



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.



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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.

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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.



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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.

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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.

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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.



- 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.

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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

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