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Abstract

The article argues for the utility of life diagrams as a methodological and analytical tool across various life history projects. Using research on post-war political mobilization among former combatants (in Colombia, Namibia and the United States), the article demonstrates how a life diagram can modify the interview and become a useful analytical tool. During the interview the diagram helps both the research participant and the interviewer to compare different events, weigh various experiences, and ensure that all periods of the life are covered even if the interview is not done chronologically. During the analysis, the diagram offers a contrast with the transcript of the interview, and the shape of the life diagram can be compared across interviews

in search of similar types. This visual turn can help address issues of empowerment, through promoting the research participants' own interpretation of their lives.

Keywords: life history interviews, life diagrams, life trajectories and transitions, temporal position, empowerment, graphic elicitation.

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Life diagrams — a methodological and analytical tool for accessing life histories

Introduction

Life histories are increasingly used among various social science disciplines. Life histories try to capture the interviewee's entire life story. Indeed, life histories are today an umbrella concept for several different methods (auto-ethnography, oral history, life stories and autobiography), and have especially been used by historians (oral history and micro history), sociologists and anthropologists. Life histories are far from a new form of interviews (see e.g. Miller et al., 2003; Bertaux and Kohli, 1984; Plummer, 2001; Thomson, 1998; Clandinin, 2007; Jones, 2004; Runyan, 1982; Pamphilon, 1999; Järvinen, 2004; Bagnoli and Ketokivi, 2009). As such, it is no wonder that we talk of a *biographical turn* in the social sciences (see e.g. Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Rustin, 2008). As a result, discussions on specific methodological challenges which arise when conducting life histories have followed. This includes, but is not limited to, memory distortion (see e.g. Thomson, 1998: 585) and the balance between particular and individual stories and the quest for more general truths. One of the larger challenges is, however, the power balance between the researcher and the person whose life story is being researched.

In conducting life history interviews I developed an interview technique using life diagrams,¹ where in addition to the conversation itself, the participants also drew a diagram over their political life. It is the advantages (and disadvantages) of this graphic elicitation technique as a methodological tool during data collection and as an analytical tool after data collection that this article is concerned with. As such, the usage of life diagrams during life history interviews can add both methodological and analytical advantages. This participatory visual method helps us address the power imbalance between researcher and researched, deepens our understanding of life

histories and is a tool for achieving systematic analysis of ethnographic data. This article demonstrates how and why working with life diagrams can enrich the data collection process as well as the analysis.

In my work, and for many others, it has been obvious that how the data collection itself is conducted is not a separate process from the data generation process. Telling your life history creates meaning in itself and therefore it becomes part of the meaning-making process we as researchers are interested in. The data collection therefore becomes part of the phenomenon we want to capture. Thus we can also strategically create certain interviews and interview situations. The form of the interview itself creates additional value for the research purpose and question each project is concerned with, and matters for what we gain access to.

Using research on post-war political mobilization among former combatants, this article demonstrates how a life diagram drawn during the research interview modified the interview itself and became a useful analytical tool after the interview. Life history interviews were conducted with a 50 former combatants from three very different cases and contexts: former Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19) guerilla in Colombia, former independence fighters of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Namibia, and Vietnam veterans in the United States. The interviews focused on specific turning events related to their membership in an armed group and participation in armed combat, the return home and the associated veterans policies for their political choices throughout their lives. As such, the interviews were concerned with the interaction between a societal process, moving from war toward peace, and the individuals' interpretation of, and choices in relation to said process.

This article first discusses research concerning life histories and visual elicitation techniques, before describing the project and associated data collection in greater detail. Finally, the article discusses how life diagrams can function during the data collection phase and then during the analytical phase. This division into a data collection and an analysis section is not clear-cut in the actual research process, but is done here for presentational purposes. During the interview the

diagram helps the research participant and the interviewer to compare different events, weigh various experiences, and ensure that all periods of the life are covered even if the interview is not done chronologically. During the analysis, the diagram offers a contrast with the interview transcripts, and the particular shape of the life diagram can be compared across interviews in search of similar types. In both stages, the life diagram helps the interviewee assert their interpretation of their life, and shifts the power balance in favor of the research participants.

Life histories and participatory visual methods

Life histories are a form of in-depth interview which try to capture the interviewee's entire life. These interviews are particularly concerned with understanding specific life paths, and transitions between different trajectories and parts of life. Life histories have often been used to understand global watershed moments, such as the Great Depression, the Holocaust or the fall of the Berlin Wall through collecting several voices and experiences around one specific phenomenon (see e.g. Miller et al., 2003; Bertaux and Kohli, 1984; Plummer, 2001). Life histories can be used for a range of other important sociopolitical processes which happen at a macro-level even if they cannot be termed global watershed moments, such as refugeehood/migration (Bennich-Björkman, 2016), social movements (Passy and Giugni, 2000), the Arab spring in Egypt (Schielke, 2015), race and racism in the United States (Hayward, 2013), and social justice activists in Great Britain (Andrews, 1991).

Increasingly, life histories are recognized as a joint production as shared meaning is produced through the specific encounter between the researcher and the researched. Just how much influence the researcher should have over the life history is a point of contestation. Polkinghorne notes that this power imbalance can be a threat to validity (2007). Turnbull's account of her life history interviews displays just how much is negotiated between the researcher and the interviewee, and the difficulties in fully empowering the interviewee (2000: 28-32). Maines (2001) has problematized the divide between autobiographical accounts and biographical accounts and

questions whether accounts by the research participant alone have more authenticity than when the researcher is involved. Rather he claims that neither form is definitive, and the variation in them depend largely on their format, and expectations about how and what they are supposed to communicate and to who. Harding also recognizes that the self and the life history is in part created and enacted through the interview, and that the interviewer has a lot of power over this process. For instance, when life histories are collected using chronological interviewing, it robs the interviewee of some power, through enforcing a linear perspective and preconceived ideas about categories of life events which may not reflect the interviewee's own life story (Harding, 2006).

Life diagrams form part of a larger turn toward participatoryⁱⁱ visual methods. The importance of the visual aspect of human interaction has been increasingly emphasized of late. Prosser has noted that 'we live in a visual world and currently, no topic, field of study, or discipline is immune to the influences of researchers adopting a visual perspective' (2012: 178). Prosser notes that this is both a question of studying the visual as it is, asking research participants to respond to, or create, something visual, often termed participatory visual methods, as well as producing a visual account of the research itself. This article is concerned with participatory visual methods. *Visual elicitation* employs visual artefacts to stimulate the interview, such as photographs, and this technique has been employed since the mid-1950s (see also Söderström, 2013). Other times research participants are asked to produce something outside of the interview encounter which is visual, often using various aides such as videos and still cameras (e.g. Rich and Chalfen, 1999). Others ask the research participants to create something visual during the interview encounter, for example, Ramos (2007) used already drawn pictures which the respondents could reorder and use to tell their own story, Powell (2010) asked her respondents to draw maps of their surroundings, Bagnoli (2009; 2012) used self-portraits, relational maps and timelines to further her interviews, and Sheridan et al. (2011) used timelining to study narratives of weight loss. Notably, Powell argues for 'visual modes of documentation as a means to account for and represent a variety of human experiences' (2010: 553). Thus, in addition to the biographical turn, we can also

talk about a *visual turn* in social science (Prosser, 2012). The visual offers communication opportunities we should endeavor to benefit more from. Through employing visual means to convey an interpretation of a life, we also allow the research participant to exercise somewhat more control over the research interview.

Life diagrams in the study of political mobilization among former combatants

In my own work on political mobilization after war I have used life diagrams. My research with former combatants in Colombia, Namibia and the United States of America is concerned with former combatants' long-term political mobilization after they have disarmed. I wanted to capture an insider's perspective of what drives and motivates their political mobilization, or what stands in the way of expressing their political voice. Thus, I wanted a tool which allowed me to understand how these former combatants portray their own political life path. While this project is ongoing, parts have been completed (Söderström, 2016b; see also Söderström, 2016a). This work shows how levels of political interest and political participation varied in the post-disarmament phase, where some described a sustained level, others fluctuations over time, and some severe drops which they did not recover from. In part, I was curious about their agency and its limits, particularly as the literature on armed groups often assume that the individual members simply follow the success or failure of the party or are heavily dependent on their network (for more on this, see Söderström, 2015; Sindre and Söderström, 2016).

Data collection in Colombia was carried out in 2012 and 2014, in the United States during 2016, and Namibia during 2017. These interviews focused on several decades of post-disarmament life. Their time as combatants varied both between cases and within each case. On average the former M-19 had been home for 24 years when they were interviewed, the SWAPO veterans for 28 years and the Vietnam veterans for 42 years. When they came home most were in their early 30s or late 20s. In total 50 individuals were interviewed (23 in Colombia, 14 in Na-

mibia and 13 in the United States). These life histories, together with the life diagram, were used to understand how multiple life events and larger macro-political processes played into their life choices. Overall, I located three typical political life paths: *the Resilient*, *the Remobilizers* and *the Removed*, which will be discussed further later in the article.

Preparing for these interviews, I was inspired by diagrams used within research on life satisfaction (see e.g. Runyan, 1979; Runyan, 1980; the potential use of diagrams during life history interviews has also been suggested by Gergen and Gergen, 1987: 132). Instead of asking the participants to draw an estimation of their life satisfaction throughout their life, I asked them to draw a political timeline of their lives, where political activity and political interest formed two lines which could vary from low to high (for more on timelines, both in terms of their historical development and on their cognitive function, see e.g. Coulson and Cánovas, 2009; Cánovas and Jensen, 2013). See Figure 1 below for an example of a diagram. They started with an overview of their life as a whole, noting some major events and then returning to different time periods and discussing those more in detail. Often the high point in their political mobilization was identified and used as a reference point for describing other parts of the diagram. The temporal perspective of the participant therefore structured the interview, as a result they were not necessarily chronological. The diagram already included a horizontal timeline (from birth or age 15 to the present) where the participants could then draw levels of political activity (in black) and political interest (in red), moving between low and high on the vertical axis. This allowed the participants to identify turning points and general trends in their political mobilization, as well as gaps between the two lines. The diagrams codified the life story told in the interview. The diagram stimulated reflection concerning the temporal development of their political mobilization or removal from politics and the role played by their former combatant identity in that process. The diagram was drawn and edited throughout the interviews.

< Figure 1 about here.>

Throughout these interviews I explored how much instruction I offered the participants, but also how the tool functioned both during the interview and after. What became clear to me is the potential for such a diagram in other areas with other respondents as well. The theoretical focus of such a life diagram could be any phenomena the researcher wants to understand across a lifetime, whether it is life satisfaction, political participation, partisanship, social engagement, shifts in identities, experiences of marginalization, sense of empowerment, family relationships, working status, or sense of integration etc. Below, I discuss how the diagram functions during the interview, how it influences the data collection process, and how the finished diagram itself can be used during analysis.

Life diagrams during data collection

The act of asking the research participant to draw a life diagram during the interview changes the interview dynamic in several ways. Below, I address how visualizing the temporal position can be an advantage during the interview, as well as how and when the diagram can further empower the research participant.

Temporal position

The most obvious advantage during the interview when the participant draws the life diagram is that points of inflection and transitions become clear to both parties. Hence, the interview can in an efficient way focus on these periods of transitions. While some such transitions may occur where the researcher suspect they would, others may not be as apparent from the beginning for the researcher who is exploring a life history without a life diagram. As the participant estimates and naturally compares different parts of a life, the diagram also allows differences across a lifetime to be visible and become explicit. While two periods can both be characterized by a heightened level of political activity, the life diagram can demonstrate how the two periods compare.

Through drawing the diagram, the research participant helps guide and steer the researcher to explore certain parts or contrasts in the life history in a meaningful way.

Our current position filters and conditions the way we think about other parts of our lives. Our position in the present can therefore be seen as an asset (see e.g. Thomson, 1998: 585-586). How the present colors our interpretation of our past and our future is central for our understanding of the life history told (Järvinen, 2004; Andrews, 1991: 65; see also Bagnoli, 2012: 96). Through the life diagram, this position is more visible to both parties. If the interview is carried out at a time when the person is very active in politics and sees a future with even more engagement (if they have drawn a line that continues into the future), this position is likely to color how they see earlier spells of life where they chose to withdraw from politics, in contrast with a person who is currently inactive as well. One of the former M-19 guerillas commented on how the timing of the interview matter for how she answers:

So I always ask them to give me the interview afterwards [...]... Because sometimes I see questions that were done to me a while ago and how I answered them, and then I say, hey, how did I answer this differently. Not different in terms of content, but the development of how I answered again in another moment after living other things, the same question... How we have changed... a different life... (Alba).

While this perspective and position (peak or valley) might be obvious to the interview even without the life diagram, it does help the research participant to also see their own journey and that their position has changed and may change again. This invites further reflection on how their present position influences the story they tell about their past.

As the interview may not be carried out in a chronological sense, the life diagram can also assist the researcher in keeping score about what parts of a life have been covered in an interview. Andrews notes that one of the challenges when conducting life histories is to help respondents from simply retelling a story they have told before, but also to help them find new ways into their story (Andrews, 1991: 68). Parts that are initially left out of the life history or glossed over

– and there will undoubtedly be such parts of a life (Järvinen, 2004: 51; Turnbull, 2000: 27-28) – may pose an interest for the researcher. Depending on the research project and its goals, such censoring or gaps may be important to pursue further, and in other instances such censoring needs to be respected. Thus, the diagram helps the researcher both to keep track of what parts are yet to be covered, especially when the life history is not told in a chronological fashion, but also to explore further parts that have been left out through directing the research participant towards parts of the diagram that were drawn hesitantly or rashly. Other visual tasks given to research participants have also been noted to help avoid ‘clichés’ and ‘“readymade” answers’ and ‘help overcome[e] silences’ (Bagnoli, 2009: 566).

For instance in the interview with Francis, a Vietnam veteran (see Figure 1), he had hinted at some protests he had participated in when he was young, but he had left this part of the diagram empty. Hence I pushed him for more details by directing him to that part of the diagram towards the end of the interview:

Johanna: So I am going to maybe push you a little bit, I think you can draw a little bit more on that to make some sort of estimate because I know it wasn't zero here [indicating the time before he was drafted]. You certainly were interested in politics to some degree and you were throwing tomatoes [laughter].

Francis: Yeah and that was before I went in the army, so this is er...[...] just, just starting here, erm [laughter] after high school erm tomatoes [laughter] and it was also a [inaudible] cabbage [...] Any, any produce I could find that that grocery store underneath us was throwing away. [...] And up there on to- this is surprising um- up there on that particular roof I was on with couple of my buddies um about a half a dozen Hells Angels, doing the same thing.

Another advantage, alluded to earlier, is that the diagram helps avoid a chronological perspective. Since both the researcher and the research participant can easily go back and forth between different parts of a life, whose sections and transitions are clearly defined by the research participant, there is no need to force the story to be told in chronological fashion. They can start to draw the diagram anywhere. As the act of remembering is not a fixed quality or ability, certain

passages may be more easily accessed, and thus starting the story there may be more conducive to the interview. From such significant time periods, the interview can easily expand to other parts of the life diagram which are less easily accessible. While the diagram does allow us to escape the chronological perspective, it is harder to escape the idea of a linear time perspective as the diagram (in my case) already included a timeline, with a 'birth' position and a 'now' position pinpointed at each extreme (see also Bagnoli, 2009: 567). However, the respondent may choose not to draw a continuous line depending on how detailed and specific instructions they are given. The estimation on the low to high vertical axis can be used without connecting different parts of a life, rather than a smooth curve connecting all stages of a life, or even with a mind map of specific events. Catalina, a former M-19 combatant, drew a continuous line for her political activity, but decided to represent her political interest as the result of specific events. Thus she drew spikes (vertical lines) at specific years of varying heights, and labeled them with specific events (such as joining M-19, the peace agreement and the birth of her daughter).ⁱⁱⁱ

Empowerment during the interview

The life diagram can also function as a source of empowerment for the respondent, as their interpretation and position of authority in terms of telling their history becomes more clear and tangible. As noted above, the temporal perspective of the research participant structured the interview, and thereby gave more power to the respondent; similarly the interpretation of their life story through the estimation of the line itself (high or low) is literally in their hands. This does not mean that we cannot ask questions which may influence how the respondent decides to draw the line, or re-draw it, but in the end they hold the pen and make this decision. Their interpretation and authority over this interpretation becomes clearer to them, as there is something rather final about a line that is drawn in the diagram.

As always, interpreting and understanding the meaning expressed in an interview is a negotiation between the researcher and the participants. Discussing your interpretations with your re-

spondents is sometimes referred to as member checking, and it is often used as a way of validating your findings after the interviews have been conducted and the written analysis has begun (for a discussion on this, see Carlson, 2010; Angen, 2000: 383). The life diagram becomes a way during an interview to directly test reflections and interpretations, as in these interchanges: Johanna: 'So there does seem to be like a little bit of a peak there, erm...' Ben (Vietnam veteran): 'I have more time now also. I retired in... from fulltime work in 2007.' And:

Johanna: So, if we were to draw a line connecting these, would it be really low here or how would it go?

José, former M-19 combatant: Not that close, around here, because under this point it could be like zero, but NO, I kept myself around here, in a fourth of the line... I kept myself here and over here we already jumped there. Something like that.

If you see a gap between the oral account and the way the respondent has chosen to depict this in the diagram that is a cue to delve deeper into what the respondent's experience actually is. The diagram provides an immediate forum through which such questions and reflections can be posed, and it is easier to contrast different parts of a life and enrich the respondent's account of why such contrasts are there. The life diagram thus allows us to discuss things which are only partially expressed during the interview. The diagram itself is a form of analysis that the respondent has already performed, where they control the interpretation to a larger degree.

The validity of our interpretations is a critical issue, and there is no shortcut to absolute truths about how something should be interpreted (Andrews, 1991: 45), and indeed as 'stories are simulations of participants' meaning, and not the meaning itself' (Polkinghorne, 2007: 482), this is a constant challenge for the researcher attempting to do life history interviews. But as the interview with the life diagram can focus on the points where the line alters and because it allows a direct interrogation concerning both clarifications and a more holistic understanding of the life story, we increase the chances of the respondent's interpretation taking precedence. It is both the drawing of, and discussion of the diagram that allow for these adjustments and clarifications in

interpretation which are so important. Using the words of Polkinghorne, I would argue that this ‘lessen[s] the distance between what is said by participants about their experienced meaning and the experienced meaning itself’ (2007: 482).

However, there are occasions when the diagram does not lead to empowerment for the person being interviewed. When the tool, a diagram, itself is something unfamiliar or difficult to muster (because of limited schooling or physical impairments) the diagram can instead become a signifier of difference and power imbalance. In my own work, I had a few experiences where the diagram could not be used in a meaningful way, or where there was a limit to the usage the diagram could be put to. One individual was battling Parkinson’s disease and the tremors in his hand made it difficult for him to draw the diagram. In this case, and in the others, it was important to realize that the diagram was not the be-all of the interview, but a tool for something, and rather than pushing forward with a specific way to use the diagram, I had to be open to other ways of exploring the life history. Another individual used the diagram as a mind map with boxes and events drawn in a network rather than as a timeline estimation of his political mobilization. And a third individual found it difficult to focus on his personal experience rather than the group history, and drawing the diagram itself was half-heartedly done and eventually ignored. It is important to be sensitive to such hesitations when they occur, and not push for the completion of the diagram if the participant is unwilling, as it would risk undermining the empowerment of the research participant.

However, for most participants the life diagram was an enriching and satisfying experience. Life histories in general give rise to a sense of catharsis and to intimacy. This invitation to an intimate dialogue about someone’s life is a crucial part of what enables the research participant to engage in serious self-reflection and self-examination (Birch and Miller, 2000: 200; see also Andrews, 1991: 58; Pamphilon, 1999: 405-407). Most participants expressed considerable satisfaction with the life diagram and being able to tell their complete story, not just their armed mobilization (for examples of studies dealing with paths into armed mobilization, see Bosi and

Porta, 2012; Bosi, 2012; Jocelyn S. Viterna, 2006), or their struggles at demobilization. Drawing the life diagram was described as a catharsis by many of the participants, and the kind of reflection this data collection invited the participants to, resulted in interviews of a personal and deeply felt nature. One participant described the diagram as ‘the diagram of the heart’ (Maria, M-19). As the diagram itself becomes a finished product, something that is there to see after the interview is completed, I believe this also helps the research participants to reach a point of closure. Charles (Vietnam veteran) commenting on the final diagram at the end of the interview: ‘I think this pretty much accurately portrays, er... [...] My journey yeah and it, it also aligns to my dialogue pretty well.’ There is some regaining of power through this, as they are not just left with a feeling of having shared their entire life with someone and being drained of information, but the diagram itself is something they can see and reflect upon which gives a sense of completion. It is their drawing, their diagram, and their agency in their own life is thus re-affirmed upon the completion of the interview.

Life diagrams during analysis

The life diagram is not only a tool during the interview, but it is also something which carries over to the writing and analytical stage of the research process after the interview. The diagram itself becomes an object of analysis, this is obvious in at least two ways: 1) the shape and trajectory itself can be analyzed; and 2) it becomes a reminder of the respondent’s interpretation.

Identifying types of trajectories

Working with life histories and life course research, the issue of trajectories and transitions loom large. George (1993: 358) describes them in the following way:

Trajectories are long-term patterns of stability and change, often including multiple transitions, that can be reliably differentiated from alternate patterns. Transitions and trajectories are interrelated. As Elder notes, ‘transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning’ (1985a).

The question of *distinctive form* I would argue introduces a visual aspect to life histories. If this is something which in the abstract is thought to have shape and form, using a diagram produced by the respondent which depicts what shape and form they would give to their account strengthens our research. The totality of a diagram is the trajectory of a life, and this in turn is built up by several inflection points, points of transition, tracks of stability, and resulting valleys and peaks. The shape and curve of the whole diagram is therefore a large part of what we mean by trajectory.

How do you identify trajectories and types of trajectories? Typologies of trajectories are common in the field (see e.g. Linden and Klandermans, 2007; Passy and Giugni, 2000; Bosi and Porta, 2012; Söderström, 2016b). Yet there is not a lot of guidance on how to do this. The resulting typology in my work is largely a function of the diagrams themselves, which were scrutinized for patterns and trend similarities. I was interested in shared meaning within each trajectory, and thus opted to present the material in reduced form as types of stories and paths.

In order to identify trajectories I started to look at the overall shape of the diagram: do they depict a relatively stable line across their lives, are there large variations, does it level out, or is it drawn on an increasing curve? But it also required a holistic and contextual reading of all the data. Depending on our research, we may be particularly interested in the overall pattern and shape of the life diagram. Here, the substance of the line drawn in the diagram is crucial. What trait, attitude, experience, or position is the line meant to represent in the life of the respondent? Sometimes describing the ebb and flow of this particular phenomenon is the heart of our research project. In my case, however, I was also interested in understanding how specific events, both private life events and societal events, shaped these life trajectories. Thus I used theoretical expectations for my first round of scrutinizing the diagrams.

I was particularly interested in how disarming and demobilizing, and their home coming experience shaped their relationship with politics, as well as how the development of political parties or organizations which grew from some of the armed groups influenced their political activity. In

order to determine the role played by these events, I plotted these events on the drawn life diagrams, if they had not already been marked during the interview. I then turned to scrutinize what the shape of the line looked like around and after these events. See Figure 2 with abstract versions of the three types. Did disarmament coincide with a drop in political activity (event A)? Did the life diagram change in any way when the political party failed or won an election (event B)? What other events are linked to points of transition in the diagram? The diagram only gives us an insight into whether these processes are timed together or not, whereas the oral account adds insight into how these processes are linked.

Three typical political life paths were identified in the work with these former combatants: *the Resilient*, *the Remobilizers* and *the Removed*. The *Resilient* experienced a sustained or increasing political mobilization post-disarmament. In the life courses of these individuals, they were resilient to all of these events (A and B). The *Remobilizers* or the *Remobilized* experienced decreased political participation at some point after disarmament followed by a re-mobilization in politics, sometimes multiple times. *The Removed* experienced a decrease in political mobilization sometime after disarmament lasting until today.

<Figure 2 about here.>

In identifying these trends for M-19, four particular events have been revealing: the time of joining M19, demobilization, the failure of the party, and the election of a former M-19 as mayor of Bogotá. The failure of the party, however, was not always obvious in the diagrams themselves (and in the life of the participants). So, here, the absence of a transition at the time of a particular event was especially telling, suggesting that party endurance is not decisive for individual political mobilization among the M-19. When I scrutinized the participants who were politically re-mobilized later in life, it became clear that this coincided with the return of a specific individual to politics in Colombia, a former M19 member became elected as mayor of Bogotá. Moving on to the other cases, I could examine if these general paths were repeated, and what events and transitions had equivalents in the two other cases.

Through plotting different identifying events in the diagrams the analysis can be extended. These events can be *a priori* identified, or they can develop from the interview material itself. The researcher can turn their focus to either external events (e.g. macro-political events) or to internal and private events (e.g. family events) depending on their individual research project. Using such identifying events, we can compare shapes of trajectories between these events across several different life diagrams and determine what paths carry more general truth and whether there are important types of paths.

Both Gergen and Gergen, and Bagnoli talk about types of narratives in more general terms (Gergen and Gergen, 1987: 126-134; Bagnoli, 2012: 80-81). Strikingly these types correspond to the three types identified in my work. Given the topic of concern in my work they have been named in relation to political mobilization. But it has also been a question of describing whether or not other events pushed them in or out of politics. Hence, the resilient type corresponds to both the progressive or stable narrative referred to by Gergen and Gergen, as this type reflected both an increasing trend as well as a path that withstood challenges. The remobilizers correspond in turn to a narrative made up of modulations, or as called by Bagnoli the ‘trial and error’ type, whereas the removed correspond to the more general type of a regressive narrative.

Empowerment after the interview

The life diagram represents the respondent’s final and revised overall interpretation of their life. As such, the respondents’ summary of their lives provides a clear point of comparison when the analytical work starts after the interviews. It acts as a powerful reminder of their interpretation. Others have also testified to this impact of visual remnants of interviews (Bagnoli, 2012: 82). This power of interpretation could be set aside if I as the researcher decided to ignore the diagrams completely, but these diagrams are an important resource and complement to the transcripts of the interview. As soon as I decide to include these diagrams in the post-interview analytical work, the respondents’ interpretation becomes an important counterpoint in that process.

Naturally, both the voice and diagram are the respondent's account of their life. Yet, contrasts between the two accounts can occur. There are several reasons for this. Not all aspects of the oral account are deemed important enough to be drawn into the diagram, or large enough to change the overall estimation of the life line drawn in the diagram. Depending on the flow of the conversation, adjusting or adding something to the diagram may not have been foremost on the respondent's mind. The respondent may also forget to adjust the diagram, even if the oral account suggests that might be appropriate. For these reasons, it was important to contrast the two accounts in the analytical stage, to see if there were incongruities. Mostly there were no such incongruities between the accounts, but when this happens it is crucial to assume the diagram is the final interpretation offered by the respondent.

<Figure 3 about here.>

<Figure 4 about here.>

Maria, a former M-19 (Figure 3), was categorized as removed from politics. Yet the oral account of her current activities contained some elements of political activity. During the interview she adjusted the diagram, and instead of indicating a total removal from politics, a partial one was drawn. The overall story told by her, as indicated by the diagram, is one where she is continually removed from politics; here the diagram helped frame the specific details in the oral account. Sackaria, a SWAPO veteran, was instead categorized as remobilizer. While his diagram does not contain any indication of this return to politics (Figure 4), contrasting and scrutinizing his oral account it became clear that this was because he does not place his activities with a veterans' organization and associated lobbying activities within the realm of politics. Sackaria described these activities as a-political, as they were *only asking for their rights* and for *money*: 'We are just asking for our money but is that one politics, really? [...] I don't think so.' Yet he continued and described in great detail the meetings he is attending and the efforts they were making to get officials and politicians to listen to their demands for increased support toward former combatants. If I, as a researcher, want to depart from this interpretation I need to have

strong reasons for doing so. In this way, I believe the respondent's empowerment over interpretation is stressed. With Sackaria, this contrast deepened my understanding of his mobilization path and the ways in which he made sense of his current veteran activities (through placing them outside of politics).

Conclusion

The biographical turn in the social sciences has prompted thorough discussions on methodological problems and opportunities within this strand of research, particularly around the degree to which the researcher has power over the life story told, and published. While the life story told in a life history interview is a joint project for the researcher and the research participant, this article has shown how the use of a life diagram during such an interview can help empower the interviewee to some degree. The research participants' interpretation and authority over the interpretation become clearer both during and after the interview. During the interview the diagram can help the researcher and research participant communicate about the meaning and interpretation of what is being told, through the contrast between what is being said and what is being drawn. During the post-interview analysis, the final interpretation of the interviewee is made more obvious through the diagram and it becomes a natural halt for the researcher imposing other interpretations on the data. This does not stop such re-interpretations from happening, but it makes it more evident when and how this occurs; ultimately allowing the researcher to become more explicit about the research process as a whole. The result should be that we are more able to determine whether such reinterpretations are reasonable or not.

The advantages of using a life diagram extend beyond the issue of empowerment however, and are visible both during the interview and after the interview. During the interview, the temporal position of the respondent becomes explicit to all involved, and the interview need not follow a chronological structure. Rather the interview can easily follow the story structure of the respondent, without the researcher losing track of what periods have been discussed and not.

Overall, this deepens our understanding of the temporal position of the interviewee. After the interview, the diagram itself can be analyzed, through the search for transitions and trajectories. The diagram by its very nature highlights transitions, and thus helps the analysis to make sense of such transitions and place them in context. Trajectories have form and shape, and again, this can be directly gleaned from the diagram. Through systematically comparing specific events in relation to the diagrams, the researcher can more easily systematically compare and construct types of trajectories.

The use of life diagram should be especially suitable when a project is concerned with a continuous phenomenon which is can be plotted in a diagram. The phenomenon should be something which can be easily communicated to the research participant, as they need to be able to return to this question throughout the interview and estimate to what degree this was present or occurring in their life at any one point in their life. Life diagrams are especially useful when the research project is concerned with understanding and describing shifts in such phenomena; when a holistic understanding of a life path is required. This technique is not limited in its use to political mobilization, but can be used in a wide range of research projects. My attempt with this article was to demonstrate how, and why, one can decide to work with life diagrams during an interview. Life diagrams can be a useful methodological and analytical tool, as they help the researcher and research participants communicate better and more about the life story at stake, while still empowering the research participants.

ⁱ Life diagrams should not be confused with life history calendars. Typically a life history calendar collects data on multiple activities (on a large grid, where time units are marked as well as rows of domains (events and behaviors)), and these calendars are often used within the context of a questionnaire, thus their purpose is not to elicit a life narrative, but more focused on collecting retrospective data of high accuracy (see among others Freedman et al., 1988; Caspi et al., 1996; Ensel et al., 1996; Hoppin et al., 1998).

ⁱⁱ Participatory research comes in many forms, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR), co-operative inquiry, action science and action inquiry (for more details about these different traditions, see Reason, 1994). Within PAR it

is quite common to use alternative forms of data collection, such as ‘storytelling, sociodrama, plays and skits, puppets, song, drawing and painting, and other engaging activities’ as this can encourage the participants ‘to find ways to tell and thus reclaim their own story’ (Reason, 1994, p. 329). The participatory element of research can happen at various different stages of the research, from problem conception all the way to data analysis and dissemination (for other examples of participatory research, see Nind, 2011; Pinter and Zandian, 2015; Enria, 2016; Ponzoni, 2016). The type of participatory approach in this article is perhaps the least participatory of the various traditions, as it is concerned with participatory elements solely in the data collection stage, as well as how this has repercussions for later stages of the research.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reproducing this particular diagram would endanger her anonymity as it contains several specific personal details.

Figures

Life diagram (red = political interest, black = political activity)

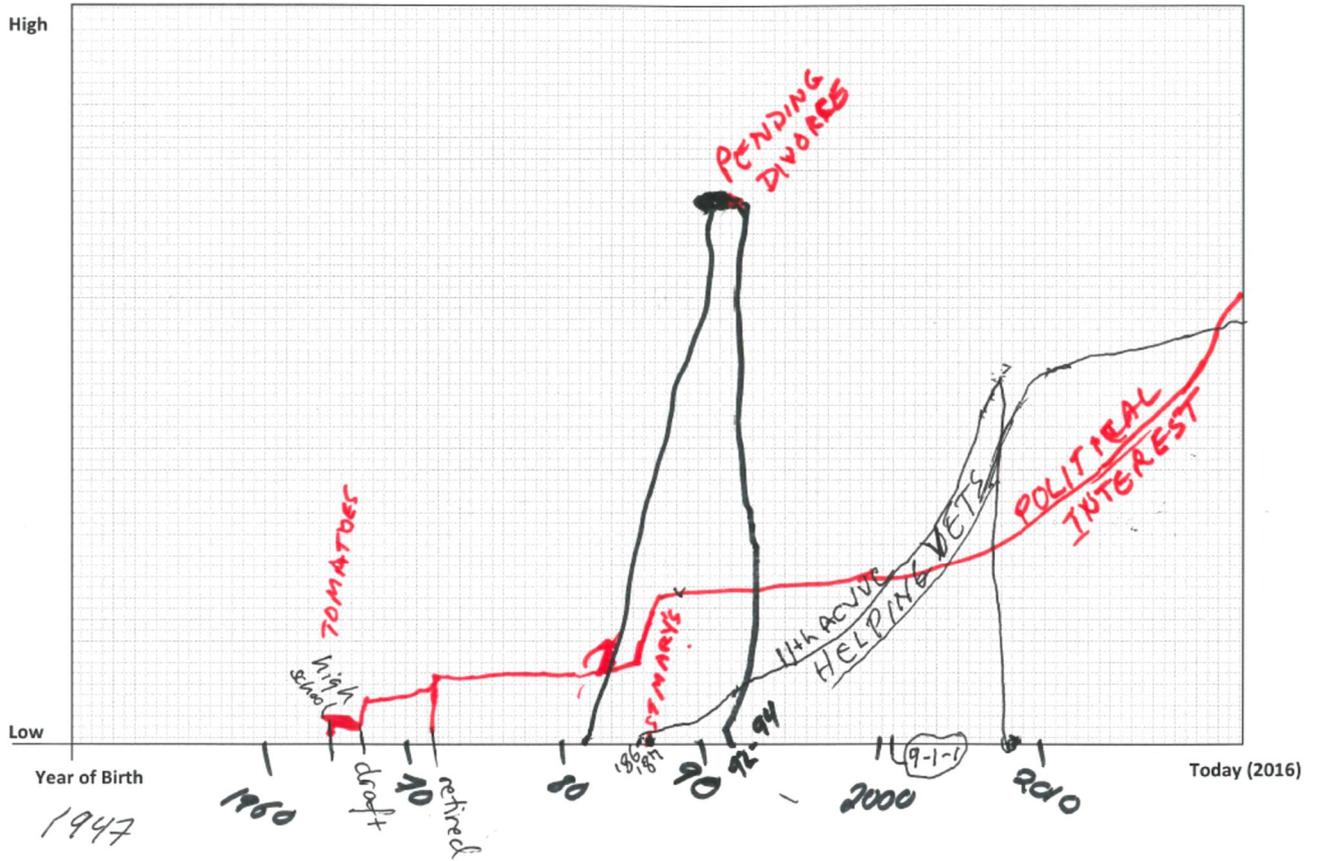


Figure 1: Example of life diagram drawn by a Vietnam veteran from the USA, Francis. The diagram includes both the lines of political activity and interest, and other annotations. Key words mentioned: high school, draft, retired, 9-11, tomatoes, St Mary's, pending divorce, 11th ACVVC, helping vets, and political interest.

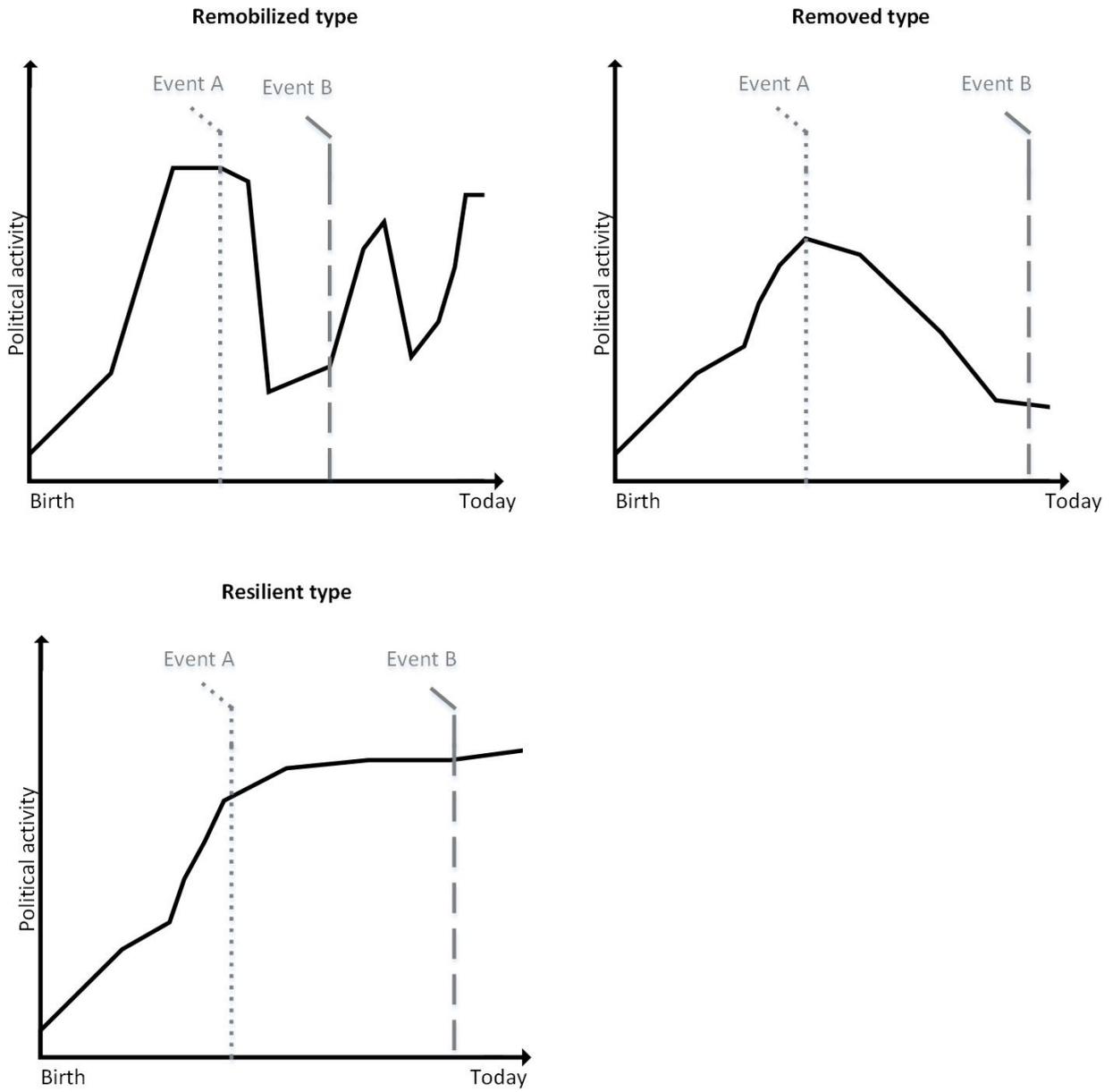


Figure 2: Abstract versions of the three political life paths

Life diagrams as a way to access life histories

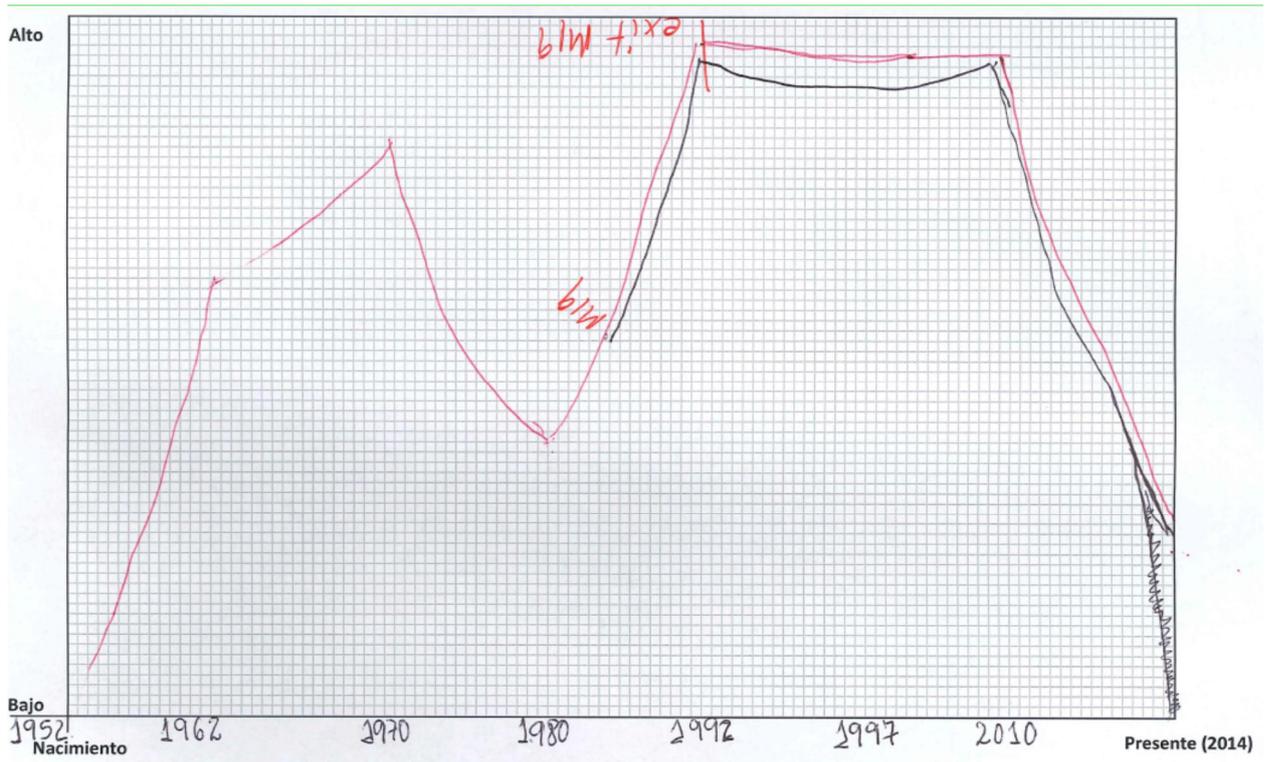


Figure 3: Example of life diagram drawn by a former M-19 combatant, Maria. The diagram includes both the lines of political activity and interest. Toward the end of the diagram she has tried to erase part of the black line (political activity) recognizing that her current political activity is not at zero today even if it is considerably lower than earlier in her life.

Life diagrams as a way to access life histories

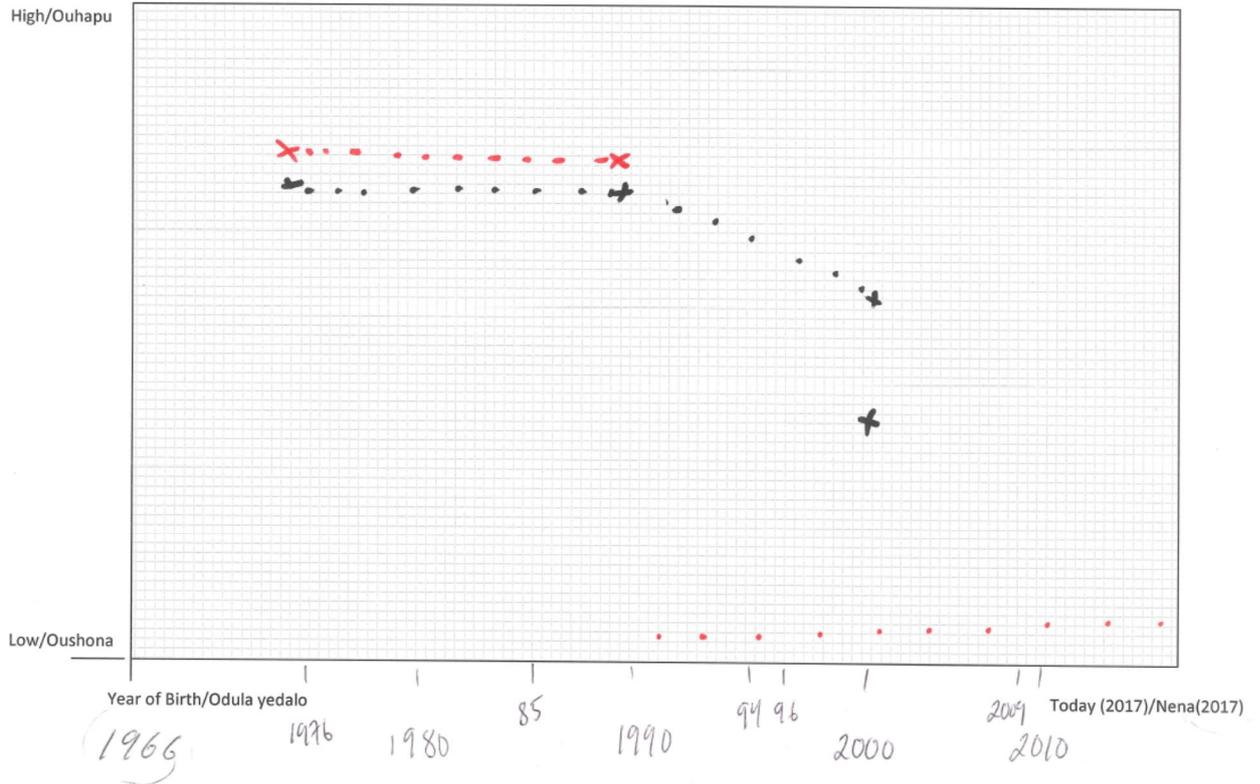


Figure 4: Example of life diagram drawn by Sackaria, a former SWAPO veteran.

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