

INTRODUCTION

Everything people do is embedded and extended in time across the modalities of past, present and future, making time an inescapable aspect of our existence, yet one that often remains invisible and intangible. Qualitative longitudinal (QL) research is uniquely placed to capture temporal data, as time is inherent in the design of a QL study where participants are revisited on multiple occasions. This approach helps to detail changes and continuities in participants' narratives, as their views and interpretations change in relation to lived experience. The long-term nature of QL research also provides greater opportunities for researchers to utilize a range of methodological techniques, some of which can help to elicit temporal data. Throughout our own study we employed strategies which enabled participants to reflect backwards and forwards in time, eliciting narratives about pasts and futures. Our approaches to exploring the past included timelines, a sequence of historical images and discussing participants' own images, the effectiveness of which has been discussed elsewhere (Henwood and Shirani, in press; Henwood, Shirani and Finn, 2011; Henwood, Finn and Shirani, 2008). In this guide we focus on three strategies from our methodological toolbox which we have used to extend participants' temporal horizons: written responses, personal images and abstract temporal questions.

BACKGROUND

Taking a temporal approach and attempting to extend these horizons is an important aspect of research which seeks to better represent the dynamic nature of participants' lives. The work of G.H. Mead has been influential in theorising about time as he considers the power of temporal organisation for the creation of social order, particularly through the partitioning of time into past, present and future. This division of temporal experience can be seen as representing a progress narrative; the process of understanding one's life as a project encompasses and connects the random segments of experience through past, present and future. Thus, anticipation is a key aspect in the construction of identity, as the futures we imagine influences the present.

KEY POINTS

- Qualitative longitudinal research is uniquely placed for eliciting temporal data. The longer time spans also provide greater opportunity to introduce a range of methodological techniques for extending temporal horizons
- Past experiences and anticipated futures are important for understanding participants' present lives
- Discussing the future is particularly challenging. There are a number of techniques for this which, our research suggests, vary in effectiveness according to participants' current life situations.
- Visual methods or participatory activities will not be appealing to all participants. It is important to have a methodological toolbox with different techniques to draw on.

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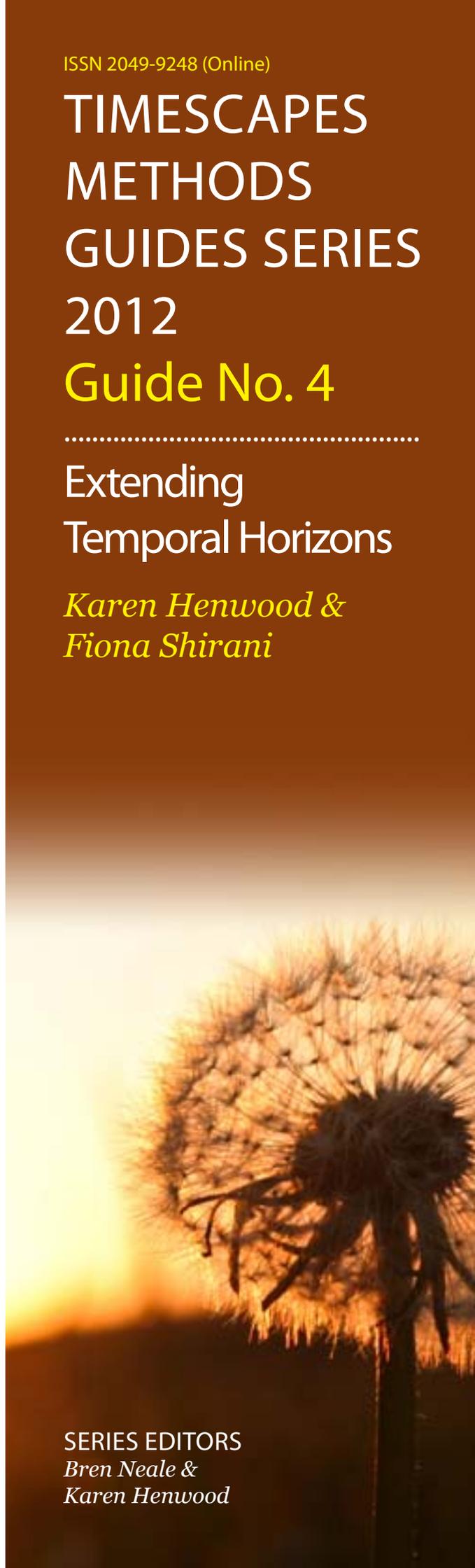
Guide No. 4

Extending Temporal Horizons

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We often construct futures according to perceptions of biographical certainty, assuming that the future will be intelligent and ordered. Theories of individualisation which describe 'open' futures subject to individual choice and agency place onus on individuals to know their projections, and the eventual outcomes (Adam and Groves, 2007), with increasing importance placed on life course planning. We found this sense of anticipation and projection was supported in our own work, with men undergoing the transition to fatherhood having specific assumptions about how their futures would unfold. In such circumstances, unexpected events which go against these perceptions appear to have both short and long-term impacts on anticipated futures (Shirani and Henwood, 2011a). Subsequently, exploring how participants visualise their futures is often important to understanding present experiences.

During the course of our research we sought new ways to facilitate discussions about longer-term futures and pasts, which included visual methods. The centrality of the visual to the cultural construction of life in western societies has meant that people are confronted with an array of visual images in day-to-day life. This has increasingly led researchers to consider how visual methodologies can be included in research techniques (Reavey, 2011). As part of our research we have encouraged participants to project backwards and forwards in time, discussing their own and wider historical pasts as well as imagined futures. Much of the discussion of pasts was facilitated through images; both personal and culturally recognisable. However, thinking of ways to encourage participants to consider the future proved more challenging, particularly given the lack of meaningful images for representing this. Some of the strategies we employed are outlined in our 'methodological toolbox'

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

The methodological approaches discussed in this paper were developed and used as part of the Men as Fathers project, exploring the transition to first-time fatherhood. A total of 46 men (30 from East Anglia and 16 from South Wales) took part in an interview during their partner's pregnancy, followed by second, and in some cases third interviews over the first year post-birth. 19 men were also interviewed again when their first child was 8 years-old. At each interview participants were differently placed to think about the past and future, so diverse methodological techniques were used at each point of contact. Whilst we used a number of different techniques in the course of our research, we will focus upon three of these techniques below.

Written Responses

One approach to accessing imagined futures was to ask participants to provide a written answer to the question

MEN AS FATHERS METHODOLOGICAL TOOLBOX

In addition to semi-structured interviews, the Men as Fathers project involved a number of additional techniques designed to extend participants' temporal horizons.

Timelines - Prior to interview participants were given a blank timeline and asked to fill in significant life events, in an attempt to aid the researcher in discussions about their past by providing some background data. This could be as detailed as participants chose. (See methods guide no. 5 for a detailed discussion of timelines).

Written Responses – Alongside the timelines, participants were asked for a written response to the question 'where do you see yourself in ten years' time?' This was designed to explore longer-term future orientations.

Historical Images - In an effort to elicit further data about past understandings of fatherhood, we used an historical sequence of 7 images to document changes in representations of fatherhood over time from Victorian to present day. These were presented to South Wales participants at the end of the first interview, during pregnancy, when they had no experience of being a father themselves.

Personal Images – Participants were asked to bring their favourite personal images at different interview phases. The aim was to discuss images that could evoke memories and emotions embedded in biographical experience, exploring their temporal extensions in everyday life, to reveal more about the lived experiences of men and fathers.

Contemporary Images - In the third interview, South Wales participants were shown a selection of five publicly available images designed to illustrate media representations of contemporary fatherhood. Men drew on their knowledge of the stories behind these images to make wider claims about changes in the culture of fatherhood, or about contemporary society in general.

Temporal Questions – Wider temporal experiences were sought by asking participants for their initial responses to the word 'time' and to the assertion in the temporal research literature that men are more future-oriented than women.

'where do you see yourself in ten years' time?' which was completed as part of a pre-interview questionnaire. Several men expressed their dislike of such questions and some did not complete the question because it was deemed too challenging. Others responded in the vein of 'I have absolutely no idea'. Even those who did write detailed

answers tended to indicate that they had no specific plans and it was challenging to think so far ahead. However, whilst people apparently had difficulty responding to this question, their interview accounts reflected often extraordinarily detailed levels of planning for their own and children's futures. Additionally, a future-orientation was evident in some men's discussion of the challenges of fatherhood. Those who found their current phase of life particularly demanding as temporal pressures were compounded, creating a sense of lack of time, often looked forward to a phase of their life where these pressures would be alleviated and they would have more time for other aspects of their life (Shirani and Henwood, 2011b). The use of this written technique suggested that it may be challenging to ask about futures directly – perhaps related to the notion that detailed planning carries negative connotations of rigidity, which goes against the value of flexibility espoused by a society permeated by individualisation – but that imagined futures were an important aspect of participants' current experiences. That said the responses of research participants are likely to vary, depending on the nature of the sample and the generation to which they belong (see methods guide no.5).

Personal Images

As we could find no appropriate images to represent future fathers, it was decided that we would use participants' personal images with carefully worded probes to prompt talk about the future. The South Wales participants were invited to bring their favourite image from their child's first year. In the discussion of personal images, men were encouraged to project forwards in thinking about what the child might be like as s/he got older, and what it would be like to be a father at a later stage in the child's life. Most men were resistant to describing their hopes or expectations for the child's future, suggesting it did not matter as long as the child was happy. However others suggested that the happiness rhetoric was a standard response they were expected to make, and in fact had more specific ideas about their child's future education, employment, relationships etc. That most of the men did not want to discuss specific aspects of their child's future may reflect their desire to not be seen as imposing rigid expectations onto their child. Instead it was emphasised that good fathers gave the child the opportunity to develop according to his or her own interests and abilities and supported them in this. Conversely, bad fathers were those with specific ideas for their child's future, seen as attempts to live out their own unrealised dreams through the child. When the child was very young, several men suggested that it was too early to tell what the future would hold until they had more of an idea of the child's personality and were thus reluctant to express specific ideas. However, the majority of men described planning for their child's future; often in terms of providing financially. For example, Adam described how he did not think about his own future but did plan for his son's as 'it would be negligent of me to not think of his future or work towards that'.

Participants from East Anglia were also invited to discuss personal photographs when their child was eight years-old. When children were older and physical resemblances and personality traits were more evident, the men appeared to find it easier to reflect back and forwards longer-term. These reflections were particularly pronounced for men with sons rather than daughters, as participants could more easily draw on physical resemblances. For men who did not describe positive relations with their own fathers, this reflection often provided re-assurance that they were doing things differently.

I mean he's a little bit like me to look at in some ways ... it's like you know, you're passing on your genes to another generation and you're looking at yourself in the new pattern of genes ... I'm, it's just made me think so much about my own upbringing I think how it was for me when I was eight and I just try to think to myself how important it is that I don't give him that baggage to carry around, that I give him the good stuff. (Terry)

Abstract Questions

As part of the research design, attempts were made to consider other aspects of temporal experience. In some interviews participants were asked directly, with varying degrees of success, whilst in others, temporal understandings emerged during the conversation. In the fourth interview with the East Anglian sample, participants were asked 'what do you think of when you hear the word 'time'?' For many participants, answering this abstract question proved challenging, although it elicited an extensive range of responses. These reactions to the word 'time' provide some insight into temporal understanding, which was contextualised by other aspects in the men's accounts. For example, Bruce's perception of time as 'potentially finite' was related to his father's diagnosis with terminal cancer and death a short while later at the age of 64. Responses were also related to age, with older fathers apparently preferring to reflect on the past, or more reluctant to look forward.

I always feel that I'm behind, I always need another few hours in the day and an extra day in the week, another week in the month, always always ... It is slipping through like this. Time is like a rope and I can't, my hands are burning too much that I can't hold on to it to slow it down efficiently. I always want to be and I always, I worry about stuff and I always want to be back in time. I never want to be forward, I always want to be back. ... Um, yeah well the future for me is I tend to worry too much about the future. What might happen if? I spend huge amounts of time wasting time on thinking what might happen if? What might happen if? And Daniel has just added to that. (Terry)

CONCLUSION

This paper has detailed attempts to elicit temporal data in a QL study. Each strategy provided data which supplemented the interview conversation, often evoking unanticipated responses, for example through a particular form of representation, which therefore may not have been uncovered by other means.

For accessing data about the past, historical images of fatherhood proved useful, allowing men to reflect on their perceptions of fathers in previous generations and highlight aspects of these models of fathering that remained salient today. The men did not tend to reflect back in relation to their own family pictures, although they did so to an extent when discussing experiences of their own childhood.

Discussion of the future proved the biggest challenge as many men appeared reluctant to describe their anticipated futures when asked directly, and there were no suitable publicly available images to discuss future fathering in wider terms. This reluctance to discuss the future when explicitly asked is intriguing, suggesting an aversion to being seen as someone who plans. This reticence made it challenging to discuss the future directly; instead such insights were often gleaned obliquely.

The use of visual materials and additional techniques such as the timeline provided extensive data from some participants, however others suggested that they did not like these approaches as they were often unsure how to respond, or did not relate to images in a way that initiated an emotional response. Therefore whilst these techniques proved useful, they could not be used in the same way for all participants. Similarly, asking directly about time could be perceived as being too abstract and whilst some relished the challenge of answering such a question, others were unsure how to respond. Having a methodological toolbox with different techniques to elicit temporal data therefore appears most appropriate, as the interviewer can adjust the focus on each aspect depending on the participant's response. One particular strength of qualitative longitudinal data in this respect is that earlier interviews indicate the kind of approaches each participant likes, so later interviews can be tailored to suit the individual.

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