

1 Biographical Interviews and Imagined Futures Essay Writing: Users of Two Methods
2 in Conversation.

3

4 **Abstract:** This article reports on a conversation between users of two research
5 methods, life history interviews and imagined futures essay writing. A dialogue form
6 is used to discuss these methods and their potential to be combined. The value of
7 comparing research methods is discussed, and then the two methods are described
8 and points of connection and contrast are explored. Although one method
9 emphasises looking back while the other looks forward, the two have much in
10 common, including the exercise of imagination, and discussion of individual agency
11 and structural constraint. Both involve the construction of narratives that help
12 understanding of people's lives as individual trajectories set in broader social and
13 historical contexts. The two methods are quite different but complementary, and
14 possibilities for their combination in one project are identified. The article ends by
15 reflecting on the benefits and drawbacks of using dialogue to consider how research
16 methods sit alongside each other.

17

18 Introduction

19 Ways of presenting approaches to research and their advantages and limitations
20 may take a variety of forms, including conversational forms. The book-length
21 'trialogue' about objectivity and subjectivity in social research engaged in by
22 Letherby, Scott and Williams (2013) allowed them to compare and contrast rival
23 perspectives and to explore the potential for them to be synthesised; the participants
24 also reported being taken on a journey from their different starting places to new
25 vantage points. Less ambitious dialogues between proponents of particular

26 standpoints similarly have potential to promote constructive discussion of
27 researchers' trajectories and shifting horizons around methodological repertoires.
28 Homan and Bulmer's (1982) dialogue about covert research is a good example of
29 how the structured exchange of ideas and points of view can be fruitful, even if
30 complete consensus is not reached. Becker and Geer's (1957) comparison of
31 participant observation and interviews, the response to this by Trow (1957) and the
32 initiating authors' rejoinder (Becker and Geer 1958) also has a dialogue form, albeit
33 not one originally intended. Such exchanges are by no means bound to pit one
34 approach against another in adversarial fashion, and it is interesting to note that
35 Becker went on to warn against the 'very strong propensity of methodologists to
36 preach a "right way" to do things' (1971: 4). These expressions of methodological
37 pluralism have continuing relevance as 'sectarian methodological fights' (Lamont and
38 Swidler 2014: 153) make an unwelcome reappearance.

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40 In addition to promoting understanding of the foundations of different methodological
41 approaches, dialogues between practitioners have the potential to facilitate the
42 development and adoption of innovations by exploring the feasibility of novel
43 combinations of methods. Certain combinations of methods have become familiar
44 with the advent of mixed methods research, for example surveys and interviews
45 (Cresswell 2003: ch.11), but more adventurous mixed methods designs are being
46 pursued, such as bringing together ethnography and experiments (Nettle 2015), or
47 citizens' juries and surveys (Thompson *et al.* 2015). Recognising that many such
48 fruitful pairings may exist, funding was secured to bring together a range of
49 practitioners of different but potentially complementary methods in a project entitled
50 'When methods meet'. This article is the outcome of one of these conversations

51 which brought together users of biographical interviews and imagined futures essay
52 writing. These two methods were selected because they do not have a history of
53 being combined but were adjudged to have the potential to generate insights and
54 reflection as their differences and their complementarity are explored. The unfolding
55 conversation reveals how researchers have distinctive, evolving relationships to the
56 methods that they use, as they feel their way towards workable practices, and
57 become more adept practitioners of the method with experience. In places the
58 conversation takes on some of the qualities of an interview, echoing the description
59 of interviews as 'a conversation with a purpose' (Burgess 1984: 54) but in this case
60 with both participants adopting the interviewer role. There are also confessional
61 elements to the conversation, reflecting perhaps the fact that the participants knew
62 each other.

63

64 **The two methods described**

65 A: There is more than one way of doing biographical interviewing, or life history
66 interviewing; it is a broad church, with room for several different approaches. I tend
67 to use life history interviews to look at how people understand and behave in the
68 political world as they see it. In general terms, the method of life history interviewing
69 focusses on how people tell stories about their lives. It is a broad church because
70 some people think that you need to start at the beginning and go to the end; others
71 focus on a very specific time period in people's lives. I tend to go broadly over the
72 whole life but focus on moments of political importance. There is again a variety of
73 views about how structured the questions are, or even whether you should have
74 questions at all. Speaking for myself, I always have semi-structured questions
75 available. It is not necessary that you have to follow them mechanically and you

76 certainly do not have to follow them in order or replicate precise wording, but I like to
77 have a pretty good idea about where I want to go. But there are some people who
78 really just ask one question and let it run from there.

79 B: So this could be simply inviting someone to “Tell me about your life”. Howard
80 Becker (2014) recalled occasions when all that it had been necessary for the
81 interviewer to ask was “How did you get to be here and what happened next?”, and
82 the person spoke about their life for an hour or more, simply with that prompt.

83 A: The funny thing is I originally trained in moral psychology and moral development
84 where it was very, very rigorous methodological training about what you could ask,
85 how far out you could deviate from that, so when I went to do my PhD I swung the
86 opposite way and opened interviews with very general questions such as, ‘tell me
87 about your life’. Soon I found that did not really work for me because people needed
88 guidance about what was wanted in the interview. They have had many experiences,
89 far too many to be covered in one conversation, so for me it has always been a
90 question of finding the right balance given what it is that you are interested in, but
91 really focussing on the stories that somebody tells about their life and trying to place
92 that biography into the wider context of verifiable, historical events.

93 B: The method that I am more used to working with is imagined futures essay writing
94 where people, generally children or young people, are asked to imagine that they are
95 older and telling somebody about what has happened in their lives. So the focus is
96 on what they are anticipating being the main things in their lives that they have yet to
97 have. It has been used quite often around young people leaving education and
98 entering the labour market, referred to as the transition from school to work. Ray
99 Pahl (1978) used this method as part of his study of the Isle of Sheppey which was
100 written up as *Divisions of Labour* (Pahl 1984), following Thelma Veness’s (1962) *The*

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

118

119 **Imagination in perceptions of the future and of the past**

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

125 elements of people's trajectories it does very much also map onto reimagining a
126 different kind of future as well.

127 B: In thinking about imagining our futures we are necessarily talking about different
128 things that might happen, all sorts of areas for different routes to be followed and
129 unpredictability. Having read your book on how imagination is an integral part of
130 narratives (Author A 2014) I now appreciate that there is a closer affiliation between
131 the two methods because people are looking back at their lives and thinking about
132 not only what did happen but also what might have happened, and that involves an
133 act of imagination.

134 A: That is absolutely right, and one of the points I try to make in the beginning of the
135 book is what kind of imagination I am talking about. Because imagination is often
136 talked about as if it is just fanciful and does not bear a lot of connection to reason
137 and indeed to reality. For me, imagination is something very different than this.
138 Sartre uses the term 'the not yet real' to indicate something that has not happened,
139 but which could. It is, he argues, the basis of our freedom, for without the ability to
140 see life not only as it is, but as it might be, we are reduced to accepting the status
141 quo. Of course there is always an element of fate, and clearly we cannot simply
142 reimagine a future for ourselves and have it magically unfold before us. It takes,
143 rather, a combination of imagination – and with this, agency – and also the good
144 fortune to have the wind blowing at your back. I agree with David Hume, who once
145 said "Nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible"; for me it is completely mistaken
146 to dismiss people's imagination of their lives as unrealistic.

147 B: In the essays one of the things that comes up as an issue when analysing them is
148 how 'realistic' they are, and how fanciful or fantastic. Williams declares her
149 participants' aspirations about their future housing 'completely unrealistic' (Rex and

150 Moore 1974, p. 251) although their anticipated jobs were more in line with what she
151 felt to be plausible. Pahl's marginal notes on the 1978 essays that are archived at
152 the University of Essex indicate that he detected some degree of fantasy, although in
153 his article about the essays he was keen to cast doubt on the idea then popular that
154 young people were routinely duped by magazines and other elements of popular
155 culture that peddled romantic ideals. Of course, some accounts do envisage their
156 authors becoming celebrities or millionaires, but although not all will do so, the fact
157 that one or more may do so presents a challenge to researchers undertaking the
158 analysis. Ambition can be a real enough phenomenon even if the odds are stacked
159 against the realisation of that ambition, of those hoped-for dreams. And one gets an
160 insight into how the authors of the essays think, how they understand the processes
161 by which life unfolds, for example by gaining employment through the operation of
162 family networks. Pahl's later endorsement of the statement that in the labour market
163 'it's not what you know... but who you know'" (1984, p. 298) indicates that this idea,
164 at least, was not regarded as fanciful. Of course, as Veness (1962) points out, a
165 good deal depends on whether the material being analysed is understood by the
166 researcher as having captured ambition, aspiration or expectation, as these are not
167 interchangeable concepts; aspiration allows more scope than expectation does for
168 imagining a life quite different to that of one's parents, for example. Some
169 researchers investigating young people's views of the future have even asked them
170 to identify their 'phantasy job' (Himmelweit *et al.* 1952, p. 166), which obviously
171 allows freer rein to the exercise of imagination than the instruction to stay realistic.
172 A: One thing which we have not touched on yet is that how and what we imagine
173 always stems from our own viewpoint. Similar to Nagel's often quoted phrase 'there
174 is no view from nowhere', Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis argue that the

175 imagination, like all knowledge, is 'situated'. What can be imagined from a particular
176 location is integrally tied to what can be known, and Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis
177 demand that we 'account for the social positioning of the social agent' (2002, p. 321).
178 Applying this concept to the research done on Sheppey, the young people imagined
179 future lives based on what their lives at the time allowed them to see. Even if they
180 produced fantasy visions, these were the fantasies of a teenager living on Sheppey
181 in the 1970s, which might well be very different from the fantasies of current
182 teenagers living in the same place. What is and is not 'fanciful' is not always as
183 black and white as we might assume. The fact that we can imagine something is, in
184 and of itself, an indicator that it is a thread which is connected to life as we currently
185 see it.

186 B: Imagination also has relevance to what people say about the role of chance in
187 their lives as they unfold. An account of a life may well include not only what
188 happened but some effort to explain why these things happened.

189 A: Yes, and one of our challenges is to remember that what is now a 'present reality'
190 was in the past only one of a number of alternative futures which could have panned
191 out. And so the explanations of how we have reached this present are invariably
192 connected to our imaginations, as we return to a past and reconstruct in our mind's
193 eye the other paths which life might have taken.

194 B: As the young people are talking about what they think might happen in their lives
195 there are all sorts of sudden changes, which reminds me of the game of snakes and
196 ladders whereby you are playing, you have the board and you throw the dice and
197 you land on one square and suddenly you are up two rows on the board and in some
198 of the essays an example of a ladder would be, 'I was offered this fantastic job'. But
199 in these essays there are also bad things that happen in people's lives and that

200 might be, 'and then out of nowhere illness struck my family', the sort of thing that is
201 associated with what Michael Bury calls 'biographical disruption' (1997, p. 124ff).

202 These narratives are full of points at which people announce, 'and then this
203 happened', and that is interesting, the way in which these young people write about
204 them, because they do just come out of nowhere in the story, there is no build up to
205 it, they appear as chance developments, rather than things for which much of an
206 explanation is given. Do you get the equivalent in your method?

207 A: Well of course fate does play a role in life trajectories, and this is often
208 acknowledged. But equally, people comment on the fact that something which they
209 once felt had 'come out of the blue' (as it were) was, on reflection, perhaps not so
210 surprising. This is related to the narrative imagination being not only critical in
211 imagining our futures, but equally powerful when applied to retrospectively making
212 sense of our pasts, and how we have arrived at this particular present. The metaphor
213 of snakes and ladders is applicable here, not so much in the sense that something
214 comes like a bolt of lightning – though of course some life changes do – but more in
215 the sense that the game is based on taking a series of steps. One travels towards a
216 ladder, or a snake, one step at a time, and those steps are a person's everyday life.
217 So yes, fate does intervene, but it interacts with and does not eliminate human
218 agency.

219 B: It is like the roll of the dice in a game, and if we think about where the elements of
220 people's stories come from, perhaps all those games that we play as children feed
221 into this process of how we make sense of our lives, including the role of chance and
222 the related idea of probability or likelihood. The sequence of squares on a board
223 suggests that there is a standard, normal rate of progression that can be speeded up
224 by a ladder or slowed down by a snake, so this helps to highlight the point made

225 about the experience of time not always being smooth and linear. There are turning
226 points where trajectories change, sometimes dramatically.

227 A: For me, I have always been very taken with the Aldous Huxley quote, 'Experience
228 is not what happens to a man. It is what a man does with what happens to him'
229 (Huxley 1932, p. 5). The people who tend to be part of my studies are working within
230 very well-thought-out political frameworks. Perhaps I do not spend enough time
231 talking with them about fate. What is always clear for me is that as political activists,
232 they think strategically about the present, and about how best to get from here to a
233 hoped for imagined future. The guiding framework for my research is one which
234 allows for the role of fate, but which nonetheless over time moves in a more or less
235 predictable way.

236 B: I suppose that social theorists interested in the issue of structure and agency
237 might find both our methods having a tendency to encourage accounts of lives that
238 emphasise individual agency. Not only is the invitation to an individual to tell the
239 story of his or her life likely to encourage narratives that frame sequences of events
240 in terms of that person's individual intentions and actions (rather than these things
241 being understood as the working out of structural forces), it is also the case that
242 narrators will be mindful of the disapproval that awaits narrators whose stories blame
243 other people or circumstances for what has happened in their lives. Sympathetic
244 audiences are difficult to find for hard-luck stories in which the individuals appear to
245 bear no responsibility for the negative outcomes that befall them, however much this
246 may fit with structural analyses of macro-level forces over which an individual can
247 exercise very little control.

248 This point about the predisposition of narrators to agency rather than structure in
249 their accounts is somewhat at odds with researchers who take people's family

250 background to be the reference point for what they might realistically achieve.
251 Williams's comment that she found her participants' housing aspirations unrealistic
252 implies that more of the young people were expected to remain living in Sparkbrook
253 than they themselves envisaged; the migration from inner-city Birmingham to the
254 countryside or the seaside about which they wrote was treated as 'unobtainable by
255 the majority' (Rex and Moore 1974, p. 251), even though the study was conducted in
256 a period when upward social mobility over generations was the norm. Younger
257 generations to-day are facing the prospect of being worse off than their parents, but
258 the 1960's was a very different context to this. So this suggests that while narrators
259 may overestimate agency and underestimate structure, for researchers the danger
260 may lie in underestimating the power of people to change their situation.

261

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

263 B: If someone asked you about your method, 'What is it that you are trying to get at
264 in using this method?', would it be something along the lines of what Elliott has said
265 about these imagined futures essays, which is that they provide insights into
266 people's understandings of the social world and their place within it (Elliott 2010, p.
267 1082)? In other words, are these essays a way of getting to see the world from the
268 point of view of the people that we are asking to write essays, or in your case be
269 interviewed?

270 A: That is a quote that could absolutely be said to describe my work as well. I think
271 that it is a wonderful prism from which to try to understand wider social questions.
272 But I am never personally interested in an individual life just as an individual life.
273 I took a photograph in New York City in about 2003 that conveys this message about
274 individual things being part of a wider whole. I was standing at a crosswalk. And at

275 the base of a lamppost, it is made up of lots of small tiles, and this is a few blocks
276 from the World Trade Centre (where the 9/11 attacks happened), and I was really
277 taken with this, because it was very small and very subtle and probably was
278 unnoticed by many people and yet someone made a huge effort to create it. And
279 reflecting on the nuts and bolts of research methods, what is powerful to me is the
280 shifting lens of perspective. The many small, discrete pieces of different colours and
281 different shapes, are very irregular and some of them are mirrors and some of them
282 are just black. Yet if you stand back from it you can actually see this writing, “A
283 Nation Once Again”. It represented the effort to restore national unity in the wake of
284

285 INSERT PHOTO ABOUT HERE (SUGGESTED BY REFEREE 2)

286

287 the 2001 attacks. I am interested in politics and everyday life, but I am also
288 interested in how the small pieces come together to give you a wider picture.

289 B: And just four words can convey so much. One of the things that this ties in with is
290 your part in that story makes sense too, and I suppose in your interviews you find
291 people bringing out photographs, or bringing out little objects and saying, ‘here is my
292 bit of the Berlin Wall’, or whatever it is, and explaining how this has significance by
293 placing it in its proper context.

294 A: That is absolutely right and one of the things that is difficult is, you do not always
295 know when you first see something what the message is there. Sometimes the wider
296 significance takes time to become apparent, and that is one reason why some
297 people conduct life history interviews by going back to respondents several times, so
298 that they can clarify points that have come up in an earlier interview, and that the

299 interviewer has reflected (having undertaken an initial analysis of the material)
300 warrants further discussion.

301 B: We have found that with the essays, sometimes elements of what is written
302 makes sense only when people with 'local knowledge' of the area have pointed it out
303 to us. For example, on Sheppey there is an established tradition of people building
304 their own houses, and once this had been pointed out to us the essays that had their
305 authors doing this could be understood in this context. It is worth mentioning here
306 that this is an advantage that collecting essays from children or young people in one
307 area has over essays solicited from participants in a national cohort such as the
308 National Child Development Study that was a random sample drawn from across
309 Britain that Elliott (2010) studied. So there are disadvantages as well as benefits to
310 representative samples.

311 A: My research has always tended to be less about place and more about a specific
312 political trajectory (be that in the United States, East Germany, South Africa or
313 Britain). What this means in terms of who I select as participants is that my decisions
314 are very purposeful, in other words person X meets these various criteria, and so I
315 will invite them to be part of this study. I can learn about people through a wide range
316 of sources, including perhaps most helpfully fellow activists, but also other channels
317 such as social media, archives and sources of news. My appeal to someone to
318 participate in my research is always a personal one built upon the particulars of their
319 lives.

320 B: And in this context I am thinking perhaps one difference between our methods is
321 that we have looked at these essays and we are talking about each time collecting
322 over one hundred, enough to be able to put some figures onto some things and to
323 say that in 1978 this many of the essay writers talked about going to university or

324 getting married and in 2009-10 this many did, and although they are not
325 representative statistics, because it is not a representative sample, it is something
326 that you can quantify (Author B and another 2012; Author B *et al.* 2012). If everybody
327 is telling you such distinctive individual stories, it is probably much harder for you to
328 see any way in which numbers might come into your analysis.

329 A: Trying to understand the wide range of things that I have heard in terms of
330 numbers actually depletes it of what really gives it its strength. It is not that you could
331 not do it, I just do not think that would be the best way to do it. That is not only
332 because my research involves working with smaller numbers than those you have
333 worked with, though that would be a further reason for me not to quantify.

334 B: And do you think that looking for data about equivalent variables (such as about
335 educational history or marital status) in everybody's story would be going beyond
336 what is warranted in biographical interviews?

337 A: It is important that people feel able to express themselves in terms that make
338 sense to them, are real to them. But getting at this does require active involvement
339 by the researcher. What is true is that any situation that I would go into to interview
340 people, I would have spent a lot of time educating myself about the wider historical
341 context. I do not want people to feel that I have just come in and have not taken the
342 time to do my homework, as it were.

343 B: And I can imagine that in biographical interviews there would be the same
344 challenge as we found with the imagined futures essays, that what people say or
345 write does not always give enough detail to be sure how to classify them. For
346 example, we were interested in young people's anticipation of being geographically
347 mobile, but on the basis of what they wrote it was not always clear when people

348 mentioned another place whether they were imagining going there to live and work
349 or simply as visitors.

350 But whether or not we quantify, these are both methods that give us a window onto
351 how people think, and that can be surprising. An example of that from the essays
352 was the way that some of them talked about age. This made me very aware that
353 sixteen-year-olds have a very different view of what it is like to be my age. One
354 young person was giving their narrative of what they imagined would be going to
355 happen in their lives, and the gist of what was written was 'Then I reached fifty and I
356 was old and my life was over and I went into an old folks' home', and as I read that
357 essay I thought 'this is wrong on so many levels!' But it also reminded me that the
358 world does look very different when you are sixteen. A sixteen year old would need
359 to step outside of their immediate circumstances to realise that life is not over when
360 you reach fifty, in order to get a better understanding of this thing that is for them
361 really in the distance. When people ask, 'what's the practical value of getting young
362 people to write their imagined futures?', my answer would be that it reminds us that
363 the world looks very different to sixteen-year-olds than it does to fifty-somethings. I
364 would also say that they remind us that the world looks very different to young men
365 and young women, which is consistent with other research showing that young
366 people's views of the future are gendered (Brannen and Nilsen 2002). What would
367 your answer be to, what's the practical value?

368 A: One of the things I am very interested in is intergenerational communication. This
369 is not only how we look at our future selves and also people who are older than us
370 but how we integrate our ideas of who we have been, as well. There is a huge
371 strength to be drawn from this intergenerational communication. It is not just about
372 getting a sense of how people see and understand the political world but it is also

373 getting a sense of history and a sense of future, cross-generational binding but also
374 through time, so to me that is a deeply hopeful trajectory. It is about the two-way
375 movement of time.

376 B: An interesting counter to the sixteen-year-olds regarding people of fifty as 'old' is
377 the finding by oral historians that their interviewees 'almost unanimously did not think
378 of themselves as old', and this was a group with ages ranged between 58 and 86!
379 One eighty-year-old woman in that study remarked 'Children probably think I'm an
380 old lady, and when you're forty anyone of eighty is old' (Thompson *et al.* 1991, pp.
381 108, 110). Older people can help younger people to get a different sense of
382 perspective, and of course it is also important that older people are reminded about
383 what it was like to be young.

384 A: I am not sure I entirely agree with that argument. When there is a powerful
385 negative stereotype about a group, in this case old people, it is not surprising that
386 when someone 'joins' this group by the sheer fact of ageing, that they distance
387 themselves from the targeted group. Thus exclamations by my nearly 90 year old
388 mother-in-law about 'old people' – from whom she clearly distanced herself – should
389 not be taken at face value. I once wrote an article on this called ' (title removed as
390 part of anonymization)' (Author A 1999). PLEASE ADD A BIT MORE HERE AS PER
391 REFEREE 3

392

393 **Bringing the two methods together**

394 B: Going back to the issue of the difference of format that was mentioned earlier, the
395 question of intended audiences is quite revealing. On the face of it biographical
396 interviews involve the interviewer being presented with a narrative by an interviewee,
397 whereas the audience for imagined futures essay writers is less clear. Young people

398 imagining themselves older and telling the story of their lives to a future audience is
399 an obvious fiction required simply to facilitate the writing process, but while the reality
400 of writing for the researcher is evident enough, the researcher is only an intermediary
401 and wider audiences may be envisaged.

402 A: But here, too, there are similarities. Yes it's true that at one level the interviewer is
403 the obvious audience for the tale being told. But what has become clear many times
404 for me is that I am not the only, and often not even the most important audience.

405 Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson (2004) use the term 'ghostly audiences' to
406 indicate the impact of those who are not physically present and yet to whom, and
407 sometimes about whom, the story is being told. With elaborated life histories,
408 especially when people are looking back over a long life, they may well be
409 recounting a version of the life they have lived for posterity's sake. On one occasion
410 when I had completed a life history over the course of several years with one
411 woman, we stood in her home, she with the hundreds of pages of transcripts from
412 our conversations in her hands. "These" she told me, "are the answers to the
413 questions my own daughter never asked me." I was not surprised to learn later that
414 she had made copies of all the transcripts and given them to her children and their
415 children. It is not far fetched, I believe, to think that they were very much part of her
416 imagined audience as she told me the stories of her long and rich life.

417 B: Gow and McPherson had one writer use the formulation 'Tell them from me'
418 (1980, p. 12), and discussed various categories of people who could have been
419 'them': not only the researcher, but teachers, educational support services, family
420 members, and peers. In one way the exercise may be understood as people
421 speaking to themselves, with the account being a record of a process of reflection
422 that may not have been undertaken previously. Their comment that 'had the

423 accounts been collected in some other way... a different picture might have
424 emerged' is followed by recognition that the essay form leaves them 'frustrated on
425 occasion, wishing to probe more, to seek elaboration' (1980, p. 12). This is obviously
426 something that interviews allow. However, from my own experience of interviewing, I
427 am aware that I as an interviewer have not always given interviewees enough space
428 to develop their narratives at their own pace and in their preferred direction, which is
429 what the essay format is good at allowing.

430 A related question raised by these investigations of people's narratives of their lives
431 is where their aspirations come from. Some early research was framed in terms of
432 the influences of home and school on aspirations, and speculated that the influence
433 of mothers may be greater than that of fathers. Gow and McPherson's comment that
434 our view of the world 'is shaped in many ways by the relatively few people we meet
435 and know' (1980, p. 6) reinforces these earlier foci, which make no
436 acknowledgement of role models in wider popular culture. Celebrity culture was a
437 prominent theme of the Sheppey re-study (Author B *et al.* 2012). Nor should we
438 overlook historical figures. The community partner we work with on Sheppey (which
439 is quite a deprived context, it is not an affluent area), Jenny Hurkett, really wants
440 local young people to be proud of where they come from. Sheppey was a base of the
441 early aeroplane pioneers. Claude Brabazon responded to sceptics who said 'Pigs
442 might fly' by taking a pig with him on a flight, and there is photographic evidence of
443 this [https://aviationhumor.net/claude-moore-brabazon-the-man-who-proved-that-](https://aviationhumor.net/claude-moore-brabazon-the-man-who-proved-that-pigs-can-fly/)
444 [pigs-can-fly/](https://aviationhumor.net/claude-moore-brabazon-the-man-who-proved-that-pigs-can-fly/) . So the first pig to fly was on Sheppey, and this is an inspiring story
445 about aspiration, ambition, and hope.

446 A: There is a challenge in analysing the material generated through interviews
447 because we cannot be sure that we have understood correctly what it is that they are

448 trying to convey. We try to listen and we do our best, but we can only access part of
449 someone's experience, and we do not necessarily know what we are not hearing.
450 Sometimes you will not be able to hear what people are actually trying to say to you
451 because it is so far from things in your own experience to which you can connect it.
452 One of the things about the student population that I teach is that they tend to come
453 from very socially-excluded, marginalised places and they have a wealth of
454 experience of things which are far away from the things that I grew up with and
455 indeed that I have in my life. But if they realise that these life stories are of value
456 themselves, and they bring them into the classroom, and those are the materials that
457 we work with and teach with, it is a potential space of real excitement when they
458 realise that their experiences and their stories that they come into the classroom with
459 really matter, that they can count as something, and these experiences can form a
460 very fertile basis from which to launch into their studies.

461 B: A further challenge about how people express themselves that we encountered is
462 that times move on, and how material was collected in the past does not necessarily
463 suit the current generation. We were asking in 2009-10 young people to write an
464 essay and they said, 'what, on paper, with a pen? Why don't we talk to the camera,
465 why don't we do Big Brother style, why are you so locked into old technology?'

466 Perhaps researchers need to be more imaginative about the ways in which imagined
467 futures essays are collected.

468 A: In a departmental meeting recently we were talking about our students and their
469 actual futures. I suggested that possibly in the first term when they arrived there they
470 should write a short piece about the person they hoped to become as a result of
471 embarking on this trajectory.

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

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

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

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

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

497

498 **Conclusion: an on-going conversation**

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

515

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