Title: Utilising timelines as a creative method in research with the under-served population of sex workers: stories from the field

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Background: Gathering participant led data with underserved populations can be challenging, even with traditional qualitative methods. Additionally, , data collection with underserved populations is often fraught with further entrenched hegemony of the dominant narrative, a silencing of lived experience and can further marginalise and exclude those most in need. Creative methods such as timelines can be a useful, sensitive tool to gather data with participants experiencing inequalities and trauma, combining flexibility and malleability with their ethical appeal.

Aim: To outline the value of timelines as a creative method in health research, with sex workers as an underserved population, using the underlying principle of a feminist ethic of care.

Discussion: This article provides an overview of timelines in health research with women sex workers. It considers the ethics of using timelines, feminist values and power dynamics in data gathering.

Conclusion: Creative methods can work well to enable participants to choose how they narrate complex and traumatic life experiences, minimising the ways in which researchers control data production. Combined with deep, ongoing reflexivity, they can work to address some of the power imbalances inherent in the research process, to mitigate against epistemic violence.

Implications for practice: Considerations of the implications of creative research methods in practice are outlined, as are some options for managing these.

Keywords data collection, narrative, research, research methods

Key points

• Timelines may not in and of themselves become rich sources of data but can be useful tools or anchor points for gently drawing participants back in

• Creative methods are responsive to the needs of research participants

• The notion of 'kitchen table reflexivity' is helpful in outlining how reflexivity can and should be achieved

• The use of timelines can shift the balance of power, as well as deepen the narrative and the understanding of the entirety of the participants' experiences

Introduction

This paper outlines the value of using qualitative creative methods in health research which explored health inequalities and access to traditional health services with women who sex worked. Both authors have previously used creative methods when researching with marginalised groups, though not with sex workers. Warwick-Booth used storyboards to enable young women to articulate journeys through a gendered intervention (Cross and Warwick-Booth, 2015), and metaphors with older women describing support following experiences of domestic abuse (Warwick-Booth and Coan 2020). Meth used artefacts with a group of refugees and asylum seekers (see Stephens et al., 2020). These methodological practices informed the choice of using timelines in this study (Meth, 2023), as the authors

explored the usefulness of using creative methods in developing narrative accounts of deeply sensitive and traumatic events. Creative methods can address existing power imbalances between researchers and participants, facilitating participant led data production, and align with feminist methodological values, principles and practices, guiding this study through the application of a feminist ethic of care.

Feminist methodology and a feminist ethic of care

Feminist methodology examines knowledge production about, by, and for women, addressing power imbalances between researchers and subjects. It emphasizes reflexivity and honesty about power dynamics. Feminist methods are not inherently "softer" or qualitative but require critical self-awareness and reflexivity. A feminist ethic of care, as defined by Gilligan, focuses on interconnectedness and ethical responsibility in research, using power and resources responsibly.

Letherby (2004a, cited in Landman, 2006) critiques the stereotype of female interviewers as good listeners, arguing it reduces the skills of both male and female researchers and overlooks male social realities. She also warns against assuming women are homogenous or that women interviewing women eliminates power differentials. Socio-economic differences can create significant divides, and reflexivity alone cannot fully address these. Power dynamics are crucial in feminist methodologies, especially when interviewing marginalized groups. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasize the need for reflexivity in Thematic Analysis (TA), urging researchers to be self-aware and critical. Feminist researchers must be transparent about their intentions and positionality to avoid harm.

Murphy (2022) cites Gilligan (1993) on the feminist ethic of care, which opposes individualism and emphasizes interconnectedness and ethical responsibility. Researchers must conduct ethical research grounded in feminist principles, using power responsibly.

Creative methods to address power imbalances – applying Feminist methods in practice

Recognising this imperative to conduct research within a Feminist Ethic of Care, an inductive approach utilising narratives was employed in this study. The research aimed to explore health inequalities and access to traditional health services and was undertaken with women

who sex worked. Working in a way that was in line with feminist principles, a methodology including creative methods – in this instance timeline drawings – was appropriate. The rationale for this decision was manifold. If utilised effectively, creative methods can be a non-threatening way of drawing out a narrative, directed by the participant shaping the story that develops around whatever creative method it is they are engaged in, be that a photo, an artefact, or a drawing. The participants drew timelines, creating narratives and developing stories around their health, teasing out and highlighting critical junctures in their lives in relation to their health, to decision making, and to their health seeking behaviours (Meth, 2023).Describing the inherent usefulness of methodologies that are visual in nature in allowing participants to own their story telling, Sanders et al (2018) refer to this creation of a 'safe space' wherein the process itself is as significant – if not more - as the outputs and the outcomes. As such, they argue, the interviewer and those being interviewed invest in the process in the form of a series of interactions that pivot the power dynamics that usually exist between them (Sanders et al, 2018). The interviewer must make this active choice to relinquish their position of power over the participant, and to do so there has to be an on-going acknowledgement of the multiple ways in which we hold and assert this power, in intersectional ways.

In addition to addressing power imbalances, methods such as timelines can allow an exploration and a multi-faceted examination of issues from different perspectives, focusing on what is important to the participant and not to the interviewer (Kara, 2015). Reviewing participants' timelines can allow a deeper understanding and meaning to emerge about - for example significant and adverse childhood experiences, what determines the points at which women choose to engage with healthcare practitioners and the decision- making process behind overlooking or deprioritising symptoms or events in their lives at other times. Creative methods facilitate the re-telling of these in the participants' own voices, allowing the construction of theory from the resultant data (Meth, 2023). For Sherridan et al (2011) the strength of timelining lies in its flexibility, allowing the narrator (participant) to tell stories at their own pace. Schubring et al (2019) add to this the self-reflection engendered in the participant telling their story.

For Ojemark (2007) timelines and their narratives additionally allow an exploration of agency and structure, and the relationship between cause and effect. Therefore, she argues, they lend themselves to feminist ethics of care, having women's voices heard. At their heart they are allowing an exposure of lived experiences, creating a platform for voices that have been silenced. Furthermore, she argues, they allow the macro and the micro to be discussed alongside each other, such as discussion of what was happening in the women's lives on a personal level while COVID19 lockdown restrictions were in place (Ojemark, 2007).

*T*imelining is both subtle and malleable, because as a method it provides not only prompts but also a central focus for the research participants to be able to frame and tell their narrative Sheridan et al (2011). It does this at the storyteller's pace, a complementary tool alongside conventional stimuli ordinarily used in interviewing (Crilly et al, 2006). Schubring et al (2019), comment on one of the fundamental features of timelining, – allowing the interaction between 'big' and 'small' life events, and the participants' health, to be explored. Biographical drawing tools facilitate the process of recall, allowing a far richer biographical narrative to be developed facilitating deep exploration of the participants relationship to their health (Crilly et al, 2006)

Sheridan et al (2011) highlight how the process of completing the timelines allows a trusting relationship to develop because of the nature of what is being discussed and the time taken, again shifting the balance of power. This, they argue can serve to deepen the narrative and overall understanding of the entirety of the participants past experiences. This is where creative methods are of particular benefit in nursing research, developing deeper relationships between those with lived experience and the researcher, enabling amplified voice and detailed narratives to inform the development of theory and practice.

Creative methods in practice: street sex worker health inequalities

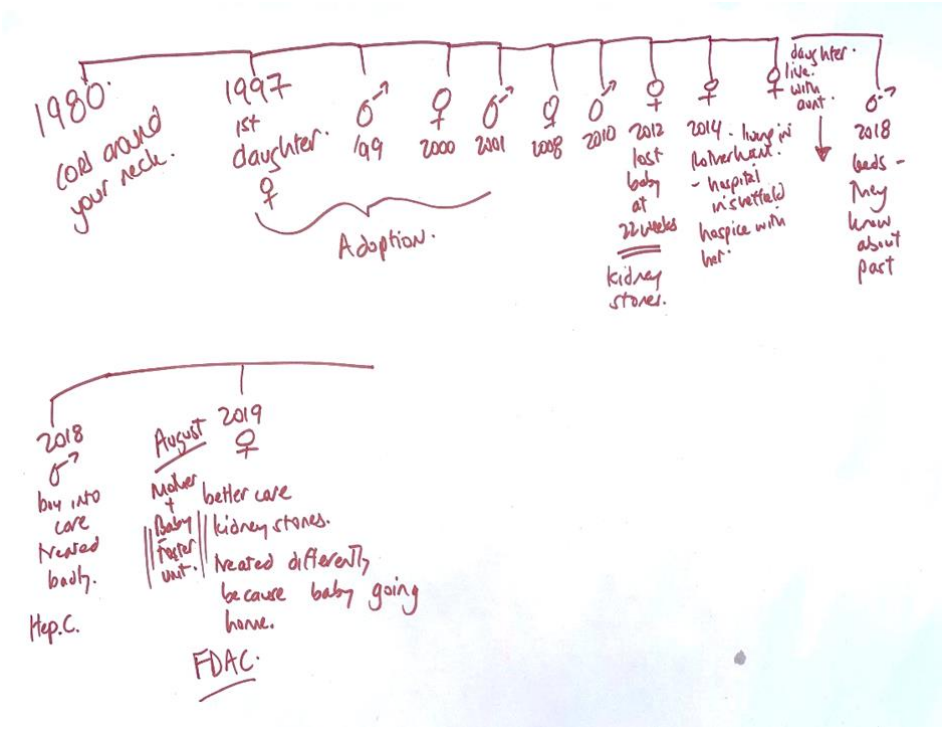
University ethical approval was sought and granted, prior to the commencement of data collection. This included the condition that there was appropriate access to additional support for participants, should they experience any of the research as traumatising.

In this study by Meth (2023), in which Warwick-Booth had an advisory role, a total of 16 interviews and the collection timelines for seven women was collected just before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. As Meth is a volunteer outreach worker with a voluntary sector organisation that among other roles supports street sex-working women, she was able to access with permission of the organisation, women who had been provided with participant information sheets and had expressed an interest in taking part. Formal consent was then obtained. The women who were interviewed had to be well enough and engaging with their support workers to an extent to ensure their overall safety and wellbeing, as this was paramount. Sanders et al (2018) commented on this type of sampling and recruitment in their work and noted that in sex worker research it is common for data to be opportunistic rather than representative, purposive rather than probability. In terms of sample size, narrative inquiries and creative methods both lend themselves to smaller numbers. These methods both generate rich data, and there were enough participants for there to be thematic links both within and between participants stories (Smith et al, 2009).

Hanna and Lau-Clayton (2012) describe how timelines allow research participants to pull out connections that they feel are relevant between events that have already taken place. The overall aim of the drawing / creative element of these interviews with the women who sex work was to elicit both an overall life history along with narrative content, but also to highlight the key junctures at which during moments of health and ill-health, the women chose to access support or to leave their symptoms unmanaged. In this way, it was hoped that a sense or overall mapping of decision-making, and health behaviours could be developed. The participants were shown a very basic example as a prompt of a horizontal linear line, with birth at the far end and present at the far right, and any key points in between (Meth, 2023). Care was taken to explain to the women that they could put down anything that was important to them, that the focus was on their health but that what mattered was that it was their timeline.

Wilson et al (2007), when describing their experience of utilising life grids as a method in interviewing, state that once implemented as a tool, a limited number of interview participants completed their life grids (Wilson et al, 2007). In the main phase of the fieldwork reported here, there were a variety of reasons provided for why the women were not completing their timelines (Meth, 2023). One woman struggled to write following multiple assaults and head injuries. Another was clear that she had no interest in drawing or being creative, because she had done ‘too much of that stuff’. In addition to this, she attended her interview with her young baby, which would have made drawing logistically difficult. Her timeline is included her in Figure 1 below and was completed by the researcher while the participant talked. It still worked to anchor the discussion, and the researcher was the scribe while the participant guided the narrative and agreed what was to be written down where on the page. Another woman struggled to write or draw because of severe arthritis in her hands, and she was unable to sit in a position long enough to be able to write (Meth, 2023).

Figure 1: Stacey’s Timeline (Meth, 2023)



In the work on timelines highlighted above, Wilson et al (2007) also described the physical position of the researcher, which was frequently on the floor. In almost all cases in this study, data collection was conducted sitting on the floor. Exceptions to this were Val, who elected to visit the University and be interviewed in an office, with Stacey, whose interview was held in a small office at a local voluntary sector support agency (Meth, 2023). Guenette and Marshall (2009) highlight that the physical positioning of the researcher when utilising creative methods is where much of its strengths lie, because the participant is engaged in an activity, and the researcher is often sat on the floor or sat side by side, with nothing physical, like a table, between them, there is less direct eye contact. This can enable more sensitive topics to be discussed, in a much less threatening and distressing way (Guenette and Marshall, 2009; Wilson, 2007).

Meth (2023) found that while sometimes women felt unable to draw or write something down, they opted to say it aloud, whilst some only wanted to write certain words down and did not want to speak to them or choose to whisper them. This indicates the importance of participant choice in disclosure, in terms of pace, timing, and mode of articulation. In one instance, a woman discussed a past distressing experience from 2004 by talking about the rest of that decade, before returning to complete the diagram for 2004 (Meth, 2023). Wilson et al (2007) echoed this finding, stating that participants can need an alternative means of telling a story. Furthermore, life grids can offer a ‘way in’ for researchers, with explicit permission, to gain some insight into certain events that participants may find too difficult to verbalise or conceptualise (Hanna and Lau-Clayton, 2012).

While caution needs to be exercised in overstating their potential to heal, Guenette and Marshall (2009) refer to the potential for timelines as tools of reflection to aid healing. Wilson et al (2007) argue that creative approaches are significantly less challenging or threatening when compared to intensely personal interview questions, put to research participants with sustained eye contact. When exploring health behaviours and concepts link to health inequalities, particularly in groups or populations that are marginalised or under-served, these methods are thus inclusive, and beneficial, either when used alone or as a means of shaping and informing interview schedules (Meth, 2023).

Kolar et al (2015), note that therapeutic discussions can allow for some closure around significant events. Whether or not this does take place through using creative methods is not easy to qualify, however timelines may be less invasive and traumatic compared to other data elicitation methods because they are participant-led. Ethical practice also should include appropriate ethical approval (standard university approval in this instance); risk assessment for all involved; careful handling of interviews; and sensitive signposting to services for participants requiring post data collection support (Meth, 2023). In this study Tracey stated that she found the process of drawing and completing the timeline to be a hopeful one, as no one had ever asked her before how she felt about her health or anything to do with her body. For her it was important to illustrate the hopefulness with balloons and pretty colours, even when discussing distressing events – see figures 2 and 3 below (Meth, 2023).

Figure 2: Tracey's Timeline (Meth, 2023)

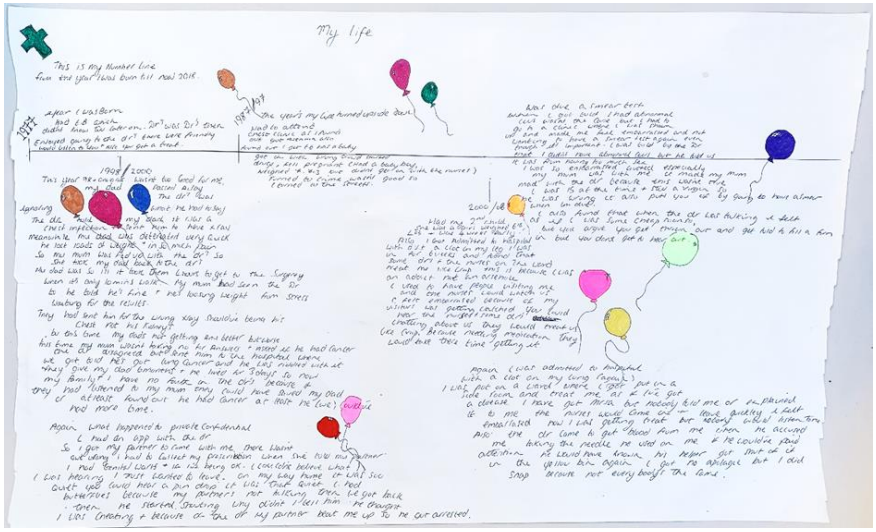
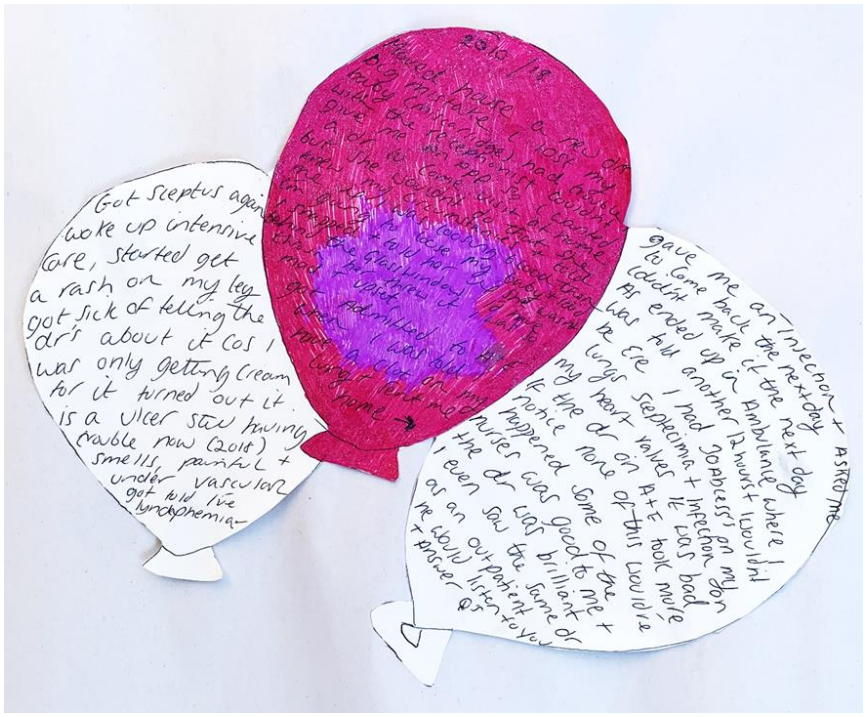


Figure 3: Tracey's Balloon Diagram (Meth, 2023)



Implications for research incorporating creative methods

The timeline activity elicited mixed responses, with some participants finding it useful, and others not engaging with it. This choice itself, to engage or not in the chosen creative method, is a powerful and significant one, and is telling. The variety of participant responses can be analysed in relation to power dynamics, with some women feeling empowered enough to decline involvement in creative activities, therefore disrupting the traditional power hierarchies found between researchers and the researched (Blaskova, 2023).

To accommodate the mixed responses to, and uptake of, creative methods, it is imperative that the process be flexible and responsive and, moreover, that researchers are not wedded to one method of working. This flexibility required on the part of the researcher is a further feature of these methods and of creative methodologies, which are responsive to the needs of the participants, and as such they involve further relinquishing of the power traditionally held. Over the process (Walters, 2019) . Having adjunctive methods such as semi-structured interviews or more traditional focus group activities that could either accompany or replace the creative methods is a proactive way to manage this. This is what was utilised in the study undertaken by Meth (2023). Moreover, analysis and writing up need to consider the motivations and meaning behind not engaging and what this more broadly gives us insight into. As Walters (2019) argues, it is often the most interesting part of the research when the researcher has lost some control of the research process, and this represents anything but failure (Walters, 2017). Silence in data collection, and the decision, for myriad reasons not to

engage in creative activities is under reported in methodological literature. Even with some participants being less engaged with the timelines, their usage provided a focal point for conversation and, furthermore, helped to redress power imbalances. Wilson et al (2007) found that whilst timelines may not in and of themselves become rich sources of data, they are useful tools or anchor points to draw participants back to, either during moments of tension or sadness, or if they have gone off topic, in a gentle manner, in keeping with a feminist ethics of care. Additionally, they can be useful for the researcher if their focus has been lost and there is a need to regain direction during interviews while still ultimately working to mitigate the power imbalances (Wilson et al, 2007), which Meth (2023) experienced in this study. Critically, power always remains present - as a tool at the researcher's disposal, timelines can help re-focus and direct, but as a tool wielded by the participant, data generation is guided or shaped by the limits of what the women chose to add to their timelines, minimising the extent to which researchers control the narrative.

The role of reflexivity in feminist methodology

As discussed earlier, reflexivity remains central to redressing power imbalances within research. Furthermore, for research findings to be meaningful and as unbiased as possible, the researcher's positionality must also be clear and re-examined throughout the study given that allegiances shift, and positions change. Reflexivity can be employed in many ways, but what is most important is that there is ongoing debate and critical questions being asked. This requires a level of self-knowing, a questioning for example of the rapport developed with participants, of the boundaries at play, and a deep searching for any evidence of epistemic exploitation (the process whereby others are exploited in the pursuit of the creation of knowledge) (Braun and Clarke 2022), Holt 2020).

Kara (2018) describes the deep-seated cognitive biases that we all, no matter who we are, hold as researchers. An upfront awareness of power dynamics, of for example what Kara (2018) refers to as the 'commodification of rapport' is vital. Without this, it is all too easy for those that have power (researchers), in the pursuit of knowledge creation or in the pursuit of even more power, compel the research participants of the chosen under-served group to provide them with the answers and to educate, at great personal costs to themselves. Related to this, Braun and Clarke (2022) discuss the importance of having a keen awareness of where we as researchers sit along a continuum of being an insider or outsider – research undertaken from either extreme standpoint risks subjectivity and bias and acknowledging where we sit, and how this position impacts on the findings is therefore vital.

When considering how this ongoing reflexivity is achieved, Folkes' (2022) notion of 'kitchen table reflexivity' (2022, p.1) is helpful, highlighting the importance of deep reflexivity that goes beyond a descriptive shopping list approach. She argues for an approach that accounts for the shifts and the fluidity of our positionality throughout the whole research process. Research can be short, or it can last a long time, and how we feel about the micro or macro environment can shift significantly during that time. Folkes argues that the most important reflexivity occurs between the interviewing of participants, in the 'waiting field' (2022, p.1). For Folkes, this is all about the informal, non-static process and discussions in passing with the research participants; and the thoughts that occur when writing interview notes, analysing data and writing up (Folkes, 2022). Crucially, what Folkes is describing here is a process that is not and should not be static. This concept of kitchen table reflexivity was employed by Meth (2023). It helped capture the messy insider / outsider identities that she straddled being both researcher and outreach worker.

In addition to these hats and varied identities, Meth also notes how she continued to identify as a nurse, and the questioning of this identity in relation to the women and their stories, and any tension that arose as a result of those, was a key feature of the reflexivity of the study (Meth, 2023). McKintosh (2023) notes how such tensions exist for many nurses who transition from nurse to nurse researcher.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the usefulness of creative methods – in particular timeline drawings – in the context of healthcare research, as a method to be employed as part of an overall feminist methodology. To illustrate its applicability, the example of Meth's (2023) study was introduced, describing how timelines were incorporated into her research with street sex worker looking at the critical juncture at which sex workers sought health care. An overview of feminist methodology was given, followed by a discussion of creative methods as a means of addressing power imbalances. This was followed by a discussion on how creative methods work in practice, often with mixed results. Ongoing reflexivity is of fundamental importance to any research methodology, if a feminist ethic of care is to be employed and if power imbalances are going to be addressed. While ultimately the power will always sit with the researcher and the risk of epistemic violence is always potentially there, ongoing deep reflexivity and a willingness to relinquish some of the power that we hold in intersectional ways, through using creative methods, is a start to addressing or mitigating this. However, this means that for researchers practicing in such ways, participant engagement can be variable, and that power sharing requires researchers to work in flexible and response ways.

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