1   Biographical Interviews and Imagined Futures Essay Writing: Users of Two Methods

2   in Conversation.

3

4   **Abstract**: This article reports on a conversation between users of two research

5   methods, life history interviews and imagined futures essay writing. A dialogue form

6   is used to discuss these methods and their potential to be combined. The value of

7   comparing research methods is discussed, and then the two methods are described

8   and points of connection and contrast are explored. Although one method

9   emphasises looking back while the other looks forward, the two have much in

10   common, including the exercise of imagination, and discussion of individual agency

11   and structural constraint. Both involve the construction of narratives that help

12   understanding of people's lives as individual trajectories set in broader social and

13   historical contexts. The two methods are quite different but complementary, and

14   possibilities for their combination in one project are identified. The article ends by

15   reflecting on the benefits and drawbacks of using dialogue to consider how research

16   methods sit alongside each other.

17

18   Introduction

19   Ways of presenting approaches to research and their advantages and limitations

20   may take a variety of forms, including conversational forms. The book-length

21   'trialogue' about objectivity and subjectivity in social research engaged in by

22   Letherby, Scott and Williams (2013) allowed them to compare and contrast rival

23   perspectives and to explore the potential for them to be synthesised; the participants

24   also reported being taken on a journey from their different starting places to new

25   vantage points. Less ambitious dialogues between proponents of particular

26   standpoints similarly have potential to promote constructive discussion of

27   researchers' trajectories and shifting horizons around methodological repertoires.

28   Homan and Bulmer's (1982) dialogue about covert research is a good example of

29   how the structured exchange of ideas and points of view can be fruitful, even if

30   complete consensus is not reached. Becker and Geer's (1957) comparison of

31   participant observation and interviews, the response to this by Trow (1957) and the

32   initiating authors' rejoinder (Becker and Geer 1958) also has a dialogue form, albeit

33   not one originally intended. Such exchanges are by no means bound to pit one

34   approach against another in adversarial fashion, and it is interesting to note that

35   Becker went on to warn against the 'very strong propensity of methodologists to

36   preach a "right way" to do things' (1971: 4). These expressions of methodological

37   pluralism have continuing relevance as 'sectarian methodological fights' (Lamont and

38   Swidler 2014: 153) make an unwelcome reappearance.

39

40   In addition to promoting understanding of the foundations of different methodological

41   approaches, dialogues between practitioners have the potential to facilitate the

42   development and adoption of innovations by exploring the feasibility of novel

43   combinations of methods. Certain combinations of methods have become familiar

44   with the advent of mixed methods research, for example surveys and interviews

45   (Cresswell 2003: ch.11), but more adventurous mixed methods designs are being

46   pursued, such as bringing together ethnography and experiments (Nettle 2015), or

47   citizens' juries and surveys (Thompson *et al.* 2015). Recognising that many such

48   fruitful pairings may exist, funding was secured to bring together a range of

49   practitioners of different but potentially complementary methods in a project entitled

50   'When methods meet'. This article is the outcome of one of these conversations

which brought together users of biographical interviews and imagined futures essay

writing. These two methods were selected because they do not have a history of

being combined but were adjudged to have the potential to generate insights and

reflection as their differences and their complementarity are explored. The unfolding

conversation reveals how researchers have distinctive, evolving relationships to the

methods that they use, as they feel their way towards workable practices, and

become more adept practitioners of the method with experience. In places the

conversation takes on some of the qualities of an interview, echoing the description

of interviews as 'a conversation with a purpose' (Burgess 1984: 54) but in this case

with both participants adopting the interviewer role. There are also confessional

elements to the conversation, reflecting perhaps the fact that the participants knew

each other.

The two methods described

A: There is more than one way of doing biographical interviewing, or life history

interviewing; it is a broad church, with room for several different approaches. I tend

to use life history interviews to look at how people understand and behave in the

political world as they see it. In general terms, the method of life history interviewing

focusses on how people tell stories about their lives. It is a broad church because

some people think that you need to start at the beginning and go to the end; others

focus on a very specific time period in people's lives. I tend to go broadly over the

whole life but focus on moments of political importance. There is again a variety of

views about how structured the questions are, or even whether you should have

questions at all. Speaking for myself, I always have semi-structured questions

available. It is not necessary that you have to follow them mechanically and you

76 certainly do not have to follow them in order or replicate precise wording, but I like to

77 have a pretty good idea about where I want to go. But there are some people who

78 really just ask one question and let it run from there.

79 B: So this could be simply inviting someone to "Tell me about your life". Howard

80 Becker (2014) recalled occasions when all that it had been necessary for the

81 interviewer to ask was "How did you get to be here and what happened next?", and

82 the person spoke about their life for an hour or more, simply with that prompt.

83 A: The funny thing is I originally trained in moral psychology and moral development

84 where it was very, very rigorous methodological training about what you could ask,

85 how far out you could deviate from that, so when I went to do my PhD I swung the

86 opposite way and opened interviews with very general questions such as, 'tell me

87 about your life'. Soon I found that did not really work for me because people needed

88 guidance about what was wanted in the interview. They have had many experiences,

89 far too many to be covered in one conversation, so for me it has always been a

90 question of finding the right balance given what it is that you are interested in, but

91 really focussing on the stories that somebody tells about their life and trying to place

92 that biography into the wider context of verifiable, historical events.

93 B: The method that I am more used to working with is imagined futures essay writing

94 where people, generally children or young people, are asked to imagine that they are

95 older and telling somebody about what has happened in their lives. So the focus is

96 on what they are anticipating being the main things in their lives that they have yet to

97 have. It has been used quite often around young people leaving education and

98 entering the labour market, referred to as the transition from school to work. Ray

99 Pahl (1978) used this method as part of his study of the Isle of Sheppey which was

100 written up as *Divisions of Labour* (Pahl 1984), following Thelma Veness's (1962) *The*

School Leavers, and Jennifer Williams asking young people in Sparkbrook to write about 'My life from leaving school till retirement' (Rex and Moore 1974, p. 233). Lesley Gow and Andrew McPherson's Scottish school leavers were similarly asked, amongst other things, to write about 'young persons' hopes and fears about the social world that awaits them' (1980, p. 5). The method has been used in other contexts too, so it can be younger children aged 11 talking about what they think their life will be like when they are 25. Jane Elliott (2010) has written about that, and the method has also been used in classroom work with children on the autistic spectrum (Ellis 2016). And there is no reason why it could not be used in other contexts. So although I am now in my fifties I might well be asked how I imagine my future and the process of ageing. But it is a little different to what you are describing because it is a task that is given, an instruction to write an essay about what sorts of things someone thinks that in the future they will be telling people about what has happened in their life, something that is currently unknown. Furthermore, once the task has been set the essay writers are on their own, whereas interviews are interactive, both in terms of what interviewers say in response to what they are being told, and in terms of nods, facial expressions and other elements of body language.

Imagination in perceptions of the future and of the past

A: We can come back to those differences, but already we can see some commonality between the two methods. Part of what I do is try to look at how people reimagine their pasts as well, and that can lead people to regard their present circumstances as having been at one time one of several possible alternatives. So it is really about a reimagining of the past, but also of course in terms of the political

125   elements of people's trajectories it does very much also map onto reimagining a

126   different kind of future as well.

127   B: In thinking about imagining our futures we are necessarily talking about different

128   things that might happen, all sorts of areas for different routes to be followed and

129   unpredictability. Having read your book on how imagination is an integral part of

130   narratives (Author A 2014) I now appreciate that there is a closer affiliation between

131   the two methods because people are looking back at their lives and thinking about

132   not only what did happen but also what might have happened, and that involves an

133   act of imagination.

134   A: That is absolutely right, and one of the points I try to make in the beginning of the

135   book is what kind of imagination I am talking about. Because imagination is often

136   talked about as if it is just fanciful and does not bear a lot of connection to reason

137   and indeed to reality. For me, imagination is something very different than this.

138   Sartre uses the term 'the not yet real' to indicate something that has not happened,

139   but which could. It is, he argues, the basis of our freedom, for without the ability to

140   see life not only as it is, but as it might be, we are reduced to accepting the status

141   quo. Of course there is always an element of fate, and clearly we cannot simply

142   reimagine a future for ourselves and have it magically unfold before us. It takes,

143   rather, a combination of imagination – and with this, agency – and also the good

144   fortune to have the wind blowing at your back. I agree with David Hume, who once

145   said "Nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible"; for me it is completely mistaken

146   to dismiss people's imagination of their lives as unrealistic.

147   B: In the essays one of the things that comes up as an issue when analysing them is

148   how 'realistic' they are, and how fanciful or fantastic. Williams declares her

149   participants' aspirations about their future housing 'completely unrealistic' (Rex and

Moore 1974, p. 251) although their anticipated jobs were more in line with what she felt to be plausible. Pahl's marginal notes on the 1978 essays that are archived at the University of Essex indicate that he detected some degree of fantasy, although in his article about the essays he was keen to cast doubt on the idea then popular that young people were routinely duped by magazines and other elements of popular culture that peddled romantic ideals. Of course, some accounts do envisage their authors becoming celebrities or millionaires, but although not all will do so, the fact that one or more may do so presents a challenge to researchers undertaking the analysis. Ambition can be a real enough phenomenon even if the odds are stacked against the realisation of that ambition, of those hoped-for dreams. And one gets an insight into how the authors of the essays think, how they understand the processes by which life unfolds, for example by gaining employment through the operation of family networks. Pahl's later endorsement of the statement that in the labour market 'it's not what you know… but who you know"' (1984, p. 298) indicates that this idea, at least, was not regarded as fanciful. Of course, as Veness (1962) points out, a good deal depends on whether the material being analysed is understood by the researcher as having captured ambition, aspiration or expectation, as these are not interchangeable concepts; aspiration allows more scope than expectation does for imagining a life quite different to that of one's parents, for example. Some researchers investigating young people's views of the future have even asked them to identify their 'phantasy job' (Himmelweit *et al.* 1952, p. 166), which obviously allows freer rein to the exercise of imagination than the instruction to stay realistic.

A: One thing which we have not touched on yet is that how and what we imagine always stems from our own viewpoint. Similar to Nagel's often quoted phrase 'there is no view from nowhere', Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis argue that the

175 imagination, like all knowledge, is 'situated'. What can be imagined from a particular

176 location is integrally tied to what can be known, and Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis

177 demand that we 'account for the social positioning of the social agent' (2002, p. 321).

178 Applying this concept to the research done on Sheppey, the young people imagined

179 future lives based on what their lives at the time allowed them to see. Even if they

180 produced fantasy visions, these were the fantasies of a teenager living on Sheppey

181 in the 1970s, which might well be very different from the fantasies of current

182 teenagers living in the same place. What is and is not 'fanciful' is not always as

183 black and white as we might assume. The fact that we can imagine something is, in

184 and of itself, an indicator that it is a thread which is connected to life as we currently

185 see it.

186 B: Imagination also has relevance to what people say about the role of chance in

187 their lives as they unfold. An account of a life may well include not only what

188 happened but some effort to explain why these things happened.

189 A: Yes, and one of our challenges is to remember that what is now a 'present reality'

190 was in the past only one of a number of alternative futures which could have panned

191 out. And so the explanations of how we have reached this present are invariably

192 connected to our imaginations, as we return to a past and reconstruct in our mind's

193 eye the other paths which life might have taken.

194 B: As the young people are talking about what they think might happen in their lives

195 there are all sorts of sudden changes, which reminds me of the game of snakes and

196 ladders whereby you are playing, you have the board and you throw the dice and

197 you land on one square and suddenly you are up two rows on the board and in some

198 of the essays an example of a ladder would be, 'I was offered this fantastic job'. But

199 in these essays there are also bad things that happen in people's lives and that

200 might be, 'and then out of nowhere illness struck my family', the sort of thing that is

201 associated with what Michael Bury calls 'biographical disruption' (1997, p. 124ff).

202 These narratives are full of points at which people announce, 'and then this

203 happened', and that is interesting, the way in which these young people write about

204 them, because they do just come out of nowhere in the story, there is no build up to

205 it, they appear as chance developments, rather than things for which much of an

206 explanation is given. Do you get the equivalent in your method?

207 A: Well of course fate does play a role in life trajectories, and this is often

208 acknowledged. But equally, people comment on the fact that something which they

209 once felt had 'come out of the blue' (as it were) was, on reflection, perhaps not so

210 surprising. This is related to the narrative imagination being not only critical in

211 imagining our futures, but equally powerful when applied to retrospectively making

212 sense of our pasts, and how we have arrived at this particular present. The metaphor

213 of snakes and ladders is applicable here, not so much in the sense that something

214 comes like a bolt of lightning – though of course some life changes do – but more in

215 the sense that the game is based on taking a series of steps. One travels towards a

216 ladder, or a snake, one step at a time, and those steps are a person's everyday life.

217 So yes, fate does intervene, but it interacts with and does not eliminate human

218 agency.

219 B: It is like the roll of the dice in a game, and if we think about where the elements of

220 people's stories come from, perhaps all those games that we play as children feed

221 into this process of how we make sense of our lives, including the role of chance and

222 the related idea of probability or likelihood. The sequence of squares on a board

223 suggests that there is a standard, normal rate of progression that can be speeded up

224 by a ladder or slowed down by a snake, so this helps to highlight the point made

225   about the experience of time not always being smooth and linear. There are turning

226   points where trajectories change, sometimes dramatically.

227   A: For me, I have always been very taken with the Aldous Huxley quote, 'Experience

228   is not what happens to a man. It is what a man does with what happens to him'

229   (Huxley 1932, p. 5). The people who tend to be part of my studies are working within

230   very well-thought-out political frameworks. Perhaps I do not spend enough time

231   talking with them about fate. What is always clear for me is that as political activists,

232   they think strategically about the present, and about how best to get from here to a

233   hoped for imagined future. The guiding framework for my research is one which

234   allows for the role of fate, but which nonetheless over time moves in a more or less

235   predictable way.

236   B: I suppose that social theorists interested in the issue of structure and agency

237   might find both our methods having a tendency to encourage accounts of lives that

238   emphasise individual agency. Not only is the invitation to an individual to tell the

239   story of his or her life likely to encourage narratives that frame sequences of events

240   in terms of that person's individual intentions and actions (rather than these things

241   being understood as the working out of structural forces), it is also the case that

242   narrators will be mindful of the disapproval that awaits narrators whose stories blame

243   other people or circumstances for what has happened in their lives. Sympathetic

244   audiences are difficult to find for hard-luck stories in which the individuals appear to

245   bear no responsibility for the negative outcomes that befall them, however much this

246   may fit with structural analyses of macro-level forces over which an individual can

247   exercise very little control.

248   This point about the predisposition of narrators to agency rather than structure in

249   their accounts is somewhat at odds with researchers who take people's family

250 background to be the reference point for what they might realistically achieve.

251 Williams's comment that she found her participants' housing aspirations unrealistic

252 implies that more of the young people were expected to remain living in Sparkbrook

253 than they themselves envisaged; the migration from inner-city Birmingham to the

254 countryside or the seaside about which they wrote was treated as 'unobtainable by

255 the majority' (Rex and Moore 1974, p. 251), even though the study was conducted in

256 a period when upward social mobility over generations was the norm. Younger

257 generations to-day are facing the prospect of being worse off than their parents, but

258 the 1960's was a very different context to this. So this suggests that while narrators

259 may overestimate agency and underestimate structure, for researchers the danger

260 may lie in underestimating the power of people to change their situation.

261

262 **The usefulness of methods: contextualised understandings of the social world**

263 B: If someone asked you about your method, 'What is it that you are trying to get at

264 in using this method?', would it be something along the lines of what Elliott has said

265 about these imagined futures essays, which is that they provide insights into

266 people's understandings of the social world and their place within it (Elliott 2010, p.

267 1082)? In other words, are these essays a way of getting to see the world from the

268 point of view of the people that we are asking to write essays, or in your case be

269 interviewed?

270 A: That is a quote that could absolutely be said to describe my work as well. I think

271 that it is a wonderful prism from which to try to understand wider social questions.

272 But I am never personally interested in an individual life just as an individual life.

273 I took a photograph in New York City in about 2003 that conveys this message about

274 individual things being part of a wider whole. I was standing at a crosswalk. And at

275 the base of a lamppost, it is made up of lots of small tiles, and this is a few blocks

276 from the World Trade Centre (where the 9/11 attacks happened), and I was really

277 taken with this, because it was very small and very subtle and probably was

278 unnoticed by many people and yet someone made a huge effort to create it. And

279 reflecting on the nuts and bolts of research methods, what is powerful to me is the

280 shifting lens of perspective. The many small, discrete pieces of different colours and

281 different shapes, are very irregular and some of them are mirrors and some of them

282 are just black. Yet if you stand back from it you can actually see this writing, "A

283 Nation Once Again". It represented the effort to restore national unity in the wake of

284

285 INSERT PHOTO ABOUT HERE (SUGGESTED BY REFEREE 2)

286

287 the 2001 attacks. I am interested in politics and everyday life, but I am also

288 interested in how the small pieces come together to give you a wider picture.

289 B: And just four words can convey so much. One of the things that this ties in with is

290 your part in that story makes sense too, and I suppose in your interviews you find

291 people bringing out photographs, or bringing out little objects and saying, 'here is my

292 bit of the Berlin Wall', or whatever it is, and explaining how this has significance by

293 placing it in its proper context.

294 A: That is absolutely right and one of the things that is difficult is, you do not always

295 know when you first see something what the message is there. Sometimes the wider

296 significance takes time to become apparent, and that is one reason why some

297 people conduct life history interviews by going back to respondents several times, so

298 that they can clarify points that have come up in an earlier interview, and that the

299 interviewer has reflected (having undertaken an initial analysis of the material)

300 warrants further discussion.

301 B: We have found that with the essays, sometimes elements of what is written

302 makes sense only when people with 'local knowledge' of the area have pointed it out

303 to us. For example, on Sheppey there is an established tradition of people building

304 their own houses, and once this had been pointed out to us the essays that had their

305 authors doing this could be understood in this context. It is worth mentioning here

306 that this is an advantage that collecting essays from children or young people in one

307 area has over essays solicited from participants in a national cohort such as the

308 National Child Development Study that was a random sample drawn from across

309 Britain that Elliott (2010) studied. So there are disadvantages as well as benefits to

310 representative samples.

311 A: My research has always tended to be less about place and more about a specific

312 political trajectory (be that in the United States, East Germany, South Africa or

313 Britain). What this means in terms of who I select as participants is that my decisions

314 are very purposeful, in other words person X meets these various criteria, and so I

315 will invite them to be part of this study. I can learn about people through a wide range

316 of sources, including perhaps most helpfully fellow activists, but also other channels

317 such as social media, archives and sources of news. My appeal to someone to

318 participate in my research is always a personal one built upon the particulars of their

319 lives.

320 B: And in this context I am thinking perhaps one difference between our methods is

321 that we have looked at these essays and we are talking about each time collecting

322 over one hundred, enough to be able to put some figures onto some things and to

323 say that in 1978 this many of the essay writers talked about going to university or

324 getting married and in 2009-10 this many did, and although they are not

325 representative statistics, because it is not a representative sample, it is something

326 that you can quantify (Author B and another 2012; Author B *et al*. 2012). If everybody

327 is telling you such distinctive individual stories, it is probably much harder for you to

328 see any way in which numbers might come into your analysis.

329 A: Trying to understand the wide range of things that I have heard in terms of

330 numbers actually depletes it of what really gives it its strength. It is not that you could

331 not do it, I just do not think that would be the best way to do it. That is not only

332 because my research involves working with smaller numbers than those you have

333 worked with, though that would be a further reason for me not to quantify.

334 B: And do you think that looking for data about equivalent variables (such as about

335 educational history or marital status) in everybody's story would be going beyond

336 what is warranted in biographical interviews?

337 A: It is important that people feel able to express themselves in terms that make

338 sense to them, are real to them. But getting at this does require active involvement

339 by the researcher. What is true is that any situation that I would go into to interview

340 people, I would have spent a lot of time educating myself about the wider historical

341 context. I do not want people to feel that I have just come in and have not taken the

342 time to do my homework, as it were.

343 B: And I can imagine that in biographical interviews there would be the same

344 challenge as we found with the imagined futures essays, that what people say or

345 write does not always give enough detail to be sure how to classify them. For

346 example, we were interested in young people's anticipation of being geographically

347 mobile, but on the basis of what they wrote it was not always clear when people

348   mentioned another place whether they were imagining going there to live and work

349   or simply as visitors.

350   But whether or not we quantify, these are both methods that give us a window onto

351   how people think, and that can be surprising. An example of that from the essays

352   was the way that some of them talked about age. This made me very aware that

353   sixteen-year-olds have a very different view of what it is like to be my age. One

354   young person was giving their narrative of what they imagined would be going to

355   happen in their lives, and the gist of what was written was 'Then I reached fifty and I

356   was old and my life was over and I went into an old folks' home', and as I read that

357   essay I thought 'this is wrong on so many levels!' But it also reminded me that the

358   world does look very different when you are sixteen. A sixteen year old would need

359   to step outside of their immediate circumstances to realise that life is not over when

360   you reach fifty, in order to get a better understanding of this thing that is for them

361   really in the distance. When people ask, 'what's the practical value of getting young

362   people to write their imagined futures?', my answer would be that it reminds us that

363   the world looks very different to sixteen-year-olds than it does to fifty-somethings. I

364   would also say that they remind us that the world looks very different to young men

365   and young women, which is consistent with other research showing that young

366   people's views of the future are gendered (Brannen and Nilsen 2002). What would

367   your answer be to, what's the practical value?

368   A: One of the things I am very interested in is intergenerational communication. This

369   is not only how we look at our future selves and also people who are older than us

370   but how we integrate our ideas of who we have been, as well. There is a huge

371   strength to be drawn from this intergenerational communication. It is not just about

372   getting a sense of how people see and understand the political world but it is also

373   getting a sense of history and a sense of future, cross-generational binding but also

374   through time, so to me that is a deeply hopeful trajectory. It is about the two-way

375   movement of time.

376   B: An interesting counter to the sixteen-year-olds regarding people of fifty as 'old' is

377   the finding by oral historians that their interviewees 'almost unanimously did not think

378   of themselves as old', and this was a group with ages ranged between 58 and 86!

379   One eighty-year-old woman in that study remarked 'Children probably think I'm an

380   old lady, and when you're forty anyone of eighty is old' (Thompson *et al*. 1991, pp.

381   108, 110). Older people can help younger people to get a different sense of

382   perspective, and of course it is also important that older people are reminded about

383   what it was like to be young.

384   A: I am not sure I entirely agree with that argument. When there is a powerful

385   negative stereotype about a group, in this case old people, it is not surprising that

386   when someone 'joins' this group by the sheer fact of ageing, that they distance

387   themselves from the targeted group. Thus exclamations by my nearly 90 year old

388   mother-in-law about 'old people' – from whom she clearly distanced herself – should

389   not be taken at face value. I once wrote an article on this called ' (title removed as

390   part of anonymization)' (Author A 1999). PLEASE ADD A BIT MORE HERE AS PER

391   REFEREE 3

392

393   **Bringing the two methods together**

394   B: Going back to the issue of the difference of format that was mentioned earlier, the

395   question of intended audiences is quite revealing. On the face of it biographical

396   interviews involve the interviewer being presented with a narrative by an interviewee,

397   whereas the audience for imagined futures essay writers is less clear. Young people

398 imagining themselves older and telling the story of their lives to a future audience is

399 an obvious fiction required simply to facilitate the writing process, but while the reality

400 of writing for the researcher is evident enough, the researcher is only an intermediary

401 and wider audiences may be envisaged.

402 A: But here, too, there are similarities. Yes it's true that at one level the interviewer is

403 the obvious audience for the tale being told. But what has become clear many times

404 for me is that I am not the only, and often not even the most important audience.

405 Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson (2004) use the term 'ghostly audiences' to

406 indicate the impact of those who are not physically present and yet to whom, and

407 sometimes about whom, the story is being told. With elaborated life histories,

408 especially when people are looking back over a long life, they may well be

409 recounting a version of the life they have lived for posterity's sake. On one occasion

410 when I had completed a life history over the course of several years with one

411 woman, we stood in her home, she with the hundreds of pages of transcripts from

412 our conversations in her hands. "These" she told me, "are the answers to the

413 questions my own daughter never asked me." I was not surprised to learn later that

414 she had made copies of all the transcripts and given them to her children and their

415 children. It is not far fetched, I believe, to think that they were very much part of her

416 imagined audience as she told me the stories of her long and rich life.

417 B: Gow and McPherson had one writer use the formulation 'Tell them from me'

418 (1980, p. 12), and discussed various categories of people who could have been

419 'them': not only the researcher, but teachers, educational support services, family

420 members, and peers. In one way the exercise may be understood as people

421 speaking to themselves, with the account being a record of a process of reflection

422 that may not have been undertaken previously. Their comment that 'had the

423   accounts been collected in some other way… a different picture might have

424   emerged' is followed by recognition that the essay form leaves them 'frustrated on

425   occasion, wishing to probe more, to seek elaboration' (1980, p. 12). This is obviously

426   something that interviews allow. However, from my own experience of interviewing, I

427   am aware that I as an interviewer have not always given interviewees enough space

428   to develop their narratives at their own pace and in their preferred direction, which is

429   what the essay format is good at allowing.

430   A related question raised by these investigations of people's narratives of their lives

431   is where their aspirations come from. Some early research was framed in terms of

432   the influences of home and school on aspirations, and speculated that the influence

433   of mothers may be greater than that of fathers. Gow and McPherson's comment that

434   our view of the world 'is shaped in many ways by the relatively few people we meet

435   and know' (1980, p. 6) reinforces these earlier foci, which make no

436   acknowledgement of role models in wider popular culture. Celebrity culture was a

437   prominent theme of the Sheppey re-study (Author B *et al*. 2012). Nor should we

438   overlook historical figures. The community partner we work with on Sheppey (which

439   is quite a deprived context, it is not an affluent area), Jenny Hurkett, really wants

440   local young people to be proud of where they come from. Sheppey was a base of the

441   early aeroplane pioneers. Claude Brabazon responded to sceptics who said 'Pigs

442   might fly' by taking a pig with him on a flight, and there is photographic evidence of

443   this https://aviationhumor.net/claude-moore-brabazon-the-man-who-proved-that-

444   pigs-can-fly/ . So the first pig to fly was on Sheppey, and this is an inspiring story

445   about aspiration, ambition, and hope.

446   A: There is a challenge in analysing the material generated through interviews

447   because we cannot be sure that we have understood correctly what it is that they are

448 trying to convey. We try to listen and we do our best, but we can only access part of

449 someone's experience, and we do not necessarily know what we are not hearing.

450 Sometimes you will not be able to hear what people are actually trying to say to you

451 because it is so far from things in your own experience to which you can connect it.

452 One of the things about the student population that I teach is that they tend to come

453 from very socially-excluded, marginalised places and they have a wealth of

454 experience of things which are far away from the things that I grew up with and

455 indeed that I have in my life. But if they realise that these life stories are of value

456 themselves, and they bring them into the classroom, and those are the materials that

457 we work with and teach with, it is a potential space of real excitement when they

458 realise that their experiences and their stories that they come into the classroom with

459 really matter, that they can count as something, and these experiences can form a

460 very fertile basis from which to launch into their studies.

461 B: A further challenge about how people express themselves that we encountered is

462 that times move on, and how material was collected in the past does not necessarily

463 suit the current generation. We were asking in 2009-10 young people to write an

464 essay and they said, 'what, on paper, with a pen? Why don't we talk to the camera,

465 why don't we do Big Brother style, why are you so locked into old technology?'

466 Perhaps researchers need to be more imaginative about the ways in which imagined

467 futures essays are collected.

468 A: In a departmental meeting recently we were talking about our students and their

469 actual futures. I suggested that possibly in the first term when they arrived there they

470 should write a short piece about the person they hoped to become as a result of

471 embarking on this trajectory.

B: So if they imagined their future three years on at the start of their degree and then at the end of their degree looked back on that period then actually what we have got is our two methods being used by the same people. So our two methods have the potential to be used together creatively. This can be the case even if participants in a piece of research about their views of their futures are not aware that they may be contacted later on in their lives by researchers interested to know how far their expectations have been realised (O'Connor and Goodwin 2012).

A: Yes, and I think that spending a concentrated period of time trying to think about imagining futures one can visualise a hoped for future but also a dreaded future. And so if we encourage our students and indeed ourselves to engage more in projecting their minds forward to imagine the lives they will want to look back on, the end result is more likely to be that we look back on a life or an experience that we find somehow approximating to satisfaction.

B: You have got a discussion in your book about 'blueprints for successful ageing', and if we return to what is the value of these methods, the more we do these types of activities, interview people about their lives, encourage them to think about the future, then that can be a real practical benefit, because it helps us to get our bearings more in what can otherwise seem like a bewildering field of uncertainty about the future. We can say ageing does not have to be something that is all necessarily negative and things to be anxious about. There are lots of blueprints for successful ageing. So these two methods speaking to each other, there is a little bit going on already but there is no reason why it cannot grow from this.

A: Yes, I think that there will be lots of fruitful ways to put them more into active conversation.

B: Well let's hope that this conversation continues.

Conclusion: an on-going conversation

Following the conversation the discussion has indeed continued, and broadened. Individually the participants have become aware of points of connection to wider debates, such as the earlier use of the imagery of 'snakes and ladders' to describe young people's transitions. In one of these publications the point is made that the imagery highlights not only individual biographies 'but also the way that the familiar social divisions and hierarchies of society are reproduced and repopulated' (MacDonald et al 2001: 5.8; see also Johnston *et al.* 2000). Separately, the point about research methods continuing to evolve has been nicely illustrated by research in which parents imagine their children's future rather than their own (Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2018). The review process of the article has also contributed to the on-going dialogue in various ways, including reference to the ethical challenges of returning in later life to follow up how imagined futures essay writers feel about how their lives have turned out, which is part of a larger debate about relationships with participants in longitudinal research, both quantitative and qualitative (Elliott 2013; Neale 2019). These debates include very real challenges relating to anonymization, but also the management of negative emotions such as disappointment and loss.

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Original submission 6354 words

Add funding acknowledgement to ESRC and SGSSS