Evaluating life maps as a versatile method for lifecourse geographies

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Abstract: This article discusses the life-mapping method developed for a research project exploring transitions to adulthood with visually impaired young people. After situating life maps as a kind of participatory diagram, the article explains the design and implementation of the life maps, and young people's response to the method. The second half of the article argues for the value of the life map technique to lifecourse geographies in two ways: practically, supporting a narrative interview and as a graphic organiser of young people's stories; and empirically, as a way to answer specific research questions about temporality that are more suited to a graphic method.
Key words: life maps, lifecourse geographies, youth transition, participatory diagramming, UK

Introduction

> I am, as researcher, a bricoleur, a maker of patchwork, a weaver of stories, an assembler of montage by which means I construct and convey meaning according to a narrative ethic . . . To do this kind of work effectively I need at my disposal a range of techniques and media capable of containing my multiple texts and making them accessible and coherent to the reader. (Yardley 2008, 12)

Taking up Yardley's challenge to approach research as a bricoleuse, this article examines one of the methods developed for a research project investigating the concept of youth transition with visually impaired (VI) young people in the north of England.1 The research examines the times and spaces where transitions to adulthood are negotiated, focusing on the subjective meanings of transition for participants aged between 16 and 25. The research challenges a traditional linear understanding of youth transition, which presupposes a straightforward move from education to work (Wyn and Dwyer 2000), by instead considering young people's own definitions of adulthood and the value they place in social relationships, now and in the future. This more personal perspective allows for the examination of the complex negotiation of transitions in social space, not just transition outcomes. The research takes a qualitative longitudinal approach, gathering data in several stages. Young people first took part in a narrative interview that was paired with the life-mapping tool, where participants told stories about the 'fateful moments' of their transition to adulthood (Giddens 1991, 142). Alongside the second stage of audio diaries (Worth 2009a), and a feedback report of early results, the narrative interview and life map were designed to engage with the messiness of young people's experiences in a participant-centred way, encouraging greater inventiveness and flexibility in lifecourse geographies methodology.

After situating life maps as a kind of participatory diagram, one specifically designed for working with young people, the article explains the design and implementation of the life maps and young people's responses to the method. The second half of the article sets out my argument for the value of the life map technique to lifecourse geographies: practically, supporting a narrative interview and as a graphic organiser of young people's stories; and empirically, as a way to answer specific research questions about temporality that are more suited to a visual method.

Youth transition and 'fateful moments'
My life-mapping technique was developed in context with an increasing focus on the lifecourse in social

geography, thinking about the entirety of people's lives, their social interactions, and linkages to wider structural forces (Vanderbeck 2007; Hopkins and Pain 2007). A key orienting concept for this research, and for the life maps in particular, is Giddens' (1991, 142) concept of 'fateful moments'. In late modernity in the West, Giddens argues

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youth is a necessary part of an individual's lifecourse, consisting of a series of risky decisions (see also critical global perspectives collected by Jeffrey and Dyson (2008), which complicate this universalism). Consequently youth transition can be helpfully conceptualised through 'fateful moments', where a person's ontological security is threatened by having to make significant choices about the future. One's protective cocoon of comfortable everyday experiences is challenged by being forced to choose one future path or another. Fateful moments are also suffused with risk, as a person may often find it quite difficult to decide on the correct course of action because of so many competing and compelling alternatives. Although expert knowledge from 'abstract systems' is often called upon for guidance, knowledge claims are also in competition with each other, making the individual the sole arbiter of success or failure. Instead of positioning fateful moments as singular once-in-a-lifetime decisions, they are part of the lifecourse, with some transitions carefully prepared for (e.g. choosing certain courses in high school to simplify higher education options), while others are unexpected (e.g. a sudden change in health status).

Although Giddens (1991, 142) considers fateful moments as moments of adversity, he also characterises them as 'periods of reskilling and empowerment', where individuals can actively shape their future. Rather than assume 'fateful moments' are completely agential, however, it is important to recognise that many 'fateful moments' are based on young people's situation within specific institutions, especially family. In this sense, 'fateful moments' is a helpful construct to think about the current debate about the balance of structure and agency in youth research, and fits into discussions of 'structured' or 'rationalised' individualisation that critique the overestimation of agential choice in youth research (Evans 2002; Furlong et al. 2003; Valentine 2003).

'Fateful moments' in various connotations has become a popular orienting concept for life transitions research, with Elder (1998) making use of 'turning points' in a discussion of transitions within the lifecourse and Bagnoli and Ketokivi (2009) using the metaphor of 'crossroads' to explore young people's migration choices. The Inventing adulthoods project (Henderson et al. 2007; Thomson et al. 2002) employs the concept of 'critical moments' as a way of making sense of youth transitions in particular spaces, from disadvantaged estates to affluent suburbs. Finally, Shildrick and Mac- Donald's (2008) research on bereavement uses both 'critical' and 'fateful moments' to explore young people's reaction to the loss of a loved one.

Before engaging with the life-mapping method, it is important to consider how life transitions have been understood across time and space. Elsewhere, I have written about the concept of 'becoming' as a way to get past the dominant sense of chronology in research on the lifecourse, working with Bergsonian concepts like 'duration', where past, present and possible futures exist within an individual all at once (Worth 2009b). In essence, this is an understanding of time that embraces the idea of lifecourse, and its focus on interrelationships and social space. When the young people in my research talk about their lives – describing their social worlds – it becomes obvious that a linear view of time is insufficient. Instead, it makes sense for research to think about different temporal structures (linear and beyond), and different experiences of the flows of time, two issues that were facilitated by the life-mapping method.

Participatory diagramming, young people and transitions

This section situates life maps within participatory diagramming traditions (Pain and Francis 2003; Kesby et al. 2005; Kesby 2000; Alexander et al. 2007). Participatory diagramming has been popular in

development geography and in work with young children, where there is an expectation that participants might have difficulty getting their opinions across verbally, in the language of the researcher (Young and Barratt 2001; Bagnoli 2009). Yet diagramming also has value where communication is not an issue, as it offers participants a different mode of expressing their views, and another layer of knowledge for the research.

Participatory diagrams of various kinds have a strong tradition in youth transitions research. In her work with young people in New Zealand, Nairn (2006) asked participants to create 'anti-CVs' to explain multiple and subjective meanings of the future and adulthood. Anti-CVs took the form of collage, drawings and creative writing, in opposition to traditional textual CVs oriented to success in the labour market. The project animated corresponding interviews on youth identity, as the talk could then centre around how young people expressed themselves in their anti-CV, subtly depersonalising a difficult subject to talk about. For Inventing adulthoods (Thomson and Holland 2002, 339), 'lifelines' charts were used as a tool to help young people think about their lives at three different points in the future (3 years from now, at 25 and at 35). The researchers found that without the rubric they filled out for participants, they received brief statements, or idealistic, unplanned dreams for the future. Once asked to think about where they would be in terms of housing, education, work and personal relationships at different points in the future, young people provided highly detailed answers that both grounded and challenged earlier imaginings. Moreover, Hopkins (2006), in his work on the transition to university, explored binaries of childhood/adulthood and hope/fear of university with

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groups of summer students. Using chart paper and markers, they documented their location within 'childhood' and their expectations of life as an adult. Lastly, life maps of various configurations have also been used in research with young people with learning disabilities (Pollak 2005). Although often created by the researcher, Gray and Ridden (1999) suggest that mapping out a life draws attention to its multiple subjectivities, preventing the researcher from over-emphasising disability.

Another set of research that has been influential on my development of life maps is around the use of timelines in biographical research, where the interviewer writes start and end points, and leaves it to the informant to fill in the rest as s/he sees fit. For example, in the 'Young lives and times' project, young people were asked to fill in timelines to capture biographical data, while also asking participants to map important world events (Bagnoli 2009). Here again, timelines were used to collect 'turning points', but they were also carefully structured to capture the interaction between macro and micro processes in the lifecourse.

So while the idea of mapping is familiar, I have worked through a wide set of literature to arrive at a method of life mapping that both answers particular research questions, and is accessible and interesting to the VI young people involved in my research. The next section examines my design and use of life maps in detail, explaining how I adapted the method to suit my participants. I then assess the value of the method for lifecourse geographies and for research on transitions in particular, arguing that its supportive role and its open graphic format encourage alternative ways of understanding how youth and adulthood fit into the lifecourse.

Designing and working with life maps

Life maps were partnered with an episodic narrative interview, which was interested in collecting VI young people's stories of transition (important events, people and places) rather than individual biographies, making youth transition the subject rather than the participant's life (Riessman 2008). After gaining informed consent and introducing the goals of the research, I introduced the life-mapping tool, encouraging young people to record important experiences, places and people in their transition to adulthood – 'fateful moments', whatever they happened to be. Participants created life maps on oversize

sheets of paper, with markers for the large print users and tactile labels for the Braille users. The large scale was chosen so partially sighted participants could write comfortably and also to encourage autonomy and creativity by making the life map look different from school assignments. For the tactile version of the map, I used a Perkins typewriter to create a set of general content labels in basic Braille (including a translation for easy readability by non-Braille users) that were then updated as needed, using ad hoc paper labels to record new ideas during the interview (see Figure 1). Participants added to the map throughout the interview, and at the end I asked VI young people to evaluate the process, before offering a copy of their map for their own use.[2]

The main hurdle of conceptualising and working with the life map was my designated starting point of a line. I decided the tactile version of the life map required a piece of string as a guiding line, which was then laminated so labels could be easily moved around with blu-tack. During the design phase, when researching other forms of tactile diagrams (Sheppard and Aldrich 2000; Ungar et al. 1998), I realised the most successful diagrams had a strategy to spatially orient the VI user, allowing them to easily know where they were on the map, and how to find their way around. A line became a starting point for the partially sighted participant to synchronise the design across both formats. Moreover, during the pilot study a blank sheet of paper proved too overwhelming for most partially sighted participants, so the centre line became both an important reference and a starting off point to build the confidence of participants. I was initially concerned that the line would suggest that time is both linear and sequential – assumptions that my research challenges. Yet it became clear that during the creation of the maps that although it was influential, participants were also capable of ignoring the line when it did not suit their particular approach. Moreover, while chronology is a clear organising strategy for the maps, they were created piecemeal and were frequently updated and revised, according to

Figure 1 Jessica's life map, showing Braille labels, the raised guiding line, and the paper labels
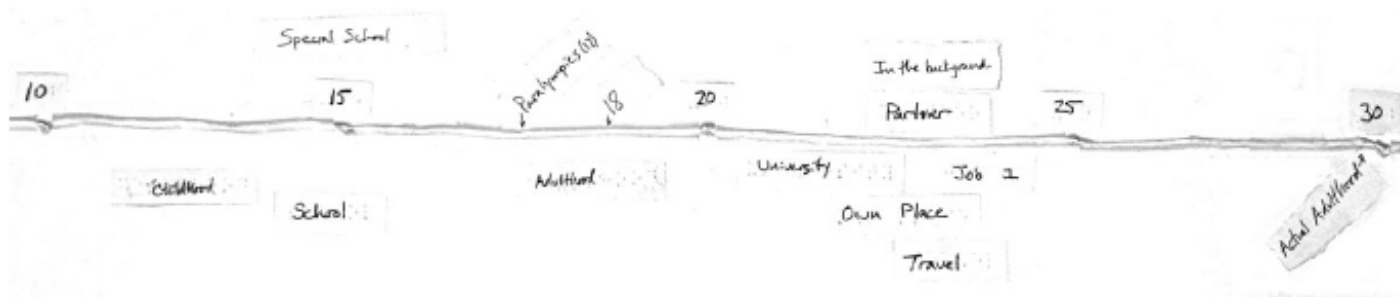
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various interview themes including family, education, work and disability. Regarding interpretation, participants' explanation of their life-mapping choices during the interview helped to guide my analysis, with young people having a chance to comment on my conclusions in later stages of the research.

Finally, before even considering the life-mapping tool, I had to think about the implications of adapting a graphic method for my VI participants, as I thought it could potentially be frustrating or confusing. From a methodological and ethical standpoint, I realised it did not make sense to rule out the idea of using a map as long as it was optional and easy to use, as it was important to engage the interest of participants in diverse ways.

## Value of the life-mapping technique for transitions research
The second half of this article shifts from the design and practical use of life maps to the value of the method to lifecourse geographies, considering their role in supporting the narrative interview process and as a source of data in their own right.

Practically: life maps as dialogic support for narrative interviews

First, life maps align well with what Leitch (2008) calls 'creative research methodologies', where innovative visual methods enhance the verbal nature of narrative interviews. As one of the goals of narrative research methodologies is to allow participants to tell their own stories in their own way, adding a diagramming component to the process allows participants to also include what is 'unsayable', or difficult to form into a story (Gauntlett 2007). For example, one participant felt that his time in social care was his most powerful fateful moment, but it ended up on his life map when telling the story was too difficult. Initially,Vincent spoke at length about arriving at specialist school as a young teenager, but only briefly about his previous months in care – instead adding to his life map: '[specialist school] – big shock to system. Into care at 13, pivotal in life, questioned myself on everything'. Although brief, connecting Vincent's life map with his interview reveals a fractured family dynamic that began when he briefly went into care and continues years later. The whole process of the life maps was oriented around what the participant wanted to contribute to the research, and the way they wanted to do so. When asked to evaluate the methods I had used, several participants told me that the life maps showed them a new perspective about their lives, while others realised that they had actually achieved more than they thought they had, once they saw it all in front of them.

The life map also increased the level of detail in my interviews, as participants contextualised new stories based on ones recorded earlier on their map, allowing them to immediately access their story at a level of greater complexity. Michael used his life map to build and support his interview in severalways (see Figure 2). First, hewanted to explain his visual impairment, and turned the map over to draw a detailed schematic of his eye. Besides signalling the importance of his visual impairment to his choices for the future, the drawing also showed how Michael thinks of VI in a medical/impairment mode rather than social/ disability. On the map itself, the happy/sad faces were added at the end of the interview to give a sense of his emotional wellbeing during a later story about moving away from his childhood home. Moreover, rather than give a back story about the friends he was planning to get a house with, Michael just drew a line connecting to Nick and Pete, previously mapped as his best friends from primary school, and jumped straight into the next story.

Figure   2   Michael's   life   map
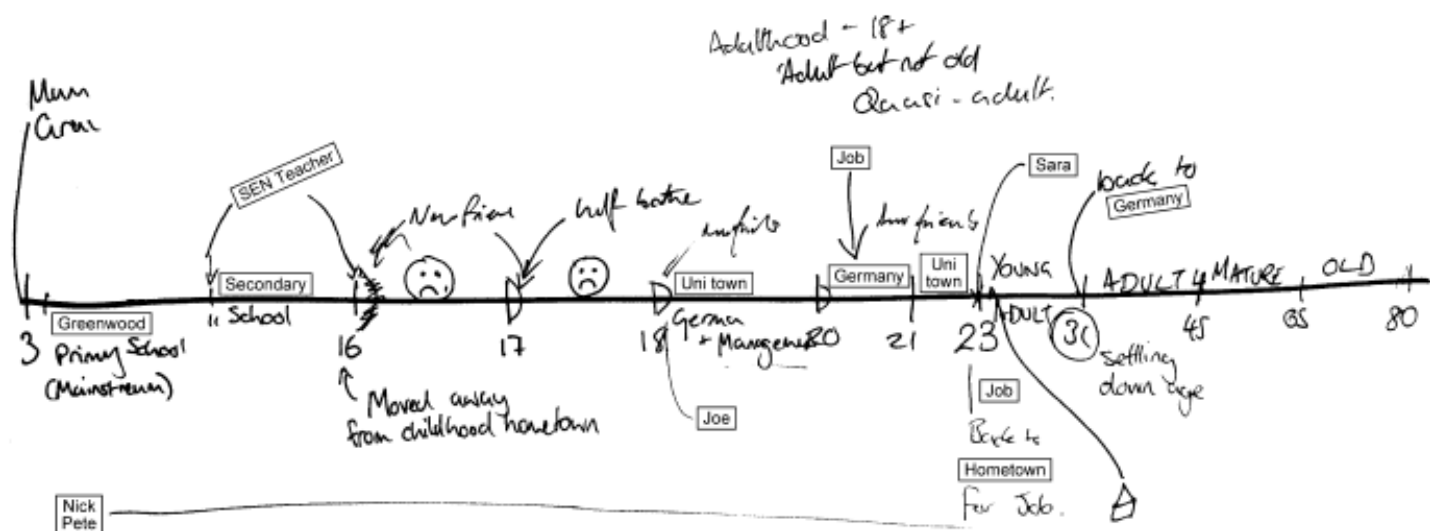
Second, the suite of methods developed for this research share an overall participatory methodology, putting the research in the hands of the participants as much as possible. As VI young people are often constructed as 'vulnerable' by educational gatekeepers and ethics review boards, choosing methods

that were open and flexible to participants was both an ethical and strategic decision. Including different methods that depended on interactive conversation as well as private reflection, and were both oral and graphic/tactile in nature supports the participatory ethic of the research, as participants could focus their energy on the method they identified with the most. One of my concerns about the life maps was that participants may have found the higher level of interactivity of the research confusing or overwhelming, especially if the flow of the interview is broken or the participant is concerned about what the researcher expects to see on the life map. This was the case for one participant, who asked me to scribe for her, as creating the life map while she was thinking of her next story was too much of a complication. I tried to respond to a participant's level of interest, presenting the life maps as an option rather than a requirement of the research so young people were less like to feel pressured. Ultimately, interest in the life-mapping tool was visible in the end result – the majority of participants made great use of it, and those that did not find it helpful only completed a brief sketch of their fateful moments during the interview.

This section concludes with some comments about how I am working with the visual narratives of the life maps as part of my thematic analysis, using them as graphic organisers of VI young people's transitions to adulthood. As I have explained above, the narrative interview and life map work together in each participant's case file, with the visual supporting the oral and vice versa. Following Riessman (2008), I used thematic narrative analysis to work with the interview and audio diary transcripts. In a thematic analysis, the focus is on 'what' was said, more than the 'how' or 'to whom'. The life maps are an integral part of this strategy, as visual narratives that extend the stories the research can tell (Leitch 2008). Narrative analysis is relatively new to geography, although several recent papers have made the case for narrative analysis as a way of connecting participants' speech to context and place (Hall 2004; Wiles et al. 2005; Milligan 2005). As an organisational tool, as narratives can be deeply personal and specific, life maps that begin from a common starting point can 'give rise to systematic data that might facilitate some comparison across the sample' (Thomson and Holland 2002, 339). The goal was not to predetermine a participant's narrative, but to help clarify patterns and trends during analysis. Overall, diagrams that show change over time are helpful for narrative inquiry, as participants can narrate the events that lead from one state of being to another.

Empirically: life maps and embodied time
While I view the life maps as a form of text that can be analysed alongside interview transcripts, I also developed an approach that interrogated the temporal-spatial strategies employed in the maps. I attached particular questions to the life map regarding how participants conceptualised time in the past, present and future, and the flow of time in their lives, linking directly to my theoretical focus on 'lived time' and the non-linearity of youth transition and the lifecourse. This section details participants' spatial strategies on the life map to represent how they live time, using 'fateful moments' as an orienting concept.

Young people used several spatial strategies to represent time beyond a steady linear flow. The most common strategy was to stretch the spacing between age markers to include more events in the recent past. So rather than equally space out each year along the timeline, extra space is given to map 'fateful moments' of transition, and very young and very old ages are excluded. Lu's map is a good example of this, as her map shows 19 years of her life, with over half the map devoted to events between 20 and 25 (see Figure 3). Lu's map is also one of the few to work vertically rather than horizontally, another way of repositioning time that disrupts a typical flow. Other participants changed the alignment of text and the Braille labels, with one participant placing the Braille label for 'partner' diagonally across 'college' to reference her partner being enmeshed with the experience of specialist school rather than any singular point in time. The life map as a visual and creative method offers young people a way to represent the flow of time in their transition to adulthood in a way that contradicts steady chronology, instead reflecting its often chaotic intensity without the often difficult task of putting their experience of time into words.

Another life map with clear spatial strategies for time is Maritsa's (see Figure 4). Maritsa's map is full of information about her transition to adulthood, but it can also be read for what it tells us about her lived experiences of time. Maritsa spent 6 years at home after she lost most of her vision in an accident – what she calls 'time wasted', describing that time as a return to childhood dependency. On the life map this period between 13 and 19 becomes a kind of extended fateful moment, a chunk of time defined by stasis rather than movement toward the future. Critically, this past experience gives context to her map's definition of adulthood, which is tied to the fateful moment of graduating from university and claiming independence. Maritsa's life map also includes a sense of 'embodied time', where time and emotion are linked, in her tentative mentions of her family, with whom she has a

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complicated, distant relationship (Davies 1996; Gren 2001). Finally, Maritsa ends her map at age 30, signalling a hesitancy to consider the future. This pattern continued across most of the maps, with participants not mapping further than their 30s or 40s, with decreasing amounts of detail (Bagnoli 2009; in contrast see Patterson et al. 2009). At the end of the interview, we shifted to some more analytical questions, including an evaluation of the concept of 'adulthood'. For Maritsa 'adulthood' as a concept was neatly linked into her personal life map, citing the importance of physical and emotion independence, and significantly for her, being away from family and in control of her own life.

The same reading of time is not present across the life maps; instead, participants make use of the life-mapping tool in different ways, getting at different understanding of time and approaches to the future. For example, several participants only wanted to map events, people and places that they were sure of, so they maintained a linear and sequential understanding of time for the purposes of the map, a group who Brannen and Nilsen (2002, 527) would describe as the 'true planners' following a 'model of predictability'. They did not include hopes or dreams (which would evoke a more embodied sense of time), as these imaginings do not fit rational plans for the future. As a result, the research engaged with the   diversity   of   young
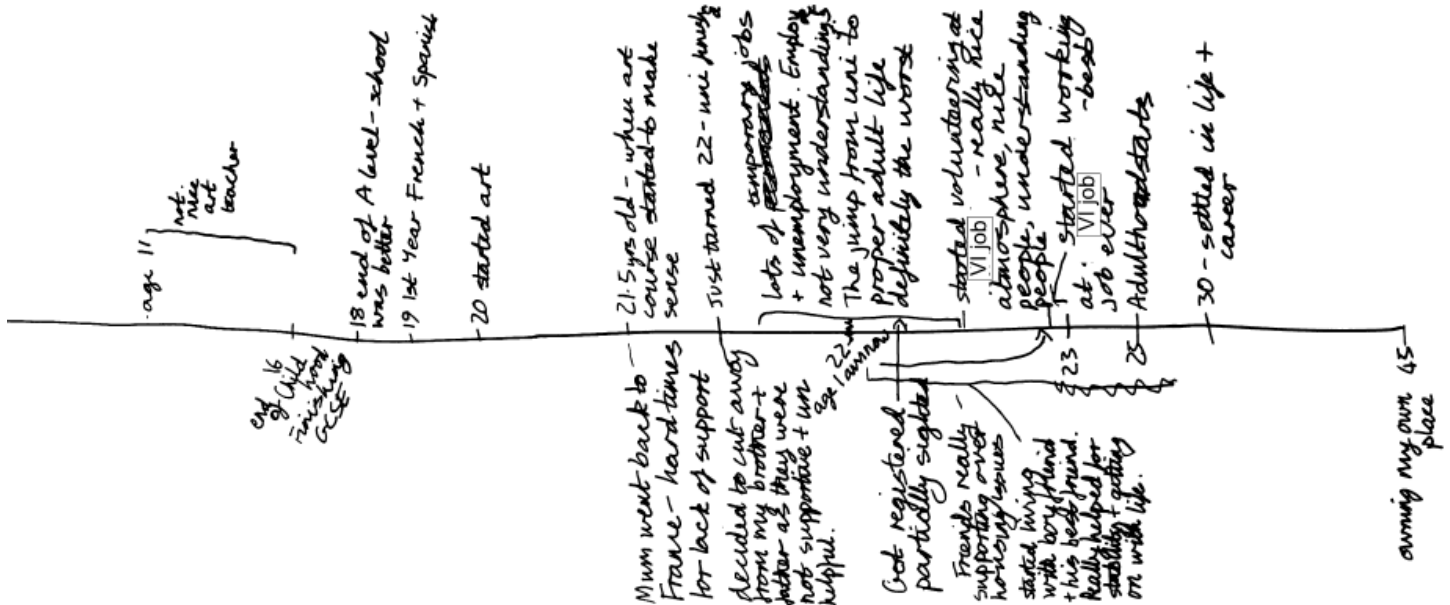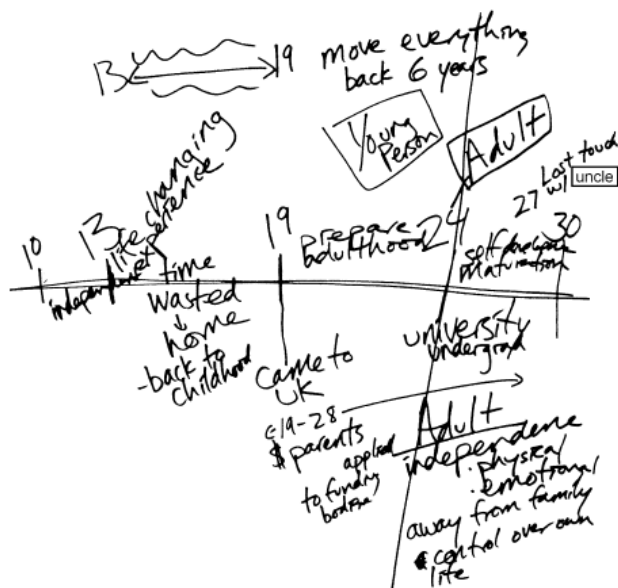

Figure 3 Lu's life map

Figure 4 Maritsa's life map

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people's approaches to time rather than trying to apply the same schematic to each. Moreover, although linear chronology was a necessary device to start off the life maps, the end results clearly show the complexity and fluidity of youth transitions. Indeed, by making linearity visible through the starting point of a line, participants were more critical of its limitations to address their experience of youth transition, and the life maps highlight the ways VI young people subverted dominant theories of time.

Life maps and lifecourse transitions

This article has explained a life-mapping technique, arguing for its utility in lifecourse geographies. As part of a narrative bricolage of methods, life maps are a form of graphic data that encourage young people to be the tellers of their own stories. The method reinforces the participatory focus of the research, while also offering the means to think about how ideas of time and the lifecourse are represented spatially. The life map draws ties between participatory and lifecourse geographies, with the tool offering potential new interests to each area. Timelines have been popular in lifecourse research, but they are often completed by the researcher, within a strict format. Participatory diagramming is often used to build group consensus, but it is also highly effective as part of a narrative interview with a single participant. The life map, with its aspects of participation, user control and an ethic of inclusion and respect for different kinds of knowledge has much to offer lifecourse geographies, challenging the use of basic timelines and engaging the interest of participants.

Stories of youth transition may start in the past, yet they intermingle with present experiences and future plans. The life map supports these often complex narratives of 'fateful moments', deepening communication and adding rigor to analysis. So while the accompanying narrative interview was a chance for participants to tell stories of the self, the life map allows the self to be performed graphically, as participants chose particular experiences to map, in their own style. And unlike oral narrative, the life map shows all experiences at once; and as a result, looking at several life maps can highlight difference and similarities between participants' experience of youth transition. Taken individually, the life maps are a vehicle to think about the temporality of transitions, confronting linear, chronological time with the multiplicity of people's lived experiences of time across the lifecourse.

Finally, while the life-mapping method was developed for VI young people using large print and tactile formats, the flexibility and accessibility of the life map gives it wide applicability for lifecourse research as

it offers participants a more dynamic experience and the potential to generate findings from new perspectives. Overall, life maps have helped examine the complexity of lifecourse transitions more critically, incorporating the contingencies of time and space into research with young people.

Notes 1 'VI young person' is the term participants preferred, echoing Weller's (2006) concern that research in youth geographies reflects participants' own definitions. 2 I was cognisant of not extending the research process past participants' level of interest, and young people were happy to let go of their life map after discussing it in the interview. Instead, their involvement in the research continued with an audio diary, and providing feedback on my early analysis.

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