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## ARTICLE

# Talking methods, talking about methods: Invoking the transformative potential of social methods through animals, objects and how-to instructions

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on "talking" methods, noting their wide application across the social sciences, and identifies potential spaces for innovation in this field. Drawing on interview material from the Methods for Change project, we argue that researching methods requires creative approaches to talk. With research methods as our focus, we draw on data collected from online interviews with 36 academics, which aimed to explore the transformative potential of social science research methods. We make three contributions. First, we consider challenges and potentials for *talking about methods* and communicating the transformative potential of social science methods to diverse audiences. Second, we elaborate on the detail of *doing talking methods*, identifying potential spaces for innovation. Third, we suggest there is value in supplementing interviews with creative techniques when talking with and about method. We highlight three such techniques used in our project as a means of eliciting conversation about the transformative potential of methods: how-to instructions; object interviewing; and methods as animals. The conceptual underpinnings, practical applications and obstacles encountered with each technique are discussed, including our own reflections on creative interviewing in a context where face-to-face research was restricted. In doing so, we respond to and advance recent debates about the need to talk more about the *doing* of talking methods. We argue that academics need to articulate why methods matter in creating change to global challenges, and that creative techniques can play a pivotal role.

## KEYWORDS

creative methods, interviews, metaphor and object elicitation, qualitative methods, research impact, societal transformation

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have a key role in developing creative and collaborative qualitative methodologies that enable researchers to attend to a range of social, political, and environmental phenomena. Human geography has become an interesting space for innovation and debate about method. With a long history in the discipline, participatory approaches that aim to “actively engage and benefit groups outside academia” continue to emphasise methods as “spaces for collaboration, negotiation and the co-construction of knowledge” (Wynne-Jones et al., 2015, p. 218). Shaped in part by the cultural turn and a resulting focus on everyday life, lived experience and difference, the past decade has also seen a proliferation of books, special issues and articles dedicated to “creative,” “ludic,” “sensory,” “non-representational,” “mundane” and “gentle” methods (Holmes & Hall, 2020; Pink, 2015; Pottinger, 2020; Vannini, 2015; Von Benzon et al., 2021; Woodyer, 2012). The crisis of representation that swept the social sciences in the 1990s, and the increasing prominence of non-representational theories in human geography, have challenged a long-standing focus on text-based methods and outputs. These shifts have given rise to an exciting array of methodological approaches which aim to witness the liveliness of the world as it unfolds (Barron, 2021a; Simpson, 2020), and to ‘destabilise traditional barriers between “expert researchers” and “researched communities”’ (Wynne-Jones et al., 2015, p. 218).

There is a risk, however, that ‘over-emphasising the prevalence and potential of such methodological “new-ness” could inhibit more detailed reflection on the mundane *doing* of methods in practice, and detract from considerations of how qualitative methods might be usefully applied in wider society (Hitchings & Latham, 2020, p. 390). In a recent review of writing conventions in human geography, Hitchings and Latham (2021, p. 395) note that an “eagerness to get past such prosaic matters [has] pushed method to the margins’, leading to an ‘ambivalent relationship with method.’ Despite growing interest in creative methods and methodologies, interviews, or ‘talking’ methods often remain the default. Moreover, while critical reflections on *doing* methods are infrequently considered in academic papers, this is particularly the case for interviews (Hitchings & Latham, 2020, p. 395). The “taken-for-granted quality of interviewing” has perhaps prohibited “an enriching discussion of how we [might] collectively “do” them better” (ibid).

Underpinning this paper is a commitment to deepening understanding of how we *do* methods, and how methods themselves can create change. We do not seek to restate the value of creative and qualitative methods per se. Rather, we highlight how creative talking techniques might be used to elicit information about methods and their transformative potential. We bring together literature on talking methods (Browne, 2016; Hitchings, 2012) with writing on social science research-policy praxis (Law, 2009; Müller & Kenney, 2014) to make three contributions. First, we consider the process of *talking about methods*, and the challenges and potentials for communicating the transformative potential of social science methods to diverse audiences. Second, we elaborate on the process of *doing talking methods*, unpicking some of the “messy” (Law, 2004) detail of carrying out interviews and identifying potential spaces for innovation in this field. Third, we suggest there is value in supplementing interviews with creative talking techniques, which are especially useful when talking about how to *do* method. In doing so, we respond to growing calls for a more critical engagement with the role of method in academic research (Hitchings & Latham, 2020), and we advance this call into new arenas by considering the roles our methods might play beyond the academy (Demeritt, 2000, 2010).

In this paper, we understand “method” as encompassing elements of methodology, research design and methodological techniques. This multifaceted definition extends common-place discussions of methods as the “tools through which we get data” (Vannini, 2015, p. 10). It recognises that in practice, the specific techniques of method (and discussions about them) overlap and extend into questions of the ethics, analysis, dissemination and writing of research; they are difficult to disentangle from the ‘broader research strategy for how that data is dealt with, alongside “big picture” questions of epistemology that orientate the research process as a whole’ (ibid). Method, then, is not merely a means to an end by which innovative research is conducted and meaningful findings derived. As Law (2009, p. 239) notes, methods are “practices that do not simply describe realities but also tend to enact these into being.” Method itself is a space for innovation; a realm of and for the transformation of ideas, practices and knowledge within and beyond the academy (Crang, 2003; Law & Urry, 2004).

This paper reflects critically on material and experiences from the Methods for Change project: a scoping study exploring the transformative potential of social science methods and how such methods are both understood and adopted within industry and business, third sector, activism and policy sectors. Making methods themselves the focus of research, we report on findings from online interviews with social scientists across a range of disciplines, each working on complex societal, political, economic and environmental challenges. These interviews drew on three creative talking techniques to elicit details about methods used, the transformative potentials inherent within these methods, and how/where else they

could be applied. Our aim was to build on these understandings to create collaboratively written methodological how-to guides aimed at audiences beyond academia.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the literature on social science and research-policy praxis is reviewed, followed by a discussion of talking methods in the social sciences and humanities, addressing the different ways talking methods have been enriched through creative approaches. Second, the Methods for Change project is introduced, before critically considering three elicitation techniques used in our interviews: how-to guides; object interviewing; and methods as animals. We discuss their utility for drawing out the salient characteristics of methodological approaches as emphasised by academic researchers and work through the tensions, hesitations and sticking points that arose in using these techniques. In “acknowledging, and staying with, messy ambivalences, sticky discomforts [and] falterings” (Chadwick, 2021 p. 4) in talk around method, we hope to contribute a more “candid” (Hitchings & Latham, 2021, p. 401) account of *doing* talking methods and of ‘the social occasion of the interview’ (Hitchings & Latham, 2020, p. 395). To this end, we highlight some challenges and potentials of communicating methods beyond academia, reflecting on the different ways of thinking and talking that these techniques can open in social science research more broadly. The paper concludes by arguing that academics need to talk more about why methods matter in creating change to the global challenges that demand our attention. Finally, we invite readers to reflect on their own methods, and how they might create or contribute to change.

## 2 | TALKING ABOUT (TALKING) METHODS

Social scientists are increasingly encouraged to articulate the value of social science beyond just providing mechanisms for critique of historical or current systems (Sinha, 2000). This connects with calls for “public” sociology and geography (cf. Burawoy, 2005; Krzywoszynska, et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021), which commits social scientists to articulating responsibilities and obligations to create change. There is growing recognition of the roles social sciences research concepts and empirical evidence can play in processes such as policymaking and evaluation, particularly around complex socio-environmental, economic and political challenges (Bailey, 2011; Government Social Research Unit, 2007). However, a decade on from these calls for increased use of social science within evidence-based policymaking, Royston and Foulds (2021) identify that social sciences and humanities research is still excluded in research and policy communities. While there is increased recognition of social science research and methods within new, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge collectives committed to creating transformative change (cf., Holmes et al., 2018; Waterton & Tsouvalis, 2015; Watson et al., 2020), qualitative methods are much less often utilised within these spaces (cf. Brockett et al., 2019).

To address this, social science researchers must move beyond communicating the outcomes of research to non-higher education stakeholders as evidence, to think creatively about articulating the values, utility and transformative potential ensconced in methods. It is widely acknowledged that many qualitative methods are shaped by interpersonal elements and have the capacity to alter and augment experience, rather than only reflecting or delineating it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Müller & Kenney, 2014). Methods can transform meaning making practices, relationships and connections, as well as creating the types of “unabashedly substantial, muscular, large-scale” impacts on policy that are idealised in academia (Horton, 2020, p. 1). If the transformative potential of social science is to be realised within non-academic policy, third sector and business spaces, it is important to recognise that change takes place at a variety of scales, temporalities and intensities. Moreover, researchers need to know how to talk about how concepts, empirical findings and methods each play a role in achieving such impacts, and to communicate why *methods themselves* matter for understanding, analysing and creating change on important societal issues (Brockett et al., 2019; Crang, 2003; Phoenix et al., 2019). Interview methods are one such space for potential adoption and innovation.

Semi-structured and structured interviews are perhaps the most widely used methods across the social sciences, although recent emphasis on novel, creative approaches has prompted some to question the suitability of talking methods for researching social phenomena. Researchers from various theoretical traditions have challenged the spoken word as the most credible means of understanding individuals’ practices and wider social processes (Latham, 2003). This has been prompted by arguments emerging in the 1980s against the perceived tyranny of ‘representation’ across the social sciences (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000), with longer trajectories of thought that extend to the foundations of ethnographic observations as a process for uncovering meaning (see Crang & Cook, 2007). Those working with non-representational theories, with their focus on practice and performativity, for instance, have criticised social science methodologies for being timid and overly wordy (Vannini, 2015). From this perspective, interviews might be

understood to “happen after the fact” in that “they can only ever provide an unsatisfactorily washed-out account of what previously took place” (Hitchings, 2012, p. 61).

For Burrell (2014, p. 137), however, interviews are always more than “word experiences” because “the emplacement and mechanisms of interviews” mean they necessarily impact on, and are impacted by, “home surroundings, body language, the mundane realities of tea drinking, bathroom using and recorder organising, and such like.” Burrell highlights the multidimensional quality of the spoken word in interviews, noting “the same voice that can report a tidy, rehearsed ... narrative can also be the voice which breaks off to speak about in-the-moment concerns” (Burrell, 2014, p. 137). Hitchings (2012) is similarly optimistic about interview methods, and argues it is important to allow time for participants to make sense of and talk around their practices, offering different understandings.

Nevertheless, critiques of interview methods have resulted in experimentation and innovation through introducing creative and participatory techniques, such as object-oriented interviewing (Holmes, 2020; Owen, 2021; Woodward, 2019), sketching (Bagnoli, 2009; Buse et al., 2020), walking (Warren, 2017), photographic, mapping and collage methods (Barron, 2021a; Mannay, 2010), and by incorporating greater flexibility into the interview process. In this way, interviews have been enlivened by a variety of embodied, visual, sensory and participatory engagements and activities, carried out while talking, or introduced to elicit different types of talk (Hitchings & Latham, 2020).

Social scientists are also experimenting with creative lines of questioning, which, though predominantly wordy in nature, require creative forms of thinking and draw on imagination and metaphor. In research about the emotions attached to mortgage repayments, Cook et al. (2009, p. 135) asked participants: “if your mortgage were an animal, what would it be?” Here, the authors aimed to generate “insight into how [participants] use their mortgage” (p. 138), given “the difficulty sometimes reported by consumers in describing ongoing or extended consumption experiences” (p. 139). Similar ‘projective’ techniques (Donoghue, 2000) have been used elsewhere in consumer research, where thinking through metaphor “help[s] to surface implicit (i.e., unconscious) beliefs and feelings” (Woodside, 2008, p. 480) and translate abstract, complex ideas into more easily relatable entities.

Another technique is object elicitation, which combines elements of material engagement with memory, storytelling and metaphorical thinking. Feminist researchers highlight how objects are not socially neutral materials, but complex material things that reveal (often mundane, domestic) lifeworlds (Sofia, 2000). Research using object elicitation typically aims to gain deeper understanding of people’s relationships with the material world, including embodied experiences (Woodward, 2019), emotional and nostalgic attachments (Holmes & Ehgartner, 2021), and relationships to places (Hurdley, 2013). In her work on self-storage, bereavement and materiality, Owen (2021, p. 38) found that breaking silences and recounting memories via object elicitation can evoke what Hurdley (2013, p. 103) calls the “other stories of divorce, grief, hesitation, failure, arguments, negotiation and dust.” McGeachan (2013) similarly incorporated objects and artefacts into her use of geographical biography, finding that talking around and handling objects helped participants with mental ill health to see value in their own lives and stories (also see Holmes, 2020).

Scholars are increasingly mixing methods creatively to generate new ways of interrogating and understanding the social (Mason, 2006), including illustration and graphical techniques. Exploring antimicrobial resistance in cystic fibrosis clinics, Buse et al. (2020) used a combination of graphic elicitation with architectural layout plans and sketch reportage. This allowed for a form of triangulation, integrating two contrasting visual registers to understand the world of the participant. Meanwhile, Bagnoli (2009, p. 547) supplemented interviews with sketching and graphic elicitation to move away from language as “the privileged medium for the creation and communication of knowledge.” In research with older people in Greater Manchester, Barron (2021a) used a suite of ethnographic methods (photo-walks, go-alongs, group discussions, participant packs and photo-elicitation) to understand the place-making practices of older people. Flexibly drawing upon different methods facilitated a rich understanding of the different ways older age is lived, allowing participants to take part in research in ways that suited them. It is also important to note that creativity and participation can extend to data analysis. Balmer’s (2021, p. 1144) technique of “painting with data” provides a vivid example, in which participants were invited to engage playfully with interview transcripts by layering the printed text with paintings or sketches, generating “data transcript pages that were often vibrant, profound and buzzing with life.”

Methodological innovation, then, is not necessarily “about finding “new” methods, but can involve creatively experimenting with different ways of augmenting and enlivening traditional ones” (Simpson, 2020, p. 197). Rather than abandoning “the methodological skills that human geography has so painfully accumulated,” Latham (2003, p. 2000) argues that researchers need to “work through how we can imbue traditional research methodologies with a sense of the creative, practical, and being with practiceness,” and that this will make conventional methods “dance a little” (ibid). The interview is increasingly being understood less as an instrumental exchange of words, and more as an embodied encounter between two (or more) individuals who each bring different dynamics to play.

This form of reflexive scholarship—which foregrounds the shifting roles of emotion, power, and positionality—has been encouraged by feminist scholars for some time (see England, 1994). In advancing a “gentle methodological approach,” Pottinger (2020, p. 1) has urged researchers to be more attentive to the multifaceted and reciprocal practices of care that shape research encounters, which might conventionally be tidied away as superfluous or awkward (Horton, 2020). In a similar vein, Chadwick (2021, pp. 2–3) suggests “The sensations, feelings, emotions and affects circulating in/ around research encounters are regarded as critical interpretive nodes and analytic resources and not superfluous “noise,” distractions or problems to be ignored, ironed out or overcome.” Chadwick advocates thinking with what she describes as the “sweaty concept” of discomfort in research interactions. There is much to be learned in unpicking ‘how people talk about experiences and situations as well as *what* they say’ (Wiles et al., 2005, p. 98, their emphasis). In Barron’s (2021b) work, it is the affective power of silence which changes the course of conversation. In Browne’s (2016) research on sustainable practices, humour and laughter enable conversation about intimate everyday practices. With these dynamics in mind, the following section describes the project upon which this paper is based and our own methodological approach, before reflecting critically on how creative talking techniques can enliven and animate interview methods.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY AND THE METHODS FOR CHANGE PROJECT

This paper draws on material from the first phase of the *Methods for Change* project which ran between 2020 and 2021. The project explores the potentials and challenges of using social science methods beyond academia, and its first phase involved a series of public facing events and focused discussions with cross-sectoral policy makers on this topic (Pottinger et al., 2021). It also entailed interviewing academics from across the social sciences around their use of creative and qualitative methodologies, and how, when and where these approaches created transformative change. It is this element of the wider project that we focus on in this paper.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who would provide insight on diverse methods, each working on complex societal, political, economic and environmental challenges, including austerity, urbanisation, sustainable consumption and production, climate change and ageing societies. We also profiled different disciplinary affiliations (including human geography, sociology, anthropology, planning, architecture, health care, education, cultural studies, social history, business); aiming for representation across institutions affiliated within the *Methods for Change* network; and with mindfulness of gender, race and ethnicity, and career stage.

Thirty-six academics across the UK were interviewed about the methodological elements of their research, often focused around one particular method or methodological approach. Participants gave their informed consent for interview data to be used for the purposes of academic writing, with an agreement to remain anonymous. Interviews were conducted by one of three members of our team - *Amy, Laura, and Ulrike* - and, when possible, a second team member joined to take notes. Interviews lasted around one hour, took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions to in-person fieldwork, and were audio-recorded. Recordings were transcribed and formed the basis of a collaboratively written methodological how-to guide (Barron et al., 2021a), and the material shared in this paper. In the first phase of the project, profiled methods centred on participatory, creative and policy-led approaches, broadly defined. A second phase of the project, planned for 2022–2023, will focus on spatial, interdisciplinary and mixed methods.

The project was built around an ethos of collaboration. Participants were sent in advance a short list of themes to cover in the interview and offered a set-up meeting in which any uncertainties could be discussed. We emphasised that the interview was a process of talking together and there would be the option for multiple iterations of the how-to guide. Our approach follows Pessoa et al.’s (2019, p. 1) account of “reflexive interviewing,” described as involving “engagement of the interviewer and interviewee in the process of elaboration and collective understanding of the interviewee’s perspectives and experiences.” Participants were also invited to join other activities in the *Methods for Change* network, such as contributing blogs and speaking at public-facing events. Data analysis was carried out iteratively and collaboratively in the process of writing the how-to guides together with participants, in further discussions about methods at project events, and in the development of creative pieces (e.g., short films, posters, animations, artworks) which accompany the guides.

An important aspect of the interviews was a series of creative provocations. Participants were asked to describe the how-to process of their method, given that a key aim of the interview was to inform an accessible, instructive methods guide, developed between interviewees and the research team. Identifying the how-to guide upfront, and working together across multiple iterations to write it, enabled us to move away from researching *on, to* or *for*, and towards researching *with* participants (Hall et al., 2021). Building on object elicitation methods (Holmes, 2020; Owen, 2021), participants were also asked in advance to “select an object that you can use to talk about your method.” This relatively open prompt

encouraged participants to playfully reflect on their approach, while centring the method, rather than the research problem or findings. Furthermore, inspired by Cook et al.'s (2009) research on mortgages and Sarah Butler's animal-inspired short stories about Devo Manc<sup>1</sup> (The University of Manchester, 2017) we used a form of “forced-metaphor-elicitation technique” (Woodside, 2008), whereby participants were asked, “if your method were an animal, what would it be?” Often posited towards the end of the interview, this question closed the conversation in a light-hearted way, while revisiting elements raised earlier and extending metaphorical thinking about method. While these creative talking techniques enabled researchers to reflect on their work from novel vantage points and to consider aspects otherwise overlooked or unspoken, they also occasionally resulted in moments of discomfort and awkwardness (Chadwick, 2021; Horton, 2020) around the “right way” to use and talk about method.

In the section that follows, we discuss each of these creative interviewing techniques and consider their utility for understanding more about methods. In doing so, we provide some modest suggestions for making talking methods more creative—the techniques can be readily incorporated into semi-structured and online interviews as well as group discussions, and do not require any special equipment. We reflect on our own experiences of carrying out interviews as part of the Methods for Change project, asking how these techniques might be useful in drawing out the salient characteristics and transformational potentials of different methodological approaches as emphasised by academic researchers and their research partners.

## 4 | HOW-TO INSTRUCTIONS

We begin the empirical discussion by considering the technique of interviewing towards a collectively authored how-to guide, highlighting three key challenges that we encountered: starting with method; narrating change; and imposing order on the messiness of research. Our interviews, the guides and the wider project centred on methods and their role in facilitating change. Methods can be an unusual starting point for academics more used to talking about their work in terms of funded projects, research problems, specific phenomena, or the communities involved in research. Interviewing with the how-to guide in mind, we were asking participants to disentangle and abstract methods from their context, to turn methods which are often highly situated and context specific into something generalisable. Participants often deviated back to more familiar ways of talking about research, so had to be gently reminded to refocus on method.

Many explained that their methods had evolved as a research project progressed, often in response to participants' needs and other contextual factors. The iterative nature of methods in practice, involving trial and error, responsiveness and intuition, familiarity and experience, presents a challenge to talking about and writing authoritative guidance on method. Indeed, one participant described research as “chaos,” highlighting the messy quality of doing creative and participatory methods: “to try and control it, and ... set it in a box and have it very neatly tied up with a bow is never going to work.” Some identified a clear title for their guide from the start, while for others the title changed several times. Naming methods invokes consideration of the politics, trends and baggage that comes with different words (“participatory,” “mapping,” “co-production”) which may be associated with complex and contested meanings, literatures and lineages. The struggle to pin down a method's title speaks to wider tensions in trying to tidy-up the “mess” (Law, 2004) of research in practice, and attempting to package methods as neatly defined, robust and readily replicated in diverse contexts.

While much social science research aims to contribute, explicitly or implicitly, to societal transformation, an important aspect of our project was considering how methods *themselves* “create or contribute to change,” with a section of each guide devoted to this question (Barron et al., 2021b). When we asked participants about changes observed through using their method, we noted hesitancy, self-deprecation or a tendency to equate change with a particular version of ‘research impact’:

Um, I mean, I don't ... I can't claim credit for this ...

[M]aybe not the type of change, wrote [sic] down on paper and promised in the beginning. But I think it has, in most cases, changed the way the participants have thought about [the research topic]

[T]here's ... the “on the ground” real change that happens in communities and people's lives as a result of working through these problems, changes in policy, for example, changes in funding regimes, changes in, you know, those kind of things that the REF [UK Research Excellence Framework] values more.

These three reflections chime with Horton's (2020, p. 1) suggestion that "self-confident, and readily narratable" modes of impact may be valorised, causing smaller-scale and more subtle examples of transformation to be overlooked. Some participants, and particularly those with recent experience of completing REF impact case studies,<sup>2</sup> could immediately highlight how their work had led to tangible, operational or policy changes. Yet, as Bandola-Gill and Smith (2021, p. 1) observe, the particular form of narrative demanded by REF impact case studies works to 'restrict the "plot line" and belie the far more complex accounts held by those working to achieve research impact'. As the authors note, this is significant because REF narratives "not only describe but also construct a very specific vision of impact, as streamlined, linear, and preferably economic" (p. 12; see also Demeritt, 2010).

Often in our interviews it was necessary to provide several prompts to encourage discussion of shifts taking place at a variety of scales, temporalities and intensities within the research. For example, on the question of "change," one respondent cautiously acknowledged a positive impact on participants' career development and confidence through their involvement in research using creative methods:

I don't mean this to sound, like, trite, or just, you know, whatever. But [for] a couple of them, it was quite transformative ... to be part of something like this.

Another noted the subtle shift in perspective created by simply documenting and presenting back the activities of an organisation involved in participatory research. Transformation here arose through the act of "validating" the group's efforts, enabling appreciation of their achievements and their own role in generating change:

One of my biggest things, I'm not sure it's a change, is that people have commented how nice it is to have their activities documented. And so I think it enables them to see the change that they have made ... I think [it] helps them realise where they've come from.

For another respondent, even if not directly intended to create change, methods can create a space for different kinds of conversations, questions and reflections, having a powerful effect on researchers and participants alike:

I think sometimes the biggest change that happens is, in the conversations that happen in the field ... and an interview can provide that, kind of, almost therapeutic space. Where problems that maybe someone's never even thought about before as a problem, you know, it gets to be aired ... it becomes out into the open.

Gently pushing respondents to go beyond familiar interpretations of research impact (Bandola-Gill & Smith, 2021) helped elicit discussion of individual, "therapeutic" or subtle change. Taking the time to talk about methodological detail exposes method itself as a space for the transformation of ideas, practices and knowledge (Law, 2004, 2009). Though perhaps less "readily narratable" (Horton, 2020, p. 1), spoken modestly or with multiple caveats, the changes mentioned by participants as arising through method are significant.

Participants were also asked to guide someone unfamiliar through their method or approach step-by-step, with these instructions forming a central contribution of each guide. These questions often took significant time during the interview and were evidently difficult to answer. Simplified, easy to follow instructions may be appealing, even essential to anyone new to a method. However, this line of questioning implies that methods can be replicated straightforwardly in diverse projects and contexts, that they proceed in a logical order, and can be described as such. Participants' unease was shown in hesitation, laughter, or shifting uncomfortably in their seat, as well as attempts to deflect or even dismiss the question: 'That's a hard question.'; 'Well it's hard to say, which comes first ...'; 'Gosh, this is tricky ... I mean, I guess we're gonna edit some of this ...'. We often prompted interviewees to go back a step by asking, for example, how might one get access, what needs to happen *before* participants are recruited? Moments of expressed discomfort, or where words fell short helped illuminate what many researchers *did* feel more comfortable to discuss, such as talking around difference and contingency. These moments also highlight the difficulty of retroactively identifying a chronology of method, and thus making sense of what in practice is often an iterative and entangled process.

Omissions in respondents' accounts also indicate methodological considerations that can be taken for granted by researchers, such as recruiting participants, acting ethically or analysing material. Hitchings' (2012) reflection on the difficulty of interviewing people about everyday practice is echoed in our attempts at eliciting the mundane details of methods, which in practice may feel intuitive, obvious or even irrelevant. And despite our intentions to create an atmosphere of collaboration (as opposed to extraction) in our interviews, talking about methods through this structuring question



seemed to generate a feeling, as one participant described, of “sitting under a microscope,” at risk of exposing academic weaknesses or giving a “wrong” answer. As the project progressed, asking the step-by-step question became increasingly uncomfortable for us as researchers, too:

Interviewer 1: It’s difficult for everybody to kind of, you know, reduce what you do into a series of steps but, if we could have a go...

Interviewer 2: I know you’ve previously said that you’re not into, kind of, step-by-step guides, and neither am I. And I cringe every time I ask this question ...

This awkwardness is evident in our introductions and qualifications to the question, as we simultaneously empathised with its trickiness, while trying to keep the interview on course to generate material essential for the guide. Our hesitations here work to convey our shared understanding of social science research as “messy” (a term used by several respondents) and which we were artificially tidying (Pottinger, 2020) to communicate methods clearly to diverse audiences.

## 5 | OBJECT INTERVIEWING

Next, we discuss how objects functioned as material and metaphorical interventions in the interviews, thinking first about objects as handy tools, before moving on to address what objects might help reveal about method. Many participants responded to the object prompt by showing, naming or describing an item used when carrying out a method. These ranged from practical “tools:” maps forming the focus of participatory mapping methods; post-it notes, pens or paper used in creative and workshop approaches; or mobile phones used to capture and record images, sound or written notes. These items were perhaps easily recalled as material paraphernalia handled in the process of doing research. Objects mentioned also included mundane items less immediately associated with data collection but deemed crucial for fieldwork: the boots worn by one researcher using mobile methods; the cushion, essential for another’s comfort during intensive and active listening. Objects, then, have the potential to bring something of the “being with practiceness” of method into conversation (Latham, 2003, p. 2000).

One respondent, using a participatory approach, chose a cup of tea. This culturally shared symbol of social connection and comfort is drawn on to highlight the importance of sociable and reflective moments in the research process:

You sit and have a cup of tea with the people that you’re working with. And they, they kind of reflect and you reflect with them. But if you were just going to interview them, it would be much more extractive and directive. And it’s just, sort of, having that collective moment where people chip in and relax and think about things around that cup of tea break. That actually is often the most useful bit.

As this participant spoke, their own mug of tea was brought into view on screen. Their description contrasts the types of “talk” generated in a formal semi-structured interview with those in a more relaxed setting (Burrell, 2014), signalling the subtle changes that can occur by incorporating moments of conviviality into method.

Though some participants described an object from memory, many selected something physically “close-at-hand.” Since interviews were largely carried out in 2020–2021 during national lockdowns in the UK, these were often prosaic, proximate items picked up from around the house, which highlights the potentials of object interviewing to offer an insight into the everyday life of living with things (Owen, 2021; Holmes, 2020). One respondent, whose method explores overlooked or underappreciated phenomena, demonstrated a small clockwork toy, their laptop computer turned towards the desk to show how the mechanism generated sparks as it moved:

It’s a distraction ... It’s a tabletop thing, but you can see that, the wheels are all sort of countered ... it wobbles around. And it is good at finding the edge of a table, it chucks itself off. So it’s kind of purposeless. ‘More heat than light’, is that the phrase? Yeah, it was something I grabbed very quickly as I was running up to my computer, so there’s not a great deal of thought going into it.

This participant was cautious to make claims about either the impact or replicability of their approach. Transformation is hinted at here, however, in the idea of methods generating “more heat than light,” as agitating established modes of thinking

rather than providing definitive answers. Though the effort of selecting or “grabbing” the toy is perhaps downplayed, this quote indicates that object interviewing can allow for improvisation. If participants had not prepared an object in advance, there were often things lying around they could gesture to or repurpose (a child’s jigsaw, a stack of post-it notes). The physical item also worked as a deflecting device, something participants could, sometimes literally, hide behind if they found the question uncomfortable.

The material properties of objects featured less often in our interviews. This is partly because our research was not focused on objects themselves (Holmes, 2020), but rather on how creative techniques might facilitate a deeper understanding of the different elements of method. There are also limitations to using object interviews in an online encounter because objects could not be physically handled by the researcher. Instead, they often appeared briefly, if at all, and then disappeared from view on the computer screen. Though corporeally close to participants, available as comfort, deflection, distraction or memento, to researchers their tactile, visual and other sensory qualities remained inaccessible.

Some also interpreted the task by discussing imagined or metaphorical objects. Three participants, for example, spoke about seeds, as living and evolving materials richly associated with metaphors of growth, potential and careful cultivation, including one participant who uses an arts-based approach:

It’s super tiny, but it’s something that needs nurturing ... they need the heat, and the water and, and the kind of, microbes in the soil and so on for them to produce a strong plant that is productive and beautiful, and gives pleasure as well as being kind of useful.

Rather than talking through the practicalities of a method in relation to an object, another respondent described their wider methodology as a brush, capable of sweeping across a phenomenon to illuminate its full richness, making its “colour shine.” The introduction of material and metaphorical objects allowed for insight into the practical, sensorial and care-full requirements of a method, as well as enabling respondents to convey something of the affective dimensions of using a method and witnessing its capacity to transform.

Talking with objects in our interviews often became a gateway for participants to reveal details about their methods and themselves that may otherwise have been unspoken. Through objects, interviewees narrated biographies of research projects (in)completed, touched on personal lives and hobbies, mentioned family members or past events not raised elsewhere in the interview. One respondent, whose method involves long-term immersion in a community, described a present from a research participant:

[T]he wife of the man I was interviewing was knitting. She was knitting a pair of booties ... and she gave them to me. I don’t know why that comes to mind. But you know, there’s that sense that sometimes ... you’ll be in the community or in that place for a while, you become friends, you’ve become known to people, and often these relationships can develop. And I think, I took that as a sign that you know, they’d actually quite enjoyed the interview and enjoyed that opportunity.

In recollecting both the item and the mutually enjoyable moment in which it was gifted, this participant touches on the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of research, highlighting the friendships that can develop through method as an instance of potential transformation. Again, this demonstrates how change through method relates not only to iconic or large-scale transformation, but also exists in the development of new connections, relationships, appreciations or understandings forged about and with places, spaces and people.

Notably, several researchers using object elicitation in their own research were hesitant or could not commit to one item, with some instead suggesting their method was better represented by a container (a bag, a box, a pot) capable of encompassing the multiple, changing and messy (Law, 2004) materials of research:

I didn’t really come up with anything. And that’s strange, because I love thinking through objects and often use them in my own interviews, you know, I do ask people to talk about an object because I think it’s quite meaningful for them. I mean, unfortunately, all I could think of was some, you know, the stuff I use, my tool-kit ... my go bag. ... I don’t know, I just got an image in my head now of something that we keep by the front door where we put all the keys in, and it’s got a pen in it, and it’s got a bus ticket in it, and it’s got everything else thrown in it. And it’s that idea of an assemblage ... I’m trying to just provide the container, where they can just throw all the bits of their life into that they want.

This resistance to identify a single item indicates both the broader difficulties of talking neatly about method, and the challenge of summing up something viewed as complex and shifting through comparison with a singular, static, definable object. Sometimes, however, talking about why a single object could *not* fully encapsulate a method was as revealing as a neat metaphor. The container technologies evoked by participants—cardboard boxes and bowls that hold other things—are also significant, since such “artefacts for containment and supply are not only readily interpreted as feminine; they are also historically associated with women’s traditional labours” (Sofia, 2000, p. 182). Containers are not simply “dumb spaces” (p. 182) but significant technologies that hold (often domestic) lifeworlds. The metaphor of method, and the researcher’s role in that method, as a messy domestic container that’s “got everything else thrown in it” is a feminist metaphor that works to communicate the complexity of all the “things” (method/processes, emotions, ethics, relationships, participant needs) that need to be held, simultaneously, to successfully implement qualitative research.

These varied examples indicate the capacity of object interviewing to elicit rich material that goes beyond the rehearsed answers that participants may think we want to hear (Burrell, 2014), and to pull on different threads compared with the more direct questioning around how-to guides. However, it is important to note that despite interviewing social scientists we knew to be enthusiastic about creative, innovative methods, respondents frequently expressed trepidation about talking to, with or about objects. Answers were prefaced with: ‘I found this one really hard’; ‘please don’t laugh at me’; ‘I struggled a bit with that.’ Both the object and animal question, discussed next, could be seen as exposing participants’ creative thinking capacities, potentially revealing them (or their methods) as “boring’ or unimaginative. Importantly, respondents’ reticence here highlights the demands that creative methods may place on participants (Warren, 2017). Trepidation about talking through objects raises questions about what academics tend to expect of participants, or assume they will find “meaningful,” yet may be less prepared to do themselves.

## 6 | METHODS AS ANIMALS

Here, we outline how thinking through metaphor—in this case, imagining methods as animals—can elucidate the embodied dimensions of methods, highlighting how interactions with materials, environments and data are envisaged by researchers. We note a tendency to choose agreeable animals, and finally, suggest such creative techniques can animate method, generating rich data through imaginative thinking.

Animal metaphors allowed respondents to convey a sense of the physical, sensory attributes and practices required in enacting a method, and its impact on researcher and participant. This was seen through reference to animals’ specific body parts, movements, behaviours and senses: the hummingbird “sticking its beak in,” or the “360 degree” viewpoint of an owl used to describe exploratory approaches; the warm, tactile qualities of cats and puppies drawn on when discussing participatory and creative research. This extract depicts the exaggerated ears of the elephant:

Elephants have big ears. They’re very good listeners. They’re also very interested in and curious about the world, about humans ... and human behaviour ... elephants communicate through nonverbal techniques, more than anything ... they use vibrations. And that’s really important in [this method], not to vibrate, but to, to be given signals beyond the verbal and to encourage someone to talk and to look interested, and to be interested in, to be present.

While the capacity to listen is critical to the method described here, the elephant metaphor allows further explanation of the multi-sensory “signals beyond the verbal” and empathetic relations also deemed crucial. Here, participants used the creative approaches we offered them as a means of drawing out embodied elements of methods.

At times, descriptions of animals veered more into the metaphorical. In the following quote, the “visible” externalised organs of the starfish are described to emphasise a flexible method that aims to disrupt traditional power dynamics between researcher and participant:

[S]tarfish can have three arms, and they can have 40 arms, they come in all shapes and sizes. So it’s not a simple starfish necessarily. There’s this idea of everything being visible ... they have their exoskeletons, then they have their mouths and stomachs on the outside ... it’s all out there. It’s all spread out. And I like the idea of the starfish as in there’s a core to it, which is a central question. And then there’s all these different lines and things they will lead back to it.

This use of metaphor allows for a multi-layered depiction. The respondent talks through the starfish and its different forms, sizes and potential complexity, drawing further comparison around the ways in which crucial elements of the method are displayed openly, and its capacity to extend across space in multiple directions whilst retaining focus around a central question.

Another respondent similarly described the Portuguese Man o' War, explaining in detail this creature (and method) as an extended symbiotic community of organisms "constantly communicating with each other in different ways," coordinated by a long, central tentacle. Others, drawing on creative mixed-methods chose the octopus:

Because of the many arms you need ... in terms of ... the coordination of many, many aspects all at once in a kind of, an intelligent fashion.

I think the octopus is particularly appropriate because obviously it's multi-legged, and bit sort of formless, shape-shifting, slightly out of control, squiddy, ink spurting. Uncontrollable but in a way smart ... Kind of arms spinning, plates spinning.

The embodied, practical, and hands-on dimensions of methods are alluded to through the 'many arms' of the octopus, along with the cognitive function required in coordinating the often complex, chaotic messiness of research in practice. Rather like the container metaphors (Sofia, 2000) described in the previous section, these creatures also enabled participants to frame methods flexibly and to convey their multifunctional and adaptive qualities, including the ability of a method to reach into different directions and contexts, and take on new forms.

In addition to shedding light on embodied dimensions, this technique also provided insight into how methods are imagined as acting on and within environments, and how data creation is visualised by participants. One of several chameleons mentioned, like the octopus above, was drawn on to signal the reactive nature of an arts-based method. It is both visually striking, and it "takes in and is shaped by the environment, and alters the environment around it". While this quote highlights the capacity of methodological interventions to both be influenced by and to transform the settings in which they are performed, others discussed animals' environments to convey a more distanced relation, such as the peregrine falcon "zooming in and out," able to take a wide view whilst also seeing detail.

Animals were also chosen for their connections with materials, with magpies, pack rats and squirrels, for example, described as gathering, hoarding, surrounding themselves with collected treasures or fragments. In the following extract, two collaborating researchers (interviewed together) discuss how they each independently arrived at the spider:

Respondent 1: I thought like, a spider, in terms of making the connections ...

Respondent 2: And I was thinking about things that made webs and draw in different bits of the environment ... It's not really about the spider, it's about the spider's, kind of, system ... the practical pulling together different strands of thinking and understanding.

Another member of this team further iterated their method more specifically as a Golden Orb Weaver Spider, a large but non-aggressive spider that spins huge webs with "golden threads," with the design method helping to identify the golden threads that spark connections and create transformative change.<sup>3</sup> Animal metaphors can illuminate how researchers imagine the collection or construction of data through method, and significantly, how those methods are implicated in processes of change. Here, the doing of method is imagined as connecting disparate threads, modifying or creating systems or "webs" to generate new understanding.

A similar environmental transformation is invoked by another respondent, who draws on two invertebrates to explain a participatory approach:

[O]ne is a bee, it's that social side, it's making honey with, and you're working together, you make more, you make a structure out of the bits that all the bees bring in ... that helps you make honey and helps you do things ... And the other one might be the earthworm, because it helps prepare the ground ... It's the action of so many worms that builds the soil that builds that possibility for new growth, the new possibility. So there's definitely something about multitude of action and then working together that builds something from those humble creatures.

The social dimensions of this method, depicted here as a process of collaboration to “make a structure” and “do things,” are key to understanding its potential impacts. Rather than assigning a large, iconic animal to this method and the processes of change therein (Horton, 2020), the material impact of the “humble” bee and worm arises through a collective “multitude of action.”

“Humble” creatures, like the invertebrates in the previous example were chosen less often, however. Animals’ perceived agreeableness influenced participants’ choices, with respondents tending to favour visually captivating creatures (monarch butterfly, octopus, chameleon), “friendly” animals (monkey, puppy, elephant), or animals they interacted with locally or in their homes (cats, dogs, squirrels). The following quote reveals one participant’s thought process to determine a collaborative creature, and decision to reject the perhaps less aesthetically pleasing bacterial community:

[S]omething that’s about co-production, like, working as a team, and I think my initial thought was something on the bacterial level. Then I thought that’s probably not a good selling point.

Participants are likely to have chosen animals that “sell” their method, amplify positive attributes (Cook et al., 2009), and persuade others of the value of their approach.

Here, another researcher likens a participatory approach to a playful, though labour-intensive puppy or kitten:

[T]he whole point is to get immersed, forget yourself, do something fun ... something familiar, something friendly, distracting, and makes you forget who or where you are ... And so I could only think really boringly of like, a kitten or a puppy ... it takes a lot of energy and it takes a lot of work, but you get so much fun out of it. And it’s kind of like a cuddle as well.

This extract draws together the embodied and energetic dimensions of *doing* method, but importantly also indicates how the researcher hopes the method is experienced—as ‘friendly’, ‘fun’, ‘like a cuddle’—by the participants it engages. As well as highlighting how metaphorical questioning can access emotional, affective and embodied dimensions of methods, the choice of an agreeable animal here hints at how researchers hope they are viewed when intervening in people’s lives through method.

This respondent also describes their choice as ‘boring’ and ‘familiar’, qualities echoed in descriptions of ‘mundane, domestic’ cats in discussions of ‘everyday’ methodological approaches. Which animals are deemed familiar, and those that may be recalled easily, depends on cultural context, as do the metaphorical qualities associated with different animals. Choices therefore reflect both respondents’ positionalities and the cultural and geographical contexts in which their research is conducted. Further, they are influenced by these conversations happening with collaborators from a UK based network, with animal choices needing to be understood, or readily explained, within a British institutional and cultural context.

The particular animal chosen is less important, however, than the types of thinking generated through this technique. How researchers *feel* about methods is important, if often overlooked in representations of research (Pottinger, 2020). Metaphors get at feelings in a different way to direct questioning, and the animal metaphor technique helped to make the methods come alive (Latham, 2003). As with the object question, participants often started by saying “I struggled.” However, as they began talking, both the participants and animals they described became increasingly animated. Participants sometimes used physical gestures to mimic actions or movement: the anteater “sticking its nose in” a termite mound to gather data; the wide, all-seeing eyes of an owl, capable of multiple viewpoints.

As well as being a useful technique to incorporate into online interviews, the ‘animal’ question formed the focus of several project workshop and training events aimed at postgraduate and early career researchers, facilitated by Methods for Change researchers and contributors. Following each session, the methods and animals discussed, as well as key points about their characteristics, were sent to an illustrator who produced a playful drawing of each ‘method-animal’ (e.g., Figure 1). We then shared the images with workshop attendees to use in future communications about their methodological approaches. The animal illustrations feature in a series of blogs, in which participants reflect on how this metaphorical technique enabled them to tell the story of their research in new and engaging ways (Hall et al., 2020; Miles, 2021; White, 2021).

Despite initial hesitation, in both the workshops and interviews, participants’ enjoyment was evident as they realised they could layer additional rationales for their chosen animal in conversation with the interviewer, fellow interviewees, workshop breakout groups, or even family members and pets. As one interview respondent described, ‘it just delighted me to kind of get off and start thinking about it’. As researchers reflected on their own research practice through animal metaphors, more about the method was revealed both to us as interviewers and to researchers themselves.



FIGURE 1 Interviews as “bird,” drawn from Methods for Change workshop, illustrated by Jack Brougham (jackbroughamdrawing.com)

## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on interviews conducted as part of the Methods for Change project, this paper sought to bring methods back from the margins (Hitchings and Latham, 2021), arguing methods themselves can be an important space for innovation and transformation. For this transformative potential to be realised within non-academic policy, third sector and business spaces, however, it is crucial that researchers know how to talk not only about concepts and empirical findings, but also the role of social science methods in achieving such impacts.

Of the three creative talking techniques we reflected on, how-to instructions were perhaps the most contentious. Describing to a non-specialist audience the process of conducting a method, step-by-step, often felt uncomfortable for respondents and interviewers, as artificially imposing order onto the messiness of research in practice. However, moments of silence or hesitancy triggered by these feelings of discomfort (Chadwick, 2021) allowed us to generate deeper understanding of participants’ decision making around methods. Attuning to pauses, silences and tone of voice enabled us, with participants, to unravel some of the more complex, and at times self-deprecatory narratives of the impacts emanating from social science research and methods that REF impact case studies are less able to capture (Bandola-Gill & Smith 2021). While this paper, and the broader Methods for Change project are informed by a commitment to creative innovation with method, we maintain that interviews, particularly when carried out sensitively and collaboratively, have an important role to play (Burrell, 2014; Hitchings 2012).

The introduction of material and metaphorical objects acted as a gateway for participants to reveal details about methods and themselves that may otherwise have been overlooked or unspoken. The objects often functioned as a third party in the interview, allowing participants to deviate and to consider how methods worked to develop new connections, relationships and appreciations; or understandings about and with places, spaces and people. Thinking through animals animated methods, highlighting embodied dimensions, and shed light on how researchers imagined method as a process

of interacting with materials, environments and data to create new configurations. Through these techniques, methods were depicted as not simply tools to extract information, but as acting into the world, shaping and transforming it.

We posit that social science researchers concerned with the impact of their research on wider society must move beyond solely communicating the outcomes of research to non-higher education stakeholders, to clearly articulate why *methods* matter for understanding, analysing and creating change on important societal issues (Hitchings and Latham, 2021). We have argued that creative talking techniques can help academics understand their own methods in more depth, and therefore to develop persuasive narratives about the role of those methods in creating change on global socio-environmental, political and economic challenges.

Given the complexities of these global challenges, there remains much scope to mobilise the transformative potential within social science methodologies with non-academic stakeholders to invoke change. In this paper we have contributed to debates around the role and value of social science methods by arguing methods must be understood as more than simply tools to generate data, and as holding potential to create change in their doing. Furthermore, methods may be an under-recognised area in which academics could generate societal impact. We hope these contributions will be useful to academic and policy research communities with an interest in knowledge production; innovation in social science methods; research on researchers; and research impact and the social sciences.

Finally, we would like to invite readers to think about their own methods, and to reflect on how they might create or contribute to change. How would you guide someone, step-by-step, through the process of using your method, and would you feel uncomfortable doing this? Is there an object that you could demonstrate or bring to mind that would help explain why this method matters? And lastly, if your method were an animal, what would it be?

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Devo Manc is the short-hand term for Greater Manchester's devolution of political and (some) economic powers, overseen by an elected mayor.

<sup>2</sup> The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK's system for evaluating the impact of research in UK higher education institutions.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://aspect.ac.uk/resources/if-your-research-method-were-an-animal-what-would-it-be/> for illustrations of a range of method-animals.

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