



## When Methods Meet: Biographical Interviews and Imagined Futures Essay Writing

Molly Andrews (University of East London) and Graham Crow (University of Edinburgh), in conversation, June 2016

This 17-minute film captures a conversation between the users of two social science research methods, biographical interviews and imagined futures essay writing. Molly Andrews and Graham Crow describe their respective approaches, after which various points of connection and contrast are explored. Although one method works with people to look back while the other looks forward, the two turn out to have much in common, including the use of imagination and the need to make sense of people's lives in broader social and historical context. They are different but compatible.

### Transcript of conversation:

GC: I don't know if you'd like to start with a quick description of life history interviews.

MA: I tend to use life history interviews in my own case particularly to look at how people understand and behave in the political world as they see it. But generally the methods of life history are focussed on how people tell stories about their lives and it's a broad church because some people think that you need to start at the beginning and go to the end, or you can focus on a very specific time period in people's lives. In my own case I tend to go broadly over the whole life but focussing on moments of political importance. There's again a broad church about how structured the questions are, should you have questions at all? Myself I always have semi-structured questions there, it's not necessary that you have to follow them and you certainly don't have to follow them in order or replicate precise wording, but I like to have a pretty good idea about where I want to go. But there are some people who really just ask one question and let it run from there...

GC: "Tell me about your life"

MA: The funny thing is I originally trained in moral psychology and moral development where it was very, very rigorous methodological training about what you could ask, how far out you could go from that, so when I went to do my PhD I just swung the opposite way and I started out by being extremely broad like, yes, 'tell me about your life' or whatever. And I found that didn't really work for me because people needed guidance, they've had many experiences, so for me it's always been a question of finding the right balance given what it is that you're

interested in, but really focussing on the stories that somebody tells about their life looking at the intersection between their biography but trying to map that on to verifiable historical events.

GC: The method that I'm more used to using is imagined futures essay writing where (generally) young people are asked to imagine that they're older and telling somebody about what has happened in their lives. So it's what they are anticipating being the main things in their lives that they have yet to have and it's been used quite often around the point at which people leave education and go into the labour market, so transition from school to work. But it has been used in other contexts too, so it can be younger children talking about what they think their life will be like when they are 25. But there's no reason why it couldn't be used in other contexts. So although I'm now in my fifties I might well be asked how I imagine my future and the process of ageing and so on. But it's a little different to what you're describing because it's a task that is given, it's an instruction to write an essay about what sorts of things you'll be telling people about what's happened in your life.

MA: Part of what I do is try to look at how people reimagine their pasts as well, and trying to actually regard the present circumstances as having been at one time one of several possible alternatives. So it is really about a reimagining of the past, but also of course in terms of political work it does very much map also to a reimagining a different kind of future as well.

GC: In thinking about imagining our futures you're necessarily talking about different things that might happen, all sorts of areas for different routes and unpredictability, but I think now having read your book (Andrews 2014) I now appreciate that there is a closer affiliation between the two methods because people are looking back at their lives and thinking about not only what did happen but also what might have happened.

MA: I think that's absolutely right, and one of the points I try to make in the beginning of the book is what kind of imagination I'm talking about. Because imagination is often talked about as if it's just fanciful and doesn't bear a lot of connection to reason and indeed to reality and then trying to project onto that map something more or less reasonable that could happen. It is unpredictable because always there is the element of fate, but it also has a strong connection to the current understanding of the framework of the life as it is being lived.

GC: In the essays as these young people are talking about what they think might happen in their lives there are all sorts of sudden changes, and it's reminded me of the game of snakes and ladders whereby you're playing the board and you're throwing the dice and you land on one square and suddenly you're up two rows on the board and in some of the essays an example of a ladder would be, 'I was offered this fantastic job'. But there are also, in these essays, there are bad things that happen in people's lives and that might be, 'and then out of nowhere illness struck my family', or something. So as I'm reading these essays and I've got a snake here (it's not real!) and also a ladder, and these narratives are full of these points at which people say, 'and then this happened', and I think that's quite interesting, the way in which these young people write about them, because they do just come out of nowhere in the story, there's not a build up to it. Do you get the equivalent of snakes and ladders in your method?

MA: Now, this is really interesting because to me the ladder is one step at a time, and it's actually moving in a particular direction but it's step by step. But I think that the idea of acknowledging the role of fate is very important.

GC: It's kind of the roll of the dice in the game, and if we're thinking about where the elements of people's stories come from, maybe all those games that we play, they feed in to this process of how we make sense of our lives.

MA: For me, I've always been very taken with the Aldous Huxley quote, 'experience is not what happens to you it's what you make of what happens to you'. The people who I tend to have in my studies, they are working within very well-thought-out political frameworks and perhaps I don't spend enough time talking with them about fate but because they are really activists first and foremost and so they are about strategy and about trying to get from here to a hoped for imagined future. It's trying to create a plan that can somehow take account of fate but that nonetheless will move in a predictable way.

GC: So if someone said to you about your method, 'What is it that you're getting at in using this method?', would it be something along the lines of what Jane Elliott has said about these imagined futures essays, which is that these essays provide insights into people's understandings of the social world and their place within it (Elliott 2010: 1082), so that these essays are a way of getting to see the world from the point of view of the people that we're asking to write essays, or in your case be interviewed.

MA: That is a quote that could absolutely be said to describe my work as well. I think that it is a wonderful prism from which to try to understand wider social questions. But I'm never personally interested in an individual life *just as* an individual life.

So I'm going to get one of my props out, this is a photograph which I took in New York City in about 2003. I was standing at a crosswalk. And this is the base of a lamppost, it's at the very bottom of the lamppost, and as you can see it's lots of small tiles, and this is a few blocks from the World Trade Centre [where the 9/11 attacks happened], and I was really taken with this, because it was very small and very subtle and was probably was unnoticed by many people and yet somebody made a huge effort to make this, and part of me thinking about research methods, I thought this is really interesting because it's many small, discrete pieces of different colours and different shapes, and they're very irregular and some of them are mirrors and some of them are just black, and yet if you stand back from it you can actually see this writing, "A Nation Once Again". I'm interested in politics and everyday life, but I'm also interested in how the small pieces come together to give you a wider picture.

GC: And just four words can convey so much. One of the things that ties in with is your part in that story makes sense too, and I guess in your interviews you find people bringing out photographs, or bringing out little objects and saying, 'here is my bit of the Berlin Wall' or whatever it is and how this is significant.

MA: That's absolutely right and one of the things that is difficult is, you don't always know when you first see something what the message is there.

GC: And as you're speaking I'm think maybe one difference between our methods is that we have looked at these essays and we're talking about each time collecting over one hundred, enough to be able to put some figures onto some things and to say that in 1978 this many of the essay writers talked about going to university or getting married and in 2009-10 this many did, and they're not representative statistics, it's not a representative sample, but it is something that you can get a quantification on. If everybody is telling you such individual stories, it's probably much harder for you to see any way in which numbers might come into your analysis.

MA: Trying to understand the wide range of things that I've heard in terms of numbers actually depletes it of what really gives it its strength. It's not that you couldn't do, I just don't think that would be the best way to do it.

GC: And finding the equivalent of everybody's story would be stretching the material wouldn't it?

MA: What is true is that any situation that I would go into to interview people, I would have spent a huge amount of time reading history, but that's true across the board, so that they don't feel that I've just come in and don't really know what I'm talking about.

GC: And I guess that does bring us on to this question about practical value about why do we do this and what's the impact of doing this and these are both methods give us a window onto how people think and that can quite often be surprising. An example of that from the essays when I was looking at those made me very aware that sixteen-year-olds have a very different view of what it's like to be my age, and so in one of these essays they are giving their narrative of what is going to be happening in their lives, 'and then I reached fifty and I was old and my life was over and I went into an old folks' home', and I was thinking 'this is wrong on so many levels!' But it also reminded me that the world does look very different when you're sixteen. So my next prop is a pair of binoculars because for a sixteen year old to realise that life is not over when you're fifty, they need to step outside of their immediate circumstance and get a closer view of this thing that's really in the distance. When people ask, 'what's the practical value of getting young people to write their imagined futures?', my answer would partly be, well, it reminds us that the world looks very different when you're sixteen.

So, what would your answer be to, what's the practical value?

MA: I've brought this time dial, have you seen these before? Which I really love, you can figure out in 1962 was March 24th a Thursday or whatever. And you can go into the past and way into the future. It's about a two-way movement of time, really, so I would say looking through both ends of those binoculars. Because one of the things I'm also very interested in is intergenerational communication. Not only how we look at our future selves and also people who are older than us but how we integrate our ideas of who we have been, as well. There is a huge strength to be drawn from this intergenerational communication, and I think it's not just about getting a sense of how people see and understand the political world but it's also getting a sense of history and a sense of future, cross-generational binding but also through time, so to me that is a deeply hopeful trajectory.

GC: The community partner we work with on the Isle of Sheppey, which is quite a deprived context, it's not an affluent area, and Jenny really wants those young people that she comes into contact with to be proud about where they come from. So my third one is a photograph of one of the early aeroplane pioneers. This is Claude Brabazon, who was on the Isle of Sheppey, and he's got this contraption and it's looking weird to the people and someone in the crowd says, 'Pigs might fly', and he's got this ambition to get this contraption up in the air, so it's a picture of the pig that he then got and put in this little wicker basket and made a sign saying 'I am the first pig to fly'. So the first pig to fly was on the Isle of Sheppey, and the reason I'm mentioning that is because he had this aspiration, this hope, this idea, this ambition. She's using these types of activities to get people to be proud of where they are, to be thinking positively about what they might do in their lives.

MA: This brings me to my third and final prop, I have this little conch shell here and then I have a portion of a conch shell, this is meant in its crude sense to represent our attempts to

listen, there's something about a distorted sound in there and we can nearly access it, etc. but the thing about this is that it looks really whole and it's unusually whole, but I chose this one really because I think this is more like what really happens. We try to listen and we do our best, but we can only access part of someone's experience, and we don't necessarily know, as we don't know here, what we're not hearing, you are you, and sometimes you won't be able to hear what people are actually trying to say to you because it's so distance-far, and one of the things about the student population that I teach is they tend to come from very socially-excluded, marginalised places and they have a wealth of experience. Many things which are far away from the things that I grew up with and indeed that I have in my life. But if they realise that these life stories are of value themselves, and they bring them into the classroom, and those are the materials that we work with and teach with, it is really a potential space of real excitement when they realise that their experiences and their stories that they come into the classroom with really matter, that they can count as something.

GC: But the other thing that we found is that times move on, so we were asking in 2009-10 young people to write an essay and they said, 'what, on paper, with a pen? Why don't we talk to the camera, why don't we do Big Brother style, why are you so locked in old technology?' So maybe imagined futures essays we need to be more imaginative about the way we collect that material.

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

GC: So if they imagined their future three years on at the start of their degree and then at the end of their degree looked back on that period then actually what we've got is our two methods being used by the same people. I suppose our two methods do have this potential to be used together creatively.

MA: Yes, and I think that spending a concentrated period of time trying to think about...When you say imagining futures it's not only a hoped for future it can also be a dreaded future. And so if we encourage our students and indeed ourselves to engage more in activities like that I think that in the end the result is more likely to be that we look back on a life or an experience that we find somehow approximating satisfaction. If you actually think about the life that you hope you will look back on, you can actually do a lot more with it.

GC: And you have got a bit in your book about blueprints for successful ageing, and again if we come back to what's the value of this, the more we do these types of activities, interview people about their lives, encourage them to think about the future, then that can be a real practical benefit, because it helps us to get our bearings more in what can otherwise seem like a bewildering field of uncertainty about the future. Actually we can say ageing doesn't have to be something that is all necessarily negative and stuff to be anxious about. There are lots of blueprints for successful ageing, I can't do better than your expression. So these two methods speaking to each other, there's a little bit going on already but there's no reason why it couldn't grow from this.

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

GC: Well let's hope that this conversation continues.

MA: Good.

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## Contributors

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References and further reading: The following are recent contributions to the discussion of the methods, and they all contain bibliographies that provide suggestions for further reading.

M. Andrews, *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

C. Squire, M. Andrews, M. Davis, C. Esin, B. Harrison, L.-C. Hyden, and M. Hyden, *What is Narrative Research?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

M. Andrews, 'What is narrative interviewing?', ESRC NCRM Research Methods Festival 2012 <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/video/RMF2012/whatis.php?id=b6235e4>

D. Lyon and G. Crow, 'The challenges and opportunities of re-studying community on Sheppey: young people's imagined futures', *Sociological Review* 60:3 (2012), pp.498-517.

D. Lyon, B. Morgan and G. Crow 'Working with material from the Sheppey archive', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 15:4 (2012), pp.301-309.

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J. Elliott, 'Imagining a gendered future: children's essays from the National Child Development Study in 1969', *Sociology* 44:6 (2010), pp.1073-90.

See also the Isle of Sheppey research <http://www.livingandworkingonsheppey.co.uk/>

## Suggested questions for seminar discussion:

In the conversation the suggestion is made that the two methods could be combined with the same group of people, students on arrival at university looking forward to the people that they anticipate becoming and then towards the end of their time at university looking back at that experience. What other ways, and with what other groups, might these two methods be brought together?

Some people who wrote imagined futures essays in the past have been traced several decades later and asked to reflect back on their lives, comparing them with the contents of the original essays. What sorts of issues does such research raise?

Does it help to think about a life as being like a game of snakes and ladders, or hearing a life history as being like listening to a conch shell?

What is the difference between ambition, aspiration, and hope in a person's life?