups experience movement through a place in contrasting ways.
- Mobile Visual Methods are useful for understanding pace, tempo and rhythm. Wearable video technology, such as GoPro cameras, can generate data related to external rhythms and movements in the environment as well as internal rhythms such as breathing, with changes in pace indicating, for example, moments in which the wearer experiences heightened states of anxiety.
- This approach can allow researchers and participants to get a sense of the micro-level and sensory details of moving through space (e.g. surfaces, textures, soundscapes) and can provide opportunities to notice and talk about elements of day-to-day lives and embodied experience. Videos created from cameras worn on the chest, for example, can reveal much about the tactile nature of surfaces such as pavements in the city. They can also highlight moments of connection and interdependency with other people moving around the same place, which may otherwise be overlooked.
- Mobile Visual Methods can generate compelling visual data, but the process is time and labour intensive for participants and researchers. Facilitation and guidance from the researcher is critical throughout the process, and time should be allowed for additional support, follow-ups, and contingencies.

## Step by step guide to using Mobile Visual Methods:

1. **Start with collaboration:** The research should begin with a dialogue between research partners and participants to ensure that the process is collaborative from the start, and that the methods used are appropriate for the group(s) involved and the topic under investigation. Think carefully about who will be asked to create visual data and in what settings, and consider what level of commitment this will require from participants. Discuss whether this is the right approach for this research.
2. **Decide on methods and technologies:** The initial planning and dialogue stage will also include decisions about the technologies used to record or document. These might include: wearable GoPro cameras, disposable cameras, mobile phone cameras or apps, notepads or diaries. Think about the types of data that could potentially be produced (e.g. photos, drawings, film footage, maps, written or photo journals), and how they will be used. You may want to offer participants a choice of different methods and technologies. People's backgrounds, skills and experiences vary, and not everyone will feel comfortable using the same kinds of devices.

## Step by step guide to using Mobile Visual Methods:

*Using new technologies may prompt some level of anxiety. Anyone drawing upon these methods should have an awareness of, and support in place, for the demands that such intensive methods can place on participants. In other words, do not underestimate the labour of participants required for these methods to work effectively. Think about strategies for mitigating any potential distress, such as giving a range of different options for participants to choose from, and scheduling regular opportunities for support and guidance.*

3. **Give clear instructions:** Ensure that participants understand the purpose of the research, and what they are being asked to do, document or record. This could take the form of written instructions, an initial group meeting or regular check-ins. It is important to be clear about the role of the researcher in this process, e.g. will the researcher accompany the participant as they take photos or film footage in a particular location? When will they be available to offer support and guidance?
4. **Use the data in follow-up interviews:** Mobile Visual Methods are likely to produce a large volume of interesting, audio-visual data. There may be some 'top-down' analysis of footage, images, or writing that will be carried out by the researcher, but the main purpose of this data is to elicit further discussion which can be recorded and analysed. In these discussions, the researcher invites the participant to talk through the materials, and may prompt the discussion with questions about which elements of the footage or images are significant and why, how participants made decisions about where to go and what to record, or how they felt when they were in different places depicted in their recordings.
5. **Produce a collaborative output:** Depending on the types of data that have been produced in the project, an exhibition, film or online resource could be produced using photos or filmed material. Participants can play an important role in analysing and editing materials to produce a tangible output, and can gain valuable skills in the process. Think about how tasks will be shared, how you can draw on and develop the different skills that already exist within the group, and whether you will need to bring in any additional expertise such as film making or curating.
6. **Share the findings:** A co-produced creative output can be a powerful tool for sharing participants' stories with diverse audiences, and raising awareness about their experiences or perspectives. Think about where a film or exhibition could be located, and consider holding a launch event, which could invite the local community, stakeholders from different sectors, participants and their families. An online resource or social media account documenting images or films from the project could also extend findings from the research further.

## Examples of Mobile Visual Methods in social science research

### VI Everyday Mobilities

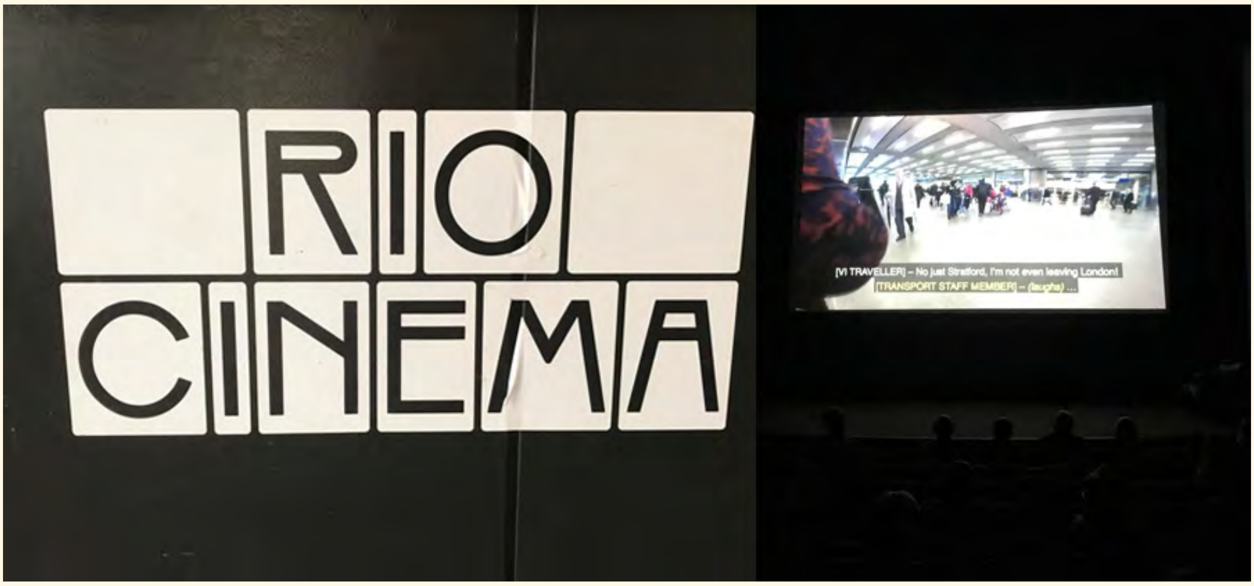
**Researcher: Dr Jennie Middleton, University of Oxford; Hari Byles, Independent Researcher**

The VI Everyday Mobilities project examined the relationship between urban transport and the everyday lives of visually impaired (VI) young people in London. The project was carried out between 2014 and 2018 by researchers in the Transport Studies Unit at the University of Oxford in partnership with the Royal Society for Blind Children (RSBC), a London based charity working with visually impaired young people up to the age of 26. Drawing on Visual Mobile Methods in the form of participatory film making, the project was developed with young people from the charity to explore independent mobility, using footage that they recorded with GoPro cameras.

The project responded to a lack of qualitative research about how visually impaired young people negotiate their journeys between different transport modes. This research examined how these experiences relate to other aspects of visually impaired young people's everyday lives, for instance; moving towards adulthood, achieving 'independence', speed/ time, access to services and employment, family relationships, mental health, and much more.

During the project, visually impaired Londoners (aged 18 – 26) used GoPro cameras to film their everyday journeys through the city, recording over 20 hours of footage. They then edited and narrated their videos making a series of short films, which show both good and bad experiences of travelling around London. The videos share moments of in/accessibility, interdependence, care, connection, frustration, support, and pride.

*VIMobilities panel discussion at the film launch event*




*VIMobilities films were screened at a launch event at the Rio Cinema in Dalston, London*

The video content was captured between 2014 and 2016, and forms part of a wider video database which contains key moments from visually impaired young people's everyday journeys. To produce these films researchers ran three workshops with participants, in which video content was reviewed, discussed, edited, and narrated to tell six different stories. The film making and research team then worked together to weave these elements into six short films, with regular input from participants along the way. The music that accompanies the films was composed and selected by the project participants and stories are told in their own words.

The six short films were premiered at Rio cinema in Hackney, inviting a range of stakeholders and community members, and Transport for London (TFL) have used some of these films in their accessibility training. The VI Mobilities website aims to provide a forum for young visually impaired people to continue sharing and talking about their experiences, as well as raising awareness of these experiences amongst transport planners, practitioners, travel assistants, and the public.

## Where else could Mobile Visual Methods be used?

Mobile Visual Methods have the potential to be used in a wide range of contexts. They are particularly useful for community organisations, public sector bodies and businesses that are interested in understanding how places, environments and infrastructures are experienced by different groups and individuals. Photo or film methods could be drawn on in research aiming to understand residents' day-to-day experiences of active travel or public transport networks in different neighbourhoods, for example, or seeking to explore how parks and green spaces are used and valued in cities, with findings feeding into future planning decisions or campaigns.

Mobile Visual Methods are also well suited to charities or service providers interested in developing meaningful and creative research and outputs alongside service users, community stakeholders and other beneficiaries. Projects based around the collaborative production of a film or photo exhibition can provide an engaging focus for children and young people to document their unique perspectives within educational or cultural institutions, for example, or with patient groups to understand how clinical settings are navigated and experienced. They could also be used by commercial organisations interested in understanding the emotional or sensory dimensions of different consumption spaces such as pop up markets and shopping centres, or at public events and gatherings.

## Top tips

1. Be patient. This approach can take time and it requires significant commitment from participants and researchers.

2. Do not underestimate the 'demands of the method'. The expectations that are placed on participants when using creative, innovative approaches are significant, since they are very time consuming and require ongoing commitment, rather than a one-off-meeting. It is important that participants are well prepared and guided, and that they get something out of their involvement as well.

3. Be available and approachable. As a researcher, it is important to provide clear instructions and to be available throughout the process. The relationships developed between researchers and participants in this research are key to its success.

## Further reading

**Research project wepage:**

- VI Mobilities

**Journal articles:**

- Pluralising the walking interview: researching (im)mobilities with Muslim women
- Interdependent temporalities and the everyday mobilities of visually impaired young people*
  **If you are unable to access the full version of this article, please email the author to request a copy*

**To reference:** Middleton, J., Pottinger, L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Mobile Visual Methods' 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.

Methods for Change

# Walk-along Interviews

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# Walk-along Interviews

*In walk-along, or go-along interviews, the researcher-participant interaction is taken out of the more traditional sit-down context into a more active and conversational setting. The concept is based on the idea that the movement across different spaces, for example a neighbourhood or town centre, exposes both the participant and the researcher to changing infrastructures, meanings and relations which can stimulate conversations in varying ways*.

Doing Walk-along Interviews means that the researcher gets immersed in the participants' world and in their 'journey'. In the process, the researcher-participant dynamic of asking and answering questions fades into the background in favour of a rather conversational encounter between two people. Walk-along Interviews are inexpensive and, in many ways, easier to set up than many other methods, including sit-down interviews. They are particularly useful to establish a holistic, in-depth understanding of how people relate or do not relate to the spaces that they inhabit and what their day-to-day experiences of inhabiting this place are like. Walk-along Interviews can be used alongside traditional sit-down interviews and meaningfully combined with other methods such as photograph elicitation and diary writing.

## How do Walk-along Interviews create or contribute to change?

On an individual level, Walk-along Interviews impact research participants differently, as they involve the participant a lot more than traditional sit-down interviews. Rather than the interviewer asking questions along a pre-set guide, Walk-along Interviews are conversational, with the participant taking the lead in terms of the walking route, as well as the topic of conversation. At the same time, the knowledge about the research topic and conversation with the researcher can trigger processes of reflection in participants. Through the research process, the participant becomes more aware of their surroundings, they might be triggered by what is happening around them, looking out for things and making connections between the research topic and their day-to-day life.

On a wider, societal level, this method brings out the voices of those who inhabit a space, and provides a platform to talk about their space in a way that is meaningful for them. By shedding a light on these individual experiences, this method can be helpful to shift fixed views and perceptions on what a certain neighbourhood or town is like. Participants' voices help to look at places from a different lens, through the things that participants point out, rather than the things the researcher considers significant. Walk-along Interviews with people who grew up locally can even challenge established ideas of the history of a place.

## What ideas or concepts influence Walk-along Interviews?

This approach sits within an intersectional approach towards research problems related to the everyday lives of marginalised groups: the idea that aspects of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, etc. intersect and that different intersections of those identities impact how people interrelate with different spaces. It is further inspired by Jennifer Mason's (2011) facet methodology, which is based on an overall bigger question, but paying attention to the over- and under-arching themes that run through it. Mason uses the visual metaphor of the gemstone as the overall research enquiry, turned one way or another, the gemstone reveals many facets, or different methodological planes which illuminate the overall research project in various ways. Some of the criticisms regarding intersectionality concern the fact that researchers often end up using a specific method and focusing on one or two intersections only, which could be race and gender, for example, but without focusing on other identities that people have as well. Since Walk-along Interviews are more open and experimental, they are perfectly suited to reveal complex, but often less obvious intersections in people's day-to-day lives.

## Why might I want to use Walk-along Interviews?

- Walk-along Interviews are well suited for the researcher to get a situated, and bigger picture, understanding of a place. While there are pre-existing views on what a certain region, town or neighbourhood is like, each local area has its own specific sort of story as well as its own needs. Walking around a place, guided by the participants' individual views on and experience within that place provides the researcher with grounding, in-depth insights which help to build nuanced insights about the 'bigger picture' of a place.
- Walk-along Interviews give both participants and researchers time to reflect. While it is normal in day-to-day conversations that people take moments to pause and reflect, doing this in sit-down research interviews can feel uncomfortable or inappropriate. The dynamic, conversational, and thus perhaps less pressured context of Walk-along Interviews allows people more space to think and reflect in different, more open ways.
- On Walk-along Interviews, you never know where research participants will take you. Walk-along Interviews reveal aspects of people's lives that researchers might not be looking for. People might take a route that is comfortable to them, or attached to a historical meaning; they might take sightly unusual routes to go from A to B, in order to avoid or pass a certain area. This can prompt personal and biographical revelations which often significantly enrich the research, but can also be emotionally challenging.

*Be aware of the environment in which the interview takes place and how this environment impacts the research process. Entering a participants' home as a researcher can cause power shifts in terms of the researchers' position in relation to the participant. On the flip side, interviews in public places such library cafes, can be limiting as well, as people might feel uncomfortable sharing personal stories. This is where the Walk-along interview can help. Walk-along Interviews create a dynamic in the relationship between researcher and participant that is wholly different from sit-down research interviews in public spaces or in people's homes. You will likely use Walk-along Interviews alongside other forms of data collection, which all provide different sets of opportunities and challenges.*

## Step-by-step guide to using Walk-along Interviews:

1. **Participants are generally most familiar with the format of a traditional sit-down interview.** Organising a sit-down discussion in a setting where participants feel comfortable can be a good way to begin the research, and to establish whether participants are willing to engage in a Walk-along Interview. In this initial face-to-face contact, as a researcher, you may guide the participant through the steps and explain the different parts of the research. The participant then decides what aspects they are comfortable with. Some may, for different reasons, only engage through the sit-down interview and talk the researcher through a place, but generally people feel more comfortable doing a walk than a sit-down interview.

*While it is important to make the research participant familiar with the research process, make sure you are not pushing the participant into one direction – instead allow them to take over the process and guide you.*

*Be prepared to go at the pace your participant wants to go and for the walk to take as long as the participant is keen on walking. You can prepare for this by making sure you charge your dictaphone batteries etc.*

2. **Allow the participant to choose the day and time of the Walk-along Interview.** Some people might prefer to have some time between the initial contact and the Walk-along Interview. There might be repeated walks as well. It is important to give participants the space to think about it and to choose what and how they are willing to share.

3. **Meet for the Walk-along Interview at the place chosen by the participant.** This may be their home, a place of significance, or a central meeting place in town.

4. **Once the walk has come to an end, make sure you debrief.** Let them know that the research part has come to an end, and ask for any last or common thoughts that they want to share at the end. This part is crucial, not only to show appreciation, but this is also often the moment when participants add really interesting reflections which can add further detail to the conversation you have had. At this point participants will have shared many thoughts and made lots of different connections, but asking this specifically at the end can trigger more reflections on the overall process.

## An example of Walk-along Interviews in social science research

**Challenging discourses on BSA Muslim women through an intersectional analysis of everyday experiences across spaces of home, work and public space**

**Researcher: Dr Rashida Bibi, The University of Manchester**

Walk-along Interviews were applied to challenge dominant discourses of British South Asian (BSA) Muslim women through an intersectional analysis of everyday experiences in Oldham, a large town in Greater Manchester, across spaces of home, work and public spaces.

A feminist methodology was employed, to specifically highlight the ways in which research could forefront marginalised voices by recognising and valuing narratives which had been subsumed within dominant or pathologised discourses of Muslim women. Because of the vastness of the 'everyday', such a concept could not be researched through just one research method. In particular, the aim was to focus on the embodied aspect of everyday lives, and the idea of fluidity and movement, to understand how a body is interpreted or looked at or seen, from different perspectives, or within different spaces. The same body within an ethnic minority community would be seen very differently from a wider public space context (the tram, a café, the local park) with a wider group of people.

Therefore, a number of methods including traditional sit-down interviews with photography and diaries were employed. Walk-along Interviews constituted one of these methods, as they proved helpful to explore the complexities of BSA Muslim women's lives, and the everyday spaces they would encounter and move through. There are inherent complexities of space and place that British Muslim women are embedded in.

In an active process, Walk-along Interviews involved listening, observing and participating through asking questions. Applied in the context of this research, Walk-along Interviews helped negate some of the awkwardness that can be present in sit-down interviews, whilst requiring the researcher to be continually engaged with not only the conversation but also the dynamic environment of the streets in which the conversation takes place. The dynamic and almost unscripted nature of the Walk-along Interview has the potential to elicit


*A picture of the derelict mills of Oldham taken from the photo album of a research participant who grew up in the town.*

rich material, as it can illuminate not only how British Muslim woman negotiate and contend with their everyday spaces in Oldham, but also how these spaces are re/made through everyday interactions in their wider social environment.

One key finding established through Walk-along Interviews in Oldham was the sense of disconnection BSA Muslim women felt from the history of Oldham, despite the fact that they have been living there all their lives, as many of their parents or grandparents would have migrated to Oldham to work in the cotton mills. Through Oldham's history as a mill town and its historical colonial links to Empire and migration, ethnic minority communities have a long, historical connection to specifically Oldham, and the wider UK. However, the Walk-along Interviews that took place in Oldham revealed that this history is not reflected in BSA Muslim women's sense of connection to this town. As such, it became apparent that this history of migration to Oldham from the former Commonwealth needs to be unearthed, preserved and shared with future generations.

The Walk-along Interviews inspired a range of further activities. The findings from these interviews led to a conversation with the curator of Oldham's local archives and history centre, and the idea of building a resource for younger generations of Muslims living in Oldham so that they have something that connects their history to the history of the town. Through oral history workshops it is hoped that ethnic minority residents of Oldham are empowered to make themselves and their place in the history of the town visible. Conducting oral history interviews with older members of their family and within the wider community will help the minority group and the wider population learn of migration and create connections between the past and present, and the growth of the South Asian community in Oldham. It will help BSA Muslim women cement their own sense of belonging to the town and make this belonging visible to society as a whole.

*A sweets machine in the streets of Oldham. Just like the derelict mills, the sweets machine represents a wider narrative of Oldham's industrial past, but also the sense of personal memory which affects how/why people feel a sense of belonging in/to Oldham. A combination of research methods which combines Walk-along Interviews with photo-elicitation and other methods can unearth these stories in holistic and meaningful ways.'*

## Where else could Walk-along Interviews be used?

Walk-along interviews are well suited to gain insights into a local area from the perspective of people who inhabit it. Through this method, we can learn more about the participants' daily life encounters and experiences, but also about the social life of a place itself. This method could be applied by many different institutions, such as councils, charities or businesses who want to learn more about people's habits and needs, the services that they use and the places that they frequent. Follow up activities from this form of data collection can help institutions such as councils to be more in touch with the communities that they are trying to work with and people in the communities can be aided to establish a sense of connection and belonging.

## Top tips

1. Make Walk-along Interviews as conversational as possible. People are always wary of research settings and the presence of the dictaphone. Even if they know the purpose of the meeting and that you are not deceiving them in any way, it makes a huge difference when you put the dictaphone away and just have a conversation.
2. Be flexible. You are not going to have the question sheet with you. You might have your questions in mind, but you will be guided by the conversation, and the walking!
3. Be open and willing to explore. People will take you where they want to take you and you're getting a really privileged insight into people's lives.
4. Be excited about the process. You will get a lot out of it, if you let yourself be guided by what people do and by how they do it. It will provide you with different views and almost certainly with some surprises.
5. Walk-along Interviews (and go-along methods in general) can be challenging for people with disability and mobility restrictions. Pick the mode and pace of 'walking through' space that suits your participant. If walking really is not possible for your participants, you can explore alternatives, such as (a) asking people to draw/map their community and/or the routes they take, (b) use digital maps (eg., google maps, open maps) or (c) virtual environments (eg., virtual reality) to explore places and experiences within them.

## Further reading

- Pluralising the walking interview: Researching (im)mobilities with Muslim women.
- Forgotten Women: The impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women.
- Ethnic minority 'ghettos' to be investigated'.

**To reference:** Bibi, R. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Walk-along interviews', 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.

Methods for Change

# Digitised Ethnography:

## Creating Interactive Stories


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# Digitised Ethnography:

## Creating Interactive Stories

*This guide looks at how to translate material generated through traditional ethnography into digital forms.*

Digital Ethnography is usually used to describe research that is conducted solely online - through social platforms, websites and in chat forums - with people who we might not otherwise be able to meet in person. A traditional ethnographer might have to travel to another part of the world to carry out their research. Digital Ethnographers travel through the internet to their field site or to explore and immerse themselves within particular communities. Instead of relying on video cameras, tape recorders and their notepad, Digital Ethnographers rely on a virtual set of methods such as web archives, blogs and servers. To learn more about Digital Ethnography as it is traditionally used in the social sciences, the following may be of use: The Drax Files: World Makers [Episode 31: Tom Boellstorff] and Digital Anthropology. Digital Ethnography is used in this guide to describe something slightly different to the above.

Digitised Ethnography describes the transformation of a piece of ethnographic research into a digital output. For example, instead of, or as well as, writing a book or article to share the findings of a traditional ethnographic study, a video game or interactive story might be created instead. While video games allow you to win, or to play against them or an opponent, interactive stories, which are the focus of this guide, are primarily about discovering. In Digitised Ethnography, the player is put in someone else's shoes. This person is usually a key interlocutor, and could be someone known by the author of the ethnography, or the ethnographer themselves.
Digitised Ethnographies are usually based on a multiple-choice mechanism, which transforms the traditional ethnographic narrative into an interactive text. By interacting with other characters through multiple-choice dialogue, the player experiences the challenges and contradictions of lives they have never lived or may never even have imagined to exist. The player makes choices throughout the game that will determine the places, people and ethnographic themes they will eventually encounter. Digitised Ethnographies can therefore be used to educate people about the experiences of marginalised groups, or to allow people to understand the world from the perspective of others through an interactive and immersive experience. Moving away from the written word by creating an interactive story means that the research conducted can be translated into different settings and will be able to reach a much wider audience. Digitised Ethnography is therefore motivated to engage different publics, such as students, scholars, civil society practitioners and concerned individuals who may be moved by hearing about the people ethnographers work with.

## How does Digitised Ethnography create or contribute to change?

The outputs created by Digitising Ethnographies such as Bury Me, My Love or Finding Home can create change by exposing people to the perspectives of others. For example, if an interactive storyline is created (through open access software such as Twine, Quest or Google Forms), people who engage with it have the opportunity to navigate the lives of people who they might otherwise never encounter. For instance, Bury Me, My Love is a Text Messaging Adventure about Nour, a Syrian migrant trying to find her way to Europe. Putting the user in somebody else's shoes through the creation of a game or interactive story might cultivate feelings of empathy and sympathy, encouraging people to grapple with what it means to see the world from a different perspective. It exposes people to seeing the world in ways that they otherwise would not, letting them experience a different point of view, rather than just being told that this point of view exists. With Digitised Ethnography, change happens right in front of you as players vocalise their perspectives through the unfolding of their experience. This method can also be an effective teaching resource, used to educate people about different social experiences or about the ethnographic method itself.

## What ideas or concepts influence Digitised Ethnography?

Digitising Ethnography is motivated by the desire to engage different publics. This is shaped by a wider shift in the social sciences toward an extended definition of impact, which includes a reflection on how best to communicate one's finding to the general public and other stakeholders. It does this by creating research outputs that are meaningful to a range of different audiences, such as journalists, policy makers, civil society activists and students. This is shaped by a recognition that academic journal articles are often inaccessible to many and that there are better ways of communicating research which will resonate with different individuals and groups. Digitised Ethnography brings people closer to the experiences of others by fostering empathy and awareness of the realities of lived experience, rather than a more distanced theoretical understanding of social processes, phenomena, and experiences. The underlying ethos of Digitised Ethnographies is also influenced by game theory which suggests that interactivity, iteration, role-playing, risks and rewards are all good methods to retain attention from your audience. Engaging with a game often translates into the ability to challenge one's own default assumptions and enhances a more flexible and unorthodox appreciation of complex social phenomena. Games such as Papers Please, Phone Stories or Everything demonstrate how these tools can successfully be used to teach people about a strange and unfamiliar experience. They could also be used to cultivate empathy by putting people in somebody else's shoes, rather than simply telling them about someone else's experience.

## Why might I want to use Digitised Ethnography?

- Digitising Ethnography can be useful to visualise spaces, lives and experiences that might be unfamiliar by asking other people to experience them first-hand. Digitised Ethnographies can be played individually or in groups, and incorporated into different settings, from class teaching to seminars, workshops and in workforce training protocols. In group settings, Digitised Ethnographies can prompt critical discussions and help to change preconceptions and address cultural biases.
- Immersing people into the worlds and experiences of others can be a powerful method to teach people about lives they may not have otherwise encountered or considered. Digitised Ethnographies place players in a so called 'ethical gym' where seemingly ethical or un-ethical choices can be experienced as separated from their consequences. This might then influence the ways those who have played the game or interacted with the storyline think about a particular topic, such as migration. This is because role-playing reinscribes one's own default understanding and interpretation of other peoples' motives with the first-person perspective of those very others.
- Games and interactive storylines created by Digitising Ethnography can be a useful teaching resource as they enable students to actively participate in the lived realities of others. They also provide students with an alternative virtual experience that is rich in learning cues, which stimulates the curiosity of an active learner. Digitised Ethnography can function as an alternative way to tell a story by foregrounding the lives of marginalised and underrepresented groups, such as migrants, factory workers, prison inmates, and miners to quote a few characters included in recent interactive stories. Doing so puts the voices of marginalised groups at the centre as opposed to understanding their lives through the lens of policy makers or activists.
- Digitised Ethnography can be used to teach people about the principles of traditional ethnography by immersing those engaging with the output in a context that closely approximates the experience of in-depth participant observation. This might be particularly useful where travel is limited or where it might be difficult to conduct a traditional ethnography for political reasons.

## Step by step guide to Digitising Ethnography:

1. **Conduct a traditional ethnography to generate material.** A traditional ethnographic study involves spending a prolonged amount of time in a place to understand how it is lived and experienced by those who live there. The aim of ethnographic research is to produce rich and descriptive material from the ground up. Time spent in a place may involve taking photographs, keeping reflective diaries, and talking with people. The aim is to do these activities in an open and exploratory way and to use a combination of these different methods as a way to immerse yourself within the place, rather than to find out anything specific.

*You could also digitise a pre-existing piece of ethnographic research, by identifying the main protagonists and reorganising the main narrative around a choice-rich reading structure. This has been done in the following three examples: Pine Point , Journey at the End of Coal and iOtok.*

2. **Work with someone who is good at taking photographs or creating film footage.** This is important because this material will be used to create the resulting game or interactive storyline. If you do not have the skills, you might want to recruit an artist. Another option could be to generate your own visual material through drawing. Drawn to See is a useful guide in this respect.

3. **Make sure you have access to basic open-access software on the internet.** Examples of open-access software's include Twine, Quest and Google Forms. Google Slides for instance, requires very little training to make interactive hypertext narratives. To create an interactive story you need to write stories that follow multiple paths using hyperlinks, create variables to track your player's actions, add scripting like 'if' and 'else' to decide when discrete events should appear in your game, and use hooks to add fancy touches like text effects, pictures, and sound. Basic interactive mechanics that are easily implemented into an open-access software such as Twine include: an inventory for items collection, a wallet for money or a glossary for keywords. These articles can be indexed so that their possession will automatically unlock further content in the game as well as provide more detailed analysis of the ethnographic material. Alternative endings are also an option: they help players to retain interest and investment in the story.

*You can find useful open-access how to guides at Inklewriter and DirectorNotes.*

4. **Make sure the output is right for your intended audience.** A game might be more suitable when a win-lose mechanic can reinforce the acquisition of insights believed to be important for players. For example, the game Balance of the Planet focuses on environmental sustainability and the player wins when a steady-state extraction of natural resources is achieved by the player. An interactive storyline might be more suitable if the intended outcomes include raising awareness and the introduction of unfamiliar social settings.

*Digitised ethnographies work at their best when played in groups and facilitated by someone directly involved in their production. Games and interactive storylines are still strongly associated with a particular cohort of people (young, male, middle class) and you may encounter resistance when introduced as learning tools with underrepresented cohorts. It is advised that producers and players first familiarise themselves with emerging progressive voices in the digital industries, whose work revolves around changing the cultural demands for what can be consumed through gaming. See for instance the work of Anna Anne Anthropy or Momo Pixel.*


*Customers take a rest in the main plaza of Beijing SOHO mall. Image credit: Andrea Pia and Marco de Mutiis.*

## Examples of Digitised Ethnography in social science research

**The Long Day of Young Peng**

**Researcher: Dr Andrea Pia, London School of Economics**

*The Long Day of Young Peng* is an interactive story that uses original ethnographic material including fieldnotes, excerpts from interviews, pictures and videos to chronicle one day in the life of Peng, a young Chinese migrant. In this Digitised Ethnography, the player is put in Peng's shoes on his journey from his native village to Beijing in search of employment. The game is based on a multiple-choice mechanic. Through interacting with other characters, the player relives Peng's first day in Beijing as well as familiarising themselves with topics in the study of contemporary Chinese society. The game has been developed using Twine - a free, open source software which allows you to write interactive fiction in the form of web pages without requiring knowledge of any programming language.

The player makes choices throughout the game that will determine the places, people and ethnographic themes Peng will eventually encounter. Throughout the game, the player collects items, money, and keywords that could be used to unlock further content in the game. The game also includes a bibliography, as some of the topics the game touches upon are revealed through ethnographic examples taken from the anthropological literature on China and scripted into the storyline. The game can end in different ways – none of which reflects what really happened to the real person named Peng, but which nonetheless reproduce some of the most likely outcomes of second-generation migratory projects in China – depending on the cumulative effects of the choices made throughout it.


*The Long Day of Young Peng Logo*

The Peng game has been used as a teaching activity within LSE's MSc Programme '*China in Comparative Perspective*'. Peng was played during seminars in groups of three to four students on iPad devices during five consecutive weekly seminars. The implementation of the game during seminars enabled students to pattern their growing understanding of migration as a social phenomenon with their own sensibility and attentiveness. By making choices for Peng, the player is made to reflect on the analytical opportunity to study migration outside the usual economistic framing of push and pull factors, and within the ethnographically more accurate register of instability, incompleteness and serendipity - qualities that ordinarily beset any migratory choice in real life. The Peng game interrogates not just players' comprehension but their very own ethical agency and interpretative capacities. How would a Chinese male migrant behave in this situation? Should I send remittances home or keep them to myself? In so doing, the game enables sympathy and a more intimate understanding of the challenges involved in migrant lives.

*The development of the Peng Game was supported by a 2016-17 LSE IGNITE! Grant*

## Where else could Digitised Ethnography be used?

**Migration**
Digitised Ethnography could be used to tell the story of migration from the perspective of migrants themselves. It can be produced collaboratively, as with the game Survival, which was produced by refugee activists and migrants in Gibraltar. It can be used to help diverse audiences to better understand the reasons behind migratory projects as well as their unintended outcomes.

**Education**
Digitised Ethnography could be used to create educational games on a variety of different topics. A multimodal ethnographic teaching session can be structured around a collective gaming session as a class activity. Material for a digitised ethnography can help put more flesh on the bones of an abstract theoretical piece. This can help students familiarise with unfamiliar contexts and help overcome stereotypes and biases.

**Welfare**
Digitised Ethnography can be used in training for people who work in welfare support or other services. A game could be created to highlight the lives of benefit recipients, for example. This method could help welfare offices garner a better sense of their clients' motivations, needs, and struggles.

## Top tips

1. People learn more if they are having fun. Participating in an interactive story or game is one way of encouraging interaction and enjoyment.
2. The traditional ethnography component of this method can be a large time investment, but remember that you can easily turn existing ethnographies and investigative reportages into interactive stories.
3. Digitising Ethnographies can be labour intensive. It requires a sense of multiple connections, as well as the use of either/or logic functions to achieve pre-identified outcomes. For stories involving the use of multiple media, including videos and sound, it may require the input of a creative coder. Please see the further reading below for suggestions on how you can learn these skills independently or for who you could work with collaboratively.

## Further reading

- Writing Hypertext
- A quick dive into immigration themed video games
- Persuasive Games
- Mollenindustria
- Edutopia: Interactive fiction in the classroom
- Twine 2.0 – Introduction

*List of people who you might be able to approach to work with:*

- Random quark
- Marco de Mutiis

**To reference:** Pia, A., Barron, A., and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Digitised Ethnography' 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.

Methods for Change

# Participant Packs:
## A Flexible, Inclusive and Accessible Method


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# Participant Packs

*The Participant Pack is a flexible and open-ended research method which includes non-prescriptive prompts for engagement. A Participant Pack might include photographs of a place from some point in the past or present to encourage reflection; a notebook in which participants may write ideas or sketch; coloured pens; news articles; a disposable camera; a Dictaphone (voice recorder); leaflets; worksheets; or crafting materials.*

The pack may be created with a specific intention (left with the participant with a specific set of tasks and activities in mind), or it could be used in a more exploratory and open-ended way (left with the participant with prompts to engage with the materials in the pack at their own behest). It is down to the researcher to decide how focused or open the Participant Pack is.

I developed the idea of using a Participant Pack whilst researching with older people in Greater Manchester. I used it alongside other participatory methods to better understand the changing relationships between older people and the places in which they live. Creating a Participant Pack was intended to make researching older people's experiences of place more accessible and inclusive for those who may be unable or prefer not to walk. Indeed, some participants preferred to not walk for reasons including a dislike for cold and rainy weather, other time pressures, the need to use a walking aid, bodily pain, or health conditions. Moreover, although walking is often the 'go-to' method when researching place, I was conscious that walking may not be the ideal or easy choice for older participants and that those who were less mobile were likely to call into play very different associations with place. The Participant Pack was therefore developed as an alternative and inclusive method to walking, to allow participants to communicate their experiences of place without necessarily being physically in the place itself. In this way, Participants Packs are a useful method to increase the inclusivity of other methods that might require physical mobility and moving around place. Within this collection Participant Packs could be used as a supplementary method to Photo go-alongs, Walk-along Interviews and Mobile Visual Methods with people from a range of ages, abilities, genders and cultural backgrounds who might not be able, or not feel safe to, engage in public space

# Participant Packs

## How do Participant Packs create or contribute to change?

In academic research, impact or change is often expected to occur once research has finished or at the point of dissemination, where research is explicitly and purposefully brought into conversation with a range of non-academic stakeholders. With the Participant Pack, change also happens during the process of researching through capacity building. Indeed, participants might act as gatekeepers, distributing Participant Packs to their family, friends, and local community, thereby forging new social connections and enabling people to talk about their lives and interests. In this sense, the pack can become a reason for participants to engage with people they might otherwise never have spoken with. These new connections often enhance participant's relationships with other people and places, though the opposite may also occur.

When used in combination with other ethnographic and participatory methods, the Participant Pack can contribute toward creating a rich collage of knowledge about the experiences of an individual or group in relation to a theme. These findings can help policy communities or researchers to understand how people's lives are lived on the ground. The experiences and findings generated may also be of interest to local history or culture groups, such as libraries and museums because of their reference to local places and histories. The flexibility, inclusivity and accessibility of the Participant Pack method itself may also be of interest to policy communities who work with those for whom walking may not be a preferred choice, or for those who cannot commit to meeting at a set time.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

A lot of participatory research across the social sciences has used and developed Participant Packs but has perhaps not discussed them as a discrete method before or named them as such. Participant Packs might also be referred to as toolkits or equipment boxes, for instance. I used Participant Packs as an alternative to walking methods. Despite it being well documented that talking whilst walking can generate collages of collaborative knowledge, it is inevitable that certain people, particularly those who are less mobile, will always be excluded. Moreover, the debate about mobile methods in the social sciences risks privileging methods whereby the participant physically moves with the researcher as opposed to a focus on the diverse array of methods which can get at movement in various ways.

The challenge therefore was to develop a method which can get at those fleeting qualities evoked by the unfolding everyday but without necessarily being in the place of focus. To put it differently, I wanted to emphasise how you do not need to be physically mobile to be sensitive to movement.. I wanted to show how experiences and understandings of place are not dependent upon the movement of the body alone. But rather, the movement of other things, people, sounds and smells have the capacity to blur places into one another.

This attention to movement and to those aspects of life which are difficult to represent is influenced by a recent turn to 'more-than-representational theories' in Geography. For example, for those older people who spend a large amount of time in the home, the stories visitors tell, a source of local news, the memories of a lifetime, continuously shape their senses of place. As such, just because a person may be more or less 'static' in a physical sense does not mean they are immobile in a cognitive, sensory, and emotional sense.

## Why might I want to use Participant Packs?

- The flexible and open nature of this method makes it inclusive and accessible. Having the freedom to engage with the different elements of the pack (which might include photographs, notepads, cameras, dictaphones, and craft materials) as little or as much as the participants please, means that this method is led by their unfolding needs. For instance:
  - While some participants may be unwilling or uncomfortable writing about their experiences, they may wish to draw or sketch as an alternative.
  - While some may not have the time to go out and take photographs of a place themselves, they may be happy to engage with photographs they already have or those you have provide in the pack to offer reflections.
  - While some participants may view taking the pack home as homework to complete, others may embrace the freedom, preferring to engage with the pack independently.
- The Participant Pack is not restrictive. It is this sense of openness that makes the Participant Pack suited to more grounded forms of theory making, whereby knowledge comes from the participants.
- Participant Packs can be used when face to face research is not possible. The pack can be posted to participants and received back through the post. If the researcher and participants are digitally literate, there may also be ways that this approach could be mimicked in an online environment or combined with digital methods.
- This method moves academic research away from text-based methods, granting participants the freedom to creatively engage with the pack as they wish. Some participants may create a collage, others might choose to write stories and memories in the note pad, while others may simply use it as a reason to engage with others.
- The Participant Pack challenges ableist tendencies in academic research by offering a flexible, open, and inclusive method for researching with those for whom walking may not be an ideal or easy choice. The flexibility of the Participant Pack means that those who are perhaps housebound, have mental ill health, or who may be unable to read or write are able to partake in research in a way which suits them. It also means that participants do not have to travel or talk at length, which other methods demand.

## Step by step guide to using Participant Packs:

1. **Source participants.** Pick a research topic or theme you are interested in and identify who you would like to work with. Reach out to them and recruit participants.
2. **Assemble the Participant Packs.** Decide what to include in your packs. This needs to be shaped by what you are hoping to find out and the nature of the material you are trying to gather. Items you might like to include are pens, a notepad, a disposable camera, a dictaphone and photographs both old and new.

*It is a good idea to include an information sheet in your Participant Pack which explains to the participant what they can find in the pack and what you hope to get out of it. Be careful to not present this in a restrictive way, leaving it open to interpretation.*

*If you want to include photographs in your Participant Pack, there is scope to make this more participatory. Why not work with a local history group and ask them to source the photographs, for instance. Again, the point here is to use the pack in a way which suits the research and which allows you to speak to those who might otherwise be overlooked. Think about what might make these groups more likely to engage.*

3. **Distribute the Participant Packs.** The Participant Packs can be distributed in a number of different ways, and this will depend on your participants. Perhaps some participants have volunteered to be gatekeepers and have offered to distribute packs amongst their networks. This is a particularly good route to take as it means the packs are likely to reach those who you might not be able to reach alone, allowing the research to snowball. Alternatively, you might want to distribute them at a community event or meeting. You might also send them out by post.

*Be aware that you might face rejection or resistance to the Participant Pack and remember that this is okay. Some participants may interpret the pack as homework and not want to participate. If this is the case, maybe the participant would prefer to talk around photographs in the pack, or maybe a different method all together is more appropriate. It is important to emphasise that participants can use the pack flexibly, in the manner they want to.*

4. **Retrieve the Participant Packs from your participants.** Again, this can be done in several ways and will depend on the nature of your relationship with participants. You could ask for participants to post their packs to you (with the researcher covering postage costs); perhaps arrange for them to be dropped off at a mutually convenient community facility; maybe the gatekeepers will collect them for you; or, if you are meeting the participant for another reason, maybe collect it then. There might be ways that the information collected in the pack could be shared digitally (eg., photos taken of the outputs) to reduce costs of postage. The point again is to be flexible and responsive to what works for the participant.

## Examples of using Participant Packs in social science research

**More-than older age: *making sense* of place**

**Researcher: Dr Amy Barron, The University of Manchester**

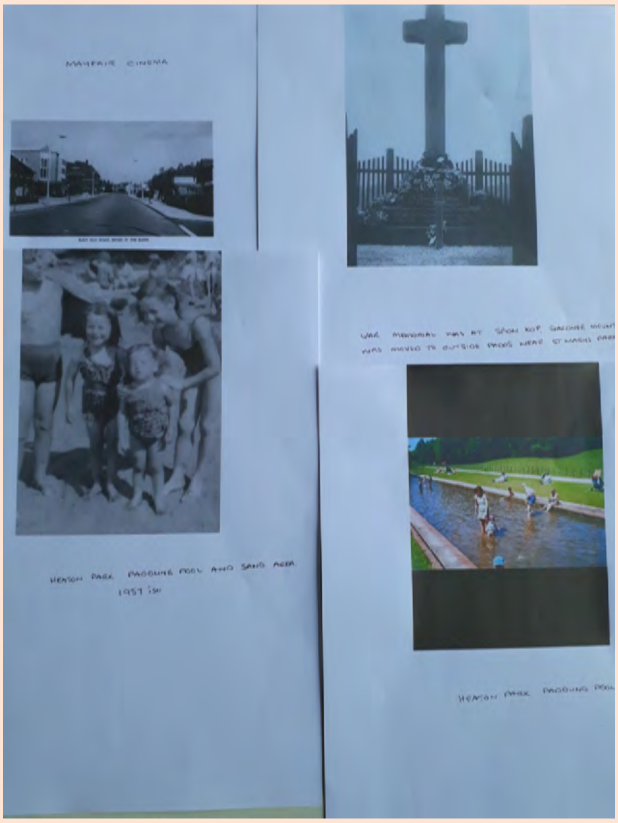
This research used the Participant Pack alongside several other participatory and ethnographic methods whilst researching with thirty-two older people from Prestwich, Greater Manchester. One aim of this research was to foreground the lived dimensions of older age against the policy backdrop of creating what the World Health Organisation call 'age-friendly cities'. I was, in part, concerned with understanding older people's lived experiences of place, but I did not want to restrict who could and who could not take part on the basis of whether they would be comfortable walking around a place.


*A Participant Pack*

The initial idea was that participants would be given a pack containing a notepad, a selection of local photographs, and a pen to take home for them to consider and reflect on themselves or discuss with friends and family.

The photographs included in the pack were of Prestwich from various points in the 20th and 21st centuries. The most recent photographs included were taken by myself whilst exploring Prestwich as a potential site for my research, whilst the older photographs were sourced online from Google Image searches. Photographs of varying ages were included to avoid assuming nostalgia and placing older people in the past. Moreover, I did not use the photographs to guide discussion as in photo-elicitation. Rather, they served as prompts for participants to engage with should they wish.

Although the pack was initially intended to be for participants who were unable or unwilling to walk and as a means to engage without my presence being overly imposing, the pack developed a life of its own with its uses becoming more diverse than initially anticipated. For example, the photographs in the packs were used by participants to prompt group discussion, while others explained how they took some packs to various classes and groups they were involved in and used them as an excuse to speak with people they would not usually converse with. Comparatively, other participants took the pack for it never to be seen again, some cautioned that they could not comfortably read or write, while others stressed that they 'did not have time to do homework', despite it being made clear that there was no obligation to engage with the pack at all.




*Photographs collected by a research participant*

Although I encountered older individuals who were unwilling or unable to walk for various reasons, the flexible approach meant that this was never an obstacle as I simply arranged with participants to do something with which they were comfortable. For example, whilst speaking with James on the phone, he explained how he spends a lot of time in Prestwich Clough (a local wooded green valley) and so I asked whether he would like to walk around there with me. James explained how, because of a heart condition and the cold weather, he would prefer to not walk and to meet somewhere indoors. James and I arranged to meet at the Church Inn Pub which is a protected building located on the edge of Prestwich Clough. Because this was the first time that I was meeting James in person, I took the Participant Pack as a conversation prompt as it included several photographs of the Clough. As it happened, James also brought his own collection of books, photographs and maps and we used these resources to talk around.

## Where else could Participant Packs be used?

Participant Packs might be useful where face to face research is not possible, such as when participants are unable to commit to meeting in person. The pack could be sent out and returned back to you by post (with the researcher covering any costs), perhaps followed up with a telephone or video call if needed. This method might be particularly useful when researching with those for whom walking is not an ideal or easy choice, this could therefore include researching with those who have mental or physical ill health. It might also be used to include people who are socially and physically isolated or housebound, or to expand the geographical reach of a project and to minimise costs. One context in which it may be particularly useful is when researching with older people who are socially isolated or lonely. It might also be useful in care homes, for instance.

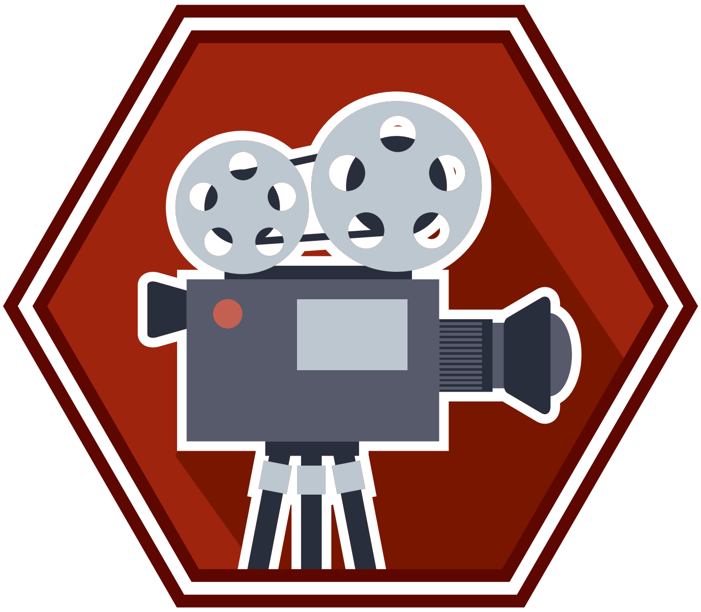
### Top tips

1. Include a range of different materials and provocations in the Participant Pack. This will be more likely to engage the widest group of people - but be careful not to overwhelm.
2. Remember that flexibility can reap benefits. Rather than predefining how you think the pack should be used, why not let the participants take a lead.
3. It might be a good idea to include a list of things that can be found in the pack, along with a summary of your intentions for providing the pack. This can serve as a useful reminder for participants, especially when researching over a longer timeframe.

## Further reading

- More-than-representational approaches to the life-course
- Creative care kit: keeping well with creativity
- The methodological potential of scrapbooking

**To reference:** Barron, A. (2021). 'Participant Packs: A Flexible, Inclusive and Accessible Method' 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.



Methods for Change

# Participatory Film Making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# Participatory Film Making

*Participatory Film Making involves working collaboratively with people using photography and film making to generate new knowledge and understandings about the perspectives and experiences of a particular group or community.*

This method involves training participants to become film makers and co-researchers through guided learning and by teaching techniques such as composition and editing. The collaborative nature of this method means it is effective in displacing power relationships and can make participating in research and the creation of knowledge more inclusive and rewarding. Participatory Film Making involves identifying relevant themes and areas of interest and concern with those you are working with; investigating key themes and issues through photography and film; developing and discussing these areas through making creative outputs, which then feed into peer learning and follow-on exercises. This method is therefore cyclical and is driven by practice, whereby each process informs the next.

In this method, photography and film making are seen as both life enhancing skills to be taught to participants, and an appropriate and effective pedagogical mechanism for exploring issues, topics and questions, including difficult or sensitive areas that other approaches might struggle to address. The skills participants acquire through their involvement in Participatory Film Making can then be used long after the research has ended. Participatory Film Making is concerned with both the process of learning and the end result. Developing film and photography skills together allows participants to feel included and involved in the research process and has additional benefits in terms of establishing social relations and group dynamics. Having co-researchers who are already embedded in the communities and contexts you are interested in can also be particularly valuable when researching sensitive topics or when working in different cultural contexts. Indeed, this method can be used to ask and address a range of questions and issues that may not lend themselves to other approaches, such as conventional interviews, questionnaires or textual methods. For example, when working in informal contexts, with vulnerable groups or children, they can facilitate a better understanding of people's lived experiences.

## How does Participatory Film Making create or contribute to change?

Participatory Film Making is in part concerned with the processes of change that happen as participants acquire the skills to become film makers. Because this method employs iteration and collaborative learning, it is not always desirable or possible to determine in advance what will be changed as a result of the skills gained. The question of change is therefore defined by what emerges through the participative process. For example, incidental learning (outcomes that are as unanticipated as they are valuable and new areas of knowledge) often emerge through the participatory process.

Participatory Film Making can be particularly useful in understanding and communicating the lives and experiences of marginalised or excluded groups. To give an example, which is discussed in more detail later, it has been used in research with deaf communities who are commonly excluded from mainstream learning contexts and the broadcast medium. The films created can facilitate a change in public knowledge and awareness about that community. Film presents a way of documenting society and culture that is accessible, inclusive and easily digestible to a wide range of people, meaning it is more likely to have far reaching influences. Change can also occur in a more fundamental way for participants, by changing the way somebody understands themselves and their capacities. For instance, in terms of understanding their personal and collective identity, communicative abilities, self-reflexivity and problem solving abilities.

Participatory Film Making can also be used with a specific agenda in mind, such as making a film about the devastating effects of the destruction of the rainforest, opening up discussion and debate on a local issue, raising public awareness about health or influencing policy. The purpose of this film would then be to change people's perceptions or to make an intervention into government debates about that topic.

## What ideas or concepts influence Participatory Film Making?

The use of film and photography is commonplace in the discipline of anthropology. Visual anthropology uses ethnographic methods - which are concerned with developing in-depth, intimate and ongoing relationships with people - with a medium that can communicate in ways that are different from writing, such as film.

This method is also influenced by a move toward more inclusive and participatory methods in the social sciences which emphasise working with or alongside participants, but it pushes participation a step further. Participatory Film Making begins from the premise that all visual methods are participatory and collaborative, because participants are always involved, and permission is needed to engage with them. It is driven by a desire for inclusivity and often starts with asking: 'who can participate?'. This question is not only of concern to those people who are being taught film making skills, but also to those who are delivering the teaching of those skills. This method recognises that the people that researchers work with have the capacity to be their own theorists about their social life and their ways of being. Training someone who is part of the group or context you are researching is important because they are likely to be more aware of the needs, enthusiasms, sensitivities, languages and experiences of the participants. The people who are trained to use the method can then act as mediators between those delivering the skills and techniques, and those learning them.

## Why might I want to use Participatory Film Making?

- Participatory Film Making can be used to investigate, share or tell a story. For example, it might be used by an activist to make an intervention into public discourse; to share knowledge and information that is relevant across a given community for educational purposes; or to give a voice to under-represented and marginalised groups.
- Participatory Film Making has the potential to educate those who engage with produced films about the challenges of being part of that marginalised group by highlighting the different practices and processes that comprise their lived experiences.
- Being involved in Participatory Film Making is often educational and fun, equipping participants with new skills in media production that can be used long after the research project has ended.
- The introduction to and use of the video camera by participants often involves a process of attunement and attention that establishes a new awareness and relationship between people, their bodies and their surroundings.
- Participatory Film Making can offer insight into how participants view their world in the processes of planning compositions and working together with other participants, as well as through the choices about how to portray their experience to others, whether implicitly or explicitly.
- The process of playing with a camera can provide opportunities for participants to respond creatively and imaginatively to the world around them and to engage with new technologies.

*Nenio Mbazima Teaching Framing Techniques*

## Step by step guide to using Participatory Film Making

Before using Participatory Film Making, it is important to build an effective team that has the technical expertise and cultural knowledge for the research to be effective. If you are looking to work with someone who has experience of film making, please see the list of further reading.

1. **Listening.** Start by asking: what are the main issues faced by the group involved in the research? A key part of Participatory Film Making is ensuring the people you work with feel confident and supported to generate ideas. It is important to identify people in the community who can act as cultural brokers or translators, and to train those people to deliver these skills themselves. Listening is crucial, especially initially because you are trying to identify issues and topics that are important to that community. It is vital to establish a mutually defined set of aims and objectives between the team and the group.
2. **Method.** The next stage involves setting a series of different exercises through which participants can learn a particular skill. These skills might include how to effectively frame or compose a picture around a theme you are exploring. Set an exercise that is open enough to go in different directions. Make sure you include time for exploration and expression where the participants are free to do what they like with cameras and to photograph what they please. It is important for learners to feel they can take control over this process and run with it. This often generates interesting insights and allows you to understand what is significant to the participants. Examples of different exercises are outlined below, and examples of where Participatory Video has been used can be found via Insight Share :
   - You might want to do an exercise that is about getting people to represent their emotions through film using everyday objects and scenes around them. This exercise aims to provide a structure to open a discussion about the emotions that are important for the people you are working with. The participants define the content and character of the visual materials for themselves.
   - A different exercise could involve getting participants to create a portrait around a particular theme. For example, if you were researching 'social isolation with older people', participants may be instructed to create a portrait to represent 'friendship' as an antidote to isolation. This step is about teaching participants to create an effective portrait that will reveal something about their character. Participants might be taught how to effectively juxtapose a person with an object, for example, or how to put different elements into a frame through effective balance and composition.
   - Another activity might involve telling a story in 24 images. This begins the process of translating photography into film making.
3. **Showing, discussion and peer-learning.** The next step involves bringing the group of participants together to discuss the photographs and films that have been created. The point here is to engage in peer-learning, as participants talk constructively through their ideas and images together. The group should consider the aesthetics of the image, discussing what does and does not work in relation to the theme being conveyed. Through this discussion, participants are developing new skills and will use these discussions to inform the creation and composition of their next image.

## Step by step guide to using Participatory Film Making

*As facilitators, it is important to give participants the space to discuss things among themselves and identify what works and what does not. Listen to what the participants are saying and what they are identifying as important. For example, some participants may be discussing the barriers they experience to forming friendships. Barriers to forming friends could then become the subject for the next photograph exercise.*

4. **Sharing.** The outputs you have created can then be shared widely with the public as well as directly interested stakeholders. How the film is shared will depend on the goal of the research. It might be used to open discussion and debate on a local issue; to raise public awareness; to influence policy; to change people's perceptions; or to make an intervention into government debates about a topic.

*Participatory Film Making in Action*

## An example of Participatory Film Making in social science research

**Enhancing resilient deaf youth in South Africa**

**Researchers: Prof. Andrew Irving, Prof. Alys Young, Dr Lorenzo Ferrarini, Dr Katherine Rogers; The University of Manchester, and Prof. Claudine Storbeck, University of the Witwatersrand.**

Trigger warning: understanding child abuse and safeguarding

The project worked alongside two non-governmental organisations based in South Africa offering early intervention and parent support services, HI HOPES and THRIVE, and six schools for the deaf, four in KwaZulu-Natal and two in Gauteng. Through a creative interdisciplinary collaboration between visual anthropology, social science and deaf studies, the project set out to enhance resilience among deaf youth in South Africa through the medium of film and photography using a series of interactive workshops with deaf young people. The project was built around specific objectives for promoting positive aspirations, well-being and to work with Participatory Flm Making and other methods in order to establish child-led interventions to support emotional literacy and youth safeguarding (for example, as ways of understanding how to assist young, deaf people from becoming victims of sexual violence). In doing so, photography and film were used to open up a creative space of learning to think about, explore and better understand a range of critical issues that can be difficult for pupils to engage with in other learning contexts. It also gave pupils the opportunity to identify and actively work on topics they themselves considered important in their own lives, families and communities.

The project objectives were:

- Through a child and community authored method, to involve deaf youth in the making and production of a series of 'this is me - this is my future' films;
- To support the development of parent-child social and emotional interactions;
- To develop a series of 'growing up and keeping safe' films aimed specifically at deaf young people.

In this project, young people were not understood as research subjects from whom information should be elicited. Instead, a pedagogical approach based on practice-based participation, guided learning, play and improvisation were combined to create a learning context to reveal, as well as generate, understandings that may otherwise have remained unarticulated. Film was a particularly suitable method to use when researching with deaf children because a strong visual orientation to the world is often considered central to deaf cultural identity.

The young people were initially taught visual methods, including photography, film making and editing by the researchers. Once they had carried out the training, they were then able to teach these methods to their peers. The young participants had a greater cultural awareness and understanding of the lives of other deaf children in this context than the academic researchers, and were therefore particularly successful in teaching these skills sensitively and appropriately.

One aspect of the project involved understanding safeguarding and child sexual exploitation, and learning more about the different situations in which children and young people might be groomed by adults (in order to build upon this knowledge to establish approaches for safeguarding for the deaf community). One Participatory Film Making activity involved the participants scripting a story. The young people were asked to come up with a set of scenarios around this theme and then to enact that story in front of the camera.

In this context, the use of film and visual methods offers an educational resource and effective pedagogical means for delivering content to young people by capitalising on their interest in the social and creative use of images. Photography and filmmaking allow for individual learning but are also shared and participatory processes that create opportunities for social and peer learning, for facilitating personal and collective understandings about how to negotiate challenging life experiences that can be carried throughout life. Through a series of visual exercises, the young people were also learning a set of skills around film making and photography which they then could use in other ways. Importantly, this method was also enjoyable, and provided an opportunity to destabilise existing power structures which may have been reproduced had participants instead been asked to write about their experiences, for example. Beginning with the existing visual lifeworlds and everyday knowledge of participants, (in this case the visual orientations and understandings of deaf young people) Participatory Film Making practice offers an inclusive means for researching and representing subjects and themes of mutually defined interest and concern.

The films and photographs created in the wider project were then exhibited in different public contexts - such as the KwaZulu Natal Society of the Arts Gallery, Durban and the Children's Museum of the Arts, New York - taking the outputs beyond an academic audience and encouraging members of the public to learn more about deaf culture. Participants valued the opportunity to share their work in this way, and seeing their stories made meaningful and relevant to wider audiences.

## Where else could Participatory Film Making be used?

**Researching social isolation with older people**

Participatory Film Making can be used to better understand what matters to, or what issues are being faced by, particular communities and individuals. As discussed above, this approach is particularly useful for giving voice to underrepresented groups, for understanding complex or taboo social phenomenon, and for improving understandings of an issue from the perspective of the community facing said challenge. For instance, social isolation is a big issue that faces many older people. In this scenario, a Participatory Film Making exercise might begin with understanding the significance of friendship in the lives of older people, as a way to counter narratives of isolation. The exercise would be developed in a way which enables the people you are working with to think through a set of questions for themselves about how they may enhance their social lives. The approach could also be adopted for young people involved in particular subcultures or sports or for inviting young people to determine the areas they would like to explore; residents in a particular area experiencing environmental change (drought, fire, flood, climate change); eco and alternative communities. While there are often specific social, political, economic or environmental challenges facing these groups you may wish to explore, the questions asked do not need to be predetermined – Participatory Film Making can be used to 'give voice' to issues defined by a community/sub-group.

### Top tips

1. Collaborate with people who already have the skills to make this happen, or train yourself on how to make films.
2. Remember that this method is an ongoing process of listening, peer feedback and discussion.
3. Think ethically and adopt process ethics – an ethical approach to Participatory Film Making is not just about the process of making the films, but also thinking with the community about how these films are to be released and distributed. These issues of who owns the films and rights to use the films are ethical considerations that needs to be discussed/determined with the community.

## Further reading

- Insight Share
- Steps for the future
- Liparu Lyetu – our life: Participatory ethnographic filmmaking in applied contexts
- Participatory ethnographic filmmaking: Transcultural collaboration in research and filmmaking

**To reference:** BIrving, A., Swannack, R., Mbazima, N., Barron, A. and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Participatory Film Making' 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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Methods for Change

# Participatory Qualitative Interviews

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# Participatory Qualitative Interviews

*This method offers a creative alternative to qualitative interviews - often understood as a 'conversation with a purpose'- by asking participants to take part in an activity whilst engaged in conversation. Introducing a fun, interactive, participatory dimension can make interviews feel less intimidating for both the interviewer and respondent, and can disrupt established power relations. Participatory Qualitative Interviews are less formulaic than standard semi-structured interviews, and can be carried out with individuals or groups*.

Rather than following a predetermined interview schedule, conversations unfold in a more fluid way. The researcher may have a list of prompts or themes, but it is the activity that structures the research encounter. As participants become immersed in the activity, they may feel more comfortable and open to talking about topics that might be sensitive or less easy to discuss in a formal interview. This approach could involve, for example, asking participants to produce or comment on something such as an artwork, a piece of music, or a video. Or, it might involve taking part in a shared activity such as dancing, knitting, singing, or storytelling, which may be related to the research topic. This method can therefore produce interesting data drawn from the conversations that take place around activities, as well as valuable alternative data and outputs in the form of images, film, song or collage.

## How do Participatory Qualitative Interviews create or contribute to change?

The method emphasises flexibility and allows participants to shape and change the research as it is carried out. Different possibilities are explored together with participants, and as such, the intentions, questions and direction of the research can shift and evolve. By giving participants the power to explore what they find interesting, it can increase confidence, and can create a shift in perspectives for individuals involved in the research as well as for researchers themselves. Power dynamics and relationships within a group can also change where research activities are carried out over an extended time period. Research drawing on Participatory Qualitative Interviews does not necessarily set out to produce change, which is understood here as something that is unpredictable that cannot be controlled by the researcher. However, in a modest way it is a method that aims to make research more humane and down to earth.

## What ideas or concepts are connected with this approach?

Participatory Qualitative Interviews are informed by feminist and activist approaches in geography and the wider social sciences that centre understandings of the lived experiences of social difference and spaces of resistance. To be carried out successfully, this method asks the researcher to be open, and to share themselves in the process of conducting the research. Reflexivity is therefore an important dimension of this approach, and it requires the researcher to examine their own practices, beliefs and judgements and how these impact on the research. It may also involve elements of ethnography (observing of social interactions and phenomena in a time/place) and auto ethnography (self-reflection about experiences at certain times/places), given that in addition to organising activities to be carried out with participants, the researcher may spend time going along with the day-to-day activities of groups or individuals in various different environments.

Participatory Qualitative Interviews introduce creativity and playfulness into traditional interview methods, which can lead to new opportunities and possibilities that the researcher may not have previously considered. Research drawing on this approach is not viewed as a linear process, but is understood as constantly evolving and dynamic. Rather than imposing a rigid structure on data collection, researchers are encouraged to embrace the messiness and often chaotic nature of research encounters.

## Why might I want to use Participatory Qualitative Interviews?

- Participatory Qualitative Interviews enable the researcher to develop rich insights by 'talking whilst doing' with participants, as well as generating a range of creative, alternative data that can give a different dimension to the research and can provide more depth than the written or spoken word alone.
- Both researcher and participants are learning new things as they work through the activities together, which can disrupt the power dynamics of more formal research methods. This approach can therefore be useful in researching sensitive topics, or in research with children, for example.
- It can be used in one-to-one research encounters with individuals, as well as with larger groups, where it can help build networks and relationships between group members taking part in an activity together.
- This method can be quite chaotic and unpredictable, but this is what makes it interesting! Avoiding predetermined ideas about what the research will discover, and being prepared to go with the flow can result in exciting new findings that had not previously been imagined. It requires the researcher to be flexible, open to trying different methods and tools, and to react as the research activity unfolds.
- You have to be ready to make yourself vulnerable as a researcher, and to be honest about what you are doing in order to create a space where people feel involved and open. You cannot be opposed to doing things yourself that you want participants to do – if the activity involves singing, you will have to sing too!

*The image depicts a 'show of hands' in support for the organisation HOME (Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics). The picture was created on an open house day to celebrate the organisation's activities and the identities of the women it helped. The handprint tree symbolises growth and beauty in nature with the handprints acting in place of leaves to build the tree.*

## Step by step guide to using Participatory Qualitative Interviews:

1. **Start with the research questions.** Identify what are you interested in understanding, and then think about how you can make your research more explorative before thinking about specific activities. It is important to embrace openness from the start. Be prepared for research questions to shift as the research evolves.
2. **Plan an activity to do together.** There is no one specific way of approaching this, the key thing is to find an activity that works for the research topic and participants, and it may involve some trial and error to get this right. Think about the issues you are interested in, and how they could lend themselves to a participatory, collaborative element. Discuss ideas together with participants before you begin.

*For inspiration in designing activities, think across the visual arts (drawing, painting, collage, video), performative arts (theatre, dance, music, song), written arts (poetry, prose), storytelling (oral traditions), sports (walking, cycling) or a combination of these. This choice depends on what you are trying to find out, but ultimately the aim is to design activities that participants can get immersed in without feeling self-conscious.*

3. **Go out into the field.** Find a place where participants feel comfortable – a neutral space or somewhere the researcher has less power. A community centre would be more appropriate than a university seminar room, for example. It can be useful to have someone to come along to help facilitate.

*It is important to leave space for reflection when using creative methods. Keep a written record either in the form of an online diary or blog, or a hand written notebook, and do not be tempted to only review and reflect on an ad hoc basis. Designate time for reflection after events, and record your reactions and emerging thoughts at specified review points. Build it in to your timetable.*

4. **Use icebreakers.** It might take a while for participants to warm up. Start with a brief introduction to the research, and an icebreaker activity. This should be something easy and fun - it does not have to be connected to the research questions directly, but it should give participants the space and time to engage their 'voice' in different ways before starting with the main activity.
5. **Start the activity.** Keep it simple – people can be quite put off if they feel that what you are asking them to do requires a great deal of skill. Try to keep it light, fun and participatory, and get a conversation going. Instead of an interview schedule, the researcher can introduce prompts, themes or questions as the activity unfolds. The point of this is for people to get so immersed in something that they almost forget that they are being interviewed and it becomes a more dynamic interaction.

## Step by step guide to using Participatory Qualitative Interviews:

*Participatory Qualitative Interviews are not for the faint hearted. This method takes guts and it takes time - it is not something that you can do in a half-hour interview. It can be incredibly tiring because you need to simultaneously organise the activities, listen, interact, record and support participants. This is an approach to interviewing that is really ramped up!*

6. **Record the conversation and the activity.** How you do this will depend on the activity and the participants, and could include video recording, audio recording or asking an assistant to take notes. Participants themselves can contribute, by taking photos, for example.

7. **Think about what to do with the data.** This method will generate interesting and varied data in the form of diagrams, photographs, collages, artefacts, or audio and film recordings that can help you tell a story with more than just words. Thematic analysis can be used to connect these varied outputs with the original research aims and questions, and analysis can be seen as a process of cutting and sticking, collaging and building a picture through the data. Creating an exhibition is one way of sharing outputs from the research with participants and the wider public. Kate Reed's Remembering Baby exhibition is a powerful example of how findings from research into sensitive topics can be communicated creatively.

## Examples of using Participatory Qualitative Interviews in social science research

**Doctoral research on citizenship, community and belonging in South Wales and Singapore**

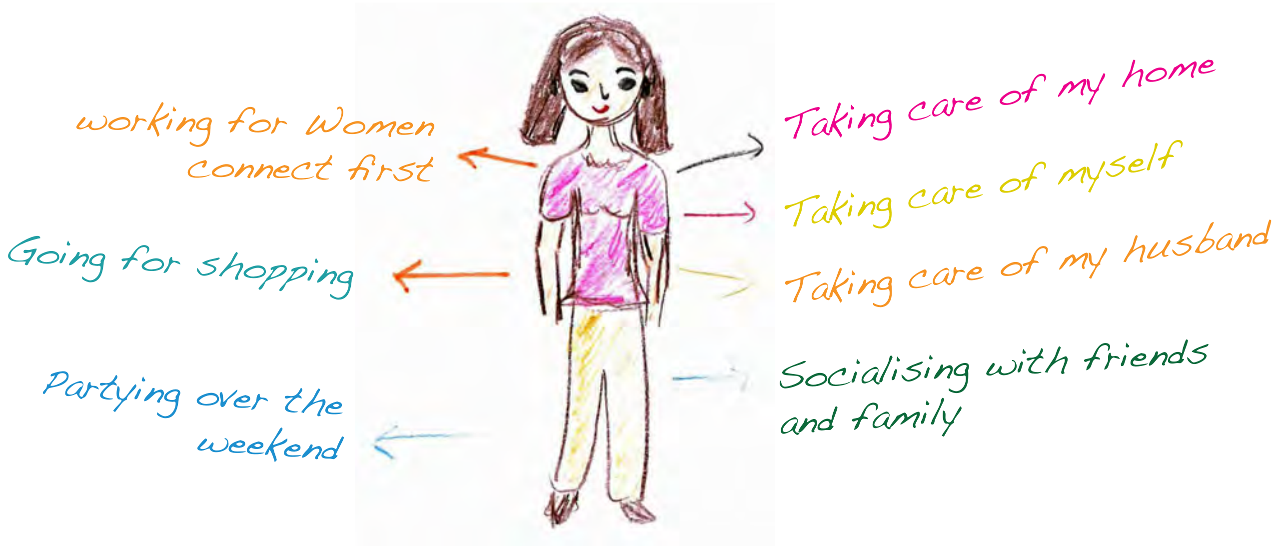
**Researcher: Dr Lucy Jackson,The University of Sheffield**

This research, undertaken between 2009 and 2012, aimed to explore how those without formal citizenship rights practised, performed and experienced citizenship and citizenship type practices in the place in which they lived. This research demonstrated that citizenship is not only a political status but is also a way of being. It is emotional, experienced, performed and practiced in and through everyday lives, through communities, networks, a sense of belonging and in negotiations of people's identities. The research was conducted with community organisations and groups who represented predominantly migrant women. Some were collective groups of likeminded individuals, very flexible and informal in nature, whilst other groups were selected by formal organisations supporting particular migrant identities in the different case study locations. What the organisations had in common was that they provided a sense of belonging for the individuals involved, whether formally or informally.

The research used a mix of qualitative research methods including interviews, focus groups, ethnography, archival material, auto ethnography, oral histories and storytelling. What became apparent early on in the research was the emotional depth associated with stories of belonging and community which were often quite difficult to put into words. Alongside this, I was working with communities of women where English was often not their first language which made conversations around politicised terms, such as citizenship, quite difficult. The research methods were therefore adapted to become much more playful and interactive in nature. I worked to incorporate arts-based approaches into participatory interviewing; this involved drawing and painting, singing and dancing, as well as large scale art projects led by myself and the organisations. The participants and I also embarked on a series of informal letter writing and journal keeping, reflecting on their experiences 'in country'. This meant that participants had a choice of how to get involved and how to express themselves. Instead of having formal interviews or focus groups, the sessions became much more fluid in nature, based upon conversations around the 'thing' being created, which itself was linked to the research.

Giving participants the freedom to choose how to express themselves meant that I was able to access those emotional and often quite raw experiences, digging into what it meant to live as a migrant woman in different contexts. The auto ethnographic element (that is, my own participation in the writing and drawing) also gave participants more trust in me - I demonstrated my own (terrible) artistic skills as well as getting involved in physical activities. The Participatory Qualitative Interview approach therefore opens you up as a researcher to those potentialities and possibilities that you may not have imagined. You become part of the research and you therefore gain depth and experience. Furthermore, the interactive nature of the research meant that I gained participants' trust in a way I had not experienced before which led to some wonderful insights. Included in this guide are just a couple of sketches which participants created and further examples of the creative products can be seen in my published research on this topic.

*Draw and write: What do you do in your community and with other people? Please draw the activities that you are involved in on a day to day basis - think about what you do in your local community, and with different people.*




*The image is a hand drawn depiction of the participant in a sort of spider diagram with links to the things that she sees as important to her and her community.*

*The image shows how a participant sees herself as connected to the local community; she sees herself in the context of the women's organisation and what she does there, as well as what she does in her personal life associated with her family and friends and as a mother.*

## Examples of using Participatory Qualitative Interviews in social science research

**Using creative methods when working with youth organisations**

**Researchers: Dr Lucy Jackson, Dr Catherine Harris, Dr Lucy Mayblin, Dr Aneta Piekut (Project principal investigator Prof. Gill Valentine, The University of Sheffield).**

This research was conducted for the project LIVEDIFFERENCE, a European Research Council (ERC) funded project led by Prof. Gill Valentine. This research programme involved five inter-linked projects which explored the extent and nature of everyday encounters with 'difference'. The example used here is from research that was conducted with a youth organisation which operated in a diverse area of a large UK city. The participants in the research were teenagers.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and the use of some highly emotive and politicised terms around diversity, inclusion and belonging, the research team took a creative approach. The research team worked with the organising group to set up an activity space and to arrange time where we could work with the young people. By using a community space in this way, multiple forms of engagement with the participants were possible. This included a space for informal discussion alongside the playing of video games, a table with art materials to create images, pictures and sketches around the key themes of the research whilst talking to participants, and a 'Big Brother' diary room, where the participants interacted with 'Big Brother', answered questions and undertook participatory activities.

This approach made the research more dynamic and interesting for the participants, but it also made the research much more informal in nature. In research that covers sensitive topics such as diversity and belonging, participants might seem shy or lack confidence when discussing their own experiences. Providing multiple different ways to engage with the key themes meant that participants had considerable agency over how they told their stories and got involved.

## Where else could Participatory Qualitative Interviews be used?

Participatory Qualitative Interviews can be used in a wide range of different sectors that deal with peoples' lived experiences (that you may or may not have yourself as a professional), and/or with people whose voices are not often heard in certain contexts or institutional processes. This method is particularly well suited to researching sensitive topics, and could be valuable, for example, in healthcare settings, with youth groups or with dementia patients. People working in these settings could think about the ways they could use Participatory Qualitative Interviews alongside other activities that are already occurring in these spaces, such as crafting (knitting, quilting, drawing) performance (dance, theatre, singing) or even sport (running, swimming, cycling). With an emphasis on encouraging participants to feel comfortable and to express themselves, Participatory Qualitative Interviews can be useful to organisations working with communities whose voices are less often heard, including non-native speakers, shy people, or those who are new to a place.

The possibility of tailoring the method and activities around the needs of different individuals and groups means that this approach could be used by charities, businesses or service providers working in a range of different contexts. In addition to generating valuable, creative data and fresh insight, Participatory Qualitative Interviews could be useful for increasing sensitivity and empathy to issues within these contexts, and for establishing better rapport with participants. Using this approach – possibly alongside activities that are already happening, or by enacting new activities - can lead to a deeper, reflexive analysis of people's experiences in these spaces. By engaging with creativity, and increasing self-awareness, it might also assist various organisations or groups to gain a better understanding of the people that they are working with, and to proactively adapt to issues that they had not previously considered or focused on.

### Top tips

1. Be brave and bold, and do not be put off by people saying 'this is silly'. Be clear on what you want to do, and why.
2. Flexibility is key - be prepared for anything! It can help to have a big bag of tools (pens, pencils, cameras, jigsaw puzzles, craft materials, post-it notes...) that you can pull out if you need to try a fresh approach.
3. Keep a notebook with you at all times to record any observations, events or reflections during the process.
4. Because this approach is unpredictable, you are never quite sure what will come out in conversation with participants. Given that developing trusted relationships is integral to this research approach, it is inevitable that there will be some emotionally draining and upsetting situations.
5. Find a way to decompress. The activities should be fun, but you don't know what will come out and you might hear stories that you were not prepared to hear, which can be challenging.

## Further reading

- 'Big Brother welcomes you': exploring innovative methods for research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments.
- Mixed methodologies in emotive research: negotiating multiple methods and creating narratives in feminist embodied work on citizenship.
- A conversation between Kip Jones and Patricia Leavy: Arts-based research, performative social science and working on the margins.

The following are examples of research dissemination using creative and participatory approaches:

- The Virtual Patchwork Quilt: A Qualitative Feminist Research method
- Geraldine Pratt: Research on Filipino domestic workers' experience of living in Canada. Dissemination through Theatre in the play 'Nanay'
- The Remembering Baby exhibition is based on a research study about experiences of early-life loss and the impact of medical imaging on paediatric post-mortem. The project is funded by the ESRC and it is being carried out by a research team (led by Dr Kate Reed) at the University of Sheffield.

**To reference:** Jackson, L., Pottinger, L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Participatory Qualitative Interviews' 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.

Methods for Change

# Visual Organisational Ethnography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# Visual Organisational Ethnography

*Visual Organisational Ethnography is a transdisciplinary approach that brings together artistic interpretation and theories from the social sciences used to study management and organisational culture. Researchers using this approach aim to generate a rich site-specific understanding of organisations, institutions, industries or interest groups, and work closely with those communities to produce a creative representation of their culture that can galvanise change.*

As an ethnographic approach, it often entails long-term and immersive processes of observing, collecting and recording while participating in the communities or organisations that are the focus of the research. Gathered materials are then brought together and edited in order to release and develop the narratives within them, telling the stories of these places or communities in a way that moves and energises the people involved and provides a springboard for their future action. The researcher is not viewed as an expert, but rather as someone with the desire and skills to comprehend and help to articulate the worlds in which participants are the real experts.

Visual Organisational Ethnography frequently involves the use of several different methods that aim to open up suppressed or neglected dimensions of a culture. Specific tools, such as photography, film, poetry or theatre are selected in response to the context of the community or organisation that is being researched. Similar approaches are sometimes termed sensual ethnography, and while visual forms of data such as photographs and film are important, researchers should aim to draw on the full range of senses in order to understand and communicate participants' experiences and stories. Whether the research culminates in a film, an exhibition or performance art, the aim is to create an immersive experience that has an emotional impact on those encountering it. The principle is that you might not remember what the research makes you see, but you will remember how it makes you feel.

## How does Visual Organisational Ethnography create or contribute to change?

Much work in the social sciences is shaped by an implicit assumption that the world is relatively stable, with change being a temporally bounded process that needs to be introduced or promoted in some way to get us from A to B. In contrast, Visual Organisational Ethnography is informed by the view that the relative stability we may perceive is something that we create out of a basic state of flux. Things are not static, but are changing, even if subtly, all the time. This suggests that rather than seeking to develop methods that promote change as an external initiative, there is a need for methods that galvanise the unacknowledged changes that are already in motion and have their own momentum, and which empower people to recognise their role in enabling these changes to take place.

Visual Organisational Ethnography can be understood as a portfolio approach, which draws on many different methods with the aim of 'broadening the bandwidth' of people who are involved in change in organisations, communities or industries, so that they become more aware of these processes and able to see things they otherwise would not see. It does this by creating cultural representations that have an emotional impact on those involved, that move people and inspire further action. By inviting people to participate in this process in a way that is organic, rather than attempting to impose an intervention onto a community from the outside, any resulting changes or actions are likely to be more meaningful and longer lasting.

## What ideas or concepts influence Visual Organisational Ethnography?

This approach has its roots in social anthropology, which has a long history of using visual data, and traditionally involved researchers observing cultures perceived to be very different from their own. Throughout the 20th century, anthropologists became more interested in studying cultures that were less 'remote' and closer to their own experiences and communities, often from an inside position. Following this line of thinking, Visual Organisational Ethnography draws on broadly ethnographic methodologies built around participant observation, that involve both observing the activities of a group or organisation, as well as taking part as an active participant within those communities and practices.

Visual Organisational Ethnography is an interdisciplinary approach to studying management and organisation as cultural practices, bringing together artistic interpretation and theories from the social sciences and humanities. Importantly, it foregrounds the significance of emotions in organisational behaviour and culture, and the 'art' of management, which is often overlooked in more 'scientific' management theories. Images, in the form of photographs, film, or artworks, are not drawn upon to supplement existing data, added in later to communicate findings, or incorporated to make research appear richer in detail and more interesting. Rather, the generation and curation of visual material is integral to this approach both in terms of understanding and representing the cultures that are studied.

A culture is a learned and shared way of life of a group of people or similar collective - the behaviours, beliefs, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values that they accept, generally without thinking about them. These are passed along and learned by symbolic communication, including stories, heroes, written and oral histories, songs and art objects; and pattern repetition, such as imitation, rituals, common experience, practices, artefacts and products. For example, the National Coal Mining Museum for England acts as a repository for many of these things for the industry and is a place where people can go to celebrate the beliefs, behaviours and collective values that shaped them and their communities. The exhibits of such a place don't reflect to people what they think about their culture – they remind them how they feel about it by prompting them to re-experience it, which can spur them to new directions of action.

## Why might I want to use Visual Organisational Ethnography?

- Visual Organisational Ethnography provides a tool for interrogating and revitalising culture. It can be particularly useful for drawing people's attention to aspects that are already embedded within their own cultures, but which may be overlooked, such as those mentioned above.
- While there is much research that looks at culture at a national level, or at the level of an organisation, this method is well suited to understanding the culture or folklore of an industry – the stories, fables, practices and rituals through which cultural values are communicated.

*Visual Organisational Ethnography has been particularly useful in understanding the values embedded over many years or even centuries within 'smokestack' industries, such as railway or mining industries. It has highlighted the ways in which they continue to exist in what remains of these industries, but also in the descendant communities and the landscapes of which they were part and which they shaped. Such insights are significant because studies of cultural change since the 1970s have confirmed the importance of respecting, honouring and celebrating the past in ways that allow its positive elements to be carried forward in continuity. Where regional economies have been successfully regenerated, it has often been because this has formed a springboard for change that built on and maintained existing values, skills and capabilities.*

- Visual Organisational Ethnography can take a variety of forms, depending on the culture that is being studied, and can involve varying levels of involvement from participants. While the format can vary, the aim is to produce a critically affective performative text. This means:
  - The work produced should be critical in that it ask questions where they would not ordinarily be asked, and interrogates what may otherwise be taken for granted.
  - It is affective in that it takes emotion and the impacts of emotion seriously, and examines how people respond emotionally to the situations that they are in – literally how they are affected.
  - It is performative because the goal is for people to do things as a result of viewing or experiencing the piece that is produced. The aim of the research is not to tell people what to do, but they should come away from that experience wanting to take some kind of action.
  - The term text refers to any piece of representation. This does not refer only to written text, although the piece that is produced could involve the written word. It could be a painting, a film, an exhibition, a drawing, a theatre production, or it could take any variety of visual, multi-sensory or written formats.

## Step by step guide to Visual Organisational Ethnography:

1. **Get access:** When you have identified a community that you are interested in researching, which could be an organisation, a subculture, a group of people living in a place or working on a specific project or campaign, you need to think about how you can gain access or invitation. A good way to approach this is to find some action or service that you can offer them as a gift or a token of respect, which demonstrates that you are willing to contribute to their causes and concerns and to make yourself useful. This could mean offering to take some photographs, to produce some filmed material, getting them information they need, or to write about an event. This offer should not be conditional on you being allowed greater access – you will do it anyway, and participants can then decide if they want to continue working with you in other ways. Basically, they often will want to keep working with you, if they like you and trust you.

*The process of gaining access may take a considerable amount of time. The aim is to make yourself available, and while there may not be an immediate payoff, this will help to establish your credibility as well as developing your understanding of the culture you are interested in. As you build relationships and become embedded within the community, other opportunities may arise. For example, you may be able to support with developing funding bids for future work that they were unaware that they could access.*

2. **Gather as much material as you can:** When you have developed strong relationships and agreed with participants to work towards an output, the early stages of the research involve a process of gathering elements that may help to tell the story of that culture. This means the researcher must spend time in the community or organisation registering and collecting a vast amount of images, phrases, situations, stories, poems, events, and key informants, and looking for the connections between them, which then become the building blocks of a narrative. As you go through this process of collecting, stay open to possibilities and unanticipated lines of inquiry. Depending on the type of output you plan to produce, identify what additional skills you may need to draw on and identify partners who can help you deliver the project successfully.

3. **Planning and pre-production:** You may now want to make a storyboard, or to create some kind of structure that allows you to plan the practicalities of producing your output. This approach requires effective multi-tasking. If you are making an independent film, you will often need to perform many different roles, from writer, producer, director, to cameraperson, as well as thinking about sound, lighting, and recruiting interviewees or actors. You will need to identify locations, plan what scenes you wish to shoot and when, taking into account your budget and the number of days you have available, as well as any other technical expertise you may need to draw upon.

## Step by step guide to Visual Organisational Ethnography:

*It is important to identify the key skills that you don't have at the right quality level, and find ways of getting people who have these skills on board. For example, if you plan to show a film as part of an exhibition, or embed it in a performance, or extract stills to make an article or book, design expertise will be essential. If you are creating a performance, what needs to be added is a sense of stagecraft in three dimensions rather than the film producer's two, an understanding of audience dynamics, and a different understanding of lighting. Whatever media you introduce to communicate, you should identify its key contribution and its specific demands. Get some input from someone who really understands the medium to make sure your work is of the appropriate quality.*

4. **Production:** In this phase, you are making sure that you have all the materials in place to create your planned output, which could be a theatre performance, an exhibition, or a film, for example – even a ballet, an opera or a poetry slam. This might involve filming in various locations with actors or with members of the community who will be interviewed; taking photographs of specific locations, people, or artefacts; creating sound recordings or sound effects; or if using existing images or sound recordings, getting permissions to use them. The aim is to generate everything that you might need so you can then move on to the process of editing, structuring, scripting or curating, without having to go back and do something again.

*Serendipity is important – whilst attempting to be as complete as possible, you need to be open enough to take advantage of what opportunities emerge as you go along. During the production of Black Snow, discussed below, we had no plan to use virtual reality or computer-generated imagery elements when we began. As a result of a technical failure of a drone, we discovered the drone pilot was also a computer design artist. On discovering this I rewrote the screenplay, and his work for the film won awards in its own right as well as making a substantial contribution to the films' overall success.*

5. **Edit and curate:** Once all the raw materials have been collected and recorded, the next stage is to decide what will be included, and how it will be stitched or staged together. This is when the potential narratives crystallise and interweave. You decide what emphasis will be placed on certain elements, and you discover which ones work and what needs rethinking. For a film production, this may involve editing film footage, perhaps adding sound effects, animation, virtual reality special effects or a musical score. This requires attention to detail and often making very tiny adjustments which will refine and lift the quality of the finished piece and therefore the experience of the viewer. Whatever form the final output takes, it needs to be conveyed in a way that is accessible and meaningful to your particular audience, so that they can take something away from it. It can work well to leave some ambiguity in the way that the narrative is constructed, so that the possibility is left open for viewers to write the next chapter of their story.

## Step by step guide to Visual Organisational Ethnography:

*Editing can be a long and drawn-out process, because it often means leaving out material to which you have become attached. Creating a coherent and impactful narrative involves making difficult choices, because there will be more stories than you can tell within the material you have gathered.*

6. **Share your creative output with people:** It is a good idea to plan in advance where you will show or exhibit your final output. Are there any competitions you can enter, or other methods of widening its reach? Depending on your budget and how much time you have available, you may wish to arrange a première or preview that invites participants to view the film, exhibition, or production rehearsal, and to provide feedback that be used in a final round of edits. This can be useful in understanding how the piece is received and if changes are needed. It also enables participants to feel more fully involved in the process, and holding an event can help to bring together the community and energise a campaign.

*Remember that you are not the expert. As a researcher who is also a director or curator, your purpose is to help participants to release their energies and their capabilities. Your role is not to take their information, repackage it and tell them 'this is who you are'. You are helping your participants to realise their stories.*

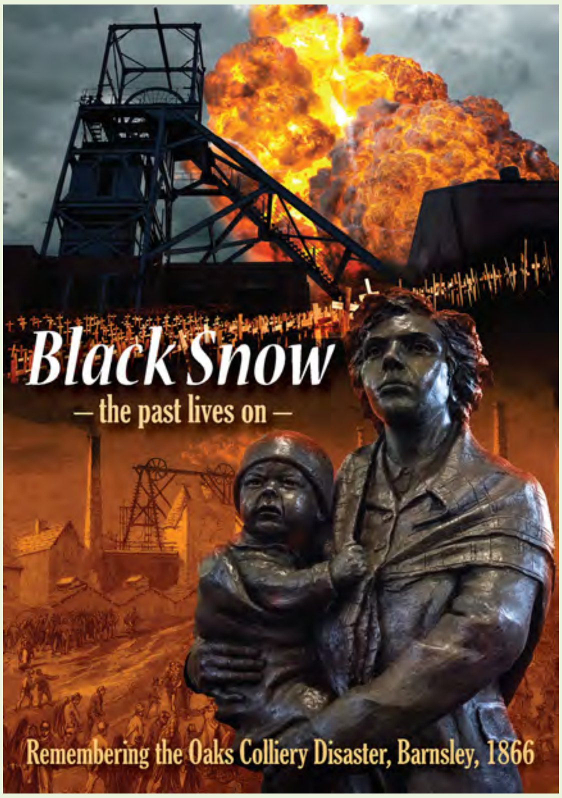
### Examples of Visual Organisational Ethnography in social science research

**Film: *Black Snow***

**Researchers: Prof. Stephen Linstead, University of York and Dr. Andrew Lawrence, University of Manchester.**

Black Snow is a 23 minute documentary film which was created as part of an ongoing appeal to raise money for a bronze memorial to England's worst mining disaster, as its 150th anniversary was approaching. Visual Organisational Ethnography was used here to create a visual part of an educational package for the general public and schools as the disaster was almost forgotten and was largely unwritten about.

The project involved a combination of historical archive research, and participant ethnographic research and interviewing, underpinning the full range of filmmaking skills. The main partner was the National Union of Mineworkers, who collaborated with a charity, People in Mining with support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, the National Coal-Mining Museum for England, AHRC




*Black Snow Film Poster (Image credit: Bryan Ledgard).*

(Arts and Humanities Research Council) and ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) were also important collaborators along with volunteer groups.

After the making of Black Snow and its public showing, the volunteers who had been involved with the raising of the Oaks Disaster Memorial, that features in the film, began to realise that they could do other things to promote campaigns for industry memorials elsewhere in the country than they had hitherto thought possible. As with the film, in these new activities they wanted to get across the social dimensions and values that the industry had fostered or provoked in its communities. They wanted to emphasise how it felt to be part of such a community and why those values – cooperation, pragmatism, care for others, respect, precision, resilience, reliability, ingenuity, 'getting the job done', endurance, kindness, sociability, friendship, generosity, connectedness - live on today. They used the film to highlight their work and help other volunteer groups, and they were also inspired to collaborate on different projects and attempt new things. This culminated in them working with Temple Newsam House in Leeds to create an installation and presentations that formed the 'Blot on the Landscape' exhibition. This won both regional and overall national Marsh Christian Trust Volunteers for Museum Learning Awards from the British Museum in 2019, both illuminating the general public and inspiring even more heritage groups.

What was particularly useful about Visual Organisational Ethnography in this project was that film was able to pull out of the archive stories that needed to be brought alive to create a living history – a history not of an event but a community discovering itself. The impact of the film on audiences has been global. Press, broadcast, online and other reads/views have reached around 9 million. It has also had an impact on curricula, and on other communities now attempting to memorialise their own histories. Most importantly for an event that was forgotten, the anniversary of the disaster is now the UK's National Workplace Day of Remembrance, commemorating all those who died at work.

**Photographic/Multimedia Exhibition: Rhythm of the Martyrs**

**Researcher: Prof. Stephen Linstead, University of York and Dr. Garance Maréchal, University of Liverpool**

In Rhythm of the Martyrs, a Visual Organisational Ethnography approach was taken to the problem of familiarising people on the UK mainland with the experiences of those in Northern Ireland as the anniversary of 50 years of The Troubles approached in 2019. It aimed to bring together work towards peace and reconciliation that had been undertaken by artists and musicians in order to communicate more effectively with people outside Northern Ireland, and deliver deeper messages than were possible through tourist bodies.

In this project, Visual Organisational Ethnography involved a range of methods, including archive analysis of written, oral, visual and newsreel materials, photography and photographic editing, sound and music editing and mixing, exhibition design. One professional photographer joined two academics to photograph and write about the so-called ‘peace walls’ and murals in the province, mainly in Belfast. This work considered their changing history and involved discussions and consultations with different bodies alongside some musical initiatives. These were all incorporated into an academic paper on peace-led arts interventions in conflict situations, and a publicly accessible exhibition in two parts.

The first part was a single room installation of 72 photographs, taken at a five year interval – 2014 and 2019. The second part of the exhibition was a 360° visual display of full wall versions of a further 72 photographs, accompanied by music and interview data.

This immersive experience gets audiences closer to the kind of embodied experience that is only possible in the streets of Belfast, but it simultaneously embeds that in the experiences of others through sound, and history through the accompanying text. Unfortunately the exhibition had to be cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but those who have seen it enthuse about its power, and the way it is able to convey conflicting feelings and subtleties, horror and hope in a powerful new form. It is hoped it will be staged at Easter 2022 in York, and August 2022 in Liverpool.


*Rhythm of the Martyrs Exhibition Poster (Image credit: Bryan Ledgard, Terrence Letiche).*

The peace walls and murals in Belfast have been the subject of documentary film work, but they are complex and demand a degree of time in contemplation that is not possible in the film medium. The availability of 360° immersive technology enabled us to produce a unique experience to convey even greater richness for those for whom a visit to Belfast was unlikely to be possible. In the complex situation of Northern Ireland and Brexit our contribution is likely to be very small indeed – but nevertheless the spirit of the arts interventions into reconciliation in the province demonstrates the power of many small intensive actions can sometimes have more lasting benefit than high-level political manoeuvres. We hope that when we are able to show the work it will be a contribution to understanding for those who have no direct experience of Northern Ireland and its problems as it comes back into the spotlight yet again.

## Where else could Visual Organisational Ethnography be used?

This approach could be used to gain deeper understanding of many different organisations, industries and communities across a range of sectors and settings. It has been used with heritage industries like museums, and public memory installations, industries undergoing change such as the railway industry in the Netherlands, and service industries such as health care and occupational health. It is particularly useful in contexts where there is a hidden history that needs resurfacing or an underemphasised human dimension, in contexts where organisations are merging, especially across cultural boundaries, or where cooperation needs to be developed. Given that this approach aims to galvanise changes that are already happening, and can enable people to recognise their role in mobilising change, Visual Organisational Ethnography could be particularly useful for understanding the work of organisations whose work itself aims to create social or environmental transformation, such as activist groups or charities, for example.

## Top tips

- Always carry a camera. You may come across an opportunity for photography when you least expect it that could play an important part in the narrative of a film or exhibition, for example, and once you miss it, it's gone! The best camera is the one that you've got on you, and that might mean the mobile phone in your pocket. It is far better to have a photograph, even if it is poor quality, than no image.
- Listen, and do not underestimate the importance of sound. In film making particularly, it is a natural tendency to prioritise the visual, but a film should be 360 degree experience. Remember to listen, and you may notice sounds that can convey an emotion that you see in your film. If you watch a film that has the wrong sounds with it you know instantly.
- Remember whose story you are telling. The story does not belong to you – you have the privilege of being able to tell it, and that is a great responsibility.

## A note on ethics

VOE can be understood as an ethical practice in itself, in that it reflexively monitors and embodies its own process. It seeks, as an art form, to build on the principle of 'informed consent' as embodied in signed declarations and contracts and to operate according to a code that protects the well-being of all involved - film subjects, film makers, film partners, and film viewers - as situations evolve. Filming and photographing in public places does not always require the express consent of every individual featured, but may require permissions from authorities (e.g. local government, businesses) if public activities might be disrupted. Unless you know you won't see someone you film intensively again, you may not need them to sign consent on the shoot. Ideally, let them think and reflect and meet again to discuss any issues and sign – that you are willing to give them time shows a level of trust that they will appreciate. However, please check this with your institutional ethics guidance. The University of Manchester Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology Filmmaking for Fieldwork programme are a good source of advice. Helpful material can also be found at the InVisio researcher support pages with example permissions forms here (account required).

## Further reading

- Filmmaking for Fieldwork, Manchester Methods Fair, University of Manchester
- Black Snow: The Past Lives On
- Feeling the Reel of the 'Real': Framing the Play of Critically Affective Organizational Research between Art and the Everyday
- The Rhythm of the Martyrs: Boundaries, Barricades and in Communities with a History of Violence.
- What to Do About Documentary Distortion? Toward a Code of Ethics

**To reference:** Linstead, S. and Pottinger, L. (2021). 'Visual Organisational Ethnography' 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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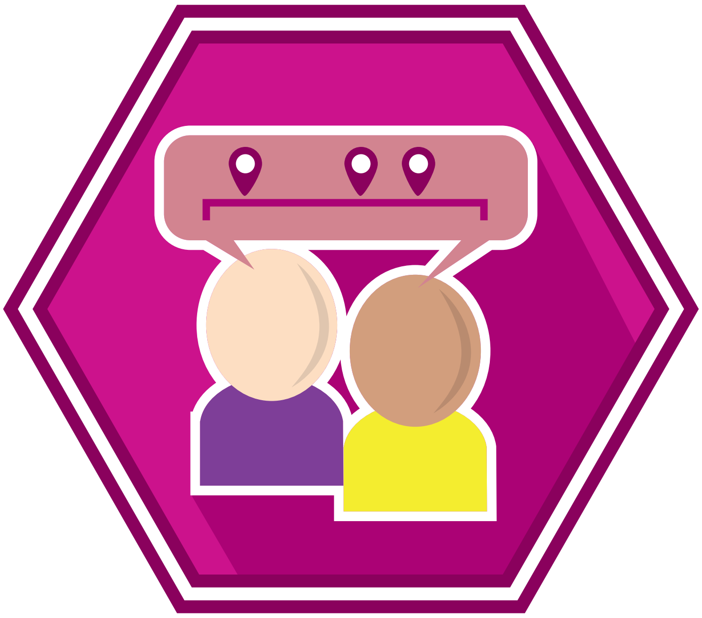

# Methods for Change

# Life Histories


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# Life Histories

*Life Histories involve talking to people to understand the changes in their lives and how these changes link with broader social and political processes. They aim to get a sense of how participants understand or evaluate these changes in relation to what is happening in the present. Life Histories are used to understand people's subjective experiences of change and how the past is interpreted to intervene in and make decisions about the present.*

In doing so, this method offers a means to understand how the present has been shaped historically, both through participants' histories and collective memory. Life Histories often involve spending several months in a place, engaging in observation and informal conversations. Spending time with participants allows the researcher to situate individual life histories in a place and to form relationships with a community. Building a rapport over time enables the researcher to foster a more embedded and sensitive approach to researching. Life Histories are not used to unearth a comprehensive or accurate picture of an individual's life but are rather there to highlight related webs of themes and events that are important to an individual from the vantage point of the present. Because of their subjective nature, each Life History will only ever present a partial picture of something, but a multiplicity of partial pictures can give a better sense of the processes of change in any given context.

# Life Histories

## How do Life Histories create or contribute to change?

Life Histories are primarily concerned with understanding change, how it happens, how it affects peoples' lives and how it is made sense of in the present. With Life Histories, change happens throughout the process of researching. Participating in a Life History might involve participants actively making connections between their own lives and the structural contexts (economic, political, cultural, material etc) and places in which they live, that might then be a catalyst for transforming relationships and feelings. The presence of a researcher might help to break down hierarchies within communities, helping to bring different people together who may not otherwise converse. Life Histories provide space for participants to understand their lives in situ, connecting their histories to a broader set of contexts and issues which might change perceptions of the self. Often, Life Histories allow participants to see that their story matters and participants can derive a sense of worth by understanding their perspective as a form of knowledge. Change also happens to the researcher. Often, it is necessary and fair for the researcher to share something about their own lives as the participants will share personal reflections to build a dialogue. This can help the research process to feel less extractive. Life History narratives can show how the same policy can affect individual lives differently depending on multiple intersecting factors and their cumulative effect over time. An understanding of such intersections that become visible through individual life stories can inform contextual adaptation of policies to meet the needs of particular groups and to map how different policies interact with each other in people's lives.

## What ideas or concepts influence Life Histories?

Life Histories are used across the social sciences and are concerned with trying to understand social, political and environmental processes of change over time. History is not understood as just context but is an active and present force which actually shapes change in people's lives. Life Histories are aligned with the Oral History tradition and both often use interviewing techniques to record, document and preserve marginalised experiences. While Oral Histories often unfold around specific themes to foreground overlooked voices and experiences, Life Histories can be more focused on the narratives of an individual life including their understandings of relationships with society and the meanings they attribute to social and political processes. The emphasis is not on uncovering particular themes that are important from the point of view of the research, but the events that individuals consider to be the most significant in shaping their life and their surroundings. Life Histories are part of broader family of ethnographic approaches, often involving immersive research over a long time period. Embeddedness means the research unfolds iteratively and the researcher can respond to what the participants deem to be important as the research unfolds, rather than staying with a set of predetermined questions. It also means the researcher can understand the lives of participants in situ and build the rapport necessary for participants to feel comfortable sharing in-depth reflections on their lives.

# Life Histories

## Why might I want to use Life Histories?

- Life Histories move beyond providing a snapshot understanding into a life or place and allow the researcher to really understand how that life or place came to be. That is how individual lives were shaped by their relations and interactions with others in their environment. These include relations with institutions, material landscapes and other human and non-human elements.
- This method is particularly good at providing insight on how people understand how change occurs in their lives. They provide a space for participants to reflect on their past and the important determining factors in shaping outcomes that include their own actions, events, processes and relations in their environment.
- Life Histories do not just produce data but are a way of understanding how agency is enacted and constrained as people recall and process their own experiences as memories.
- This method allows for narratives to unfold organically. Participants often narrate their lives in a non-linear and chaotic way, jumping from one point in life to another. This enables the researcher to get a sense of what matters to that particular participant by listening to what they choose to talk about first and how long they spend discussing different themes. Through multiple accounts it can also direct attention to the structural processes that are deemed important by different actors and groups.
- Life Histories are often understood to be a political method and can be used to foreground marginalised perspectives. The word perspective is used in a considered way here, because Life Histories are not a means of collecting data about people's experiences and practices but emphasise the meanings participants attribute to what has happened and how they evaluate change. The political element comes in thinking about whose perspective on change gets captured and informs the making of the present and the future.

## Step by step guide to using Life Histories:

1. **Begin with background research**. This background research might involve using archival sources or reading secondary literature. Better understanding the situation or community you have chosen to research will allow you to develop an understanding of the context you are entering, of what stories and voices are already documented, and of what is missing.
2. **Take time to familiarise yourself with the context you are working in.** During this stage, it would be useful to have a series of very open conversations with a range of different people you might be interested in talking with in greater depth at a later date. These conversations are not to probe or understand individual lives in any depth, but rather to get a sense of the shared memories of a place from multiple standpoints, and the social, political, and economic context. You can use this understanding to shape the questions you ask in the more in-depth interviews.

## Step by step guide to using Life Histories:

3. **Approach individuals to ask if they are interested in having a more in-depth conversation.** Use the initial open-ended conversations to decide who you would ideally like to get to know a little deeper. It can be useful to begin these interviews in the present and use this as a vantage point to explore pasts. This will allow you to get a sense of what people, institutions or events are important to participants. You can then use this information to get a sense of the broader story these events fit in and use them to structure your next interview with the same participants. Remember to ask participants if it is okay for your conversation to be audio recorded. You can then transcribe the conversation and revisit it later.

*Remember, the in-depth nature of Life Histories might make it difficult to recruit participants. Be honest about the level of commitment and openness that this method requires. Think also about who you are asking to take part and how the project could be framed differently to appeal to different participants – could they get anything out of taking part, for example?*

4. **Ask the same participants whether they would be willing to speak with you again.** Life Histories are about building up a rich understanding of someone's life and of what is important to them. Talking with the same individuals on different occasions can therefore be useful in building this understanding. In this conversation, try to dig a little deeper into the topics and events that were identified as significant in the first interview to develop a more detailed understanding.

*It can be useful to try to have these interviews in different spaces or while walking with participants. It is often through movement that participants remember things and the researcher can get a sense of how memory works. Changing the space can provoke remembering of different kinds of events.*

5. **End your interviews appropriately.** Once you are happy with the amount of material you have gathered, try to broaden the conversation again to move away from the specifics of a participant's life to be more general by talking about everyday life. This will signal to the participant that the interview is coming to a close.

6. **Transcribe your interviews.** Use your audio recorded material to transcribe the interviews. When reading the transcript, try to identify any gaps in understanding or contradictions that might be interesting to explore further. If you can identify topics you would like to explore further, ask the participant if they would be happy to have a further conversation.

7. **Revisit participants to discuss their narratives.** Work through the transcript with the participant so they can decide which aspects of their narrative they are happy to be shared further. This can be an important part of assembling life histories as participants often reveal intimate material about their lives in the moment that they later decide they wish to keep private.

## An example of using Life Histories in social science research

**Techno-politics, Agrarian Work and Resistance in post-Green Revolution Indian Punjab**

**Researcher: Dr Divya Sharma, University of Sussex**

This research was trying to understand the social, ecological and political changes brought about by the Green Revolution, a project of agricultural modernisation initiated in the 1960s, in Punjab, India. There are extensive scholarly studies of the Green Revolution with diverging and contested narratives. On the one hand there are narratives celebrating the Green Revolution as a success story of increased agricultural productivity in the region that transformed it into a breadbasket for the country. In contrast, a parallel narrative talks about the present-day ecological crisis in the region with depleted soils and groundwater. Furthermore, high levels of toxic contamination and excessive use of synthetic agro-chemicals have led to deteriorating health outcomes as well as debt and an economic crisis amongst rural households. Life Histories in this context were used to understand these narratives through farmers' and farm workers' perceptions and evaluation of these long-term changes and their present consequences in shaping their lives.

Divya spoke with mostly farmers and farm workers aged between 60 and 80. Life Histories were centred on understanding changes in labouring practices that occurred with the use of synthetic agro-chemicals, hybrid seed varieties and mechanisation. They drew attention to practices that existed prior to the onset of Green Revolution as well as trees, animals and ways of being that have now disappeared. A survey of previous

*A cultivator explaining the shift from manual to mechanised postharvest processing of grain and how it impacted women's lives.*

*A farm worker explaining how his ancestors from a nomadic community migrated to south-west Punjab.*

research showed that landowning farmers and agricultural scientists were seen as main actors in the story, whereas women's voices and those of farm workers who played a significant role in some of these transformations were absent. Overall, the scholarly literature primarily was about the impacts of these processes on these groups, but without a sense of how they actually saw these processes and their own role in the making the so-called Green Revolution happen.

This research wanted to understand the relationship between the people's understanding of how these processes shaped their own lives and outcomes for their households and communities. Understanding their perspectives of long-term changes also provided insights on why some farmers participated in political and social movements that sought to resist or redefine agricultural and rural development policies associated with the Green Revolution while others could not or did not do so or their participation was intermittent. Life History narratives of people who lived through the period therefore disrupted the narratives of progress attributed to the Green Revolution. They also illustrated the agency of farmers and farm workers that often is erased in narratives of decline and crisis.

## Where else could Life Histories be used?

Life Histories are useful if you would like to understand and explore perspectives on change in any context. They might be useful for researching:

- Shifts in work trajectories particularly among those who are in precarious employment or where people move between various forms of work through their lives.
- Charities or public policy institutions who are working on food policy could use Life Histories to map shifts in diets and their various drivers that are not just limited to access, incomes and tastes but are driven by interaction with other factors such as changing household circumstances or other changes.
- Mapping and understanding the effect of land use changes on individual lives through the lens of long-term inhabitants of a place.
- Movement in and out of poverty.
- Intergenerational mobility in households.

## Top tips when using Life Histories

1. Value the time participants share with you.
2. Be upfront with participants about the time commitment involved in research with Life Histories.
3. Be clear about how collaborative the process of assembling the narratives could be in the final stages of research.

## Further reading

- Contextualising Life Histories in Tamil Nadu
- Oral History Narmada
- What is Revolutionary about the Green Revolution?

**To reference:** Sharma, D. and Barron, A. (2021). 'Life Histories' 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.

The University of Manchester

Methods for Change

# Hands-on engagement and learning with Ketso


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*Ketso is a physical tool for creative engagement and learning that promotes effective participation. This hands-on kit is designed to make it easier for anyone to run an effective and engaging workshop.*

The word 'ketso' means 'action' in Lesotho, where Joanne Tippett invented the toolkit in the mid-1990s. Built around a metaphor of growth, the physical kit is based on the imagery of a tree, consisting of a trunk, branches and colourful leaves, which participants write on, then add to the felt workspace. This physical kit is animated with a series of questions and processes to share ideas. Ketso is a catalyst for discussion, enabling people to learn from each other and see different perspectives. Using the kit makes sure everyone's voice is heard and helps to structure effective thinking.

Ketso can be used in a range of settings, from one-to-one and small group discussions, to large workshops with hundreds of people. This participatory toolkit has been used to engage stakeholders in contexts as diverse as the environment, health and wellbeing, community development, education and business. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this face to face toolkit has been adapted for use in in remote and hybrid settings. Each person has their own individual kit and develops ideas before discussing them in digital breakout rooms. Pictures of the completed Ketso felts can be shared via tools such as Padlet. Ketso Connect is also being used as a method to encourage student engagement and structure work on assignments in higher education.

## How does Ketso create or contribute to change?

Ketso can be used, and can facilitate change, at any stage in a project. In the beginning, Ketso can be used to get a better sense of different stakeholders' views, priorities and resources, laying the foundations for change. Change continues to unfold because of the mutual learning emerging from the dialogue that Ketso encourages. As a tool for social learning, Ketso facilitates understanding of the bigger picture and opportunities for change. A frequent comment is that using Ketso uncovers a clearer sense of existing assets and resources. It helps people see new ways to make more effective use of what they already have, such as by working in partnership.

Encouraging people to understand different perspectives can lead to change, because it helps to build bridges across heterogeneous groups. This can lead to synergistic benefits, sometimes with links forged in addition to the main focus of the workshop. Ketso Connect has already enabled people from over 25 countries to work together in a hands-on and visual way, sharing ideas online. This has great potential for facilitating learning across national boundaries, without the climate change impacts of flights to bring people together in a workshop space.

The sense of empowerment created through active involvement in the research means action is more likely to be taken. The process of using Ketso builds capacity amongst participants, as the act of using the kit develops skills in creative thinking, effective communication, group work, and action planning. The physical artefact of Ketso, with its coloured leaves for different kinds of questions, branches to cluster ideas around themes, and icons for participants to highlight priorities, means that key issues and opportunities become more apparent. This ability to create a synopsis of findings, coupled with the skill and capacity-building amongst participants, can facilitate organisational and strategic change.

## What ideas or concepts influence Ketso?

As a method, Ketso sits within a participatory and action-orientated data gathering framework, which is about building ideas together for change. Inspired by Robert Chamber's work on Participatory Appraisal, Ketso is designed to ensure everybody's voice is heard. Participatory data gathering involves the researcher working with participants to explore issues that are of interest to them. The action orientation is inspired by Paolo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Asset Based Community Development, which seeks to recognise and build on existing resources and assets in the community in any change process. Feedback from users in over 80 countries shows that the Ketso toolkit helps participants to clarify priorities and develop ideas for action.

Ketso is built on three pillars of effective coproduction (developing ideas and taking action together, coupled with shared responsibility & decision-making) which were synthesised from this theoretical grounding and decades of experience running workshops. See the Top Tips below, and the creative output for this guide at aspect.ac.uk/m4c to learn more about the pillars. As the discussion is facilitated with a hands-on kit, the participants develop their thinking both as individuals and as a group, move ideas around and are able to find patterns amongst them. The process, in and of itself, gathers and structures data.

## Why might I want to use Ketso?

- Designed to make running an effective workshop easier, the physical pieces of Ketso guide the facilitator and participants through the process. All of the pieces rinse clean in water and can be used again, in many different ways.
- Ketso Connect is designed to be used in remote workshops. This innovation enables people to use the tactile and visual toolkit to gather their thoughts before sharing them via video link, which encourages deeper thinking and reflection. The fact that everyone is using the same physical toolkits in their own spaces helps create a sense of cohesion, despite physical distance. It can also be used in hybrid meetings, where some people are in the same room or space, and some are joining by video link.
- Ketso is an innovative way of making sure everybody has their voice heard in a discussion. The interactive and participatory nature of the kit means participants who would not normally speak up, those with different languages, or who experience learning differently, can actively participate.
- Using Ketso can lead to unexpected insights. Ketso structures the thinking process so participants are able to gain clarity in their thinking. As the kit is highly visual, it is possible to see how ideas cluster around particular themes or 'branches', and links between ideas can be identified.
- Ketso can be used as a prompt to ask deeper questions and foster collaborative analysis. The tactile nature of the kit means that participants and researcher can do the analysis together. The visual representations created during the workshop can in turn be analysed further, used to ask additional questions and engage with participants about the findings.
- Ketso helps to foster genuinely ethical research by being of use to the participants as well as the researcher. The collaborative discussions facilitated by Ketso help the participants learn from each other. They gain something from this process, because it often sparks ideas for action and collaboration.
- The data created by using Ketso can be turned into a structured synopsis of findings for an organisation, revealing key ideas such as: what is going well (and should be kept in any change process), challenges and ways to overcome them. Participants use coloured icons to highlight priorities, so it is easy to identify key points for sharing.

## Step by step guide to using Ketso:

**The Ketso kit includes:**

**Leaves** – for each participant to write or draw their ideas on. There are different colours for different kinds of questions, with an underlying metaphor of growth, which can be adapted to suit different purposes. The leaves rinse clean and are reusable.

**Felt workspace** - a tree, with a centre piece like a tree trunk that is the focus, a reminder of what the workshop is about.

**Branches** – that spread out from the central focus. The branches represent different themes, or aspects you want to consider and help to structure your thinking. Participants can cluster their ideas on leaves around the branches, where they best fit.

*Exploring a dementia-friendly society, with people living with dementia, their carers and service providers*

1. **Preparation: purpose and framing of the workshop.** To get the most out of the workshop, it is important to be clear about why you are doing it. Think through the following questions to develop a good plan: What do you and your organisation hope to get out of the workshop/s? What kinds of people are you thinking of inviting? What do you think they would like to get out of the workshop? Ideally you would include potential partners and stakeholders in this early scoping stage – What are we trying to do together and why?
2. **Work out the practicalities.** The ideal length for a Ketso workshop is 1.5 - 2 hours. This length of session allows you to go through several different stages of developing ideas, plus a warm-up, table swap, break and feedback at the end. The general rule of thumb is to allow 10 - 15 minutes per stage (e.g. green leaves – creative thinking). In an online workshop with Ketso Connect, we suggest allowing 2 - 3 minutes for people to write ideas down for each stage, then breakout rooms of 10 - 15 minutes to share them, preferably then with a few minutes to share ideas back in the plenary digital space.

*The ideal number of participants per Ketso felt at a table, or in a digital breakout room, is 5 – 6 (maximum 8). You can have as many tables or breakout rooms as you need for the group size, and it is possible to run very large workshops, with hundreds of participants at once, as the kit itself provides the structure and guides participants through the process.*

3. **Plan how the elements of Ketso be used in the workshop.** Envisage Ketso as a bit of hardware that lets you run different applications, or ways of running workshops. This encompasses the centrepiece on the felt as a main focus, a sequence of questions and activities using different coloured leaves in sequence, and themes relating to the main focus represented by branches spreading out from the central trunk.

4. **In the workshop itself, give a clear introduction of both the aims and the process at the beginning.** Be clear what the purpose of the workshop is, what will happen with the outcomes, and how participants will receive feedback. Introduce each piece of Ketso and its associated process one step at a time. For instance, introduce the idea of writing on leaves with a simple warm-up exercise, shared on one of the small plain felts (or with a top idea or two shared verbally in a digital breakout room if running an online session). In the second stage of leaf writing, introduce the idea of using the colours to ask different kinds of questions, leaving the felt and branches covered with the small felt used for the warm-up exercise until participants have developed leaves ready to share.

5. **As you go through the workshop, give people time on their own to develop their ideas before they share them, and repeat this process for each stage.** Once people have written some ideas, you can uncover the main felt and introduce the branches, and ask participants to share their ideas. One person shares one idea, then goes around to the next person to share an idea, placing the leaves on the felt as they are shared, pointing at whichever branch where they best fit. Leaves can be moved around to create clusters and show connections between the ideas.

*Developing a vision for nature recovery in the Carbon Landscape with community members*

## An example of Ketso in social science research

**The Carbon Landscape**

**Dr Joanne Tippett, The University of Manchester and Fraser How, Ketso trainer and facilitator**

Ketso was used to build a partnership and engage with communities to inform a successful bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2017 for the £3.2 million Carbon Landscape Project. The different coloured leaves were used to find out what was already working and what mattered to people in their landscape, as well as to develop creative ideas for how to make the area better for nature and people (using the metaphor of growth). The branches were used to help structure this questioning process, stretching the thinking to include landscape issues, community concerns and different ways to bring diverse groups along with the process. Keeping the colour coding for questions consistent across workshops over time, and for different workshops and stakeholders, made it possible to synthesise the ideas and find key patterns.

Ketso has subsequently been embedded in the community engagement of the Carbon Landscape Project to engage new audiences (e.g. 35 workshops with schools, community and youth groups, and local authorities and other public sector bodies). Significant land improvement projects have been delivered on 18 key sites, underpinned by a programme of stakeholder and community engagement using Ketso.

Ketso has played an important role in allowing extensive stakeholder engagement in the challenging context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a Partnership Manager at Natural England explains: *"We are using Ketso to explore national community engagement standards for Nature Recovery Networks. We have been able to carry on with this engagement despite the pandemic, engaging with 150+ people online, using the new Ketso Connect to develop our understanding of the potential reserve in more depth than would have been possible with digital tools only... Using the toolkit builds capacity in project officers and participants to really engage with community members in meaningful dialogue. It helps all participants to think beyond their local patch."*

## Where else could Ketso be used?

**Partnership working and coproduction of change**

Using Ketso allows for more inclusive engagement across a diverse range of participants, and it can be used in a range of ways, from patient and public involvement, to engagement between service providers and people with lived experience, to involving community members in developing plans for their local area. It can be used in contexts such as climate change planning, as in the city of Alameda, California, a low-lying city threatened by rising sea levels, where *"Ketso created an engaging and inclusive process for community members, which resulted in hundreds of community-sourced ideas generated in a relatively short amount of time"* (Climate Change Co-ordinator, City of Alameda) .

Ketso facilitates participation with marginalised groups and enables a deeper understanding of their lived experience and needs, leading to improved plans and processes. For instance, SeeMe Scotland adopted Ketso in 2014 to engage 200 mental health service users, carers and providers to develop a national strategy to tackle mental health stigma. Engagement using Ketso has now been extended to hundreds of additional participants. *"The most useful aspect of Ketso is giving people without power a voice"* (SeeMe's Programme Manager).

**Organisational effectiveness and learning**

Ketso can help improve the working arrangements of a range of organisations. It has been used in project planning, change management and organisational learning. For example, Trafford Housing Trust uses Ketso to improve its services based on customer feedback: *"Our Anti-Social Behaviour service's key performance indicators have been redesigned based on customer feedback gathered [using Ketso], and our development arm is using customer feedback to refine the houses it builds...In the past we've just used post-it notes and pens, but Ketso made it much easier to structure the focus group and to record and analyse the discussions."* (Head of Business Intelligence, Trafford Housing Trust).

Ketso can bring a range of voices into guiding organisations' activities. Wageningen University's Centre for Development Innovation use Ketso in project work in Africa and Asia to develop new ways to teach landscape management: *"A key aspect of Ketso that is different to other tools is its ability to consolidate ideas into something that can turn into a finished product that actually has an impact...it's like a translation tool"* (Senior Advisor, Global Landscape Forum).

*Image credit:*
*Anna White @SneakyRaccoon*

## Top tips

1. **Hear everyone's voice.** Make sure everyone has a way to make an input via a pen and leaves. Give people time on their own to develop their own thinking before sharing their ideas, and repeat the pattern of 'think, then share, then discuss' for each new stage of developing ideas in the workshop.
2. **Structure effective thinking and creativity.** Think about the questions you are going to ask, and the sequence to ask them in. A key way to encourage productive dialogue is to start with the positive. Encourage participants to reflect on what is going well, what resources they already have (brown leaves). Then go on to think of future possibilities, including how to make more effective use of these resources (green leaves).
3. **Link information across time and place.** Take time to think about what you are trying to achieve and gain clarity about the purpose and focus. Consider what you already know about the topic, and how you will use and share the new information that will be developed. During a workshop, clarify priorities and actions to be taken.

## Further reading

- Ketso ‘How To’ Resources
- Ketso used to gather young people’s views on employment support
- Using Ketso in research with students who identify as learning differently
- Returning Knowledge to the Community: An Innovative Approach to Sharing Knowledge about Drinking Water Practices in a Peri-Urban Community
- Creativity and Learning – Participatory Planning and the Co-Production of Local Knowledge
- Where to lean the ladder of participation: a normative heuristic for effective coproduction process
- Hands on Engagement with Ketso

**To reference:** : Tippett, J. Barron, A. Pottinger, L. How, F. (2021). ‘Hands-on engagement and learning with Ketso’ 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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Methods for Change

# A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

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# A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

*Taking a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation means that quantitative approaches for evaluation complement qualitative research elements.*

This can include various forms of interviewing, observation and documentary analysis, and different combinations of methods and materials depending on the nature of the research problem at hand. While quantitative approaches, such as those found in surveys and experimental studies, often allow researchers to produce and analyse large amounts of data, they tend to frame the problem rather narrowly. Conversely, qualitative approaches (e.g. interviews, observations) do not reduce problems to numeric values, instead providing a detailed picture of what is happening. Integrating qualitative elements challenges standard ways of doing evaluation, illuminating avenues for unexpected, fresh insights. The flexible perspective of such approaches enables researchers to consider significant institutionalised and systemic circumstances that shape the problem and its implications. This approach is instrumental in complex settings where interventions have repeatedly followed established dynamics in the past, but their impact remains unclear.

# A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

## How does a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation create or contribute to change?

A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation aims to ascertain the conditions that produce change by identifying and understanding the realities of the relevant actors. Also, it requires being adaptable and open to exploring unexpected routes, leading to defining problems through new lenses. Evaluation often focuses on the impact of implementations on one specific group and therefore offers one side of the story, asking questions such as: How is an organisation implementing solutions, and how do these tackle the problem? What benefits is an instrument delivering? Taking a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation, on the other hand, explores different sides of the story, gaining insights as to how and why impact is happening for a diversity of target actors, by asking questions such as: What are the structures and circumstances that contribute to the identified problem? How do these structures and circumstances affect the success of an instrument? The research problem is looked at from new angles and in a non-predefined way. This allows researchers to look not only at the motivations, expectations and experiences of users. Instead, they can recognise the responses and experiences of the beneficiaries concerning the implementations of instruments within broader societal and personal contexts that lead them to respond to, and perceive the impact of the instrument in a particular way. In doing this, this approach relies on traditional methods but expands its application beyond normative evaluation methods that look only at the expected change, while ignoring other effects or changes occurring as direct or indirect consequence of an intervention or policy.

A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation considers 'target groups' as part of the process of change. A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation can thus allow for those seeking to promote change (e.g. policymakers, organisations, intervention instrument designers) to regard beneficiaries', users', or target groups' own interests and circumstances in the design process. Giving a more active role to beneficiaries when designing and planning interventions could generate new interpretations of the problem and, consequently, new solutions and ways to address it.

## What ideas and concepts are related to a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation?

This approach draws from science, technology and innovation studies, which aim to understand what creates technological change and innovation, what conditions can prompt innovation, and what are the effects innovation produces in terms of productivity, economic development, technological and scientific change and entrepreneurship. This approach is further influenced by some contributions of evaluation theory that call for a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of change (impact) and the context in which this happens.

# A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

## Why might I want to use a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation?

- A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation supports ongoing communication with end users or beneficiaries. Social problems cannot be solely understood through numbers. Taking a qualitative approach to evaluation allows us to go and speak to people, to hear and see their stories. Working closely with the target group helps build trust, which is likely to increase response rate, access to new sources of information, and openness. This can lead to detailed responses about the process that underpins their understanding of the implementation and its impact.
- A Comprehensive Qualitative Approach to Evaluation helps to challenge pre-existing judgement and bias towards policy beneficiaries. Rather than quantifying effects and variables that could explain such effects, zooming in to the context of peoples' lives, observing and interacting with people in real-time allows researchers to comprehend their attitudes and behaviours amidst the complexities of their lives. This can enable researchers to find the roots of the problem.
- Bringing in a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation means asking questions in a slightly different way. Be prepared that this might change how the problem is approached. A Qualitative Approach to Evaluation requires being open to unexpected findings or findings that open further questions rather than answering pre-existing questions. Evaluation exercises taking this approach might, for example, reveal that an intervention is not alleviating the problem as expected, or even tackling the problem at all, or that can it can be more impactful if paired with other forms of interventions.

*The power of qualitative research is not always evident for some, leading to misconceptions of what this type of research entails. Also, because quantitative evaluations tend to be more well-received by people in policy-led research, there is often little awareness of what qualitative research offers to design and implement better policies. Once qualitative evaluation methodologies are conscientiously introduced, people involved are often positively surprised and their assumptions challenged.*

- Qualitative research is not about just listening to people and producing stories. It is a reflective research process that involves re-thinking and questioning elements of a problem or a social phenomenon that have been ignored, and stepping aside from what is commonly believed and assumed. Qualitative research is not only about reporting the stories of beneficiaries; it follows a strict process of research design, collection and organisation of data, and logical analysis, which can lead to more significant interventions.

*There is often a complicated tension between predefined ideas of what is needed and introducing a new approach. It may be important to bring in slightly different elements, whilst maintaining focus on the kind of evidence that is needed.*

# A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

## Step by step guide to using a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

1. **Start with the question you have at hand.** Find any information already available that may help you to answer your question, even partially. From there, you will assess the extent to which the existing data is relevant to your question and whether you need to collect additional data.
2. **Design the instruments to collect the data you need.** Consider what instruments you want and can use. There are many different ways in which qualitative approaches can complement quantitative evaluation data. All come with advantages and limitations, which not only concern the data in itself but also the framing of the questions to be explored, resources needed and results.
3. **Discuss and ask for advice.** Speaking to colleagues about what you are doing can help immensely. They can bring compelling ideas about how to go about your research question, how to access data and key informants. Communicating your problem is always a good idea to find meaningful and creative ways to tackle it.
4. **Communicate the scope of qualitative research to your team and partners.** Sometimes, you will work with partners and team members with different skills and academic backgrounds, and they might have very different ideas about how qualitative research instruments work and what they are meant to achieve. They might not see the value in conducting interviews or may not know how to design an interview protocol and conduct an interview. In order to familiarise everyone involved with the requirements, benefits and drawbacks of qualitative research and to get everyone on board, it is crucial to communicate what is relevant pertaining to the use of qualitative methods and to establish measures to prevent drawbacks from impairing your research process and findings.
5. **Understand restrictions and work within these boundaries.** Restrictions should be considered when framing questions and designing the research process. The more you plan at the early stages, the more options you will have if limitations arise. It can happen that some restrictions may not affect the deployment of the project as initially foreseen.

*Depending on the field and the programme or instrument under evaluation, you may encounter limitations as the research unfolds, which may negatively affect your endeavours. In these cases, it is important to reassess all decisions made and planned, questions asked, and contemplate changes in the study's design and implementation. For example, data restrictions might be in place, which will prevent you from speaking with service/programme users/beneficiaries directly. In this case, you won't be able to use ethnographic approaches to conduct in-depth interviews, but you can still re-design the survey to offer more open questions and encourage participants to respond openly and in creative ways, for example to write, sing or draw their stories. Pre-defined questions can be reformulated to further respondents' engagement and reflections.*

## Step by step guide to using a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

6. **Make an inventory of what you have gathered**. You might explore widely, and you will keep a record of all the information you gather and process. Be systematic and strict when creating an information system that suits the project aims and resources. A good system will save a lot of time when looking for a particular piece of information, its status in the project and future tasks depending on it. A good system will be of great support when selecting the sources of information that are relevant to your questions. It is important to record everything that is searched, collected and produced, even if this is not directly incorporated in the final outcome.

7. **Define the contribution that additional research instruments deliver.** Qualitative approaches to evaluation might be implemented alongside existing instruments and become a secondary instrument corroborating the quantitative data that is already in place. Qualitative and quantitative instruments should be integrated into coherent instruments that work, within their own boundaries, towards a common goal.

8. **Adapt the research instrument to the target group.** If you want to get meaningful feedback from beneficiaries, you need to design and communicate your research instrument accordingly. Who is the target group you will evaluate? What are their characteristics? Are they young people, marginalised groups, households or customers of a company? Adapt your communication to their realities, and you will receive richer responses.

9. **Communicate to your stakeholders.** There are decisions that will need to be made considering the interests of your stakeholders or your own interests in terms of the questions you want to explore and the findings you want to highlight. Regularly update stakeholders on your decisions and progress and ensure everyone involved is happy with what you are doing. This is also important to reduce the risk of leaving them with unmet expectations – make sure you stress what the data supports and what it does not support.

*Be ready to be challenged about the validity of your study. You may be questioned about your approach and the credibility of your findings. Draw on your research process design, documentation and data supporting your findings and be clear about the additional benefits conferred by taking a qualitative approach. Communicate clearly the scope of your study and the paths and measures followed to guarantee its reliability.*

## Examples of a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation in social science research

**Service Evaluation of a Career Service Provider**

**Researcher[1]: Dr Mayra Morales Tirado, The University of Manchester**

The project aimed to investigate the factors that enable young people to successfully transition from Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) to Education, Employment and Training (EET) via a Career Service Provider. The evaluation, led by a multidisciplinary team, shed light on the impact, challenges and lessons from a career service provider's support approach.

The service provider that commissioned the evaluation work had produced a large set of data on the type of services provided to young people searching for opportunities to develop employability skills, gain knowledge of workplace culture and appropriate behaviour. There were some pre-defined ideas as to what the research team should do with that existing data. The service provider's main interest was for the research team to quantify how many users had accessed their services and quantify the amount of work their staff had put in when helping those young people. For instance, the research team would look at workloads to estimate hours worked, the number of staff working those hours, and the time spent and outputs of each activity performed by staff.

The research team proposed to the service provider an evaluation approach that included the use of quantitative methods and qualitative methods. The mixed-method approach would offer a more complete picture of the problem that the service provider wanted to understand, as it would look into the landscape in which the young people accessing their services lived, their family situation, personal expectations and ambitions. The research team was convinced that by understanding the young people's side of the story, alongside analysis of the service provision approach and organisation of work, the evaluation would offer findings and recommendations closer to the needs and realities of the young people in NEET. This would, in consequence, enable the service provider to design and deliver more impactful support.

As the research team could not approach directly the young people using the services of the provider, the team conducted interviews with the staff that had been working closely with young people that had been in the category of NEET, or in and out NEET, for more than a year. The team also designed an online survey for the service users that was implemented with the assistance of staff working in NEET cases. After service users had contacted a staff member, this staff member asked the users to fill the survey. The research team designed the survey to be completed easily and quickly, and encouraged users to be as open as possible in their responses. In addition to the survey information, the research team identified in the service provider's data set a sub-set of crucial qualitative information that could validate the primary dataset's quantitative results and interview results. The team transformed that data into a format that would facilitate its analysis and comparison against other empirical results.

[1]The evaluation team consisted of three members, all from the University of Manchester.

This evaluation's different methodologies yielded results that were not expected by either the research team or the service provider. Results challenged initial assumptions as to why some young people were not coming out of NEET —some of these young people did not understand why they were in such a situation and why things did not seem to get better for them. This allowed the research team to identify recommendations including that the service provider needed to work closely with education providers, family members and employers.

The research team developed a report that presented the quantitative results first, followed by the qualitative results, and included a section of analysis that brought together all the results. This way, the service provider could see that the time a member of staff puts into supporting a service user can make a difference in how this user responds to the advice and support offered. The service provider was happy with the evaluation results, as this made evident the value of the support they gave to young people and flagged the areas that need improvement in the organisation to continue changing the lives of young people for good.

For the research team, this evaluation work was transformative, as some members with quantitative background experienced for the first time the richness of qualitative research and it changed their preconceptions about the rigour and validity of this type of research. Moreover, this evaluation made the team aware of how a narrow understanding of social problems can lead to policies, initiatives or programmes that offer temporary solutions but do not tackle the real problem.

## Where else could a Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation approach be used?

A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation offers an inclusive and creative way of thinking about policies in the more general sense, and is useful for governments, funders and service providers in various sectors, such as social benefits, public health initiatives and professional, employment and training services in schools, the community and in prisons. In a research context, this approach has been applied by sociologists in education studies, migration studies and studies of science.

### Top tips

1. Create a good system to keep and record all the information you gather. This will save you time and help you identify key pieces of information.

2. Develop a robust research design. Consider all the necessary measures that will make your data and results reliable.

3. Trust your findings. If you have sound design and sound decisions backing them up, you can trust your results.

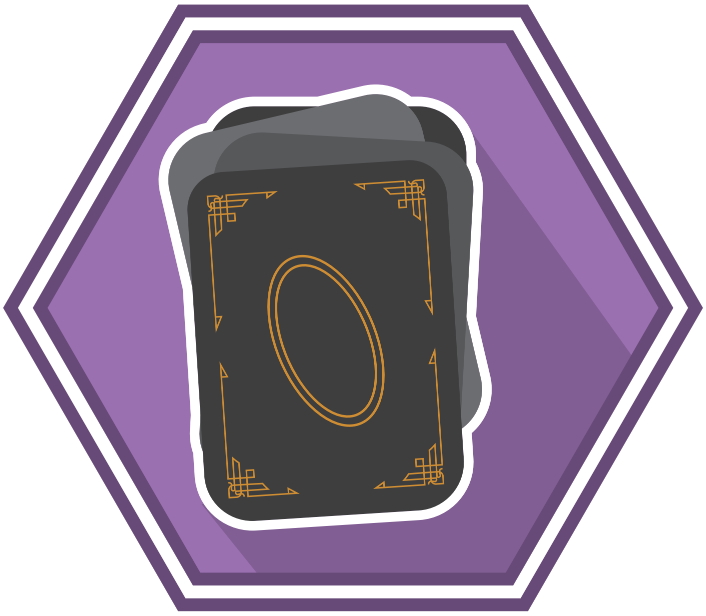
4. Be ready to be challenged. Remember that a solid research design will speak for itself, but you will still need to do some convincing.

# A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation

## Further reading

- Understanding NEET users to provide a better service
- Changing research on research evaluation: A critical literature review to revisit the agenda.

**To reference:** Tirado, M.M., and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'A Comprehensive, Qualitative Approach to Evaluation' 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.



Methods for Change

# Elliptical Methodologies

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# Elliptical Methodologies

*An Elliptical Methodology can provide a creative and provocative framing for exploratory research studies. This approach works by taking two very different focal points, which could be based on observations or be theoretical in nature, and using them as a way of shaping a research project. The idea is that these two foci or poles work as opposing centres of gravity, forming an ellipse or path which then acts as a structure for open-ended inquiry.*

This approach is particularly useful for studying things that are often left out or overlooked - social issues, subcultures, practices or things that tend to be excluded from existing research. It has been applied to explore phenomena such as mediaeval Breton burial practices, early computer simulation, forensic accident reconstruction, twentieth century ring-roads, failed architectural projects, tablecloths and working surfaces. By encouraging the researcher to look at a topic from a range of different and perhaps unexpected angles, Elliptical Methodologies can provide new insight into things that may otherwise be unseen or disregarded, as well as offering fresh perspectives on more established research topics. Researchers working with an Elliptical Methodology may draw on many different types of methods and sources (e.g. archives, architectural records, participant observation, photography, film, oral histories) depending on the research context and on the two poles chosen to form the ellipse. This is not an approach that can be easily generalised to provide a road-map for application in different contexts. Rather, Elliptical Methodologies provide a device for framing experimental studies, and for thinking about how theories – sets of ideas or principles used to explain something - relate to the phenomena that are studied through research.

# Elliptical Methodologies

## How do Elliptical Methodologies create or contribute to change?

Elliptical Methodologies can galvanise change in several ways. By generating novel and unusual configurations, this approach can generate new conversations and shift attention towards things that are usually overlooked. They can help to highlight areas and topics that have not yet been researched, including things that may currently be viewed as frivolous, irreverent or unimportant within a particular discipline, sector or field of study, as well as those that would benefit from a fresh perspective. As such, they can begin to expand accepted discourse and practice, by posing a challenge to what is perceived as worthy of study, as well as the types of tools or theories that are seen as appropriate for understanding certain issues. When Elliptical Methodologies are used in research with marginalised communities, groups or practices, they can bring to light and validate aspects of daily life and experience that may otherwise be disregarded or undervalued by academics, policy makers or the general public. In this way, Elliptical Methodologies can raise public awareness of overlooked social problems and perspectives.

*Since research informed by this approach tends to be open-ended and evolving, it is not always possible for the researcher to control processes of change that might take place, and which may not be desirable. For example, research may bring marginalised subcultures or aesthetics to the attention of new audiences. There is potential that this new awareness may then be appropriated or misused in a way that further disempowers disadvantaged groups or trivialises social issues.*

## What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

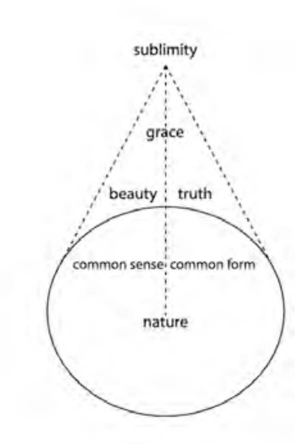
This approach originates in architectural theory, and was initially conceived as an attempt to challenge ideas about the types of things that were acceptable to consider within this discipline. However, Elliptical Methodologies are not defined by a specific academic tradition, and instead are characterised by a commitment to interdisciplinary ways of thinking and working. This approach encourages diverse, reactive, exploratory methods of inquiry and processes of trial and error. An Elliptical Methodology provides a guiding structure or framing for a flexible and experimental approach.

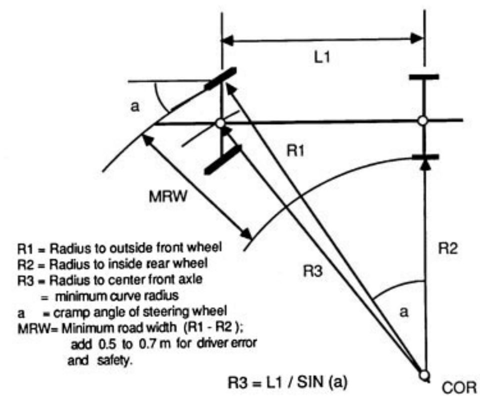
Elliptical Methodologies aim to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and established ways of looking at research problems or theories. This is achieved by exploring new combinations - pairing things that have not been brought together before, or that do not seem to fit with one another. An Elliptical Methodology could involve taking two very different theoretical approaches, and combining them to generate a new theoretical understanding. Equally, one theoretical approach could also be paired with an unlikely real world area of study. Research drawing on Elliptical Methodologies has, for example, used a combination of critical theory and architectural theory to shed light on overlooked and undervalued phenomena, including mediaeval Breton burial sites, ring roads, and travelling street fairs. In the example of ring roads, an Elliptical Methodology brought together eighteenth century theories of sublime experience and contemporary experiences of journeying around ring-roads, and has shown how closely these relate. Pursing this relationship in more depth revealed surprising similarities in the explanatory techniques of geometry used by sublime theorists, and the geometries deployed by modern highway engineers.

# Elliptical Methodologies

## Why might I want to use an Elliptical Methodology?

- Research using this approach is fun, playful and creative. An Elliptical Methodology can provide a coherent framing for research that seeks to use many different methods to look at a problem or topic from multiple angles.
- This approach is flexible and malleable, and it can be constantly adapted to fit the research problem that is being studied. It enables the researcher to work opportunistically, by building in different methods and activities in response to new ideas, theories, or possibilities that arise across the duration of a research project.
- Elliptical Methodologies can be particularly useful for researching under-explored topics that do not have an available body of methods attached to them. By shedding light on overlooked phenomena, they can help to persuade varied audiences that a place, topic, community or practice is interesting, valid, and worthy of study.
- They offer multiple possibilities for seeing things differently, by establishing new viewpoints or frames of reference through the structure created by setting up the two opposing poles. As such, this approach can provide novel angles for looking at things that are under-appreciated, that do not seem to fit, or for reinvigorating discussion in academia or professional and public debates.
- This is an approach that can be hard to communicate, however, and it may not always be taken seriously. It involves an element of risk-taking, in that it often draws on ways of working that are as yet untried and untested. But this is often what makes it valuable and enables the researcher to yield surprising results.




*Sublime experience: Frances Reynolds's Diagrammatic Representation of the Topology of the Sublime (1785) redrawn by the author; Photograph of Derby Ring Road (A52>A6>A601 >A5250>A601>A516>A52) by author, 2001; Highway Geometry diagram (anon, 1965).*

## Step by step guide to Elliptical Methodologies:

1. **Identify two key ingredients.** Elliptical Methodologies require two contrasting poles to structure the research inquiry. These two foci could be abstract or tangible, real world or theoretical. This approach works best with things that do not fall neatly into a category, or things that have not been given serious academic attention. Think about unusual practices, subcultures, activities or places. Some potential starting points could include railway journeys, guerrilla knitting, overspill car parks, ad-hoc signage, institutional DIY, how-to-guides, second-hand postcards, professional accreditation criteria, grounded boats, or old rulers. These could then be paired with theories or frameworks that have not yet been used to explore these phenomena. The researcher can then begin to explore the space between these two poles.
2. **Start in the middle.** This type of research focussing on previously unexplored or underexplored topics does not have an obvious starting point or a set of ordered stages that should be followed. Instead, it is important for the researcher to simply get stuck in - find a starting point that seems interesting, and work outwards from there. Keep an open mind and look out for new opportunities and avenues to explore as the project progresses.

*This approach to research can be compared to a 'cabinet of curiosities' - a display case containing a collection of unusual and interesting objects. The researcher's task is to shuffle things around (phenomena, ideas, theories, materials or narratives), experimenting with different configurations to see how they resonate with one another and what new stories may unfold in this process.*

3. **Try a range of methods.** Think about data collection methods that will enable you to look at the research topic from various different angles. This could involve combining participant observation with archival research, photography and interviews with key stakeholders, for example, or any number of creative methods or approaches that could offer an interesting viewpoint. The idea is to generate data that allows you to put things together that you find interesting on their own terms, and see if there is a way that you can arrange them that is more than the sum of its parts.

*One way of generating multiple viewpoints on a topic is by working at a range of different scales, simultaneously. A longer-term, broad interest may be revisited over many years with material continually collected, and could also be broken down into smaller projects with a specific focus in response to emerging ideas or opportunities. This can take the research in a number of different, perhaps unanticipated directions. It could also be useful to think about different time scales – combining historical archives with time-lapse photography and participant observation 'in the moment' can generate rich data on long-, medium- and short-term phenomena and experience.*

## Step by step guide to using Elliptical Methodologies:

4. **Do not overly worry about the outcome.** It is the process of exploration that is important in this approach, so avoid starting the research with predetermined ideas about what you will discover or what will be created. Projects that use this approach are best thought about as involving a process of trying things out and starting new conversations, rather than identifying what will work straight away. Some experiments will be durable and complex and will grow into something bigger, while others will not. Try not to worry about the ideas that do not work – sometimes thinking about why something hasn't worked can be insightful in itself - and don't be afraid to move onto something new.

5. **Communicate your findings.** In using an Elliptical Methodology, you will not only have identified an overlooked topic or taken an unprecedented perspective, but you will also have explored it in depth. Think about the organisations and communities that can benefit from insights into this phenomenon, how you can raise awareness about it in wider society, and the tools you might use in order to do this. Communicate your findings to policy makers and the broader research community to demonstrate that this area is worthy of study.

### Examples of Elliptical Methodologies in social science research

**Fairground Architectures**

**Researcher: Prof. Stephen Walker, The University of Manchester**

Fairground Architectures is an ongoing project that is considering various aspects of travelling street fairs in the UK. Fairground architecture does not normally form part of the canon of architectural history or contemporary practice. With this background, Fairground Architectures sets up a number of elliptical connections around fairground practices and objects, with the broad project aims being to expand how the architectures of the travelling street fair can be understood and valued. Objectives range from: establishing an appropriate framework for studying and interpreting fairground architecture; developing a generous catalogue or guidebook of fairground objects, practices, people and ingredients; and presenting a range of focused studies that expand how fairgrounds are understood in order to communicate the complexity and sophistication of these environments, and to position them within longer histories of social, cultural, economic, urban and material practices.

In contrast to previous studies, which have focused on individual rides and attractions, their technologies and decoration, and the overall arrangement of these objects in the fair, Fairground Architectures pays more attention to the invisible architectures of the fairground. Invisible architectures refers to hard and soft legislation - laws and established behaviours - and practices that determine how the fairground is laid out and when it takes place, but also how visitors to the fair behave. It also refers to larger scale networks that exist between different fairgrounds, and the long histories and traditions of fairgrounds and showpeople. The project combines archival study; durational fieldwork (repeated visits year after year), large scale and detailed participant observations, drawing and photographic surveys, time-lapse photography, interviews with showpeople, Local Authority officers, and historians, and collaborative work with local museums, amongst other methods.

Two examples from across this wide range provide more detail. One focused study of the 'Opening Ceremony' set up a simple Elliptical Methodology that combined this short, official event seen at most fairs with Louis Althusser's philosophical reflection on Ideology. Within this structure, the methods listed in the previous paragraph were used. In combination, this established an uncomfortable counter-reading of the pomp and tradition of the ceremony, and established a framework through which the relationships between the fair and the host town can be understood in much more of their complexity. Using this approach revealed more and different aspects to the interdependencies between fairs, fairgrounds and everyday architectures.

*Ilkeston Fair: Opening Ceremony adjacent to Ilkeston Town Hall, 2012 (image by author).*

A second example has explored the fairground crowd. This study deliberately set up a study of fairground crowd behaviour and dynamics with accepted Crowd Theory. Although the origin of Crowd Theory can be linked to broad socio-economic concerns about bad behaviour witnessed at fairs and festivals, and although much legislation to control, close or displace fairs from the eighteenth century onwards makes reference to crowd behaviour, neither Crowd Theory nor legislation can be applied to explain the behaviour of the fairground crowd. Again working with the broad palette of methods listed above, this study borrowed detailed terminology from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, particularly his study of Behaviour in Public Places, to structure a series of drawn accounts that demonstrate the diversity of fairground crowd behaviours. Different points of view and different time-frames were brought together to reveal the wide variety of individual, group and crowd interactions that are lost by simple references to 'the crowd'. This was achieved by deliberately identifying different viewing positions and modes, including time-lapse photography shot from above, from church towers or top-storey windows, street-level views from within the crowd, and the views enjoyed from on or within fairground rides.

While the work from these various examples is relevant to existing academic debate, the findings are also of interest to the organisers of fairs, and to the fair-going and general public. Work on the Opening Ceremony drew out some of the complex interrelationships that exist between the host town, its ceremonial and functional officials and members of the Showmen's Guild. It helped to reveal the differences that exist between the ways that these roles and interrelationships are believed to operate by those concerned, compared to what actually happens in their negotiations. Similarly, work on fairground crowds revealed the gulf that exists between how these are currently theorised, legislated for and controlled, compared to how large numbers of fair-goers actually behave and interact.

## Where else could Elliptical Methodologies be used?

- This approach is particularly useful for researching topics, subcultures, practices, and material forms that have been overlooked. Collaborating with a researcher using this approach could therefore be useful to organisations and charities working with marginalised social groups or communities, or those interested in minority practices, such as sports, hobbies, or crafts that have yet to receive serious academic attention and societal recognition. Research could feed in to the production of a film, artwork or podcast, for example, that communicates the stories and priorities of those involved.
- This approach could also be useful to organisations, groups, or communities that have been over researched, or where studies tend to follow the same path, and would benefit from fresh thinking.
- A simplified version of this approach could take the form of a game, in which different pairings are randomly generated and then used as a conversation starter or prompt. This could also be used as an icebreaker, a tool for workshops or within design and planning processes. Participants in the game would be asked to suspend disbelief long enough to bring some things together that don't seem to fit, and to see what ideas or conversations may be generated as a result. This could be useful in teambuilding, agenda setting, and encouraging conversation between diverse individuals, particularly groups interested in generating new ideas or revisiting familiar problems and looking at them through different lenses.

## Top tips

1. Start in the middle. Get stuck in, do something, and work from there.
2. Be greedy and be open minded. Don't be afraid to try multiple different approaches.
3. Fail quickly. Try not to be precious about an idea if it doesn't seem to be working. If it is not a good fit, you will know quite quickly - instead of persevering, shuffle the pack and try a different approach!

## Further reading

- Anna Tsing et al.'s Feral Atlas is an interactive website that enacts aspects of elliptical methodology by encouraging visitors to select and gradually combine entries from the 'more than human' Anthropocene. Through playful navigation, new and deeper understandings emerge.
- Invisible City is both a book and a web-based installation that adopts a horizontal structure to tell various stories about invisible networks and infrastructures within and below Paris, building up a more complex picture of the city than is usually presented.
- Theatrum Mundi describes itself as 'a centre for research and experimentation in the public culture of cities... developing imaginative responses to shared questions about the staging of urban public life'. Their website hosts a wide range of their projects, sounds, performances and other bits and pieces.
- Robinson in Space (1997) and Robinson in Ruins (2010), along with London (1994), form part of an ongoing cinematic and research project directed by Patrick Keiller, which combines wide-ranging research topics across a psycho-geographic filmic narrative. Robinson in Space is also reimagined as a book (Reaktion Books, 1999). This is not just a book-of-the-film, but uses the different media to play with the same core ideas in an alternate format.
- °Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture is a book by Hélène Frichot. A taster is available here.

**To reference:** Walker, S., Pottinger, L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Elliptical Methodologies' 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.

Methods for Change

# Biographical Mapping

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# Biographical Mapping

*Biographical Mapping involves using a combination of pictures and texts to represent past experiences and functions as a tool for reflection and talk. It involves the creation of a visual map of places, journeys, trips and a few words about why they are meaningful. The map can include drawings, diagrams, personal photographs or downloaded ones, routes and maps.*

The result is a collage which richly represents parts of an individual's life. Biographical Mapping aims to foreground meaningful places and mobilities rather than chronology and the tracing of change. This method helps people tell stories about their lives, building on their memories of places and travel. Whether completed on one's own or with others, those who engage with Biographical Mapping are encouraged to look closely at the photographs they have selected, especially personal ones, and to dwell on the details that might otherwise be overlooked. These reflections are then used as a way of opening discussion, reflection and memory.

Biographical Mapping is different to Life Mapping partly because of the materials used to invoke a discussion of memories of places, spaces and time. Biographical Mapping relies on existing visual materials (photos, maps) and other material artefacts to map out an individual's history. It is the use of these already existing things, alongside talk based methods such as interviews, that enables participants to map out connections to place, space, and their associated memories and how they have changed in space and over time. An online Biographical Mapping kit has been created for use in non-academic as well as academic contexts. This kit includes guidelines and a list of prompts to help people remember important places, everyday movements, and travel. Those who use Biographical Mapping need not be good at art - the kit provides useful links and downloadable resources that people can use.


*We use a homing pigeon to represent this technique because of its affinity to place (Image Credit: Claire Stringer/ More Than Minutes)*

## How does Biographical Mapping create or contribute to change?

Change occurs at a personal level in the sense that people move through different recollections and memories in the process of creating their map. Creating a Biographical Map may improve memory function and quality of life and might therefore be of interest to organisations and groups who work with those who have declining memory function. Biographical Mapping can also change interpersonal relationships by building and strengthening rapport or by creating connections between people. It might also change local communities by encouraging interaction between people thereby enhancing the pleasure felt in a space through the sharing of memories and experiences. Biographical Mapping can be used to bring about change in community contexts because people are collectively pooling their resources and working together. It can generate insights and knowledge about place, communities, movements and personal histories and thereby lead to change around specific issues. Biographical Mapping can also be used to inform discussions of change in localities by exploring people's investments in local places and helping people bring about change and adjust to it.

## What ideas or concepts influence Biographical Mapping?

Biographical Mapping was developed in the context of research that involved talking to older women about their youth in the 1950s-70s. Its intellectual origins can be traced to: elicitation methods; literature on the significance of place for memory; a response to the limitations of current dominant approaches that prioritise chronology; and recognition in geography, sociology and related disciplines of how important movement between and around spaces and places can be to people's lives. Biographical approaches that have influenced Biographical Mapping include: oral history; photo, object and graphic elicitation approaches; mapping approaches; participatory approaches; arts-based research and engagement methods.

Biographical Mapping functions primarily as an elicitation tool. It works to open-up the spatial, place and memories. This method is different from conventional elicitation techniques in that it encourages participants to reflect in ways that move beyond and away from rehearsed accounts of the past. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the small details in personal photographs and other images as this can awaken memories that have not been set in concrete or embedded in rehearsed stories of the past. Mapping is used as a way of describing and representing an individual's life and the interconnections between different elements that are meaningful. The organic and dynamic process of creating a map helps to move away from linear accounts of a life.

## Why might I want to use Biographical Mapping?

- Biographical Mapping is based on participants sharing memories and experiences of places which can be a pleasurable activity. Everybody has somewhere or some journey that they find pleasurable to talk about.
- Biographical Mapping gets people talking. Participants usually embrace the opportunity to talk about the places they have lived or visited at various points in their lives. The enthusiasm for discussion that this method cultivates can be useful to 'break the ice' in group settings.
- This method is accessible. Interacting with meaningful photographs and other images, sketching, drawing and adding post-it notes to a sheet of paper to build a story of a life while talking often makes it easier for participants to find a starting point for their story.
- Biographical Mapping is untethering in that it tends not to feel overly personal or intrusive because it is not structured around pointed personal questions. Rather the participant is given creative control over the assembling of the map and the accompanying discussion.
- Biographical Mapping is flexible in that it can be done on one's own or with others, such as family, friends, carers or community groups.


*A Biographical Map created as part of the 'Girlhood & Later Life' study.*

## Step by step guide to using Biographical Mapping:

The steps outlined below are for individuals and people working with Biographical Mapping in non-academic and academic contexts. However, the guidance is written so that it addresses the person who is doing the remembering. If you are assisting someone in doing this, you can adjust the questions so that they become prompts.

If you are leading a biographical mapping session in a non-academic or academic context, the preparatory questions (Part 1) will often be decided by you rather than the participant. But keep in mind that participants need to know why they are being invited to create a map – where feasible, discuss with them the purpose, objectives, and likely audiences.

Academic researchers are advised to be particularly clear about the purpose of using the method, also to consider carefully how it fits within their research design and enables them to address their research questions. It can be a self-contained activity to explore memories of place and mobilities, or a means to explore in detail experiences touched on in an interview or survey.

**Part 1: Preparation**

(a) To get started, decide on your purpose and objective. What do you want to achieve? You might want to:

- Reflect on a place or journey that is special or remembered clearly. This could be a home once lived in, the route to school, a memorable trip.
- Focus on a particular period in life. This could include being a teenager, becoming a parent, or retirement.
- Create a life story through places and journeys.
- Explore a theme in your life, such as experiences of mobility in different stages of life.
- Work with community groups who may choose to focus on people's shared and unique experiences of particular local places. This might include a park, community centre or town centre.

(b) Clarify who you are doing this for. Is it for yourself, a community initiative, family and friends (children or grandchildren, your partner), or a professional setting? It is important to reflect on who your audiences are, including their priorities and interests.

(c) Who do you want to do this with? Remember, you can change this at any time. Do you want to do this on your own or with someone else, such as a friend, family member, carer, colleague, community members?

(d) Get a large piece of sturdy paper, ideally A1 size, something to stick things on with and a selection of coloured pens and pencils. It might be a good idea to have some personal photos to hand. Have the Biographical Mapping kit to hand.

*This exercise works best if you have access to a digital device, such as a smart phone, tablet, laptop or PC, so that there is the option to search and download images of locations or objects that may remind you or the participant of places or a given time in life.*

## Step by step guide to using Biographical Mapping:

**Part 2: Creating the Biographical Map**
Academic researchers are advised that their research questions and objectives will determine how much they direct the participant in deciding how to start (Part 2). You may simply ask the participant to start by remembering a meaningful place or trip, perhaps relating to a particular period in their life. Alternatively, you may have some guiding questions that encourage the participant to focus on, and explore, a particular set of experiences, perhaps about commuting to work when they were younger, or their relationship over time to the local town centre, or the significance of being able to drive.

(a) What place or journey do you want to start with? Identify a place or trip that is particularly fresh in your mind, or that is thought back to on a regular basis. How do you want to represent this on the Biographical Map? This could be represented with a personal photograph, a downloaded image, a sketch by you or, if appropriate, the person you are working with.

*The Biographical Mapping kit has helpful tips about where to find images. If you are helping someone create a map, remember to be mindful that holidays and international travel may need to be de-prioritised and asked about sensitively when participants are from poorer backgrounds.*

(b) Why is this place important to you, and what do you recall about it? Small details are as important as big ones, so if you are using a photograph, try looking closely and then standing back from it. If it is a digital image, you can zoom in and out. Your reflections can be audio-recorded. Think of a few words that sum up this place, journey or trip for you and write them on to your Biographical Map. You might like to also write down the years, if that is relevant to your purpose for creating the Biographical Map.

*If you are leading a Biographical Mapping session with others, remember to use different kinds of questions to encourage reflection and talk e.g. focusing on small details, drawing attention to objects in photos. Use questions such as 'what best captures what it looked like to you?' You can also choose to record your reflections on the images used and what the participant is recounting.*

(c) At this point, it is important to remember your aims in creating the Biographical Map. If you are tracing the places and journeys that have been important to you across time (e.g. your childhood, or your entire life to this point), your map might be organised chronologically, for example, with images and text clusters signifying important places corresponding to different points in your life going forward in time from left to right. The next place you choose might be forward or backward in time. Again, ask yourself: what images and words best capture your memories of this place? Alternatively, if you want to focus on the places and journeys that mattered to you, the next move might be to think about what other places were important during this point in life. What images and words come to mind when you or the participant thinks of them?

## Step by step guide to using Biographical Mapping:

**Part 3: Bringing the session to a close**
Don't forget to label your Biographical Map and include the date. You can also take a photograph of it. If you have created an audio record, make sure it is dated and given a name that links it to your map. The map, or photo of it, along with the audio record if available, can be revisited and discussed further at another time.

### An example of a Place-based Case Study Approach in social science research

**Transitions and Mobilities: Girls growing up in Britain 1954-76 and the implications for later-life experience and identity**

**Researchers: Prof. Penny Tinkler, The University of Manchester; Prof. Anne McMunn, University College London; Dr Laura Fenton, The University of Manchester; Dr Resto Cruz, The University of Edinburgh; Dr Baowen Xue, University College London. Communications & Public Engagement Officer: Hazel Burke, The University of Manchester**

Penny, Laura and Resto worked together in this project to develop the Biographical Mapping method. The way in which the method evolved was partly a rejection of how mobilities are typically researched. In longitudinal mobilities research that employs graphic elicitation techniques, it is striking that a linear representation of time dominates the representation of space and mobilities. An outcome of this is that everyday movements, trips and other types of travel are represented as fixed points and this most likely influences how mobilities are remembered and discussed: stasis rather than movement is emphasised; destinations rather than journeys; place rather than mobilities. Movement is rendered barely visible in this linear framework.

Biographical Mapping was designed to not prioritise the temporal and the linear. The researchers focused on important places and aspects of girlhood as well as on turning points, rather than using time as the organising principle. Age remained a reference point, but it was not foregrounded. Biographical Mapping was one of several methods used to research women's accounts of their girlhood and later life.

- Biographical Mapping was a self-contained activity with the aim of exploring memories of place and movement during youth. Participants often elaborated on details mentioned in the preceding biographical interview on youth, drawing out their significance, but the mapping process also introduced new topics and perspectives.
- Biographical Mapping was typically undertaken between two semi-structured biographical interviews – one on youth, the other on later life - that all our participants chose to do on the same day. It was surprising how much this method lightened what could have felt intensive and kept the interviewees engaged. This affirmed the value of Biographical Mapping as an elicitation device.

# Biographical Mapping

- Most people enjoyed Biographical Mapping, but not everyone. Some interviewees were initially concerned that they would need to be able to draw well. The researchers decided that interviewees could do the artwork, but that Laura and Resto would otherwise do it under their direction. The researchers made use of the participants' photographs, down-loaded images, also Laura and Resto's own sketches which included stick people as well as more elaborate drawings.
- The researchers photographed the Biographical Maps at the end and gave interviewees a copy of the image when this was requested.
- Biographical Mapping enabled detailed exploration of mobility histories and the feelings associated with them. It also proved useful for checking details mentioned in the first interview.
- Biographical Mapping allowed us to explore experiences from a different angle than was possible in the interviews in that we side-stepped conventional, including rehearsed, narratives of girlhood and growing up. For example, the exercise brought to light the experience of one participant, Megan, who when she was in her early twenties walked everywhere with her young sons, as she had no other means of transport while her husband was at work. She pointed out flowers and plants, naming them for the boys. Remembering these walks become a poignant moment in the exercise, as later on in her life Megan had become estranged from her sons. Moreover, the mundane and routine nature of the walks means that they are not the kind of memory likely to be shared in the life history interviews.

## Where else could Biographical Mapping be used?

**Community-building initiatives**

Biographical Mapping is well suited as an ice breaking exercise when people are getting to know one another. For example, volunteers in a community group or a befriender and the person they are befriending. People often enjoy reminiscing about places they have known, and trips they have taken. Unlike some other topics, talking about memories of places and travel tends not to feel overly personal, and so people are more likely to share experiences. They can be particularly useful in community group development, especially where locality is a common feature. Biographical Mapping can also be used as a tool for cross-cultural and inter-generational initiatives by youth workers, school teachers, and community development workers.

**Education and community-research initiatives, public consultations**

Biographical Mapping could be used as part of community history initiatives, perhaps linked to local museums or residential homes, for instance. It might also be used in youth work and education contexts by youth workers, teachers, or museum and gallery outreach teams. Biographical Mapping could be used as part of public research consultations and publicity development initiatives where the aim is to find out about people's relationships to, and feelings about, places and mobilities. This may be useful for the public transport sector and could be used to explore people's memories of, and feelings about, travel, or local authorities and public responses to, and ideas about, change. It could also be used to explore perceptions of safety in various places at different times, within police public-liaison activities, youth work, and schools.

**Wellbeing**

Biographical Mapping could be used by organisations supporting those with failing memories, such as Age UK as well as Dementia and Alzheimer support groups and organisations.

Research by Andrea Capstick & Katherine Ludwin (2015) suggests that place is a key and hitherto rather overlooked feature of the memories of older people with dementia. In foregrounding place and spatial mobilities, Biographical Mapping can serve the needs of older people whose memories are functioning normally but also help them to develop materials that might assist them and service providers in managing any future memory loss.

### Top tips

1. Keep in mind that Biographical Mapping is about the places that are meaningful, memorable and interesting for the participants. It is not a test of memory and there is no right answer.
2. Small can be beautiful, so let participants explore the small details that they remember, such as the flowers on a favourite walk.
3. It is helpful to think of a few words that sum up the importance of each place or trip.
4. Note that there is a huge stock of images available online to download for free to help participants in addition to adding their own.

## Further reading

- The Biographical Mapping kit and an animated guide to using it are available from the 'Girlhood & Later Life Project' website www.manchester.ac.uk/biographical-mapping
- Girlhood and later life project

**To reference:** Tinkler, P., Fenton, L., and Barron, A. (2021). 'Biographical 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.

Methods for Change

# Engaged Capacity-building Workshops


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# Elliptical Methodologies

*This is a method that draws on repeated, interlinked workshop activities as a way to bring people together to work on shared issues. Workshops are not one-off events aimed at extracting data from participants, but rather are embedded in long-term engaged forms of knowledge exchange and research, which may draw on multiple methodological tools such as interviews and ethnography, with communities as project partners.*

Using this approach can help to build networks of groups and individuals. This could include those who play different roles in relation to a particular service, resource, community or product, within food systems, social care, health or planning, for example.

Engaged Capacity-building Workshops can be applied to understand the materials, values, norms and relationships that shape the issue or system in question, and how power relationships and inequalities are reproduced, to establish avenues for changing and redesigning these relationships. Using this approach can help to build networks of groups and individuals, for example those who play different roles in relation to a particular service, resource, community or product, for example  within the food system, social care and health or planning. It involves the researcher working closely with participants, often in experimental ways, to explore problems and questions and to identify solutions. By strengthening relationships between the different stakeholders, this approach can increase resilience and build the capacity of organisations and individuals, leading to improved practices, ways of working and outcomes for those involved

## How do Engaged Capacity-building Workshops create or contribute to change?

Engaged Capacity-building Workshop methodologies aim to create significant changes in the systems in which they work by enhancing the learning of all who participate, including the researcher. By bringing together diverse groups to work through problems collectively, and identifying solutions based on varied, lived experience, this approach can have a meaningful impact on the lives and practices of individuals, as well as informing changes in policy or funding regimes. Working closely with participants over a significant period of time can create change by supporting the formation of trusted relationships between the researcher and organisations or communities, which often extend beyond the duration of an individual research project. Further, by reimagining the relationship between researcher and researched, Engaged Capacity-building Workshops can shift understandings of what research can be, and the power dynamics that are involved. They can therefore improve the image of research in communities that may be over-researched and sceptical about the value of further intervention, because the aim is positive and meaningful change for those communities.

## What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

This is a qualitative approach aimed at understanding power dynamics and processes, involving elements of coproduction. During organised, facilitated workshop activities, the researcher spends extended time with stakeholders and often contributes to the production of outcomes which can help develop and strengthen participants' capacities to self-organise and self-determine. Similar to other participatory approaches, Engaged Capacity-building Workshops involve the researcher participating in the setting that they are researching. This may involve exploring the activities, experiences, perspectives and values of the different groups that make up that system, then experimenting with different framings to break down barriers between various groups. It is research that is done with participants, rather than to, for or about them. The researcher's aim is not to extract knowledge from participants, but instead to be a resource that the individuals and groups involved in research can draw upon to achieve a shared goal. This approach is influenced by grounded theory, with themes, questions and theories generated iteratively from qualitative data that is produced in collaboration with participants through workshop activities. It can also be used in mixed methodological approaches, where questions and themes generated with participants form the basis of quantitative surveys.

## Why might I want to use Engaged Capacity-building Workshops?

- Working together with participants as partners or co-researchers, this approach supports individuals, organisations and groups to self-organise. It can be used to help communities to create the interventions that they need to overcome problems and to thrive. Instead of feeling like they are 'under the microscope', participants can become more invested in the research.
- Engaged Capacity-building Workshops emphasise learning by doing, reflecting, observing and listening to those who experience and engage with the topic or problem under investigation.
- They are well suited to understanding complex issues or systems that involve a diverse range of different stakeholders with competing agendas. This approach can be useful for overcoming tensions, misunderstandings or conflicts between various groups or individuals, by encouraging participants to work together on shared problems and to understand one another's viewpoints.
- By listening to participants, understanding their stories, perspectives and priorities, researchers using this method can develop research questions which have the potential to yield further meaningful data and insight. Questions and themes generated collaboratively can also be used to inform the design of nuanced quantitative surveys.
- Engaged Capacity-building Workshops often draw on experimental, creative and playful ways of working to encourage problem solving, critical thinking and networking between diverse participants. They can support curiosity-driven, rather than expert-driven, theory-driven, or data-driven research.
- This approach is interested in understanding the big picture by investigating small details. Facilitated workshops can be used to identify and map the elements that are connected together to make up a complex system, as well as building a picture of the wider landscape in which these elements are embedded. They can be used to develop a framework to explain and communicate the workings of a system or community, so that ideas and solutions can be shared with others working on similar issues.

## Step by step guide to Engaged Capacity-building Workshops:

1. **Understand the wider landscape.** The first step is to build a picture of the landscape that shapes the system or problem that is of interest in the research, and involves:
   - Connecting with key stakeholders: speak to as many people working on or impacted by the issue, including community groups, local authorities, charities, national organisations or companies and members of the public. Listen carefully to their stories and try to understand the variety of perspectives that frame the topic under investigation.
   - Mapping stakeholder values and priorities: identify what the values are for each stakeholder group and where these might intersect. What are the core issues that need to be addressed or better understood?
   - SWOT activity to identify strengths (assets), weaknesses (barriers), opportunities, and threats (constraints) to solving the problem: What do stakeholders see as the current barriers and limitations, and how do they frame them? What needs to change, and what resources are needed to build capacity? What does transformation look like for those involved?
2. **Organise and facilitate workshops.** Facilitated workshops are an effective tool for bringing together diverse stakeholders, enabling safe opportunities to experiment and learn from failure. They can take place at all stages of the research and can be carried out as part of organised events, which might also include a programme of speakers. Ideally, they should involve practical activities that encourage participants to work together on a shared problem.

*Workshop activities could include collectively deciding on shared research questions or priorities, or a SWOT activity. They could also include creative prompts, such as building with Lego, clay modelling, drawing tasks and post-it note mapping exercises. These types of activities can encourage people to problem solve and discuss ideas in creative ways, and can generate rich data for further analysis.*

3. **Continue engaging beyond organised events.** Spending time with, listening and talking to key stakeholders is an ongoing process, before, in-between and after facilitated workshops, in informal conversations as well as structured interviews. The researcher may also go along with practical tasks and activities taking place within the wider stakeholder landscape, which might involve volunteering or observing the day-to-day work of an organisation or charity.

*Analysis takes place throughout the entire research process. Themes, questions and theories are developed iteratively by moving between the big picture and the detailed specifics. The researcher's role is to understand where there are contradictions, pressure points and frictions, and to identify ways of moving beyond these tensions. As analysis progresses it can be useful to go back and 'sense check' – testing out theories or interpretations that the researcher has developed with participants.*

4. **Make sure it's collaboration: share outputs with stakeholders and seek their feedback**. Any written outputs that the researcher produces should be shared with participants to give them the opportunity to make comments and offer alternative perspectives, although they are not required to do so. Where opinions differ, the text is altered to reflect that there are multiple viewpoints or interpretations. While Engaged Capacity-building Workshops leave the researcher with clear data to take away and disseminate, research participants should get something in return as well. Depending on the social values and aims of organisations involved, researchers may also provide advice on how to practically meet the needs of their community. Community members who took part in workshops may appreciate a voucher or other forms of help to access goods or services.

*There are specific approaches for addressing the ethical issues involved in doing this form of research. With regard to using the data derived from Engaged Capacity-building Workshops, a negotiated ethics approach can work well. This involves being clear about how you would like to use the data, discussing anonymity with groups and participants in advance and how they would like you to handle this, and offering a right of reply to written reports and papers before they are made public.*

*Workshop activity in the FareShare Academic in Residence project*

## Example of Engaged Capacity-building Workshops in social science research

**FareShare Academic in Residence**

**Researcher: Dr Megan Blake, The University of Sheffield**

Over several years I have been working with a range of organisations, local authorities and communities to consider how to address the 'wicked' problem – a problem that is difficult to solve, and where there is no single solution - of household food insecurity. For example, in 2018 I secured an Impact Award funded through the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) to be the Academic in Residence with FareShare UK, a national network of charitable food redistributors, who supply good quality surplus food to frontline charities and community groups. This collaboration emerged from a SWOT workshop that I organised. FareShare were involved in this workshop as part of a collaborative project with Doncaster Council that sought to understand how healthy foodscapes can be enhanced in low-income areas by community and council partnerships.

Given that they are a charity organisation, a key motivator for FareShare was to understand what social value there is in distributing surplus food and how they might capture this impact. Over the year that I was embedded within their organisation I ran a number of workshops with them as well as with their commercial partners to understand what they saw social value as meaning and to consider what they as an organisation could do to enhance that. In one workshop, groups drew pictures to illustrate the social value of food, which included creating community connections between people, exposing people to unusual foods, reducing stress around food access, and increasing the presence of healthier food options in the local foodscape. In another workshop we used Lego and playdough to consider how bringing these elements together can facilitate community resilience. One of the key things to emerge was an awareness of the diversity of food support that is offered by the organisations that they serve and that FareShare employees can help these organisations to learn from the good practice of each other.

Engaged Capacity-building Workshops also helped FareShare to understand that different organisations have different food needs depending on how they use the food. This shifted FareShare's focus from simply providing food in a manner that is safe to also considering how food support can help tackle loneliness, for example. As a result of this workshop process FareShare has developed collaborations with other national charities that it would not have considered as relevant to its mission previously. This increased understanding led FareShare to identify new ways of identifying and measuring their impact, which involved redesigning the way that they capture data about those organisations who access food through their distribution channels.

While the initial period of intensive engagement lasted a year, I remain involved with the work that FareShare is doing around the social impact of surplus food. Recently, for example, I collaborated with members of their impact and data teams in a series of weekly workshops that they designed and organised using virtual white boards and post-it notes. Together we reviewed and updated how they understand their data needs with regard to reporting the social impact of food distribution.

Engaged Capacity-building Workshops are an important part of the research process from question identification through to project completion. Through carrying out these workshops my research network has expanded, which has also meant that a number of other collaborative projects have emerged from this work with an ever-increasing circle of academic and non-academic partners. Working in this way also is very rewarding because I can see real change happening as a result of my involvement which makes a difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

*Workshop activity in the FareShare Academic in Residence project*

### Where else could Engaged Capacity-building Workshops be used?

This approach is useful for conducting research on difficult social challenges, particularly those that involve multiple stakeholders and complex systems. Engaged Capacity-building Workshops can be useful in building trust and developing stronger connections between groups and individuals, such as those who play different roles in relation to a particular service, resource, community or product. This could include the range of community, charities, public sector groups and businesses involved in the food system, as in the example above, but equally it could also apply to other complex systems such as those related to health, social care, or planning. Using workshops as a research method works well with diverse groups as well as within a single organisation to help tease out what the motivations, shared values, processes and power dynamics might be that are linked to the problem under consideration. While the workshops can be conducted with very large groups, dividing them into smaller groups of 8-12 people gives participants the opportunity to think deeply and creatively.

### Top tips

1. Remember that you are not the expert. See yourself as a partner in the research who is there to learn. Be aware of your own assumptions, and constantly question them.
2. Listen actively, let participants guide you, and be flexible. If something is not working, be open to trying something different.
3. It is normal to feel a little out of control or afraid of places that are unfamiliar. When you can engage with people and listen, those places become quite safe.
4. Pay attention to things that feel a little uncomfortable or odd, as these are often important moments.

## Further reading

- Feeding Affordances and Decent Helpings: Working Together to Reduce Food Poverty and Improve Public Health.
- Formality and friendship: Research ethics review and participatory action research.
- Workshops - collaborative arena for generative research.

**To reference:** Blake, M., Pottinger, L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Engaged Capacity-building Workshops' 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.