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Asking about the future: Methodological insights from Energy Biographies

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Asking about the future: Methodological insights from Energy Biographies

Abstract

Temporality is fundamental to qualitative longitudinal research, inherent in the design of returning to participants over time, often to explore moments of change. Previous research has indicated that talking about the future can be difficult, yet there has been insufficient discussion of methodological developments to address these challenges. This paper presents insights from the Energy Biographies project, which has taken a qualitative longitudinal and multimodal approach to investigating how everyday energy use can be understood in relation to biographical pasts and imagined futures. In particular, we detail innovative techniques developed within the project (e.g. SMS photograph activities) to elicit data on anticipated futures, in ways that engender thinking about participants' own biographical futures and wider societal changes. We conclude by considering some of the significant benefits and challenges such techniques present. These methodological insights have a wider relevance beyond the substantive topic for those interested in eliciting data about futures in qualitative research.

Introduction

The importance of considering imagined futures has been highlighted in several areas of social research, such as youth transitions (e.g. Gordon et al., 2005), whilst the wider relevance of anticipated futures for everyday life is strongly emphasised within temporal theory. For example, Mead (1932) highlighted the temporal divide of past/present/future, a distinction that has been particularly significant for understanding personal biographies, whilst Felski (2000) suggests that individuals make sense of their identities by endowing them with a temporal *gestalt*, to describe a 'life time'. The process of understanding one's life as a project connects segments of experience through reflection on the past, present circumstances and anticipated future trajectories, which is acknowledged in the dynamic orientation of longitudinal studies.

Although other methodological techniques may elicit temporal data, the need to take account of people's dynamic lives has led to the development of longitudinal methodologies, which embody the notion of time (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003). Such approaches are informed by a recognition that participants' thoughts, actions, emotions, attitudes and beliefs are all

1 dynamic through time (Saldaña, 2003). Temporality is inherent in longitudinal research as the
2 design comprises multiple research encounters over an extended period. For example,
3 qualitative longitudinal (hereafter QLL) studies often involve scheduling data collection at
4 particular intervals to capture and explore changes that occur over time and the processes
5 involved with these changes (Farrell, 2006) and particular life events or transitions are
6 frequently the focus of QLL research (Saldaña, 2003). The longer-term perspective offered
7 by QLL facilitates exploration of how changes emerge and are lived out in the context of
8 individual lives. Therefore in QLL studies such as Energy Biographies, which foreground
9 issues of time and change, it is possible to map the social world temporally (Elliott *et al.*,
10 2008) to consider these issues in detail.

11
12 Reflexivity is also central in QLL research as participants are asked to reflect back or project
13 forward (McLeod, 2003). This reflexivity involves recognition that past and future both
14 influence how the participant experiences the present (Brannen & Nilsen, 2007) through
15 repercussions and rewards of past decisions, or preparations for future trajectories. The
16 recursive, comparative movement between past, present and future in QLL interview studies
17 can yield insights into the histories, aspirations and orientations of individuals (McLeod,
18 2003) and their strategies for making sense of the past or navigating their futures (Neale and
19 Flowerdew, 2003). Investigations that can instigate temporal reflexivity (Henwood and
20 Shirani, 2012a), and the study of risk and identity in a changing world, foreground how
21 important it is to consider that people might act differently today in light of how they
22 envisage their own and others' futures – both in their personal lives and as part of society-
23 wide transitions and transformations (Henwood and Pidgeon, 2012).

24
25 Drawing on the methodological writings of Weber, Adam (2009) highlights the importance
26 of opening up futurity and contemporary social extension into the long-term future as issues
27 for social science consideration and debate. She argues that Weber highlights the influence of
28 future-based reasons on action, and thus the importance of not losing sight of the futures that
29 guide actions in the present. Similarly, Rosenberg and Harding (2005) suggest that the future
30 is not an empty category but is often as rich and full of consciousness as the past, involving
31 anticipatory hopes and fears. Given the significance of anticipated futures for situating
32 present experiences (an issue we return to below), different approaches have been developed
33 to elicit data. Use is made, for example, of structured techniques such as questionnaire and
34 survey questions about future plans (e.g. Pidgeon et al., 2014 in relation to energy research).

1 This approach has been invoked in large birth cohort studies (such as the National Child
2 Development Study, British Cohort Study and Millennium Cohort Study) where children
3 have been asked to describe their aspirations for the future. Other approaches include
4 timelines or writing tasks where participants are asked to document imagined futures
5 (Henwood & Shirani, 2012b). This technique has been used in large-scale studies spanning
6 wide historical time periods; for example, Mass Observation issued a directive in 2009 asking
7 participants to imagine their personal and wider social situation in one year's time. In
8 qualitative studies, researchers may also opt for more open-ended approaches, such as asking
9 participants about the future during an interview (Phoenix et al., 2007). Whilst each of these
10 techniques offers an innovative way to discuss the future, they also raise certain difficulties.
11 For example, participants may find written exercises challenging and may not complete them
12 (see Henwood and Shirani, 2012b for discussion). In addition, whilst young people may be
13 used to routine discussion of their future educational and employment plans, asking older
14 people about the longer-term future can raise issues around finitude, although this does not
15 mean they are unwilling to discuss the future (Bornat, forthcoming). Subsequently, in terms
16 of ethical research practice it is also important to consider how participants are differently
17 positioned in relation to the future. Previous life events may also impact upon individual
18 ability or willingness to imagine the future, as experience of unexpected transitions may
19 highlight a sense of uncertainty, meaning participants are reluctant to plan for the future
20 (Shirani & Henwood, 2011).

21

22 Asking about the future is highly relevant for energy and environmental research given, for
23 example, debates about environmental justice which draw on notions of intergenerational
24 sustainability, (e.g. UNWCED, 1987) or the societal transitions needed to address socio-
25 environmental issues such as climate change. One approach to asking about anticipated
26 futures in energy research is scenario analysis. Examples of research using such techniques
27 include; backcasting – where a desirable future is identified and then the processes necessary
28 to reach it are delineated; scenario development through deliberation or modelling; and use of
29 existing scenarios as stimulus for engagement. Pidgeon et al. (2014) used a scenario
30 technique in a large national study to prompt public deliberation about energy system
31 transitions and through this explored the values underpinning public perceptions. However,
32 whilst this approach garnered many important insights into public views, it is linked more
33 closely to shared 'imaginaries' of the social future, rather than shining a light on the links
34 between individual biographies and such imaginaries.

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In the Energy Biographies project we have sought to develop innovative techniques to elicit futures data, focusing on complimentary techniques that facilitate the explication of both biographical futures (as are commonly the focus in QLL studies) and wider social issues (which are often a concern for energy research). This paper presents a detailed documentation of three strategies, including some of the technical and ethical issues that were raised, illustrated with participant responses, and discussion of the kind of data elicited. By focusing in such detail, we aim to provide a practical account to inform methodological development in approaches to researching the future.

Study Design

The Energy Biographies project aims to explore people’s current energy use in the context of their lifecourse trajectories and across the different spaces people inhabit through their everyday lives. Within four case site areas in the UK, interviews were conducted with individuals on three occasions over a one year period. Between interviews, participants were also involved in multimodal activities designed to evoke further insights into energy use as part of the lifecourse¹. Figure 1 outlines the different stages of the project.

[nser Figure 1 here]

The project’s four case site areas were selected to represent different socio-demographic and community contexts. Our first two case sites were from the city of Cardiff; Ely-and-Caerau, a socially-deprived inner city ward, and Peterston-Super-Ely; an affluent commuter village on the city’s outskirts. Whilst the two areas represent quite different socioeconomic profiles, they both had community groups that actively campaigned about energy and environmental issues. The third case site is the off-grid Lammas Tir-y-Gafel ecovillage in Pembrokeshire, West Wales. The ecovillage comprises nine households, with residents building low-impact homes from sustainable materials and making their living from the land. Our final case site involved employees of the Royal Free Hospital in north London. The hospital has a number of energy-saving and carbon reduction targets, meaning this workplace-based case site

¹ For a detailed description of each research stage, see <http://energybiographies.org/our-project/project-design/>

1 offered a different perspective on the transfer of energy-saving messages between work and
2 home. In each area we made contact with a case site representative who facilitated
3 recruitment by circulating information about the study to the wider community, asking those
4 who were interested in participating to contact the research team.

5
6 74 people participated in first round interviews. Participants were aged 18-80 and had a wide
7 variety of relationship, living and working circumstances. The majority (n=58) were White
8 British and there was a relatively equal representation of men and women. After initial
9 interviews, participants were asked if they would be interested in further participation and a
10 sub-sample of 36 (aged 18-70 and an equal number of men and women) from across the four
11 case site areas took part in two rounds of subsequent interviews and activities. These
12 participants were selected to ensure the longitudinal sample included individuals with a
13 diverse range of demographic characteristics and life circumstances.

14
15 Qualitative semi-structured interviews covered a number of themes (see Figure 1) to create
16 meaningful encounters rich in biographical, narrative and contextual detail, whilst activities
17 and subsequent discussions provided an opportunity for participant-directed conversation.
18 The project was designed to include multimodal activities, however the nature of these were
19 developed during the course of the research, after the project team had had an opportunity to
20 reflect on the outcomes of interview 1. This ability to adapt and develop later waves of data
21 collection in response to initial outcomes is a particular strength of QLL research. In the
22 remainder of the paper we detail three of the methodological approaches we employed in
23 order to demonstrate some of the benefits and challenges of these techniques to elicit talk
24 about the future².

25 26 27 **Interview 1 – asking about the future**

28 Initial interviews were designed to provide insights into participants' current circumstances
29 through a detailed exploration of everyday energy use and discussion of some aspects of their
30 life history. In light of an underlying recognition that anticipated futures have an impact on
31 present lives, as noted above, finding out how people saw their futures can be viewed as an

² As activity 1 and interview 2 were not designed to elicit talk about the future we do not include discussion of them here. For more information about what these phases involved see <http://energybiographies.org/our-project/project-design/>

1 important aspect of understanding current energy use. Subsequently, participants were
2 encouraged to think about their future in response to direct questions focused on biographical
3 transitions, with prompts around how this may impact on energy use. For example:

- 4
- 5 • Are there any particular life changes/events you expect to make in the next
6 5/10 years? What kind of lifestyle changes might this prompt?
7
- 8 • How do you think lifestyles might be different for your
9 children/grandchildren when they become adults? What would you like to
10 see change/stay the same?
11
12

13 Several people felt able to respond to these questions and provided answers about aspects of
14 their anticipated future trajectory. For some, these were general notions of family transitions
15 they hoped to make e.g. having children. For others, responses offered a more detailed focus
16 on specific aspects of their lives that they thought would change in relation to energy use:

17

18 I'd like to have my own place then yeah of course hopefully if my own bills
19 are all on my head I'll be very careful all the time, switching things off ...
20 sometimes we have the heat on here [shared housing] and we don't really want
21 it but the others are cold so you have to ... but if I'm living by myself I can
22 turn the heating off whenever I feel like and turn it on just to suit my comings
23 and goings rather than thinking about anyone else. (Marie, London)
24
25

26 When imagining futures for younger generations, responses were overwhelmingly negative,
27 including comments on problematic economic and employment situations as well as
28 anticipated energy shortages.

29

30 [w]hile I'm generally a kind of, the glass is half full person, quite optimistic by
31 temperament, I do kind of look at the world and see the trends and think, shit
32 (Laughter), what kind of my life are my kids going to have? It is clear that our
33 western lifestyle is totally unsustainable in itself, I mean even in terms of
34 resource terms, of that pot of energy that was fossil fuel, you know, on its way
35 out (Jeremy, Peterston)
36

37 Participants from our Lammas ecovillage case site offered some of the most detailed
38 responses to these interview questions on anticipated futures. Indeed, it seemed that concerns
39 about the longer-term future of mainstream society had been a motivating factor in their
40 decision to live in a low-impact way:

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[w]e have quite a strong feeling that the world is a very unstable place at the moment, I think we're not really planning on particular courses of action; we are doing a lot of planning for the future but it's mostly about building resilience within our family and community units more than it is about any particular outcome ... I don't think we'd even really presuppose that we could even go to the shops and buy food next year really... I think we feel it as being quite unstable... (Darren, Lammas)

Darren's extract shows that an explicit concern with the future stability of mainstream society has led his family to live in an alternative way now, highlighting how insight into anticipated futures is important for helping us to understand participants' present circumstances and past choices. This is an issue we consider in forthcoming work (see also Adam, 2009).

In contrast to the clear ideas about futures envisaged by some of our participants, others felt unable to respond to our direct questions, finding it difficult to discuss the future in this way:

At the moment this will sound like a really badly thought out plan but I tend not to think that far ahead because the future does actually scare me (Lucinda, London)

I didn't know I was going to be out of work and that would have been my choice. You know, really don't know what's around the corner so we don't look into the future as such. (Christine, Ely)

As Christine's extract suggests, participants indicated that past experiences of unexpected events highlighted a sense of the future as uncertain and unpredictable, therefore difficult to plan for (see also Shirani & Henwood, 2011). Although only a small number of our interviewees described the future as frightening in this way, these responses raise important ethical issues about potentially causing distress to participants by asking about futures, an issue we return to later.

Whilst the first interview covered a broad range of issues, the direct question and answer format placed some limitations on the elicitation of temporal data. In particular, the difficulty some participants found in responding to the questions meant we did not achieve the depth of reflection we would have liked. In designing the subsequent activities and interviews we sought new ways to address these challenges.

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Activity – photographing everyday life

Energy Biographies was designed to include photograph activities to offer different means for participants to engage with energy use as part of their everyday practices³. As it has previously been suggested that attempts to research everyday life often fail to capture the complexity of the mundane (Phoenix & Brannen, 2014), we included visual approaches as a different modality in order to help to make energy in everyday life more visible. Once we had encountered some of the limitations of a direct question and answer approach for exploring futures in interview 1, in designing the multimodal activities we took inspiration from a pilot study by Mountian et al. (2011), which involved the use of text message (SMS) prompted photographs. Their study involved 13 participants (colleagues of the researchers) who were sent 8 SMS-prompts each day for a week (at varied times from 9.30am to 9.30pm) asking them to take a picture of what they were doing, tape record their assessments and impressions and answer six questions on the activity. Mountian and colleagues found that some participants described the activity as invasive and raised issues around power relations – for example, not having control about when they took the picture, being exposed to colleagues, and feeling the camera phone acted as a regulatory gaze. However, others described enjoying the activity and the opportunity for reflection it provided.

In deciding on our own approach, we felt that with a number of significant modifications, this technique would help us to access different kinds of data relating to everyday routines and energy use. Moreover, through the activity we sought a point of comparison across the sample by asking all participants to take pictures on the same dates and times, potentially elucidating similarities and differences between case sites. Participants were offered camera phones to enable participation in this activity. Providing equipment raises a number of ethical issues, however we saw this as important for enabling participants to have an equal opportunity to participate, and to facilitate further development of this innovative methodology, which has the potential to offer new insights into everyday life.

The SMS activity took place between interviews 2 and 3. In an attempt to minimise the sense of intrusion described by participants in Mountian et al.’s study, we reduced considerably the frequency of SMS contact and level of immediate reflection required. Instead we contacted

³ See e.g. http://energybiographies.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Protocol_Energy%20Biographies2.pdf

1 participants across all case sites on ten occasions over a period of several weeks, asking them
2 to take a picture of what they were doing and return this to the research team by multimedia
3 message (MMS) or email. Participants were notified in advance of the dates when they would
4 receive a SMS, although not the specific times. Whilst arguably this influenced the sense of
5 daily routine documented by the task, our participants did not report feelings of intrusiveness
6 and most said they enjoyed the activity. However, despite the reduced frequency of contact,
7 some described similar sentiments to those in Mountian et al.'s study; for example, feeling
8 the regulatory gaze and that their images were being judged.

9

10 [y]ou'd text me and I would be doing something really mundane I was like
11 gosh I wish I'd been doing something exciting [laughs] ... quite a few of them
12 nothing was on and I thought oh this is quite good actually I don't feel too
13 bad. Where you know I'd hate it like if had everything like the Christmas tree
14 on [laughs] every single light on you know the stereo blasting you know TV's
15 on and I'm watching a video ... so I did kind of think oh ok this is quite good
16 actually you know this is quite random. (Russell, London)

17

18 In a further effort to reduce intrusiveness, we had explained that images did not have to be
19 too personal and could be representative of an activity e.g. an empty bath to signify bathing.
20 We emphasised this so participants did not feel obliged to provide any pictures they felt
21 intruded on their privacy, or that of others who had not consented to be part of the research,
22 which resulted in a relative absence of people in the images. In another attempt to avoid
23 intrusion, the latest we contacted participants was 7pm. In interview reflections, participants
24 subsequently suggested that contact did not occur late enough to capture social activities,
25 which may be another explanation for the absence of people in the images and would be a
26 relevant issue for future use of this methodological approach. However, it is important to note
27 that people were always involved in the images – as the photographer – and could describe
28 their own standpoint. Whilst some researchers have advocated analysing images themselves,
29 others point to the way visual accounts are partial and meaning cannot be ascertained by
30 images alone (see e.g. Tinkler, 2013 for discussion). In our research, we found that much of
31 the relevant explanatory detail associated with the images, particularly the position of people,
32 would have been lost without the subsequent interview discussions.

33

34 Participants were asked to return the pictures to us immediately after receiving the SMS,
35 whereupon we compiled a photo narrative for each individual with images and captions
36 (provided by the participant when they sent us the image, or added by them during the

1 subsequent interview) in chronological order (See image 1). This was then taken back for
2 discussion in interview 3 and used as a tool to facilitate reflections on pasts and futures. For
3 example, participants were asked to comment on the photo narrative as a representation of
4 everyday life and whether anything important was missing, then asked to consider how things
5 might have looked different had we asked them to undertake the task a year earlier.
6 Following this, we asked participants how things might be different, first one year and then
7 fifteen years in the future. The photo narratives appeared to help participants to talk about the
8 future by giving them something tangible to refer to.

9

10 [Insert image 1 here]

11

12 Participants frequently used particular images to anchor their thoughts. For example, when
13 asked to contemplate fifteen years time, Dennis had quite specific ideas related to one of his
14 images that represented driving.

15

16 I'm very keen to get an electric car and ... I would sort of say maybe in ten to
17 fifteen years' time that it's a lot more a possibility than now. Maybe my needs
18 would have changed a little bit by then, my son would probably be driving so
19 maybe we only need it as a family maybe only have you know a petrol car and
20 maybe then a little electric car for me and my wife to sort of go around for
21 local trips or something like that. So yeah I think there may be some changes
22 as the kind of household grows into different needs ... Maybe by then the kind
23 of car hire you can sort of do ... where you hire them by the hour if and when
24 you need them so you have Car Club membership maybe that is more
25 widespread in ten/fifteen years' time (Dennis, London)

26

27 Whilst Dennis reflects on how the family's needs are likely to change, he also had clear ideas
28 about the kind of technological advances that might make alternative modes of transport
29 possible in the future. By drawing on the representations in his timeline, he discusses
30 biographical changes but also the structural and technological adjustments more widely that
31 would make different ways of living possible. This suggests that the tangible reference points
32 provided by the photographs were helpful in encouraging reflections on anticipated futures.

33

34 Alerting participants to the contact dates in advance meant a number of people had made a
35 note of that day's activities in a diary, so it was still discussable if an image was absent due to
36 a technological failure. Participants were largely positive about this task, suggesting they
37 liked these moments of engagement as brief interludes in everyday life, which did not feel too

1 onerous or intrusive and prompted further thoughts about the research topic, as Steve
2 indicates:

3

4 I do think it's made me think about things, even just walking around and
5 getting a text saying take a photo of what you're doing now, straight away you
6 take the photo and you think what's this got to do with energy use? And then
7 you think well actually it has got something to do with you know actually
8 straight away that's a trigger to make you think about this stuff (Steve, Ely)
9

10 Whilst participants could often articulate ideas about their own biographical futures in
11 relation to the timelines, it could still be particularly challenging for some to think about
12 changes in wider society.

13

14 How will the society be like? [Laughs] That's a broad question. It's really
15 difficult to answer that. (Anna, Lammas)
16

17 Some people felt that the pace of change to-date made the future impossible to predict, others
18 thought that life might be relatively similar, albeit with updated computer and communication
19 technologies. Whilst this photograph task helped us to extend talk about personal futures, the
20 extract from Anna illustrates continued challenges for many people in visualising wider
21 social futures, which we attempted to address with our final methodological technique.

22

23

24 **Interview 3 – Wider social futures?**

25 We recognise that it can be challenging for people to imagine future social change, given
26 high levels of uncertainty and circumstances beyond individual control. However, in light of
27 concerns about climate change, energy security and energy affordability (Skea et al., 2011), it
28 is important to understand how people imagine the ways in which energy use might change in
29 future, or if they anticipate continuity of current lifestyles and feel unprepared for change.
30 Resources for helping participants think about these wider issues in the future are somewhat
31 limited. For example, whereas past images and films are available alongside personal
32 memories to facilitate discussion of prior social change, similar depictions of the future are
33 more restricted. However, in fields where technology and resources are central – such as
34 energy use – there have been some attempts to imagine the future and present this in a visual
35 format, which we utilised for the third interviews.

36

1 As one of Energy Biographies' specific concerns was domestic energy use, we sought
2 visions of future homes and encountered both images and video material. We opted to use
3 videos as they provided a broader view of relevant issues, for example, depicting a number of
4 technologies whilst also showing people's reactions to and interactions with them, which
5 would not have been feasible to capture using static images. Whilst being an image and sound
6 based medium, video can also capture and represent other senses (Pink, 2003), as well as
7 physical and emotional reactions. In our study it also provided a different modality from the
8 previous task to sustain participant engagement, an important consideration in QLL research
9 (Elliott et al., 2008).

10

11 The use of video in social research is increasingly popular (e.g. see Jewitt, 2012 for
12 discussion). Like images, videos have an ability to represent particular times and places via a
13 medium commonplace in everyday life, capturing detail and depth. However, much of the
14 focus to-date has been on the development of video content as part of the research encounter.
15 For example, participants keeping video diaries, or filming aspects of their everyday lives and
16 interactions, which are subsequently explored analytically by the researcher (Ross et al.,
17 2008). Less attention has been paid to the use or 'repurposing' (Jewitt, 2012) of pre-existing
18 video in research, although studies have shown a number of academic articles citing publicly
19 available video content (Kousha et al., 2012). There appear to be few examples of practice
20 where videos have been used as a stimulus for discussion, which is perhaps surprising, given
21 the ubiquity of online publicly available video content. In particular, YouTube – a video
22 sharing website established in 2005 – offers wide-ranging video content, with over 6 billion
23 hours of video viewed per month⁴. As the viewing of online video content is likely to be an
24 increasingly familiar activity in the daily lives of participants (Weller, 2012), we decided to
25 utilise this medium via two videos depicting homes of the future at different points in time.

26

27 Firstly, we selected a video from the 1950s demonstrating the Monsanto house of the future;
28 an exhibit originally part of Disneyworld's 'Tomorrowland'. The video shows a family
29 visiting the house and then a lived imagining of what it would be like if this was their home⁵.
30 The film is largely promotional and emphasises the benefits of the plastic products made by
31 Monsanto. Though major technical change was portrayed in the film, the family dynamics
32 depicted did not show evidence of change; with 1950s gender roles clearly evident. After

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/en-GB/statistics.html>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoCCO3GKqWY>

1 watching the video participants were asked to comment on what they did or did not like about
2 it. The interviewers subsequently raised the following questions to encourage participants to
3 think about wider social changes and plans, e.g:

4

- 5 • What do you think the video says about how people 50-60 years ago
6 thought about the future?
- 7 • Was anything surprising?
- 8 • What do you think would be different in envisaging a future house
9 today?

10

11 In discussing the video, participants showed some temporal reflexivity, describing the
12 historical context of its production (see also Henwood and Shirani, 2012a) and how they felt
13 the future would have been seen at the time.

14

15 I think they thought everything would be very easy and effortless basically,
16 life was made so easy that you could just press a button and that would give
17 you time ... you could have a free life because you're not bound to chores
18 because the house, the house looks after itself ... they were coming from a
19 time of war and deprivation and they had in the beginning of the 20th century
20 there was a lot of economic problems so all this is a part of the past and we're
21 looking into the future which is the opposite. So it's abundance, it's an easy
22 life... it's more enjoyment without thinking if it's practical, if it's functional,
23 if it's economically viable and things like that. (Suzanna, London)

24

25 Most were fairly critical about the materials used in the house, which reflected a time when
26 energy and other resources needed to create plastics were seen as abundant. By contrast, they
27 suggested contemporary visions of a future house would involve more natural materials and
28 energy-saving technologies. Through these discussions, participants who had found their own
29 futures challenging to talk about were able to reflect on visions for wider social futures.

30

31 I think that it would be minimalistic, it would be sleek lines, it would be
32 considering energy use and in this environment making sure that the heat is
33 not lost and is more effective, so efficiency of heat and also I think they would
34 probably consider waste so whether that would be carbon dioxide waste in the
35 heating system or whether it's your actual water waste from your property,
36 whether that would be able to be recycled, whether you would be using
37 rainwater for things other than drinking (Christine, Ely)

38

1 This discussion led to the second video, from a 2012 Channel 4 series ‘Home of the Future’⁶.
2 In this series, a multi-generational family’s home was completely refurbished with a range of
3 technologies (including for energy generation) and the programmes documented the family’s
4 experience of living everyday life in this environment. As above, participants were asked for
5 their initial reaction to what they did and did not like about the depiction. They were then
6 asked more specific questions e.g. if there were alternative visions of the future they would
7 prefer to see instead. Again, this enabled us to engender much more detailed talk about wider
8 social futures than we had elicited using other approaches.

9

10 Many commented that this depiction of the future bore multiple resemblances to the 1950s
11 vision. However, the contemporary vision of increasing reliance on gadgets was regarded as
12 less excusable given current public knowledge about energy and environmental issues. As
13 such, the videos prompted participants to reflect on issues of societal ethics, responsibility and
14 morality.

15

16 The amazing thing about that is that how similar it was to the 1950’s one.
17 Very gadget-focused ... It doesn’t have the feel of the way I would see the
18 house of the future because it seems like more consumption and more reliance
19 on electricity and things like that ... In fact, the 1950’s one has an excuse
20 because they didn’t know. ... How could you predict global warming in the
21 1950’s? You never would have done ... So these people [2012] have got no
22 excuse! What are they doing? (Graham, Lammas)

23

24 Some elements of the video – such as a hydroponic system for growing plants in the house –
25 received mixed responses. Some participants disliked the disconnection with nature this
26 implied, and questioned the nutritional (and financial) value of this way of producing food.
27 Yet whilst others may not have wanted the technology in their own homes, they saw ways
28 that it could be useful for dealing with future societal challenges, suggesting the
29 methodological approach helped them to engage with issues around wider social futures.

30

31 I think it’s a brilliant idea you know this challenge of having to feed 9 billion
32 people, the more food production you could get into city flats the better. Yeah
33 I thought that was wonderful (Jonathan, Peterston)

34

35 After discussion of these representations of domestic life, participants were finally asked to
36 consider how changes could potentially transfer to their work environments; for example,

⁶ <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/home-of-the-future/4od#3301480>

1 video conferencing rather than face-to-face meetings. Whilst some could see the potential
2 benefits of these ways of working in terms of reduced energy consumption from commuting
3 and reduced traffic congestion, several people expressed concern about potential social
4 fragmentation and isolation, with London hospital employees in particular suggesting such
5 changes would be potentially problematic for patient care. Even Jack, who ran a business
6 from home, highlighted concerns about the potential consequences of widespread adoption of
7 these ways of working.

8
9 But there's a price to pay for it and it's not just the money, you know you walk
10 around the city and it looks pretty dire sometimes and everyone is in their little
11 houses and you know in lots of futuristic films you see cities of the future and
12 they look, they're wrecked, everything looks dreadful, there's advertising
13 hoardings everywhere and you know people are flying around on hover boards
14 and stuff but the actual cities are dirty and it's kind of realising that as people
15 create their environments in their minds and in their interiors they're less
16 bothered about what's going on out there. (Jack, Ely)

17
18 Therefore whilst the technological solutions presented in the videos were seen by some to
19 have potential environmental and economic benefits, there were also implications in terms of
20 wider societal costs – loneliness, disconnect, and degeneration of the physical environment.
21 This suggests the methodological approach facilitated discussion of both positive and critical
22 anticipated futures for individuals and society-wide.

23
24 Using existing videos in qualitative research has a wider potential beyond the substantive
25 topic discussed here. For example, although the depictions largely focused on issues related
26 to domestic energy use, discussion elicited talk around gender and historical transitions in
27 addition to personal life. Like the photographs, the films provided participants with
28 something tangible to base their discussion on, yet they were able to also consider other
29 issues relevant to their everyday lives (such as work environments) and wider society.
30 Therefore, whilst our study had an advantage in that there exist multiple depictions of future
31 energy technologies from which we could choose, other studies could invoke a similar
32 approach given the potential for the interview discussion to go beyond what is depicted.

33
34
35 **Concluding Discussion**

1 This paper has presented a detailed account of methodological techniques used as part of the
2 Energy Biographies project in order to elucidate innovative ways for researching futures.
3 Following others, we argue that understanding anticipated futures is key to situating current
4 experience and therefore an important aspect of studies into everyday life. The three
5 approaches we have outlined here offer different benefits and challenges for accessing talk
6 about the future, which we discuss before drawing out overall conclusions.

7
8 Our experience suggests that asking directly about the future can provide a useful opportunity
9 for people to engage with their thoughts and plans, and some participants are able to provide
10 quite detailed responses. However, we also found that others struggled, or did not wish to
11 contemplate the future, sometimes due to past experiences or their current lifecourse stage.
12 We suggest, therefore, that it is important to be attentive to ethical issues and consider
13 different approaches to discussing the future in a variety of ways. The multimodal approaches
14 we have utilised appear to make some aspects of the future easier to discuss, particularly for
15 participants who had previously found adopting a future perspective challenging.

16
17 In asking people to photograph everyday activities, then discussing how things may look
18 similar or different in the future, we found that the image timeline gave participants
19 something tangible to refer to and anchor discussion of the future around. The activity itself
20 was not unproblematic given it represented a somewhat partial picture of everyday life, and
21 therefore would have been of more limited use without the subsequent discussion during the
22 interview. This was partly due to the design of the activity, where images were used primarily
23 as a prompt for discussion, rather than as objects of analysis in and of themselves (Tinkler,
24 2013). By asking people to take photographs of what they were doing at the time, participants
25 were able to capture things they may not otherwise have considered relevant to the research
26 but that frequently bore some relationship to energy use, which became evident through the
27 interview discussion. Therefore, without this SMS technique we may not have elicited such
28 extensive data around everyday energy use and potential future changes. Ultimately, this
29 technique did help a number of people discuss the future, albeit largely within the realm of
30 their own biographies, by providing specific aspects of everyday life to situate discussion
31 around. Adopting this methodological approach to capture these everyday occurrences could
32 therefore be relevant for other research that aims to explore day-to-day life.

33

1 The video task was designed to expand the discussion to wider social issues, although again
2 the futuristic representations were largely confined to the domestic sphere. However, once
3 people had an idea about different technological possibilities, our prompts also initiated
4 consideration of how this could transform their working lives, or have implications for wider
5 society more generally. As discussed above, the potential for discussion to go beyond what is
6 explicitly portrayed means this approach could be invoked for other research topics where the
7 availability of relevant depictions is more limited. These activities therefore demonstrate a
8 range of strategies for accessing different kinds of talk about the future – both biographical
9 and wider societal – which could be tailored to meet the needs of individual research projects.

10
11 Whilst the techniques we have discussed could be invoked as multimodal strategies in
12 research more generally, we suggest there are specific benefits to utilising them in the context
13 of qualitative longitudinal work. Given the design of revisiting people over time, the
14 increased amount of time participants spend engaged with the research in QLL studies
15 provides greater opportunity to include a range of methodological techniques. For example,
16 discussion of the video clips often took up to 60 minutes of the third interview, which may be
17 too great an amount of time to spend on a single activity in a one-off study, but represents a
18 smaller proportion of time in a study with multiple research encounters.

19
20 Including a range of activities in a QLL study can also help to sustain participant interest and
21 engagement over time, in order to aid sample maintenance (Weller, 2012). In particular, the
22 gaps between interview encounters offer opportunities for multimodal activities as a way of
23 maintaining contact with participants as well as potential occasions for data collection. There
24 was no attrition in the Energy Biographies study and, although participants were largely
25 positive about the multimodal activities, it is unclear to what extent they contributed to
26 sample maintenance. A further specific benefit for QLL studies is that these techniques can
27 encourage temporal reflections, particularly ways of exploring longer-term futures. This has
28 particular relevance in QLL research, where time is central methodologically and
29 substantively.

30
31 By combining multiple approaches within a carefully crafted study, our project makes an
32 original contribution to the development of social research methodologies for investigating
33 anticipated futures, which have potential to be utilised beyond the substantive research area
34 foregrounded here. In bringing together these approaches we have highlighted their potential

1 strengths, as well as related weaknesses, in helping participants to extend temporal
2 discussions. This represents an important contribution to the development of strategies that
3 can facilitate discussions of longer-term pasts and futures, which could have particular
4 benefits for QLL and temporally-focused research more widely.

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