

Seeing and Telling Households: A Case for Photo Elicitation and Graphic Elicitation in Qualitative Research

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The aim of this paper is to provide a case for using participant-generated photos and diagrams in qualitative interviews. These visual methods are gaining momentum in sociology and the research presented in this paper builds on previous uses of photo elicitation with members of shared households (Heath and Cleaver 2004), couple households (Morrison 2010) and uses of graphic elicitation with family households (Gabb 2010). I draw on data from the early stages of my doctoral research on young adults' living arrangements. This research is investigating households which are comprised of a romantic couple and other unrelated adults, focusing on those in early adulthood in the UK. This paper addresses my use of photos and three diagrammatic activities: relationship maps, timelines and 'household maps'. Through presenting preliminary data, I demonstrate the suitability of photo and graphic elicitation for researching three connected aspects of the social world – relationality, temporality, and spatiality – and discuss the practical and ethical considerations associated with implementing these methods.

Keywords: Photo Elicitation, Graphic Elicitation, Visual Methods, Timelines, Relationship Maps, Shared Living, Cohabitation, Youth Transitions

Introduction

Context

Within a general context of a drive to break down methodological boundaries, there have been calls for the development of visual methods in the social sciences (Harper 1998; Emmison and Smith 2000). Two methods in particular have gained popularity: photo elicitat-

tion and to a lesser extent, graphic elicitation, where photographs and diagrams are used during in-depth spoken interviews. Given the long history of image-based research in the social sciences, and in anthropology in particular (Banks 2007), claims of 'innovation' must be heeded (Wiles et al. 2011). Nevertheless, many researchers are rejecting 'language as the privileged medium for

the creation and communication of knowledge' (Bagnoli 2009, 547) and are experimenting with using images with new groups of people and in different ways. Similarly to other articles which present the novel application of methods in particular contexts (for example, Oliffe and Bottorff 2007; Beilin 2005), the aim of this paper is to provide a case for the utilisation of photo elicitation and graphic elicitation by discussing the early stages of my doctoral research. I am interested in young adults' living arrangements and specifically, the views and experiences of those living in 'couple-shared households' which are comprised of a romantic couple and other unrelated people. This research builds on previous work using photo elicitation in shared households (Heath and Cleaver 2004) and couple households (Morrison 2010) and graphic elicitation with both adults and children in family households (Hanna and Lau Clayton 2012; Gabb 2010). This paper, therefore, contributes to the methodological literature generally by discussing the application of visual methods to an under-researched phenomenon, and more specifically by developing a particular diagrammatic activity I am calling the 'household map'.

Perspectives and Approaches

Despite growing interest in visual methodologies in qualitative sociology, there are of course different epistemological perspectives, rang-

ing from those who believe that *collecting* visual data provides a reproduction of reality to those who believe that *generating* visual data requires an interpretation of reality (Banks 2007). Furthermore, some see 'elicitation' as referring to the creation of data, whether verbal or visual (Varga-Atkins and O'Brien 2009) while others use 'elicitation studies' to refer to the use of images as cues for verbal discussion (Harper 2002). In respect to this research, I have adopted a broadly interpretivist stance and use 'elicitation' to mean the process by which verbal discussion is brought about. That is not to state, however, that I treat images only as a prompt but rather, believe the value of these methods comes from the combination of the verbal and the visual. Another distinction between approaches to both photo and graphic elicitation lies in whether one uses images which have been generated by the researcher or by the participant (Prosser and Loxley 2008). My research is not participatory in the 'action research' sense (where participants are 'involved in every stage of the research process and directly benefit from the outcomes' (Richards 2011a, 1)), but by giving participants different forms of expression, I encourage them to 'take the reins' and steer the direction of the research interview. It is now necessary to outline key terms, processes for implementation and previous uses of each of these methods.

Photo Elicitation

Photo elicitation was first outlined by anthropologist John Collier (1957; 1967) and a common definition is Douglas Harper's (2002, 13) assertion that this method is 'based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview'. The discussion of photos taken by a participant has been variously described as native image making, photo-voice, photo novellas and visual narratives (Guillemin and Drew 2010), but in this article, the term 'photo elicitation' will be used throughout. A common approach to implementing this method, and that used by Alan Radley et al. (2005), involves several stages: conducting an initial interview with a participant then giving a brief for taking photos; the participant taking photos over a specified period of time (and researchers developing them); and finally meeting the participant to discuss the photos. This second interview would be likely to include questions about why each photo was taken, what it represents and which photo best exemplifies the participants' thoughts and experiences (Radley and Taylor 2003).

Photo elicitation has been used to research topics ranging from men's experience of cancer (Oliffe and Bottorff 2009) to agricultural farming (Beilin 2005) but it is also an appropriate method for researching shared households (Heath and Cleaver 2004), couple households (Morrison 2010) as well as every-

day routines, ideas of home (Radley 2005), youth transitions and imagined futures (Woodley-Baker 2009). Asking participants to visually represent their experiences of living arrangements offers a number of benefits. For the researcher, this method may provide: representations of how sociality and emotional closeness can be manifest in the spatial and material; greater access to 'the private' not usually available in research situations; and 'the film of the book' – a confirmation of (group or individual) interview themes (Heath and Cleaver 2004). For the participant, this method affords more autonomy and the opportunity to put topics on the agenda (Morrison 2010). Sue Heath and Elizabeth Cleaver's (2004) experiment in photo elicitation with two of their 25 households and Carey-Ann Morrison's (2010) 'self-directed photography' undertaken by female participants have been a major influence on my methodological approach. There is, nevertheless, the opportunity to develop these methods by building photo elicitation into a research design for all participants – both men and women – and by taking advantage of technological developments in the last decade.

Graphic Elicitation

The term 'graphic elicitation' refers to the use of diagrams as stimuli in research interviews (Bagnoli 2009). Despite potential similarities with photo elicitation, this method

is less well-established in the social sciences but nevertheless worthy of consideration in its own right (Crilly, et al. 2006). It has been argued that diagrammatic methods have three core features: simplifying complex ideas; verbal and visual components, and clear structures and conventions (Varga-Atkins and O'Brien 2009). It is important to consider the use of diagrams for graphic elicitation in the context of arts-based methods as graphic elicitation may also be seen to include self-portraits (Bagnoli 2009), expressive drawing (Guillemin and Drew 2010) and collage and memory books (Rose 2012). As Tunde Varga-Atkins and Mark O'Brien (2009) argue, however, diagrams are more structured than drawings, but less so than tables and lists. Furthermore, the way this method is employed can range from quite directive instructions to broad guidance as a form of 'scaffolding' (Prosser and Loxley 2008).

Graphic elicitation has been used to study areas such as chronic illness (Forbes 1999) and student learning (Hay et al. 2007), as well as topics related to my research interests, including life course transitions (Hanna and Lau-Clayton 2012) and interpersonal relationships (Roseneil 2006). In my own research, I am inviting participants to take part in three particular diagrammatic activities: relationship maps and timelines which are relatively well established in qualitative research, as well as a technique I am

developing called 'household maps'. Firstly, relationship maps aim to visually represent emotional closeness or demarcate interpersonal relationships (Bagnoli 2009). The implementation of this method can vary widely, from using a structured approach of pre-drawn circles (see Roseneil 2006; Pahl and Spencer 2004), to using the metaphor of the solar system (see Jossleson 1996) to allowing participants to openly interpret the activity (Hanna and Lau-Clayton 2012). Researchers have argued that a visual element makes research more accessible and engaging for children and young people (Gabb 2010), although such techniques were first used in the context of participatory research with adults (Clarke 2011). Secondly, timelines have been used where ideas of biography, chronology and narrative are particularly important and it has been argued that timelines biographically situate current experiences, condense a life history and reveal 'turning points' (Hanna and Lau Clayton 2012).

With regards to my development of 'household maps', I acknowledge that 'there is a long history of participatory mapping of places' (Emmel 2008, 1) where researchers have asked participants to draw maps of local neighbourhoods and community spaces (O'Campo et al. 2009). I, however, am interested in the mapping of domestic spaces and Jacqui Gabb's 'emotion map' with family households has been very in-

fluent on my own methodological approach. In order to 'visually map the affective geography of families' interactions' (Gabb 2010, 44), she asked participants to draw up floor plans of their home and represent interactions by using coloured stickers to signify family members and happy, sad, or angry faces or love hearts to signify emotion. However, I think that boundaries and the intersection between the public and private are particularly interesting in the context of households where ideas of 'family', home, intimacy and privacy may be more complex. Maps of domestic spaces also arose in Heath and Cleaver's (2004) research on shared households when they sketched the locations of their interviews (see Heath and Cleaver 2004, 69) and in Morrison's (2010) research on couple households when a participant included in her solicited diary a sketch representing the spatiality of love in her home (see Morrison 2010, 145). However, developments can be made by using participatory visual methods to explore household members' perceptions of their use of space and by building this method into the design for all participants.

The following section will provide the context for my research on young adults' living arrangements by discussing the socio-political climate, social theory and previous research, and will outline my aims and methodology. The main body of the paper will address my use of

photo elicitation and graphic elicitation in turn; I will then reflect on data generated in the early stages of my fieldwork and practical and ethical considerations.

'Couple-shared Households'

Socio-political and Theoretical Context

It has been observed that long-term trends and recent changes are impacting young adults' transitions to independent housing (Berrington 2012). These long term trends may be associated with the 'macro' such as a weakened youth labour market, changes in the structure and cost of Higher Education (HE), and associated with the 'micro' such as a delay in family formation (Clapham et al. 2010). However, more recently, in the context of economic recession and the Coalition government's subsequent welfare cuts, there have been restrictions on mortgage credit, the momentous rise in the Private Rental Sector (PRS) and a shortage of social housing (Berrington 2012). Home-ownership is still an important aspiration for many young adults (Clapham et al. 2010) but greater proportions remain in the PRS (Heath 2008). The average age of first-time buyers has been reported as 35 (Hall 2012) and it has been found that young adults are increasingly reliant on support from family members to finance home-ownership and independent living (Heath and

Calvert 2013). Recent headlines declare ‘UK Housing Shortage Turning Under-30s into ‘Generation Rent’ (Ramesh 2012) and ‘Boomerang Generation Boosted by High House Prices, Rents and Graduate Debt’ (Cowie 2012). Importantly, the Shared Accommodation Rate, which limited housing benefit for under-25s to the cost of a room in a shared house when it was originally established in 1996, was extended to single under-35s in 2012 (Rugg 2010). It must be remembered that transitions to independent living are not clear-cut and vary significantly with regards to gender, ethnicity, and particularly, class – those from a middle-class background and/or those who attend HE are likely to leave home earlier but more likely to return (Heath 2008).

It is in this socio-political context that my interest in young adults’ domestic relationalities arose – that is, the different interpersonal relationships which occur within the home between people in early adulthood. The term ‘young adults’ domestic relationalities’ encompasses a range of concepts relating to vast and complex bodies of literature and I will briefly break down the key themes of my research. Firstly, the term ‘young adults’ is not as unproblematic as it may first seem. Traditional markers of ‘adulthood’ – such as employment, marriage and independent living – are being called into question as these statuses are impermanent and reversible (Wyn and White

1997; Henderson et al. 2007). It has been argued that transitions from youth to adulthood have become increasingly protracted, complex, and diverse (Jones 2005) and should not be seen as a shift from dependence to independence but as a shift in interdependencies (Lahelma and Gordon 2003). Particularly, transitions are seen as extended (Furlong and Cartmel 1997) with terms such as ‘adultsecent’ and ‘Peter Pan generation’ used in the media (for example, Power 2012). I view the different strands of transitions – from school to work, from the parental home to independent living and from family of origin to a family of one’s own (Coles 1995) – as interconnected (Thomson et al. 2002), and I am particularly interested in the connections between the two latter strands (Bridger 2011).

Secondly, the term ‘domestic relationalities’ is used to signify a range of relationships of varying degrees of closeness within a household setting. I draw on sociological theories of ‘personal life’ (Smart 2007) and intimacy (Jamieson 1998) to encompass relationships beyond ‘the family’ (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). My work builds on that of Heath and Cleaver (2003; Heath 2002) who have explored the range of relationships within shared houses: from partner to friend to housemate to lodger to colleague¹. These themes relate also to the core issue of sociology: the relationship between the individual and society: a person’s

ability to exercise agency within social structures (Wright Mills 1959). I am interested in how relationships, living arrangements and 'transitions to adulthood' reflect choice, constraint and the intersection of the two.

Previous Research

In order to explore the themes of relationalities, transitions to adulthood and choice and constraint, I am investigating a very specific phenomenon: households which include a couple and other people. I am operationalizing a 'couple-shared household' as a romantic dyad and other unrelated adults who live in the same residence and I am focusing on those in early adulthood (aged between 18 and mid-30s²). This arrangement may occur in shared houses in the PRS or where homeowners have lodgers. This phenomenon links together two bodies of literature. Firstly, it involves research on couple households, which shows that the proportions of young people living as a couple increases with age (Berrington et al. 2010) and that cohabitation may be undertaken for a range of both practical and emotional reasons (Sassler and Miller 2011) (see also Haskey 2001; Syltevik 2010).

Secondly, it links research on shared households which shows that it is increasingly likely that young people will live in a shared household at some point in their lives (Heath 1999), although expe-

riences of this living arrangement can vary significantly for 'white collar' workers sharing high quality accommodation with friends, and 'blue collar' workers sharing low quality Houses of Multiple Occupation with strangers (Rugg 2010). An issue with previous research, however, is that marriage and cohabitation are often unquestioningly understood as referring to couples who do not live with others, whilst research on 'shared living' has not addressed the existence of romantic couples *within* shared households³.

There has been limited research that touches upon the conflation of couple households and shared households. Non-academic research has suggested that the number of young home-owner couples letting rooms to lodgers has risen in the last 10 years (lv.com 2011); has indicated that the number of couples looking for rooms in rented house-shares has increased, particularly since 2010 (easyroommate.com 2011); and has found that, of couples looking for rooms in shared houses, 58% would like to rent alone but can't afford it, 19% would like to buy alone but can't afford it and 12% enjoy the social aspect of shared living (spareroom.co.uk 2012). To date, I have found two pieces of academic research which discuss couple-shared households: firstly, a piece aiming to understand the practices and meanings of shared living in Sydney (McNamara and Connell 2007) with around one fifth of the

sample of households including a couple. They discussed intimacies generally (as did Heath and Cleaver (2003) and Heath (2002)) but did not specifically address this dynamic between couples and housemates. The second piece is a doctoral thesis by Morrison at the University of Waikato in New Zealand, exploring the everyday geographies of young heterosexual couples' love in the home (Morrison 2010). Around a third of the couples interviewed lived with housemates and the author described the difficulties faced by the couples (such as disrupted privacy) and by the other housemates (such as a lack of agency). These dynamics, however, were not the focus of the work.

Aims and Methodology

My research, therefore, aims to address a gap in the sociological knowledge-base and contribute to theoretical debates by establishing the prevalence of, and reasons for living in, households which are comprised of a couple and other adults. I aim to understand couple-shared households in relation to three core themes: different kinds of relationships, transitions to adulthood, and the complexities of individual choice and structural constraints. In order to answer these research questions I am using a mixed-method longitudinal research design. Firstly, secondary quantitative analysis is being undertaken using data from the Labour Force Survey to answer

questions about the prevalence of couple-shared households and the characteristics of individuals within them.

My primary method of data generation, however, is in-depth qualitative interviews with around twenty people aged between 18 and mid-30s in the Yorkshire region who either live with their partner and housemates/lodgers, or who live with a couple. I am sampling at the individual level rather than the household level⁴. The in-depth semi-structured interviews involve asking participants to provide a brief housing biography, asking about their views and experiences of their current living arrangement, and their plans for the future. This also includes the option for participants to complete three diagrammatic tasks: relationship maps, timelines and household maps (Hanna and Lau-Clayton 2012; Gabb 2009) and the option to take photos and discuss them with me (Harper 2002). It is these visual methods which will be the focus of this paper. Based on initial qualitative analysis, a strategic sub-sample will be invited to take part in follow-up interviews around 3–5 months after their first interview. The analysis of this qualitative data will involve the synthesis of the verbal and visual as well as cross-cutting and longitudinal themes. This research is currently in the early stage of data generation, with around a quarter of interviews having been completed.

Seeing and Telling 'Couple-shared Households'

The following section will present some of the visual data generated in the early stages of my fieldwork. It must be emphasised that this project is on-going and my discussions of these photographs and diagrams are, therefore, tentative. That said, the experience of critically reviewing my methodological approaches and techniques at this stage has not only been useful for my reflexive practice, but reading about these initial experiences may also be useful for others. For both photo elicitation and graphic elicitation, I present data around three main themes within my research then share my experiences of using these methods in terms of practical and ethical considerations. Firstly, I am interested in *relationality*: the inherent interconnectedness of human experiences and the importance of different kinds of relationships in people's everyday lives (Budgeon 2006; Smart 2007). Secondly, I am interested in *temporality*: not only biographical, generational and historical time (Adam et al. 2008) but also daily, weekly and monthly routines. Lastly, I am interested in *spatiality*, where physical space is seen not only as the location of social interaction but as constructed through social interaction (Moss and Richter 2010). While these themes – which Mason (2002, 15) identifies as 'ontological properties' – have been separated out in order to provide

structure for my early analysis, it is of course recognised that space, time and relationships are not discrete categories. This section will, therefore, discuss the usefulness of photo and graphic elicitation for investigating these three aspects of the social world generally, and for investigating couple-shared households specifically.

Photo Elicitation

Sharing Preliminary Data

I have found the discussion of participants' photos a good route into asking about social dynamics and emotional closeness. Several of the people I have spoken to so far live with friends they knew prior to living together. For instance, one participant had moved in with some friends who are a couple. When asked which of her photos best represented her experiences of living with a couple and living with friends, she said:

'I think maybe the fridge one because it represents them keeping an eye on me and looking after me, us having shared friends and shared interests that are outside the house as well as inside the house ... sort of being a bit crafty and creative with the fridge poetry ... (see figure 1).

This one image links to several dimensions of the kind of relationships present in this house: the im-



Figure 1: Photo of a fridge



Figure 2: Photo of a shelf

portance of being able to rely on one another for practical and emotional support, the importance of being part of a wider social circle and the importance of having things in common beyond sharing a roof. This, therefore, shows the potential for photo elicitation in answering my research questions about young adults' understandings and experiences of relationalities within couple-shared households.

Another of my themes is about uses of space within couple-shared households and the material aspect of this living arrangement. One of my participants owned her house with

her husband and had let out rooms to friends and lodgers for over 10 years. When describing one of her photos (see figure 2), she said:

It's a shelf with a load of handbags and it's in the hallway bit outside my bedroom ... and the reason I took it was the sort of space issue of sharing your house with loads of other people ... As we have reduced the number of tenants storage has become less of an issue but there was one point where we had big bookcases on landings and stuff was just everywhere basically! So it's the last remaining

sort of ... communal space storage'.

As well as practical issues, another aspect of spatiality relates to boundaries and issues of privacy. For example, figure 3 is of a doorway: a physical and symbolic boundary:

That's the door up to John and Sarah's room ... I guess it's the one bit of the house that's their personal space so I don't go in very much but it's usually open so I'll often yell up for a chat when they get in in the evenings ...



Figure 3: Photo of door

This photo in particular highlights the interconnection between the physical, material and emotional as Heath and Cleaver (2004) suggested.

Photos might also be used to capture daily routines. Another participant had moved into a house share and subsequently formed a relationship with her housemate. When asked about this photo (see figure 4), she said, *'This is my mug – special mug – and this is one of [my boyfriends'] mugs ... that's my evening mug ...'* *'But yes this is another normal evening activity, drinking camomile tea ...'* Similarly to Radley et al.'s (2005) use of photo elicitation to capture key points in participants' days, images such as these offer a way into in-depth discussions about this living arrangement in relation to time and routine.

These observations give an idea of the ways in which I am using pho-



Figure 4: Photo of mugs

to elicitation to gain a deeper understanding of young adults' experiences of living in a couple-shared household. One of my main reasons for using photo elicitation is epistemological: compared with interviews involving only spoken language, it is argued that photo elicitation interviews 'produce a different kind of information' (Harper 2002, 13), generate richer data (Meo 2010) and access meanings which would have otherwise been 'dormant' (Clarke-Ibanez 2004). This is seen to stem from a combination of the verbal and the visual. For example, Figure 1 demonstrates the value of having two modes of expression: the participant's account is far richer for being able to describe and show different dimensions of closeness with her housemates. In closing comments of another interview, one participant said '*I do like that photo because it has a lot more to it than is on the surface*'. As Sarah Pink (2007, 28) argues, photography offers the benefit of inspiring 'people to *represent* and then *articulate* embodied and material experiences that they do not usually recall in verbal interviewing' (my emphasis).

Other reasons for choosing photo elicitation may seem at first paradoxical. Firstly, (depending on the cultural context) people tend to be comfortable taking photos and as Guillemin and Drew (2010, 179) note, 'sophisticated cameras are now standard features of mobile phones; being able to take a pho-

to anywhere, anytime is now often taken for granted'. As such, creating photos for a research project is a task which participants often report as enjoyable, fun and engaging (Meo 2010). The selection of images I have received thus far includes photos of the results of a baking project, a photogenic cat and a scenic view from a window – images you might imagine people posting on facebook or instagram. I would argue, therefore, that drawing on extant social practices and everyday modes of meaning-making is likely to generate naturalistic data. Some commentators argue, however, that asking a participant to look at, analyse, question, and justify their own photographs is a way of creating distance from the everyday (Rose 2012) and 'making the familiar strange' (Mannay 2010). This may, therefore, draw out reflections and articulations not otherwise elicited in a traditional verbal interview. This paradox that photography may be seen as an everyday social practice which may also create distance from the everyday is something I continue to reflect on as I move through the research process.

Sharing Initial Experiences

With regards to practicalities of employing photo elicitation, it has been agreed that the tasks involved in photo elicitation – including setting up cameras, solving technical problems, developing photos and indexing photos – is time-consum-

ing, expensive and demanding (Meo 2010). Given the technological developments in recent years, however, photographic research need not be seen as so problematic (Clarke-Ibanez 2004). I am aiming to take advantage of the estimation that in the UK, around 62% of internet users aged over 16 own a smart phone (Mintel 2012a) and around 78% own a digital camera (Mintel 2012b). While others have assumed that participant-generated photo elicitation involves the researchers providing a disposable or digital camera (Rose 2012), in my research I am recognising the technological advancements since Heath and Cleavers' (2004) research conducted in the late 1990s. Therefore, I am giving participants the choice of using their own camera phone or digital camera if they have one, or using a disposable camera which I can provide. If they use their own camera, they have the choice of sending the photos by email or picture text message (as Morrison (2010) footnoted, 3 of her 14 participants offered to do this). Furthermore, this approach involves simply reimbursing participants for the occasional cost of MMS text messaging, thereby reducing costs of cameras and postage. So far I have found that participants assumed they would use their own device but of course I recognise that not all young adults will own a camera-phone or digital camera. Despite developments in technology, this method is still more

time-consuming than traditional verbal interviews. The laborious organisation of photographic data is unavoidable and I have come to learn that having to number photos, to organise digital and paper archives, to remember to state the number of the photo during the audio-recorded interview, and to subsequently make sense of verbal and visual data concurrently, are practical issues that come with the territory of photo elicitation.

A detailed discussion of ethical considerations may be beyond the scope of this piece (although see Clarke 2012) but there are several pertinent issues. For example, it could be seen that asking for a window into personal domestic spaces oversteps a cultural boundary (Heath and Cleaver 2004) and Pink (2007, 28) argues that:

When doing [ethnographic] research in intimate contexts like the home the use of visual media and methods creates new ethical and practical dilemmas as the camera enters personal domains that might not normally be the object of public scrutiny.

Marisol Clarke-Ibanez (2004) observed that this level of intimacy may render recruitment more difficult, making processes of informed consent particularly important. In my research, where I am recruiting at the individual level rather than at the household level, I have to make it

explicit to participants that in order to photograph the house or people in it for the purposes of my project, they must gain consent from those they live with. While I considered seeking written consent from all housemates and drew up an information sheet aimed at those living with a participant, following Katherine Davies' (2008) advice from working with family photo albums, I concluded that it was reasonable to leave the main participant with the responsibility to gain consent from those not involved directly with the project. This links to the issues of anonymity, ownership and publication which are pertinent in visual methods (Banks 2007). Following the guidance of the British Sociology Society Visual Sociology Study Group (BSA 2006), I have clearly stated to participants

that they legally own the photos they take and then may agree to allow me to reproduce them in different domains. I have adapted Analia Inés Meo's (2010) approach to consent by using a form which lists each photo a participant has taken by number, and gives them the opportunity to clearly specify which photos need to be anonymised and in what forum they may be published (my thesis, an academic forum or a public forum).

Graphic Elicitation

Sharing Preliminary Data

I will now turn to my experience of using diagrammatic activities in research interviews: relationship maps, timelines and household maps. As aforementioned, the use

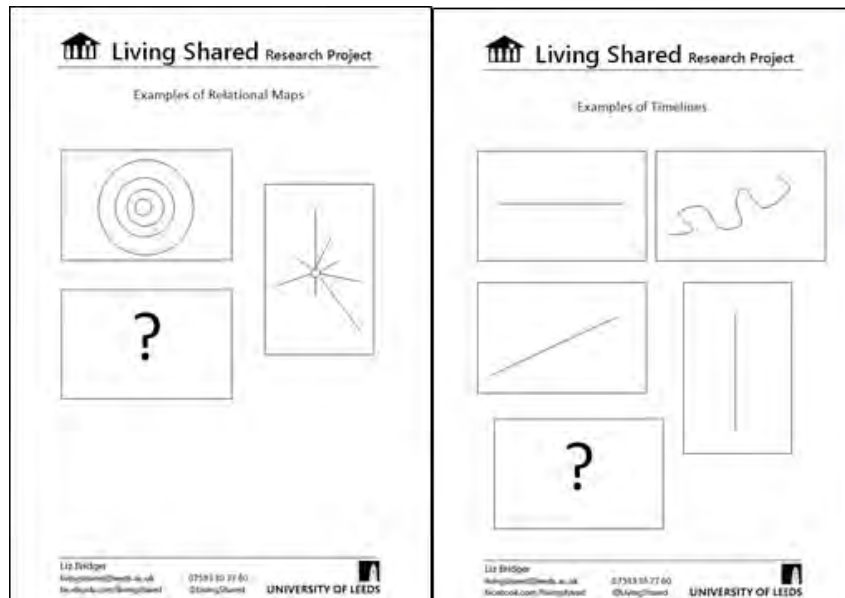


Figure 5: Examples of relationship maps and timelines

of relationship maps is fairly well-established in the social sciences. Following Jane Elliot's (2012) advice, I am providing participants with examples of the kinds of relationship maps they might draw (see figure 5). I have found the traditional concentric circle approach particularly useful as it allows me to ask participants why they have placed different people in each layer to further understand participants' ideas about the difference between a housemate and friend, for instance. This method in itself may be quite flexible: one of my participants who was not born in the UK used 'satellite bubbles' to represent geographical location as well as emotional closeness (see figure 6). However, other participants preferred to take the 'mind map' approach where groups of friends or family members could be clustered (and perhaps colour-coded) (see figure 7).

As discussed above, timelines are useful for understanding significant events and turning points (Hanna and Lau-Clayton 2012) but I am interested in the various and interconnected strands of transitions to adulthood (Thomson, et al. 2002). Following Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson's (1997, 60) observation that 'life stories can be structured by an infinite number of themes' and Heath and Cleaver's (2003) use of housing biographies, I am asking participants to draw timelines showing the different houses they have lived in and the people they have lived with. Once this main structure has been drawn, I then ask if they would like to add other important points relating to relationships, family, education, work or anything else. This allows me to understand a participant's housing pathway in their wider biographical context. For instance, one participant added

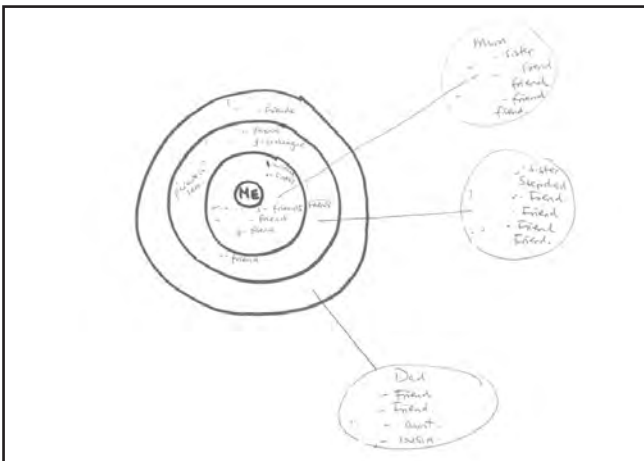


Figure 6: Relationship map

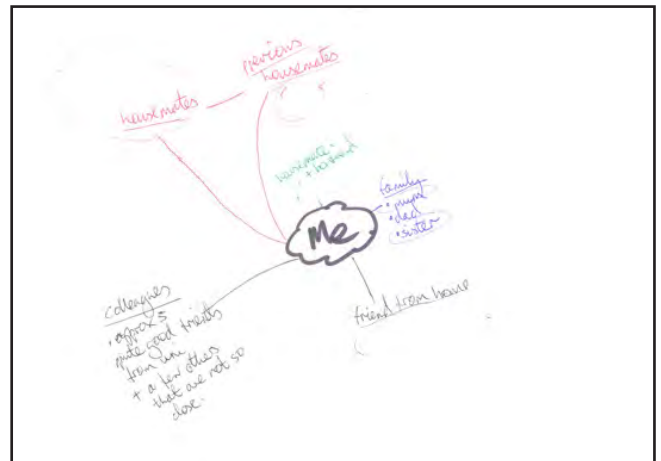


Figure 7: Relationship map

his university education, his first job, the point at which he met his partner and their wedding, coding these additions in red (see figure 8). Another aspect, which I have adopted from Anna Bagnoli (2009), is to ask participants about any significant events in the wider world which may have impacted upon them. The participant mentioned above added to his timeline coded in green the Iraq/Afghanistan wars and the 2010 general election as they had affected his worldview. This, therefore, allows me to link biographical and historical-chronological time (the micro and the macro) to understand individual choices in their socio-historical context. At the end of the interview, I ask participants about their plans for the future (as Bagnoli (2009) did) as I am trying to capture these ‘imagined futures’ (Neal and Flowerdew 2003) with a prospective timeline (see figure 9). As I found

in my pilot research, these may be vague and adhere to normative expectations around home-ownership and children (Bridger 2011) but nevertheless provide a useful tool though which to explore participants’ thoughts on the ‘fit’ between their living situation and life stage.

Another consideration for timelines is the sequencing of the task: household biographies may be drawn and then discussed, discussed and then drawn or discussed and drawn simultaneously. While some researchers using participatory diagramming see talking and visually mapping as inherently part of the same process (Emmel 2008), in earlier research (Bridger 2011), I found the ‘draw-and-tell’ (Crivello et al. 2009) approach difficult and felt that each task obstructed the other. In my current research, I am asking participants to talk me through the different households in which

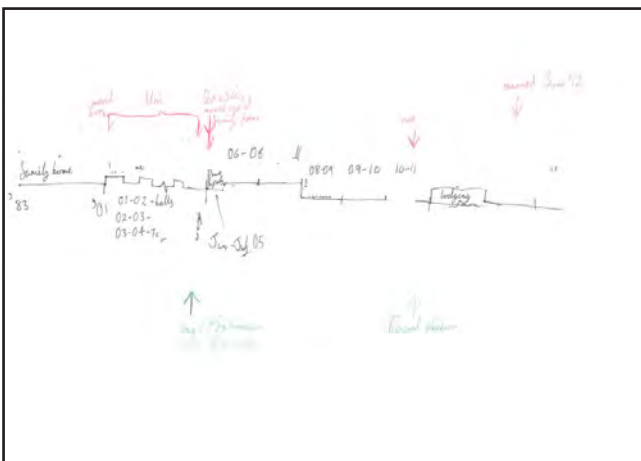


Figure 8: Timeline

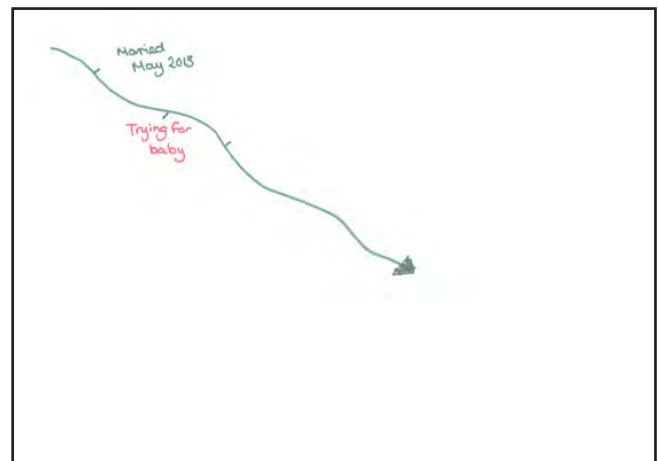


Figure 9: Future timeline

they have lived first, then summarise this onto a timeline, as this gives the participant time to think through the most important events before committing pen to paper, and gives me time to think about points upon which I would like to follow-up. While this method does not capture all scales of temporality (such as daily, weekly, and monthly routines) and is limited by a linear conceptualisation of time (Bagnoli 2009), this activity does situate the discussion of a participants' current situation in the context of their life story.

Finally, I am developing the 'household map' as a more appropriate way for adults to 'spatially locate relational encounters' (Gabb 2009, 7), given that art-based activities such as Gabb's (2010) emotion maps have been described as having connotations of childishness (Guillemin and Drew 2010). During the interview, I ask participants to

draw a floor plan of their home on a piece of card (see figure 10). Then, by overlaying sheets of acetate and providing participants with different coloured permanent markers, I can probe for further information by asking a range of different questions. This method is still in the early stages of development, but I have found that asking where household members tend to spend their time on an average evening to be particularly interesting (figure 11). For example, whether a home-owning couple tends to spend evenings in the living room while their tenants spend time in their bedrooms, or whether a couple and their housemates spend their evenings cooking together and watching films, could say something about the potential range of dynamics within couple-shared households. With varying results, as a form of episodic interviewing (Harding 2006), I am also

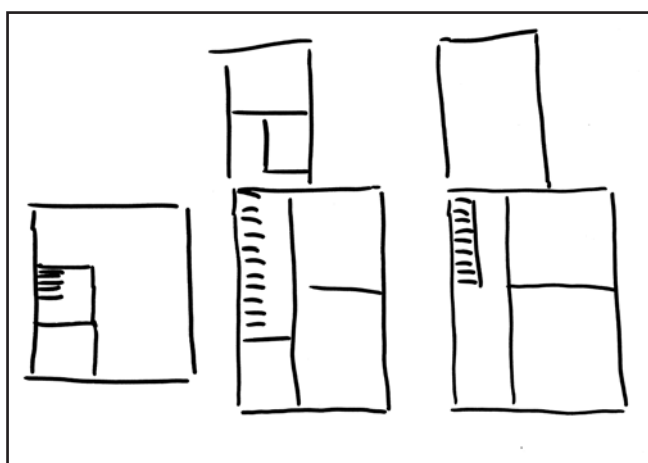


Figure 10: Floor plan for household map.

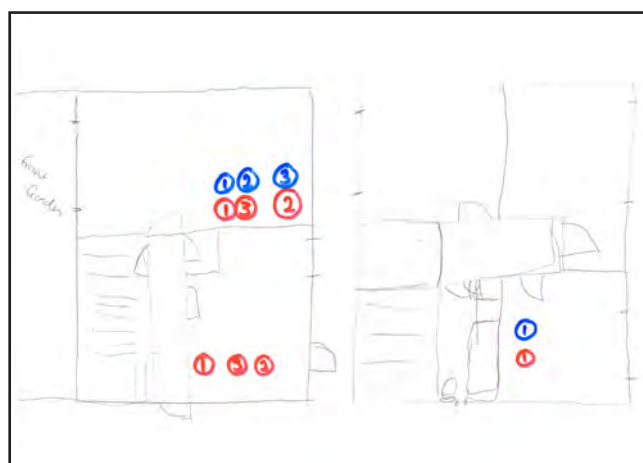


Figure 11: Completed household map.

asking participants to map specific events such as a particular positive and a particular negative situation. This is, however, a flexible method and can be adapted to allow participants to visually represent what is relevant to them. For example, one participant discussed what she called ‘the sofa situation’ – that she and her boyfriend usually sat on one sofa while their housemates sat on the other – and offered to draw this on the household map. So while this method may well evolve into a quite different technique, I believe the ‘household map’ offers a potentially very useful way of allowing participants to articulate and represent their thoughts and experiences of living in a couple-shared household.

One of the reasons I chose to use graphic elicitation was the epistemological richness offered. Proponents of this method argue that diagrammatic activities offer ‘a different way into the research question ... and engage the brain in a different way, drawing on a different kind of response’ (Guantless and Holzwarth 2006, 84). This is seen as helpful when discussing issues which may be difficult to put into words. In terms of sensitive topics, graphic elicitation may allow participants to ‘express the unsayable’ and use images and labels in place of discussion (Guillemin and Drew 2010, 187) or may allow researchers to broach sensitive issues (Hanna and Lau Clayton 2012). For example, in one interview, the drawing of a time-

line allowed for the conversation to come back to a past relationship, which otherwise the participant may not have brought up, or which I may not have asked about. Furthermore, graphic elicitation may also allow participants to represent that which is difficult to put into words such as the abstract (for example, complex family relationships (Gabb 2010) and the literal (for example, the layout of domestic space (Gabb 2010) or local community geography (Emmel 2009))). In each of these examples, it may be seen that an advantage of graphic elicitation is the combination of visual meaning, written meaning and spoken meaning. I am certainly finding this flexibility of expression to be one of the strengths of graphic elicitation.

Sharing Initial Experiences

With regards to practical considerations, graphic elicitation does not involve the same technical issues as photo elicitation. There are, however, other areas of concern such as the location of the interview and the time allocated to complete it. Firstly, there are many issues to consider when the location of an interview is negotiated generally (Elwood and Martin 2000) and, for graphic elicitation interviews, the setting must be conducive to paper-based drawing activities for each participant – some people may feel perfectly comfortable engaging in such activities in a public café for instance, whilst others might feel more self-

conscious. Also, given that people engage with graphic activities to differing degrees (Guillemin and Drew 2010), it can be difficult to anticipate how long an interview may last. For instance, one participant seemed to particularly 'click' with the diagrammatic approach and offered to produce several ad hoc diagrams in addition to the standard three, while another declined the invitation to complete a household map.

With regards to ethical issues, it has been noted that the usual guidance around informed consent, anonymisation, safe storage of data, and the right to withdraw are equally applicable to diagrammatic activities (Emmel 2008) but there are several pertinent points. For example, the anonymisation of data might be achieved through pseudonyms for textual data and through blurring faces for photographic data but a combination of approaches is needed for graphic data. Furthermore, given that diagrams may be used to express ideas which might be difficult to put into words, care must be taken about minimising potential emotional harm to participants (Guillemin and Drew 2010). For example, with the relationship map, I found that one participant said she had come to terms with the fact that her biological father was not in the 'inner ring' but others may find this classification upsetting. Furthermore, another participant who described themselves as having a severe mental health issue

declined the invitation to complete the future timeline because they felt their future was too uncertain. This clearly shows the need for sensitivity when asking people to express themselves by committing pen to paper.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has provided a case for photo elicitation and graphic elicitation by discussing the use of these methods in the early stages of a doctoral research project. I am building on previous uses of photo elicitation with members of shared households (Heath and Cleaver 2004) and couple households (Morrison 2010), and on uses of graphic elicitation with family households (Gabb 2010). This paper contributes to the methodological knowledge-base by sharing experiences of using photo elicitation with a new group – households which include a couple and other unrelated adults – and in the current technological context. It also makes a contribution by sharing data generated through a new diagrammatic activity, the household map, developed to gain a deeper understanding of how adults perceive their use of space in a complex living arrangement.

Through demonstrating my experience of using photo and graphic elicitation in new ways and with a new sample, in this paper I have suggested the ways in which these methods may be useful for

researching three interlinked dimensions of the social world: temporality, relationality and spatiality. Photos may capture daily routines while timelines situate experiences in their biographical and historical context; photos may capture signifiers of emotional closeness (or lack thereof) while relationship maps situate experiences in their relational context; and photos may capture representations of space and boundaries while household maps situate experiences in their physical context. However, I have also raised issues which may be of interest to all qualitative researchers interested in visual methods. In terms of epistemological considerations, I have shown that visual methods have the potential to generate different kinds of information to traditional verbal methods. On the one hand, it could be argued that using images as prompts encourages discussions which are more in-depth and nuanced, whilst on the other hand, it could be argued that the photos and diagrams themselves represent meaning in a different way and should be analysed as data in and of themselves. In my own research, I believe that techniques which use visual, spoken and written expression are greater than the sum of their parts.

Another important issue relates to the practicalities of employing photo and graphic elicitation. With the groups with which I am working, I have been able to take advantage

of relatively high ownership rates of camera phones and digital cameras, and have considered the opportunities opened up to researchers by technological advancements and cultures of photo-sharing. With regards to ethics, it is important to consider Jennifer Mason's (2002) observation that the more multi-dimensional the methods of data generation are, the greater the risks. As such, I have briefly considered the ways in which usual ethical issues are pertinent to visual methods: the need to explicitly negotiate informed consent around processes of anonymisation and reprinting, and the need for particular sensitivity when asking participants to commit pen to paper.

I have suggested novel ways of using these methods but there are several ways my ideas could be developed. For example, I have discussed photo and graphic elicitation as two separate methods but it may be worth considering bringing different forms of visual information into conversation with each other, such as by encouraging participants to reflect on the correspondence between their diagrams and photos. Such integration is common-place at the formal stage of data analysis (Rose 2012) but unfortunately a detailed discussion of the analysis of verbal and visual data lies beyond the scope of this paper (see Pink 2007). What I have found, however, is that embracing the epistemological complexity of spoken, photo-

graphic and diagrammatic information does not make the on-going practical and ethical considerations any easier. These are issues which must be iteratively negotiated throughout the research process, and issues I continue to grapple with as I move beyond the initial stages of my fieldwork. Nevertheless, by going through this process I not only hope to offer a theorisation of an under-researched living arrangement and offer a contribution to wider sociological debates, but I also hope to adapt and trial new methodological tools in order to develop the sociological toolbox.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on an on-going doctoral research project at the University of Leeds (Ethics reference AREA 11–178) funded by the School of Sociology and Social Policy. Ideas for this paper were presented at the ‘New Researchers in Families and Relationships’ conference hosted by the Centre for Research in Families and Relationships at the University of Edinburgh on 28 October 2012. I am indebted to the participants who have taken part in my project and allowed me to reproduce their words and images. Many thanks too to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their comments, and to Laura Connelly, Deborah Fenny and Simon Haywood for their proof-reading skills and feedback.

Endnotes

- ¹ Another doctoral researcher is currently exploring the ways in which relationalities in shared households may be considered distinct from friends or family (Richards 2011b)
- ² The upper age limit of ‘mid-thirties’ was chosen in order to reflect sociological ideas as well as the changes in housing benefit policy: namely, conceptualisations of adulthood as protracted (Kenyon 2002) and the extension of the Shared Accommodation Rate to single under-35s (Rugg 2010) respectively. This is consistent with previous research on young adults’ living arrangements (Heath and Cleaver 2003; Berrington et al. 2009).
- ³ Heath and Cleaver (2003, 194) acknowledged the existence of couples within shared households but excluded those ‘connected by marriage, cohabitation or family’ from their sample in order to draw boundaries.
- ⁴ The decision to sample at the individual level rather than the household level was taken for several reasons: to make recruitment easier, to increase the likelihood of accessing a range of people with varying degrees of satisfaction with their living arrangement (Heath and Cleaver 2003), and to avoid the ethical issues associated with interviewing groups with existing and on-going relationships (Bloor et al. 2001).

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