

Timelining: visualizing experience

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Abstract

This article discusses the uses and benefits of an innovative method of graphic elicitation; timelining. The method was developed in the context of a narrative-based research project on fatness and weight loss. Participants' weight over time was plotted on a graph, informed and elaborated by a variety of material objects such as photographs, diaries, and medical records. The timeline provided a focus for participants and prompted their stories of weight loss experiences over time. While initially intended as a simple heuristic tool for eliciting talk, over the course of the research the process of timelining became a central feature of the project. Timelining is a subtle and malleable research method. While keeping time in view, timelining documents, records, extends and deepens understandings of participants' past experiences. It encourages the construction of rich temporal narratives. It also provides opportunity for a deeper researcher-participant relationship to develop. This form of graphic elicitation has particular value for narrative forms of research.

Keywords

graphic elicitation, narrative, reflexivity, time, timeline, timelining, visual methods, weight loss

In western musical notation, the music stave is a graphical (re)presentation of pitch over time. It visually represents the aural experience of music through the written symbols on a graph. A musical stave specifies the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and

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PRELUDE

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Frederic Chopin



dynamic intentions of a composer. However, each piece of written music is laid open to interpretation by a musician. No two interpretations, performances or experiences of a piece of music are ever exactly the same. We use this musical stave analogy to draw attention to the use and (re)presentation of timelining in visual research methods.

The use of visual (re)presentation and visual methods in social science research is not new (Collier, 1957). It has been used to encourage memories and stories about experience to be extended and elaborated. Visual methods research has largely used photographs, often made or created specifically for the research (Bell, 2002; Collier and Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002; Hodgetts et al., 2007; Hurdley, 2007; Keller et al., 2008; Morgan and Pritchard, 2005; Pink, 2001; Radley and Taylor, 2003; Rose, 2007). However, visual methods have also used already existing photographs, retrieved from archives and collections, albums and computers, or boxes, suitcases and the like (Creff, 2004; Sheridan and Chamberlain, in press). Besides photographs, visual researchers have used other material objects such as possessions in homes (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Miller, 2008; Noble, 2004), Lego (Gauntlett, 2007) and paintings and artworks (Bellof, 1997; Irving, 2009; Radley and Bell, 2007; Tamboukou, 2008), to encourage storytelling about past experiences.

Graphic elicitation is a drawing and arts-based form of visual methods research which tends to use diagrams and drawings created specifically for the research. Although less well-established than photo-elicitation, there is growing interest in the use of graphic elicitation in research (Bagnoli, 2009; Crilly et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2007). The diagrams and drawings created for graphic elicitation research can represent anything from corporeal and physical objects to intangible perceptions, impressions and relationships, and can stretch the creativity and innovativeness of researchers and participants alike.

These diagrams and drawings can act as a vehicle for focusing participants' attention during interviewing and help them better understand the scope of the research (Crilly et al., 2006). By combining visual methods with talk, graphic elicitation can uncover layers of past and present experience that may not be readily represented through language alone (Gauntlett, 2007; Henwood and Shirani, in press). Nevertheless, researchers need to be mindful of the limitations of interviews and talk, since 'experience and subjectivity cannot fully make its way into language' (Squire et al., 2008: 9). While we agree that stories are only ever partial, we would argue that graphic elicitation is a valuable method for uncovering the layering and subtlety of lived experience. It has considerable value in situations where there are literacy or language limitations (Gauntlett, 2007) or the subject matter is of a sensitive nature (Cornwall, 1992). For

instance, asking participants to draw pictures has been helpful in research with children, where such young participants may not be able to express themselves adequately in words (Bagnoli, 2009; Driessnack, 2006; Whetton and McWhirter, 1998). Dealing with the sensitive issue of contraception in a rural area of Zimbabwe, Cornwall (1992) used graphic elicitation in the form of body maps to help women gain reproductive knowledge and change contraceptive behaviour. In addition, graphic elicitation methods, used in participatory action research (Alexander et al., 2007; Cornwall, 1992; Kesby, 2000; Wienand, 2007), can facilitate a more active role for participants to 'recognize their own agency' (Kesby, 2000: 425) since researcher and participant become more reciprocally engaged in the research. Overall, graphic elicitation methods have substantial potential to contribute to qualitative research practice in a range of ways.

Time is an important feature of graph elicitation and a defining characteristic of life and of stories (Brockmeier, 2000; Murray, 1999). Time and narrative are inextricably woven together, in that narrative almost always involves time and requires a temporal component to be meaningful. Time is organized through narrative and narrative humanizes time. As Ricoeur (1984: 52) comments, 'time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence'. Also, stories can change over time as new situations and life experiences are encountered (Riessman, 2008; Sheridan and Chamberlain, in press). As for narrative, time is necessarily embedded in graphic elicitation processes of drawing and visually exploring life experience. Various researchers have drawn attention to the value of time by using timelines, life grids, event history calendars and memory books (Bagnoli, 2009; Martyn and Belli, 2002; Thomson and Holland, 2005; Wilson et al., 2007), as well as through the use of repeated interactions in longitudinal qualitative research (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003; Plumridge and Thomson, 2003; Shirani and Henwood, 2011) to encourage participants to tell stories about their lives and past experiences.

In this article we explore the value of timelining as a form of graphic elicitation in research, drawing on data from a major research project about fatness and weight loss over time. Analogous to the musical stave and plotting pitch over time to offer a visual (re)presentation of music, our research uses a graphical timeline and plots weight over time to visually record and (re)present body weight, fatness and weight loss. For us the production of a timeline has a value far beyond simply plotting and recording participants' weight. The timeline was used to encourage narratives and explore the content and dimensions of a participant's memories about being fat and losing weight. When combined with interviews, it acted as an aide-memoire, focusing attention beyond what is possible through talk alone, thus becoming not only a piece of data in its own right but a vehicle through which further data were produced. Using the timeline for graphic elicitation offered us, as researchers, greater leverage for interpretation and insight.

The research project used here to illustrate these issues is a narrative analysis of stories told by nine women who were obesely overweight. These women had lost an amount of weight ranging from 23 to 62 kilograms which represented 27 to 44 percent of their body mass and had sustained their weight loss for at least five years; a difficult task (Crawford et al., 2000; Elfhag and Rossner, 2005). As an integral part of this research, participants graphically plotted their weight over time. The initial idea of plotting weight

over time was informed by Gergen and Gergen's (1986) theoretical representations of narrative form, and in particular the 'temporal arrangement of events relevant to goal' (p. 37). Stories about weight loss are very often stories about struggling to reach a goal weight. Hence, the concept of plotting weight over time, to explore the experience of living with issues around fatness and weight, was formed.

All data collection was conducted by the first author over the course of four one-on-one interviews held at weekly or fortnightly intervals. As part of the interview process, participants were asked to produce material objects which, from a perspective of fatness and weight loss, held special meaning. These objects were used to help plot data points on the timeline and elicit stories. The sorts of objects produced included fat and slim photographs, items of clothing, personal diaries and medical records. The material objects produced were recorded as part of the data set by making copies of photographs and written material, and taking photographs of objects such as clothing and jewellery. Towards the conclusion of the interviews the participant and researcher chose objects that could be added to the graph to illustrate the timeline. Interview sessions were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed. Participants consented to allow excerpts from interviews, written texts and specific images to be used in publications. Names used here are pseudonyms.

We present our discussion of timelining in two parts. In the first, we discuss what is involved in the graphic elicitation process of creating the timeline as an object for facilitating participants' storytelling. In the second, we discuss timelining itself to show how it functions as a subtle, malleable and reflexive research method.

The machinations of graphic elicitation: plotting the timeline

In this section we discuss the mechanisms and processes of creating the timeline; the machinations involved in using this version of graphic elicitation. In our research, each participant, with the researcher's help, constructed a timeline on a sheet of A3 size graph paper. Time in years was plotted on the horizontal axis and weight in kilograms was plotted on the vertical axis. These axes provided the scaffolding around which participants framed a visual (re)presentation of their experience of fatness and weight loss and constructed their talk. Although mindful of the critical research and commentary around obesity (Campos, 2004; Flegal et al., 2005; Gard and Wright, 2005), and the use of the Body Mass Index (BMI) as a measure (Evans and Colls, 2009; Jutel, 2006), we chose to depict the familiar BMI 'categories' of underweight, normal, overweight and obese on the graph. Participants often referred to these categories in their discussions about weight before timeline plotting began and for us, as researchers, it was a way of indirectly and surreptitiously alluding to, and troubling the categorization of weight and health, and encouraging further talk around these issues. This subtle feature of plotting the timeline was especially valuable given the sensitive subject matter of this research; fatness and weight loss.

The extent of the time frame was left up to participants who were encouraged to focus the timeline on the period of their lives when weight was of interest or concern. The time frames ranged from 10 years to a whole lifetime, including childhood and a participant's

earliest memories. The timelines were often extended out by participants as plotting of the timeline progressed.

The production of the timeline was a co-constructed endeavour. During the initial plotting session, the researcher took on the role of plotting the graph. However, what was entered onto the graph was at the discretion of the participants, who provided the details to be plotted. Each data point of weight was contemplated by the participant, discussed with the researcher and then plotted on the graph. The sequence for plotting data points was also not researcher directed but left to participants. Some participants preferred to plot memories of weight around a specific theme, whereas others were guided by time. For example, one participant used a series of sporting events to focus the development of her timeline, while another systematically plotted weight changes starting from her teenage years and moving to the present. Participants had no trouble providing data points for the graph:

Yep. You always know how much you weigh on your wedding day! So it's just one of those things you do. You hop on the scales and it's committed to memory forever. (*Alice*)

After the initial plotting session, participants took their graphs home giving them opportunity to alter or add to details on their timelines. By leaving the graph in a prominent place at home, such as a dining room table, the timeline became the focus of further comment, questioning and revision. Participants also used the timeline to elicit stories about themselves from family members and friends, encouraging further augmentation and providing more material for discussion during subsequent interviews. Participants thus became researchers of their own lives.

When planning this research project the intention had been to complete the timeline before eliciting stories about experiences of fatness and weight loss. However, in practice the process was more complicated and less linear. When data points were plotted, every detail added to the graph provided an opportunity for participants to talk about their life experiences generally and their weight experiences in particular. Often, as one data point was plotted, or life event or activity discussed, it would draw out a story about a similar experience at a different time in the participant's life:

I would've been weighing about 65 [kilograms] when I first saw my midwife. And then through the pregnancy with her [Amy] I got up to 80, so I was lighter than what I was with [Adam], and she was born in September 1996. Then in 1998, in August, after Adam's birth, I was at 81.8. (*Becky*)

The need to plot a data point while it was being talked about meant that plotting sometimes jumped backwards and forwards, seemingly chaotically, all over the timeline. While this process appeared somewhat haphazard it was held together by the story the participant was telling as the plotting of data points progressed. Besides plotting weight over time, participants were also asked to describe, draw or write details about various life events, activities and experiences directly onto the graph to facilitate these discussions. Examples of experiences which punctuated the timeline included surgery

and illness, holidays and employment, shopping and leisure, birthdays and weddings, the birth of babies and the death of parents. In addition, participants were asked to produce material objects to illustrate their experiences. These objects were spread out on the table with the graph and could be called up in discussion as the timeline was developed. The objects also helped participants focus on time periods they had previously glossed over. As one participant who, for years, had kept a personal diary remarked:

I actually don't even remember those [periods of binge eating] but they're in the journal so can only assume that they happened. The journals don't lie . . . (*Ismene*)

Involving material objects was not, as Gauntlett argues for graphic elicitation procedures, 'so much used for triangulation or to improve reliability' (2007: 110) but rather to explore experience in a variety of ways. The timeline creation process and the subsequent talk it provoked ensured a deeper, richer and more nuanced (re)presentation of experience.

The timeline alleviated the need for a list of interview questions or prompts. Like material objects generally, it was used as a point of entry into narrative about past experience (Carpiano, 2008; Henwood and Shirani, in press; Pink, 2008). Typically, while doing the timeline, the researcher could simply point to areas on the graph and ask 'What's happening here?', or, 'Tell me about this'. Such questions were all that was needed to encourage storytelling. Researcher comments like, 'that was when your second baby was born' unobtrusively connected the timeline to the storytelling to facilitate later analysis. Another strength of our timeline creation process was the utility of time. The use of multiple interviews not only delivered some of the strengths of qualitative longitudinal research (Corden and Millar, 2007; Neale and Flowerdew, 2003; Saldaña, 2003; Shirani and Henwood, 2011) but also served to ensure that time was central to our graphic elicitation process on several levels. The availability of time afforded participant and researcher occasions and opportunities to get to know each other better and to develop a more open, closer relationship. Also, the physicality of drawing the graph forced them to sit close together as they plotted each data point. This encouraged the physical and emotional distance between them to shrink: the timeline became a bridge between two strangers. Our research process also allowed participants time to reflect on past experiences, time to seek out material objects, time to reflect on what they had said in previous interviews, and time to think about what they were doing as the timeline was drawn, changed and augmented over several interview sessions. The timeline, with its constant construction and reconstruction, rather than being an initial pre-interview stage, became a central focus for the research.

It is important to note that graphic elicitation may not be valuable or suitable for all participants or all situations. Being confronted by visual (re)presentations of life experiences can be illuminating for some participants, but upsetting and disturbing for others (Sheridan and Chamberlain, in press). For example, in our research one participant's weight ranged from 60 to 199 kilograms, thus finding a workable scale for the vertical axis for the graph was problematic. The graphical scale could not allow the subtleties of

smaller weight losses and gains, essential to the method and personally important to the participant, to be shown. In this case, plotting the timeline became disruptive and unhelpful. However, by developing two graphs with different scales, plotting could continue. Just as a researcher carefully adapts questions in an interview according to previous participant responses, a researcher using graphic elicitation needs to modify or abandon drawing if it becomes a nuisance or an impediment. Graphic elicitation is not a prescriptive method for research and its value must be continually evaluated.

In the planning stages of this research the timeline was conceived of as a heuristic tool to promote narrative and encourage participants' storytelling about fatness and weight loss. However, this pragmatic approach to our graphical elicitation method proved too simplistic and linear. In practice the creation of the timeline developed into a process we call *timelining* and became an integral part of the research. The following section discusses the complexities of both the timeline as a resource for documenting and recording past experience, and the process of *timelining* as a vehicle for reaching beyond and between mere dots and lines on a graph to enrich and deepen storytelling.

The process of timelining: unravelling the complexities

The evolution and unexpected layering and complexity of *timelining* are explored in this next section. For our purposes we have chosen to discuss the process of *timelining* in three phases of documentation, extension and reflection. Visual data are often discussed in this way, especially in biographical and memory-based research (Sheridan and Chamberlain, in press; Thomson and Holland, 2005). However, although we consider these phases separately, the processes of *timelining* need not be sequential, nor are they easily separable. *Timelining* can document, extend and reflect simultaneously.

Documentation and record: drawing the lines

It can be difficult to separate the object of the timeline from the process of *timelining*, yet documenting and recording is a necessary first step of the *timelining* process. As previously shown, the plotting of data points onto the graph documents and records what a participant weighed at a particular time in their life. For a composer and musician a manuscript documents how a piece of music should be played and for a participant the timeline documents some very specific information about a very specific part of their life:

I got my doctor to print this out for me. Um, he hasn't got all of my weights but that's just from 1995 to September 2006. (*Charlotte*)

Dot by dot as the graph is plotted the timeline documents what a person weighed, but it also documents when babies were born, what a person looked like in photographs and where and when a wedding took place and so on. For this research the documentation of weight, objects and events provided a framework which participants regularly referred back to when seeking support for storytelling.

Extension and distraction: beyond the lines

The timeline, as a completed document, is singular and object-like, but the *process* of timelining is multiply faceted. It is this process that reaches beyond the mundane, using the timeline to explore interesting perspectives on experience, storytelling and time. Construction of a timeline can begin with a single dot. However, in our research, *doing timelining* became a complex amalgam of: interrogating weight data, life events and activities; finding and discussing the meaning of material objects; a focus for talk; a means to capture the importance of time; as well as producing an object for discussion in its own right.

Participants were not asked to restrict themselves to any form of temporal linearity while creating the timeline, but they were guided by the grid of the graph. It is worth pointing out that the linearity of the timeline, suggested by the stricture of the axes on the graph, is probably no different from the constraint imposed on storying by a list of questions during interviewing (Kvale, 2006). In practice, the graph's axes did not curb the unfettered nature of plotting the timeline. As more and more data points were plotted participants were able to join the dots together and the graph began to picture a neat and tidy, linear display of the fluctuation of weight over time. However, the messiness of timelining is hidden by the tidy, albeit zig-zaggy, upward and downward movement of time passing on the timeline.

Timelining has the power to attend to small details and skim over others. With music, the conductor of an orchestra can pull apart one of Chopin's concerti to draw attention to the nuance and detail within a single bar of music. The musicians can practise this bar over and over again and derive much from its intricacies. Yet, at other times, whole sections of the concerto are not laboured over but instead skimmed over. Similarly, timelining makes possible the scrutiny of small details of past experience, times past, but also time passing. On some occasions single weight-related events can be elaborated and expanded upon; at other times many years are glossed over with little comment. In contrast to Alice knowing what she weighed on her wedding day, the following excerpt demonstrates how periods of time can be skimmed over:

I've got lots of little photographs, this is probably the most important one of me which sounds stupid but that's me hovering around 11–12 stone-ish which I'm always. This is where I started this and it seems to last . . . to put a date on that; that's my dear old dad who's gone. Um this would be um just before I left, 1980. I left in July 1980 so it's my last photograph where I was hovering 11–12 [70 to 76 kilograms] I couldn't give you the exact [date] but it was always 11 or 12 and it was like that from here so that's some 15 years worth.

And then I came to NZ and I still was wearing this [a dress she is wearing in the photograph] um when I first started so um 10 years worth. So I'm obviously the same person. Although, I think it [the dress] was perhaps a bit slimmer on me there. Yeah, but having said that, I actually look slimmer there (in one photograph) than I was there (in another photograph) and yet that was only a month apart. That's actually quite interesting could be the dress – looking horrible in it. It's the same me but that's a month later. (*Fiona*)

Fiona used the events in photographs to identify and guide where particular data points should be positioned on the graph, although they are snapshots of events in her life unrelated to being fat or losing weight. She uses features within them, such as the dress she was wearing, to determine what she weighed at different times in her life. As others (Collier and Collier, 1986; Sontag, 2003) have noted, these images, as a source of information, are bridges to events in the past; the story Fiona builds connects her past experience to her present need to plot the graph. Had her motivation for looking at these photographs been anything other than our research about weight, then the story may well have been very different. An image produced by a photograph, although representative of an event in the past, is seen differently every time a story is told. In other words, it is the present which shapes the past, but it is also stories about the past which shape the present. Timelining pulls time, events, photographic images and storytelling together.

Previously (Sheridan and Chamberlain, in press), we have discussed how fat and slim photographs misleadingly and unjustly condense the experience of losing weight, which can take months and in some cases years to achieve. The instants of time captured by fat and then slim photographs, when used to represent the success of dieting, often oversimplify a journey of change that may have been convoluted and protracted. An instant, captured by a photograph, can confine and define experience (Barthes, 1982; Sontag, 2003). In the excerpt above, Fiona says the image is her; 'it is the same me'. Unlike the significance of Alice's wedding day, the period Fiona talks about here may have been unmarked and ordinary so time escaped; certainly time pertaining to weight was unremarkable. The image she talks about is given responsibility for 15 years of lived experience during which little has changed except time. While time did not stand still, with this photograph 15 years have (col)lapsed in an instant.

The timeline keeps time in view. The stricture of the horizontal time axis is a constant reminder of the traditional mode of temporality: an arrow-shaped, chronologically linear procession of past, present, and future. However, as Polkinghorne (1988: 132) argues, time is not simply a 'series of "nows," instants that exist along a timeline' but an abstract (re)presentation of time. While the *timeline* in our research can appear to promote this notion of time as a series of 'nows', in practice *doing timelining* plays with and manipulates this linear (pro)portioning of time.

Time is not simply a chronological construct; the subjective experience of time is more complex and varied (Brockmeier, 2000). As Neale and Flowerdew (2003: 192) argue, 'Understanding how people move through time, use time or relate to time – their strategies for making sense of the past or navigating their futures – requires an understanding of the varied and individualized circumstances of their day-to-day lives.' This was true for our participants who, at various points during timelining, located themselves in different contours of time (Brockmeier, 2000; Neale and Flowerdew, 2003), historical time (talking about weight during childhood compared to the present), circular time (talking about knowing why previous attempts to lose weight failed), cyclical time (talk about weight change at Christmas), spiral time (talking about weight being out of control), personal time (talk that linked weight to mortality, provoked by the death of a parent), and future time (talking about losing weight to find a partner).

The time signature of a piece of music stipulates the number of beats in a bar but the number of notes within a bar can vary substantially. Some bars of music can be very simple and uncomplicated whereas others are elaborate and detailed. Similarly, timelining reveals how the experience of time can be one of fits and starts; large pieces of time can be compressed while others are expanded. Through storytelling, time is measured by what has happened; how much weight a participant has lost or how much something has changed. For researchers interested in narrative, change is of great interest (Denzin, 2001; Gergen and Gergen, 1986). Since time is at a storyteller's mercy, it can be tempting to read a lack of change as time when nothing is happening. However, with timelining it is possible to draw attention to spaces on the timeline where data points are conspicuous by their absence. Drawing attention to such spaces in our research provided a versatile vehicle for elaboration, explanation and discussion, similar to the value missing photographs have in photo-elicitation and photo-production research (Brookfield et al., 2008; Hodgetts et al., 2007; Sheridan and Chamberlain, in press). Periods of absences or lack of change are significant, for like periods of silence in a piece of music, they can be very poignant indeed.

The timeline can also serve as a distraction, especially for participants concerned or shy about being interviewed. Intensive probing during interviews can make participants uncomfortable and uneasy, whereas an object like a timeline can distract, and by providing something to talk about, make a participant's need to perform less arduous (Sheridan and Chamberlain, in press). By drawing attention to itself, the timeline became a third and active player in the interview, since elicitation took place around the timeline instead of around the participant. In particular, timelining made it possible to interrogate the timeline's coherence, compare one part of it with another, and compare its story with the stories told through the photographs and other objects produced, to more deeply explore aspects of experience. Throughout this process, participant and researcher almost take a backseat to the timeline's centrality; their relationship is changed as the timeline comes more strongly into view. Also, as has been found when using photographs (Collier and Collier, 1986), the timeline's active role meant that repeated interviews were never stilted or stale. Timelines are malleable objects which are open to change, fine-tuning, and augmentation; they need never be finished but can continue to add freshness and newness, like the stories that are drawn from them.

Reflection and insight: between the lines

An important feature of timelining is that it allows considerable time for reflection and contemplation. Through timelining participants became researchers of their own lives by reading between the lines of the timeline and gaining insight into aspects of the past and the present and making plans for the future.

Details about participants' experiences, such as events and activities, could be interrogated and discussed before, during, and after they were incorporated into the timeline. They could be discussed on their own, or in relation to other details plotted on the graph, as well as in relation to material objects produced, like photographs and previous talk. Participants often talked about enjoying the complex nature of timelining. Sometimes it was the combination of using material objects, drawing the timeline, and the utility of

time for contemplation that was valuable. The following participant mentions the insight derived through taking part in the research:

Yeah, well it was a big opening by going through these photos and sitting there [at home] chatting about it [the timeline]. It's interesting. And getting their [family] feedback on things and what they thought. No, it's an interesting game. It's been a big eye-opener this whole study has. Never ever thought about it; why I was large . . . it was because I was so lonely. So it's an amazing opening to see that. (*Becky*)

Becky does not credit her insight to any one aspect of our research method; she is grateful to the whole study. It was the demands of timelining, the to-ing and fro-ing between weight records, photographs, material objects, events and activities, talk, and time for reflection, which enabled her insight.

Timelining provided participants with a variety of perspectives from which to view their lives. For example, sometimes it allowed the close scrutiny of important events like a wedding or the death of a parent. These events were frequently significant turning-points in a participant's life and can be described as life-changing epiphanal moments (Denzin, 2001; Turner, 1986). However, participants can be so involved and caught up in the immediacy of these experiences that events are only recognized as life changing or insightful some time after the fact (Ellis and Bochner, 1992; Frank, 1993). For example, by graphically plotting weight and events and connecting them to time, timelining provided Becky with a vehicle for hindsight. She attributes her decision to change her life to a string of specific events:

If you look at it [the timeline], there were so many trigger points over such a short period, of over, you know, like a couple of months, there were so many little things . . . and then the doctor finalized it. That's why I ended up doing it [losing weight]. There was the Jacques E [a bad experience in a clothing store], there was splitting of my pants, there was my husband's work-do – trying to find something to buy [clothes], and then my doctor. And they were just such – so many little things. (*Becky*)

At other times, timelining encouraged participants to stand back and take a bird's-eye view of the timeline as a whole; the picturing of a lifetime. Here a participant talks about the melancholy she experienced as she nostalgically looks at her life:

It's been quite interesting for me for reflection I think. It's been really funny, really, really, strange, not sad, not emotional . . . it was just, I suppose going back 50 odd years, I suppose in a nutshell . . . going through my life. (*Fiona*)

For many participants creating the timeline and coming face-to-face with a visual (re) presentation of life was powerful, if not a little disconcerting.

Timelining also encouraged participants to compare one part of the timeline with another, or one part of life-experience with another. In the following excerpt Ismene discovers a portion of the graph she had not noticed while plotting her weight. She did not give any significance to it until she looked at the timeline as a whole. Through

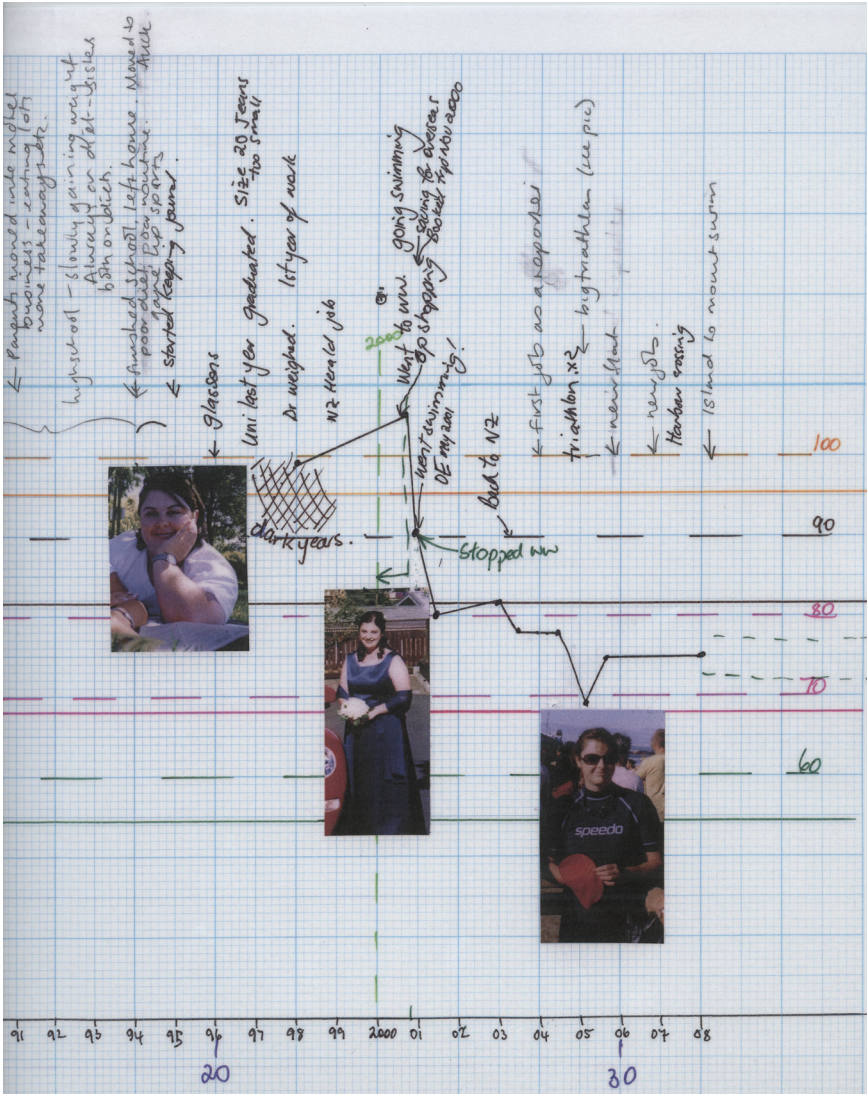


Figure 1. A segment of the timeline created by Ismene

The graph is accented with events, activities and photographs important to her. The horizontal axis spans the years of her life from 1993 to 2008. The vertical axis is weight in kilograms.

timelining she became captivated by what she described as a ‘wiggle in the line’, and compared it with other sections of the timeline. The portion of the timeline she is talking about is shown in Figure 1 and refers to the more recent, right-hand section of her graph. Ismene uses this section of the timeline to reflect on the past, and, in the present, she makes plans for the future:

I thought that it [drawing the timeline] was quite helpful. I'd never looked at it in that way before. I think, looking at that and seeing how I did have that little kind of wiggle in the line in the last five years. It reinforced for me that I really don't want to do that. I don't want to be yo-yoing around and that if I can just keep that nice steady line within the weight range I am in, then that will be fine. (*Ismene*)

The wiggle in the line is a fluctuation in Ismene's weight, and while the wiggle may appear to be a minor aberration in the timeline, the lack of control it represents is not minor for her:

All of those feelings came back and it was really a bit sort of panicky and you start to think, 'Oh my God is this going to spiral out of control. Am I going to lose it all? All that hard work that I did, is it going to be lost?' (*Ismene*)

For Ismene, fluctuation in weight is very undesirable and noticing the wiggle in the timeline elicited concerns about being able to keep control of her weight. Seeing this small section of her timeline reinforces her resolve to maintain control in the future, to avoid fluctuation and to maintain a nice steady line.

The timeline is a valuable tool for reflection. It can work to reveal, uncover and expose. However, it can also work to conceal, hide and disguise. 'The nice steady line' which Ismene desires hides her anxiety about losing control and the constant dissatisfaction she feels; she can never relax:

[I] never consciously stopped wanting to lose weight – still think I need to lose 5–10kg more. Probably stops me from feeling too relaxed. (*Ismene*)

Timelining also provides insights for us as researchers. For example, the story elicited by the 'wiggle' in the timeline gave insight into the never-ending-struggle participant's face in trying to maintain significant weight loss. If Ismene had not focused on, and discussed this 'wiggle' we would have read this section of her timeline as success given that she had maintained her major weight loss for seven years. However, timelining provided insight into her fear of losing control. This illustrated how for successfully maintaining significant weight loss the fear of major failure is ever present; the battle is never won (Sarlio-Lahteenkorva, 2000). The complexities of timelining allowed us to extend, elaborate and deepen storytelling, and enabled insights into the meanings of fatness and weight loss.

Conclusion

The music analogy is apt for timelining. Writing music is similar to plotting a timeline; both require a composer. As a musical manuscript has a time signature, similarly timelining keeps time in view. Rehearsing specific sections and sequences of a piece of music is analogous to the close scrutiny or glossing over of events and episodes on a timeline. As music invites interpretation so too does timelining. Being laid open to interpretation by musicians and storytellers, no two performances of a piece of music or a story are ever

exactly the same. Neither are the understandings of different audiences. A piece of music can stir up memories deep within us as can the process of timelining. When musical instruments play together each makes a contribution to the music produced, and different instruments create different harmonies. Equally, the instruments of timelining – talk, the timeline, photographs, objects, notes, participants and researchers – all contribute to the process of timelining and the facilitation of storytelling.

This article opened with a prelude by Chopin, who mostly composed for the piano. In the few cases where he also composed for an orchestra, the piano was still the star, albeit ably assisted and supported by the other instruments. Similarly, a good deal of qualitative research relies on talk to gain insight into the intricacy and texture of lived experience. However, talk can be very ably assisted and supported by visual methods (Bagnoli, 2009; Collier and Collier, 1986; Frith and Harcourt, 2007; Harper, 2002; Hurdley, 2006, 2007; Irving, 2009; Keightley and Pickering, 2006; Mannay, 2010; Pink, 2001; Rose, 2007; Sheridan and Chamberlain, *in press*) and, as this article has shown, by timelining in particular.

In this article we have described how a timeline, a simple graph of weight augmented with life events and photographs, developed into an informative, reflexive, method of graphic elicitation which we call timelining. As a form of graphic elicitation, timelining has a number of important features. First, timelining keeps time directly in view, providing understandings and interpretations of the past, and how pasts shape presents and futures. As Brockmeier (2000: 51) states, time is omnipresent; there is 'no aspect of human reality that is without temporal dimension'. Unlike most forms of visual research, which tend to treat time as unobtrusive, timelining retains a clear focus on time in all its varied dimensions, including historical time, circular time, cyclical time, spiral time, personal time and future time. Further, the timelining process demands time; time for participants to plot and extend the timeline, time to seek out material objects and link them to the timeline, time for the development of closer participant-researcher relationships, and time for reflection and insight by both participants and researchers.

Second, timelining is a malleable and adaptable method. It is malleable because it can be used in different ways across a single project, with different components of the timeline coming in and out of view at different times. For example, at one time it can focus on the changes in a person across a series of photographs or at another the timeline can be left out in view for family members to embellish. Timelining is adaptable because it has the potential for use in different ways across different research projects. As one example, it could be used in migration research, drawing on time, photographs and material objects, to explore the ways that transnational links are forged and maintained.

Third, timelining has particular value for narrative research. The timeline provides a means to lay out for a participant a comprehensive, multi-textual (re)presentation of her life. It pulls together rich data, promotes narrative accounting, and allows both participants and researchers to focus in on specific aspects of the data to deepen and enrich storytelling. It is a particularly effective means of highlighting turning points and epiphanies in people's lives.

Fourth, timelining is a highly reflexive research process, for researchers but especially for participants. The systematic agglomeration of data onto the timeline allows participants to contemplate the life (re)presented, to gain insights into their experiences,

to explore dimensions of continuity and change in their lives and often to see things from new perspectives. In so doing, participants can effectively become researchers of their own lives.

In this article we have used a project about weight to illustrate the value of timelining for cultivating and advancing storytelling about fatness and weight loss. However, we would argue that timelining is a generic method, particularly valuable when the focus of attention is on events changing over time. Timelining is a form of graphic elicitation that extends graphic elicitation methodology, and is particularly relevant for narratively-driven research, with all the advantages we have discussed for visualizing experience.

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