Article

Timeline Mapping in Qualitative Interviews: A Study of Resilience With Marginalized Groups

Kat Kolar, MA
Department of Sociology, University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

Farah Ahmad, MBBS, MPH, PhD
School of Health Policy and Management, York University
Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

Linda Chan, MPH
Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

Patricia G. Erickson, PhD
Department of Sociology, University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

Abstract

Growing interest in visual timeline methods signals a need for critical engagement. Drawing on critical emancipatory epistemologies in our study exploring resilience among marginalized groups, we investigate how the creation of visual timelines informs verbal semistructured interviewing. We consider both how experiences of drawing timelines and how the role of the timeline in interviews varied for South Asian immigrant women who experienced domestic violence, and street-involved youth who experienced prior or recent violent victimization. Here we focus on three overarching themes developed through analysis of timelines: (a) rapport building, (b) participants as navigators, and (c) therapeutic moments and positive closure. In the discussion, we engage with the potential of visual timelines to supplement and situate semistructured interviewing, and illustrate how the framing of research is central to whether that research maintains a critical emancipatory orientation.

Keywords: resilience, timeline, visual methods, South Asian women, street-involved youth, qualitative interview

Despite the growing interest in use of visual methods in qualitative research as a way to engage with issues of power relations, representation, and meaning, researchers who have attempted to use drawings to facilitate sense-making in the social or public health sciences remain relatively far and few between. Only limited literature is available on the use of visual methods in guiding or supplementing semistructured or open-ended interviewing methods in these disciplines, or in navigating issues of interviewing vulnerable populations who have experienced trauma (e.g., Berends, 2011; Goodrum & Keys, 2007; Horsfall & Titchen, 2009; Patterson, Markey, & Somers, 2012; Umoquit et al., 2008). Although such research has contributed to the understanding of potential uses and strengths of visual methods—including the building of rapport, enhanced contextualization of narratives, and non-verbal communication as a way to access "othered" ways of knowing—detailed exploration of use of visual methods with diverse populations is still required. Also essential is critical engagement with the ways in which visual methods may inform or pose new concerns for the researcher-participant relationship.

This article contributes to the growing literature on visual methods by providing an analysis of the implementation and findings of a study using participant-created visual timelines and semistructured interviewing to explore resilience among marginalized groups in Canada's Greater Toronto Area [GTA] in 2010. Timelines are a visual, arts-based data collection method, derived from a broader framework of graphic elicitation designs (Bagnoli, 2009; Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011; Umoquit et al., 2008). Timelines are created from a participant's life events, placed in some sort of chronological arrangement, with visual indication of the significance or meaning attached to highlighted events (Berends, 2011; Patterson et al., 2012). This study draws on two groups of research participants: (a) South Asian [SA] immigrant women who had experienced domestic violence, and (b) street-involved youth [SIY] who had experienced (one or both of) childhood maltreatment by a caregiver, or violent victimization since becoming street-involved. The primary aim of the current article is to examine the potential of visual timelines to supplement and situate semistructured interviewing with marginalized groups.

The use of in-depth narrative interviews on sensitive topics or with marginalized groups not only rouses concerns regarding potentially exploitative research relationships, but also involves issues regarding the development of rapport (here understood as accountable, meaningful engagement with participants. See Holland, 2007; Nicholls, 2009). We recognize that interviews may elicit anxiety as participants reflect on and share potentially traumatic or otherwise difficult experiences (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). Researchers must work to ensure that no undue distress is caused to participants. Appropriate selection of research methods, ensuring that participants are reciprocally engaged and have a say in how the research proceeds, can facilitate increased participant authority in the research process and enhance trust and meaningful, accountable engagement (Holland, 2007; Nicholls, 2009).

To address such concerns, qualitative methods can be integrated to make data collection situations more amenable to marginalized participants, as well as to allow diversified exploration and representation of participant life experiences (Patterson et al., 2012; Umoquit et al., 2008). The combination of graphic elicitation methods such as visual timelines with verbal interviewing provides one such possibility to address these issues. Timelines have been used to study the trajectory of substance abuse and treatment (Berends, 2011), the process of weight loss (Sheridan et al., 2011), the impact of financial incentives on clinical behaviours (Umoquit et al., 2008), and barriers to health of people experiencing homelessness (Patterson et al., 2012). The available visual methods literature suggests that use of timelines in tandem with in-depth narrative interviews may enhance the data collection experience and data quality, particularly when researching sensitive topics or marginalized populations (Berends, 2011; Harper, 2003; Sheridan et al., 2011).

Although this literature has begun to assess some of the strengths and limitations of timeline implementation, much remains to be elaborated on how sources of data, topics of investigation, and epistemological approaches all inform timeline interview processes and outcomes. Academic articles on timelines appear to focus largely on the content of timelines at the expense of what their form contributes to an understanding of various social phenomena (exceptions include Bagnoli, 2009). Some researchers note that they could not include individual timelines due to ethical issues (e.g., Berends, 2011), could only provide researcher-created timelines (e.g., Patterson et al., 2012), or were limited to the use of pre-structured diagrams in the interview (e.g., Umoquit et al., 2008). Berends (2011) suggests that increased availability of such research is necessary because the analyses of individual timelines in combination with supporting interview text will facilitate more holistic understandings of data by readers. Several articles state that timelines can act to produce a participatory space but engage in minimal (if any) discussion as to how or why this may be the case, and what this does to change the interview process (e.g., Bagnoli, 2009; Sheridian et al., 2011). Further, considering the glaring absence of timeline implementations with immigrants and other groups who experience social structural marginalization, it is clear that research on use of timelines across more varied participant populations is still required to understand differences in uptake and response to this method. To speak to these gaps in the timeline literature, we provide an in-depth critical discussion of our implementations of timelines with SA immigrant women and SIY participants. Our aim in this article is to expand the scope of this method for those who are considering visual timeline research with marginalized populations.

In alignment with the formulation of this project and the original analyses here of the timeline data, our inquiry was informed by critical emancipatory and feminist perspectives (Ahmad, Rai, Petrovic, Erickson, & Stewart, 2013; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012). We value power-conscious epistemology where the interview is approached as an active, co-constructive process between the interview participant and researcher. This perspective moves a researcher away from conventional approaches that treat interviews as pipelines between the research "subject," positioned as the passive conveyor or object of knowledge, and the researcher who is the source of objective authority eliciting information (Gringeri, Wahab, & Anderson-Nathe, 2010; Nicholls, 2009; Smith, 1990). Emphasis is placed on participant narratives by asking simple, open-ended questions with adequate interview time and active listening by the interviewer. Reflexivity is recognized as a central practice in the construction, application, and analysis of interviews, whereby researchers critically engage with how the very production of knowledge and interaction with participants is situated in social relations and power inequalities. Further, in the current study, the use of visual methods is not assumed to be emancipatory simply because the mode of expression and communication is expanded to nonverbal data, but because such methods should arise as the result of a reflexive research process that maintains awareness and critical engagement with issues of power and representation (e.g., Horsfall & Titchen, 2009; Mason & Davies, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2013). In this analysis, we sought to understand how timelines in in-depth interviews could provide a venue for participants to tell their stories, and how timelines could be used to recognize and legitimize participants' understandings of resiliency (Maxwell, 1992; White & Klein, 2009).

Methodology

Study Setting and Design

The larger study was conducted with collaborating agencies in the GTA, which includes the city of Toronto and the regions of Durham, Halton, Peel, and York. According to the 2011 census, nearly 6 million people reside in the GTA. The GTA was deemed appropriate for this study because it is a dense area providing access to several community-based agencies serving large SIY and SA populations (Ahmad et al., 2013; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012). The substudy

with the SA group was conducted in Peel in collaboration with a community-based agency, serving newcomers to Canada. The SIY substudy was conducted in Toronto in collaboration with a community agency serving SIY. One author (Patricia Erickson) had done considerable prior research on street youth issues with this agency. She met with agency staff at an early stage of study planning in order to explain the project and gain their participation, and also committed to returning and presenting the findings when data collection was complete (Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012). Both agencies were purposefully selected because they served the communities of interest and had counselors specialized in the issues of domestic violence and youth homelessness.

The qualitative design of face-to-face, in-depth interviews was employed for both groups. The interview guide was developed out of consultation of literature addressing resilience and SA- and SIY-specific concerns, from available literature on timeline implementation (e.g., Bagnoli, 2009), and through consultation with collaborating agencies. The interviews were shaped around a semistructured interview guide with open-ended questions on resilience, defined as resources (internal or external) that may assist individuals in their engagement with and navigation of adversity (Kolar, 2011; PreVAiL, 2010). This investigation of resilience was intended to disrupt benchmarks of positive adaptation that frequently reflect values of White, middle-class families (Ungar, 2004). Such benchmarks are particularly problematic for those who have lived in resource-limited and volatile contexts, such as SIY and SA immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence (Ahmad et al., 2013; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012; Ungar 2004). Interview questions were accordingly intended to encourage participants to identify what constituted a "resilience resource." For example, interview questions included: "Can you draw a timeline depicting events that were important in your life?" and "Can you tell me if there were other supports that you wish you had when you were going through your difficult time?" A short sociodemographic survey was conducted with participants prior to commencing the in-depth interviews. The collaborating agencies reviewed the study protocol and provided feedback. Research ethics approval was obtained from the relevant academic institutions (University of Toronto; York University).

Data Collection

The substudies were designed to be exploratory, aiming to develop understanding of resilience in relation to the specific challenges faced by SIY and SA immigrant women. Thus sampling was not aimed at representativeness but at inductively exploring variation and generating new insights through in-depth investigation. For such studies a small number of cases are recommended (i.e., fewer than 20) (Crouch & McKenzie 2006; Kuzel et al., 1999). Potential SA and SIY participants were identified according to criteria of being over 18 years of age (and at most 26 years of age for SIY), of experiencing violence, and of making positive changes in their lives. SIY were eligible if they had experienced violence since becoming street-involved and/or had experienced childhood maltreatment. SA immigrant women were eligible if they had experienced intimate partner violence. Through collaboration between researchers and agency counselors, "positive changes" were determined as being context-specific for these exploratory substudies. It is recognized here that what constitutes appropriate indications of positive development will vary for SIY and SA immigrant women participants due to the different social environments they occupy and structural barriers they face. Broadly, "positive changes" were construed to mean that participants have been engaging in activities that promote their mental health, well-being, and coping, including: (a) addressing addictions and past trauma; (b) establishing more supportive relationships; and (c) pursuing goals such as education, stable housing, or employment. Counselors identified participants meeting these criteria, and potential participants received preliminary information about the study through flyers distributed by counselors at the collaborating agencies. Interested participants contacted study coordinators for further details. The team thus relied on the help of

social workers and counselors at a SIY clinic to screen five women and five men, and at a SA service agency to screen 11 women (for more detailed information on sampling, see Ahmad et al., 2013; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012).

Interviews were organized in a private space provided by the collaborating agencies. Prior to proceeding with interviews, researchers discussed the interview process with participants, gave consent information sheets to participants, provided a verbal overview of consent information sheets, and then addressed any questions or concerns of participants before obtaining verbal consent to proceed. The verbal consent process was used by researchers in order to reinforce the anonymity of participants, as no record of participant names was kept post-interview in any file. Participants also completed a brief demographic survey and received an honorarium of 30 dollars. SIY interviews were conducted in English while the SA interviews were conducted in Hindi/Urdu and English by a bilingual interviewer. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and visual timelines were kept by interviewers. Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average. One interview was conducted with each participant.

Timelines were introduced to participants through a brief description of the timeline as a tool to assist researchers in better understanding the important life experiences of participants. Participants were then shown sample timelines created by researchers. These sample timelines were intended to help stimulate creative engagement by participants, and to provide them with a sense of the flexibility with which they could engage in creating their own timelines. Sample timelines took a variety of forms, including simple straight lines and lists, and nonlinear representations (e.g., swirls). We emphasized that timelines did not have to be done in any specific way, and so were not prestructured. These instructions were intentionally broad because this study is exploratory, aiming to identify resilience processes and resources among marginalized groups that could not be captured by prestructured resilience scales that fail to recognize the context-specific struggles and successes of marginalized groups (Ahmad et al., 2013; Kolar, 2011; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012). Participants created their own timelines. Interviewers sometimes contributed to timeline creation when requests were made for direct assistance (e.g., spelling and clarification for separating "future" from "current" timelines), though this kind of direct involvement was minimal.

Data Analysis

Both interviews and timelines were thematically coded (King & Horrocks, 2010). The interview data included transcribed narratives of the participants and interviewer reflection notes. Coding of timelines involved analysis of both *content* and *form*, as well as exploration of differences in *implementation* across SA immigrant women and SIY groups. Coding was implemented using a two-stage team-based approach, and was conducted by hand. The thematic open coding framework was developed to investigate how timelines as a tool could assist researchers in better understanding the experiences discussed by participants. Coding was also attuned to how timelines shaped the data collection process. These overarching coding goals were identified by the research team prior to commencing primary open coding of the timelines. Primary open coding was conducted by one team member who was not involved in data collection. This initial set of codes was then reviewed and refined by all four team members over the course of several group meetings before consensus on codes was reached.

As discussed above, a critical emancipatory and feminist lens guided the implementation and analysis of this research project. Such a lens requires that reflexivity be a central practice, whereby researchers critically engage with how the very production of knowledge and interaction with participants is situated in social relations and power inequalities. For our analysis, this involved looking to how the experiences of SIY and SA participants—experiences and social locations which are conventionally marginalized—could be given voice in ways that addressed

the concerns and interests of participants. This lens also requires that differences between members not be flattened into a homogenous or rigid representation. As such, this lens stimulates researchers to engage with the diversity or differences apparent in the data.

Findings

This section presents participant demographics characteristics, a description of timeline styles, the sequential and parallel use of timelines with interview questions, and the themes identified in exploring timeline impact on interview dynamics.

Participants

Twenty-one interviews were conducted in the larger resilience study. All participants were living in the GTA at the time of the study, and described themselves as survivors of violence. Ten of the participants were young men and women who had lived on the streets (SIY Group) and 11 were South Asian ethnic women with experiences of partner violence (SA Group). Participants in the SIY group were 19 to 26 years old, reported diverse ethnic origins (self-identifying as White, Black, Aboriginal, East Indian, or Latino) with half of them being born outside of Canada; most reported good or excellent English language skills. A majority of SIY participants rated their health as good or excellent. None were married or had children. Most had high school education, an annual income of less than 10 thousand dollars, and reported poor or fair social support. Eight of the 10 SIY participants reported having access to housing at the time of the interviews. Participants in the SA group were 32 to 57 years of age and nearly all were born outside Canada (eight from Pakistan, two from India). SA participants on average had spent just under 15 years in Canada, ranging from 4 to 36 years in Canada. All had children through marital bonds, but only one was currently married. Most SA participants reported good self-rated health, college or university education, an annual income of less than 20 thousand dollars, expressed having very good social support, and had good English proficiency. Detailed descriptions of research participant demographics and experiences of resilience have been reported elsewhere (Ahmad et al., 2013; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012).

Timeline Styles

Two distinct timeline styles were prominent from the variety of timelines created by the participants: the list-like timeline (Figure 1) and the continuous-line timeline (Figures 2 and 3). Square brackets in the timeline figures indicate information that has been anonymized in order to preserve participant confidentiality.

List-like timelines described life events chronologically and were text-heavy. These timelines consisted of columns with brief notes (e.g., short phrases and keywords) with or without dates (e.g., ages, years, months, and time periods). Only a few of the participants tried to separate the positive or negative life events by using positive (+) or negative (-) signs or emoticons. Others used dots or X's to mark important events on the timeline. On comparing the two groups, SIY participants used list-like timelines more often than SA participants. The only SA participant who used this style of timeline reported higher English proficiency compared to her SA counterparts. It may be the case that the text-heavy nature of this style of timelines, which were implemented in English in both groups (the SA interviewer did not have command of written Hindi/Urdu, only spoken), required comfort in the written English language, which many SA participants did not have. As such, the SA interviewer assisted participants in translation and spelling into written English for the SA timelines where needed.
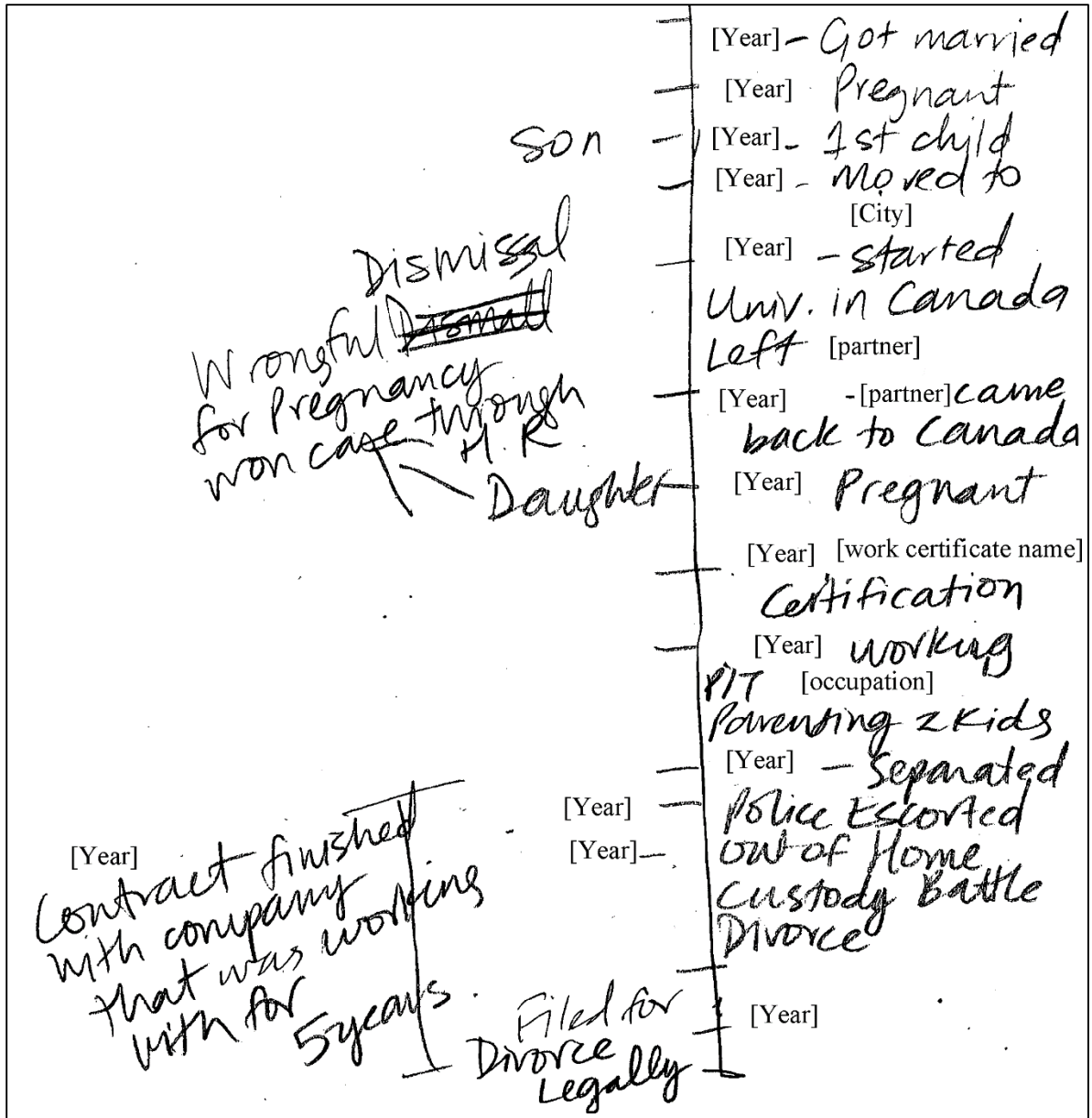
Figure 1. List-like Timeline.

Continuous-line timelines were also created by participants: They drew a line and used spikes, dips, angles, waves, and curves to represent positive or negative dimensions of their experiences. The majority of the continuous timelines were constructed horizontally. Similar to the list-like timelines, some respondents used dashes, dots, or X's to indicate events significant to them. Often this timeline was complemented with varying types of notes and dates, either below, above, or beside the continuous line. On comparing the groups, SIY participants often listed every year of their lives, unlike SA participants. This may be explained by the increased familiarity of our sample of SIY with counseling services and engagement with case workers at the street-involved youth center from which SIY were recruited.

Figure 2. Continuous-line Timeline.

Other timeline styles included a unique hybrid of the continuous-line and list-like timeline styles. For instance, one SIY timeline (not shown in this article) entailed a continuous line with an annual list of years from the participant's birth to the present while tumultuous years were expanded by adding a list of significant events underneath. This participant drew several pictures under tumultuous years and the timeline was "messy," depicting the complex experiences of the participant who in referring to his life stated, "To be like this with all this mess [pointing to timeline]" (Angelo).
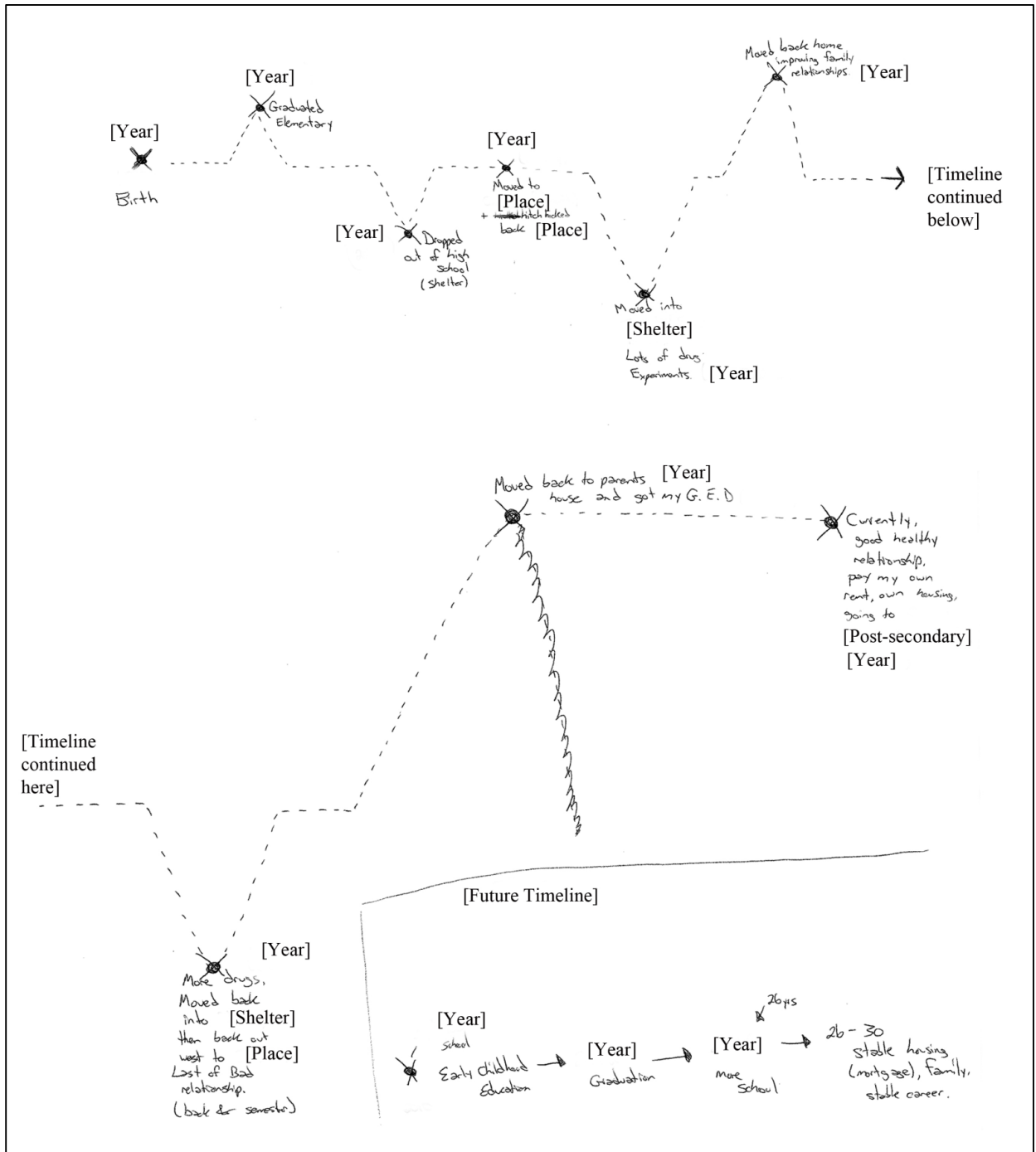
Figure 3. Hybrid Timeline.

Sequential Versus Parallel Use of Timelines

The two interviewers implemented the timelines in two ways during the interviews: *sequentially* for the SA group and *in parallel* for the SIY group. Although each group was unique in terms of sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, English proficiency, marital status), all participants had experiences of interpersonal violence, isolation, and social oppression. Aligning with the resiliency focus of the overarching study, timelines were anticipated to generate rich contextual descriptions by centering the participant within the interview space.

The SA group created timelines and then participated in interviews sequentially. The interviewer explained the format of the interview to the participants and started with the timeline activity followed by key questions on resiliency and sources of support during difficult times. The interviewer introduced the timelines to participants as a tool "to allow you to start thinking actively about yourself and it'll also help me understand your life better." With the timeline already created, the participants were able to refer back to events discussed in the timeline when answering the interview guide questions. For example, a SA participant explained her experiences of personal violence in the timeline:

> From 2006–2009 … I spent my life there as a prisoner. I didn't even know about my own immigration, what is happening with it. I wasn't allowed to go outside, I couldn't use the phone, I couldn't make friends. I couldn't go anywhere without my husband … So in terms of the mental aspects, it was torture, 24 hours … everyday. (Naila)

This example demonstrates how participants spontaneously shared contextual details without being probed about the nature of partner violence while referring back to their timelines, adding depth in the examination of adversity, resiliency, and access (or lack thereof) to support sources.

Many of the SIY interview timelines were created in parallel to the interview questions. The SIY interviewer introduced the interview format in a manner similar to the SA interviewer, asking participants to draw the timeline by thinking about the:

> …important events that stick out in your mind when you reflect on your life. It can be the first time you slept on the street, it can be a time that you were really hopeful or satisfied with your circumstances.

The SIY interviewer then probed about several life events in the timeline to build contextual detail during the remainder of the interview. This contrasts with the sequential implementation of the timeline by the SA interviewer where the timeline did not continue to play a central role in the interviewing process. For instance, Jade, a SIY participant, iteratively constructed her timeline, filling in details on the timeline regarding how her experience of homelessness changed over the course of several years while she verbally described these experiences to the interviewer who probed for contextual details:

> Jade: [After being in the hospital] I went to [a shelter] and it was an interesting place. It was just for women ... I was the only person who wasn't like, smoking crack in the building.
>
> Interviewer: When was that? Was that in [year], then?
>
> Jade: Yeah, Christmas would have been [year]. [Fills in timeline]. ... Bronchitis, hospital, [shelter name] [Adds these to timeline]. Ok ... at the same time, I suppose like a couple of my friends died … [by] overdose. Yeah. Like I've never done heroin, but apparently it's like a fickle drug. [Fills in timeline].

The decision to implement a timeline parallel or sequentially was made according to time constraints. It should be noted that time constraints were higher for SA interviews as a result of added discussion of resilience scales with participants, and because most SA participants had

children whom they had to pick up from school. Such time constraints restricted the SA interviewer's capacity to return to the timeline during the interview, resulting in a sequential rather than parallel application of timelines.

Regardless of the sequential or parallel approach to implementation, the timelines consistently helped in making participants' life stories the center of the interview space, and brought contextual depth. At the same time, the SA interviewer noted that SA participants were not very familiar with use of visual methods in research and showed initial hesitation, which was largely overcome through encouragement. The reflection notes by the SA interviewer showed that more time could have helped with further integration of timelines in the interview process, as well as with the implementation of timelines in Hindi/Urdu to overcome language barriers.

Thematic Findings

Through thematic analysis, we identified three themes on timeline-facilitated interviews. First, the use of timelines encouraged *rapport building* by reducing traditional hierarchies of a research interview. Second, the timeline activity allowed the *participants to navigate* the interview space through reflection and boundary setting around their experiences. Finally, the use of timelines facilitated positive closure to the interview participants to include both pleasant and unpleasant events with the opportunity to envision future timelines in light of survivorship and resiliency.

Rapport building.

Analysis of timeline narratives reveals that rapport building between the interviewer and participants was mediated by a *life-story* approach taken by participants, purposeful use of *topic-shift* and *self-disclosure* by the interviewers, and the *interactive* nature of the timeline. The rapport-building theme was supported by interviewers' reflections as well.

Participants took a life-story approach when creating timelines. This open-ended approach allowed them to share significant life events unobtrusively while the interviewer became an involved listener. This style of conversation centered on the participant and so "shifted" the power dynamic away from the conventional ask-and-answer of the verbal interview, which is highly directed by the interviewer, to facilitate more participant control over the structure and direction of the conversation. For example, Rachel from the SIY group created a list-like timeline, where she used two columns to represent positive or negative life events that corresponded with the year the event occurred. Aligning with the way Rachel created a timeline framed by chronological dates, the interviewer was able to ask resilience-related questions regarding the time and experience of, for instance, Rachel's move to Canada, or that of her move into stable housing following a period of homelessness. By structuring her own responses through the timeline, Rachel had primary control over the direction of the interview. At the same time, the interviewer was able to probe in subtle ways for eliciting richer descriptions.

The use of topic-shift was another mechanism to build rapport. The interviewers used the timelines to point to certain important events illustrated by participants, both positive and negative, and asked about resources and strategies that helped participants to cope with experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and violence. This style of questioning allowed the participants to respond without providing details of the difficult event or its gravity. This added some degree of anonymity and so made the participants comfortable in providing details about their sources of support. For example, SIY participant Chris "stopped using meth" and listed this as an important life event on his timeline. Upon the interviewer's probing, he talked about what motivated him to stop, and the types of support his friends were able to provide him during this time. Likewise, a SA participant (Shazia) listed her experiences of partner violence as a difficult life phase on her timeline and later she referenced back to this phase on the drawn timeline, when asked about her survivorship and coping resources. Further, if participants became

visibly distressed or preoccupied with reflecting on traumatic events, interviewers also utilized the timeline to topic-shift toward how the participants coped with those events or toward other events that indicated a positive change. As such, the topic-shift strategy allowed for interviewers to subtly redirect participants away from highly distressing reflections and maintain focus on strategies and resources that participants indicated were important in enhancing their lives, as was the intended focus of the interviews.

The introduction of the timeline by the interviewer included several examples how people may draw a timeline. Interviewers shared stories about personal timelines mixed with hypothetical events and humor. This self-disclosure led to a more comfortable start to the interviews, and so enhanced rapport:

> SA Interviewer: I can give you examples … I can give you mine. So in childhood, my life was very good so for that reason this is going higher [drawing on paper an ascending straight line] …
>
> Rubina: Ok [shifting chair closer to interviewer].
>
> SA Interviewer: Ok, so then let's say I migrated to Canada with my family… My drawing is usually pretty bad [Rubina laughs].

The *interactivity* of the timelines facilitated a sense of participant comfort and momentum in the interviews. The interviewers encouraged and coached participants to reflect on their major life events in creating their timeline. For example, the SIY interviewer assured a participant "you don't have to worry about missing anything, because you can always add stuff in [to the timeline] while we're talking" (to Jordan). Likewise, the SA interviewer supported the participants in generating timelines by giving suggestions during descriptions of their life stories:

> Veena: We had left when we were really young abroad, so it was a tough time adjusting then. I remember I was in grade 2 then.
>
> SA Interviewer: Okay, you can write that down if you like, grade 2.

The interactive nature of the timeline enhanced participants' confidence in sharing contextual details and elaborating on their descriptions.

Reflection notes written by the interviewers lend support to the rapport-building capacity of timelines. The SA interviewer noted that use of timelines early in the interview gave "participants an opportunity to draw out their life story and process it." The SIY interviewer noted:

> The timeline provided a middle ground, which the participant constructed ... This allowed the researcher and participant to reach some sort of working consensus on the ground to be covered in the interview, and acted as a reminder to both of how the interview would proceed. … I personally used the timeline to jog my memory of previously mentioned items in the interview to be expanded on. It also decreased my need for note taking. As such, I believe the timeline increased my capacity to pay direct attention to the participant and to prevent from distracting them.

The interviewers found that the timeline interview "may help to mediate power imbalances between the interviewer and the participant," because the timeline creates "a middle ground," and "avoids putting participants 'on the spot' in the interview" by referring to the timeline as an external mediating object through which the interviewer and participant interact.

Participant as navigators.

The creation of timelines facilitated active engagement of participants through *reflection* of major life events and through *visual aspects* by drawing the events on a paper. A SIY participant differentiated a traditional face-to-face interview from one where timelines were incorporated and

stated, "The timeline was definitely helpful cuz … You are definitely looking back at that [referring to the timeline], like it's physically there" (Leanne).

Reflection, recall, and break down of life events through timelines allowed the participants to create a sense of direction of what they wanted to share when asked the interview questions. Participants became critical navigators of the content of their discussions. For example, in a SIY interview, a participant used the timeline to create boundaries around what she could contribute to the interview:

> SIY Interviewer: So how long were you living with your dad? When did you move out with your grandparents?

> Mona: [I was] too young to remember the year and too young to remember anything, so, I wouldn't be able to help with anything around here. [Points to flat line at beginning of timeline].

The visual aspects of the timeline provided a navigational filter to the participants in sharing their experiences. To begin with, participants themselves identified which events were significant enough to be added on the timeline. Then, they were able to separate positive and negative events using spikes or dips in the continuous-line timeline and columns and dates in the list-like timeline. Some participants also expressed emotions by adding emoticons and small diagrams for particular life events. Through such visual distinction of life events, participants were able to choose what they were comfortable talking about, and with this had the opportunity to take control of the interview content.

Much support is provided from the interviewers' reflections on participants' enhanced ability to navigate the discussions. The SIY interviewer found that:

> The timeline provided a middle ground which the participant constructed, and which the participant then used to guide the researcher toward important topics to cover in the interview … This may have provided the participant with a greater sense of control and comfort in the interview process.

Therapeutic moments and positive closure.

The timelines brought about therapeutic moments for the participants through its *dual focus* on positive and negative events, and the use of a *future timeline*.

The dual focus of timelines on both pleasant and unpleasant events highlighted as important by participants on the timeline helped to maintain participants' emotional comfort and calmness within the interview by reducing stimulation of distress about traumatic experiences. For example, a SA participant drew her timeline and stated, "[during] childhood everything is pretty straight … and then at marriage it's ups and downs … and then this is migration, a time with lots of tension … then became stable" (Mariam). Moreover, completing the timeline in itself created a sense of achievement for some of the participants:

> SA Interviewer: You've made a very nice timeline. You said you couldn't make it, but look [both laugh].

> Shazia: That's it right, when a person does something, then she can do anything. If a person tries, you know. If the person has the strength inside for doing things, then they can do it.

At the same time, interviewers noted that the interview topic of resiliency affected the emotional impact of the interview upon participants. Regarding the role of a resilience focus in this research project with marginalized groups, the SIY interviewer commented:

> The timeline represents a picture of the lifecourse with which [participants are] confronted at the end of the interview. If the focus of the interview had solely been on negative experiences, such a representation of trauma and setbacks would do little to provide positive closure in the interview ... when using the timeline, especially with vulnerable populations, it may be unethical and cause undue harm if the tool is used to explore only negative experiences.

Further, the topic-shift strategy described above, in combination with a dual focus in interviews, allowed for interviewers to move the interview toward reflections on more positive experiences if a participant seemed "stuck" on discussing difficult events, thereby minimizing emotional distress.

Participants were also asked to think about their aspirations and goals for the future. Some of them added a future timeline and this generally facilitated positive closure of the interview. In one future timeline, a SA participant stated, "Even I will hope for bright [future]. I don't want to think that something wrong will happen, no" (Fouzia). In another future timeline, a SIY participant identified her immediate goals followed by her long-term dream:

> So, I think that I've just come to terms with accepting being in school and that a career takes long … I'm just taking it a year at a time. But I know by the time I'm thirty I'd like to have things like my own home. (Leanne)

However, some participants found the future timeline difficult to envision because they did not want to "think too far ahead … and be set up for failure" (Christopher), or they wanted to focus on the "most simple things" in the present (Angelo). The interviewers reflected that the use of a future timeline "gave participants the opportunity to reflect upon their future plans, to identify additional supports they may need to obtain their goals and to realize their future plans are attainable." The interviewers noted that participants seemed to find the process of "concretely lay[ing] out their future plans on a piece of paper to visualize their future" to be therapeutic, and this "created an uplifting emotional shift that provided a sense of closure for both the interviewer and the participant." At the same time, interviewers found that participant's use of future timelines was related to their fears of experiencing a future characterized by ongoing (or escalating) violence and socioeconomic marginality. Particularly, the SIY interviewer recognized that the future timeline might have produced "feelings of ambivalence, uncertainty, and fears of failure." Both interviewers recognized that future timelines need to be used with sensitivity, and enough time should be allotted for the completion and discussion of the future timeline.

Discussion

The current study suggests that timelines hold strong potential to enhance qualitative interviews that are implemented at only one time point with each participant. This study contributes to the emerging literature on timelines through its unique approach of examining multiple sources of data (i.e., timelines, verbal interviews, reflection notes, and a short survey) and a team-based approach wherein team members discussed and then came to agreement on a coding scheme and analysis. To our knowledge, this project is one of the only studies to explore timeline implementation with immigrant groups, and SA women in particular.

Timelines have been found to strengthen data by enhancing interviewer-participant rapport, mutual understanding, and reflexivity through interactive and supportive engagement with a time-lined representation of a participant's life (Berends, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2011). Although interviews that involve only one point of research contact with each participant (i.e., one-time interviews) limit researcher engagement with participants, and so may pose difficulties for rapport-building, such an approach may be necessary as a result of issues of confidentiality (i.e., preserving anonymity), with maintaining contact with mobile or transient populations (e.g., SIY),

or because of limited finances. Our findings indicate that timeline implementation need not be limited to repeat interviews in order to be effective: self-disclosure and interactivity created a common ground between participants and interviewers, increasing the comfort of participants, and thereby enhancing rapport.

The study findings show that timelines help to focus a participant's attention on the interview by acting as both a memory aid and a visual guide or map for how the interview will progress, as well as to situate responses within personal and structural contexts while highlighting important events in an individual's life story. That is, the timeline creates a visual middle ground between interviewer and participant from which both can draw to iteratively inform interview questions and responses. In this study, strategies such as the topic-shift were used by interviewers to ensure that the interview could stay focused on the aim of the study, to move the interview along to meet time constraints, and to ensure minimal emotional distress by redirecting focus when participants appeared to feel distressed. Participants' navigation of the interview was facilitated through their reflection on life events, which encouraged a focus on time-lined event points and allowed the participants to walk the interviewer down the path they had illustrated. The timeline also provided a more flexible creative space for nonconventional and nuanced communication of meaning, struggle, emotions, and experience through visual aspects. Others have recognized the timeline as a tool to organize and accumulate data, helping to place the research construct in the context of a participant's life events (Berends, 2011). Complementary aspects of timelines for enhancement of verbal interviewing are also confirmed by other research utilizing visual methods (Bagnoli, 2009; Patterson, et al., 2012; Sheridan et al., 2012).

Navigating trauma and emotional distress should be a primary concern for researchers who explore emotionally sensitive topics, particularly when interviewing marginalized populations. To allow participants to share difficult experiences in a manner that does not cause prolonged emotional distress, an interview approach that fosters a safe and supportive space is necessary for participants to disclose sensitive stories (Goodrum & Keys, 2007). Therapeutic aspects built in to the data collection method can help participants address the stress of discussing a difficult or traumatic experience (Horsfall & Titchen, 2009; Osei-Kofi, 2013). To create a supportive interview space, we relied on the timelines to maintain a focus on resiliency in a context of marginalization, and to guide participants to discussing other topics if they appeared to become distressed. Adding a future timeline provided a point of projection that allowed the researchers to consider the possibilities that participants saw for themselves, at the same time that it operated as a goal-setting tool to facilitate positive closure. However, it is important to note that taking resilience as the topic of investigation allowed the timeline to be an overall reflection of achievements and coping strategies, rather than a confrontation of the participant with their perceived failures and negative experiences; that is, on their own, timelines do not ensure positive closure.

In this exploration of marginalization and resilience, timelines can be interpreted as providing lifecourse imagery that is representational of intersections of social structure and individual experience. Lifecourse analysis that is informed by social constructivist theory may be particularly fruitful in exploratory analyses. Although a detailed analysis of this kind is beyond the scope of this article, a constructivist approach to lifecourse analysis is conducive to exploring how lifecourse imagery is itself used by participants to construct their in developmental terms, and how this imagery provides insight into the ways that participants make sense of and position the relative importance of various events in navigating the struggles they face arising from marginalization and violence (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). The different temporal logics evidenced by various timelines (e.g., use of lists, directions of lines, and the use of spirals or diverging lines to illustrate multiple potential future trajectories) are one example of how constructionist approaches to lifecourse analysis provide an avenue for researchers to better grasp

the ways that participants establish the relevance and meaning of particular events for how they experience the present and understand possibilities for the future.

Whereas both parallel and sequential implementation of timelines in our study enhanced contextual understanding, sequential implementation added little in the way of engagement with participants during the interview portion of the study as the timeline was set aside. The SA interviewer used the timeline to inform her questions and interactively discussed the timeline as it was being created by participants, but did not directly refer to the timeline for most of the semistructured interview portion of the study. In contrast, in parallel implementation, where SIY participants were asked to draw a timeline and then add to it during the verbal interview, this allowed for a more interactive interview because the timeline remained the central aspect of participant-researcher interaction. This meant that the participant could more effectively direct the interview through their timeline by using the timeline as a map to walk the researcher through their life story. As noted above, time constraints were higher for SA interviews. Such time constraints restricted the SA interviewer's capacity to return to the timeline during the interview. Further, the SA interviewer had the added difficulty of not being able to read all South Asian languages of participants, so participants had to use English, which increased the difficulty of using timelines. Despite this, our findings show that SA participants nevertheless accepted and could use timelines. Future work should ensure availability of interviewers who may speak and read the language preferred by participants.

Other differences between SIY and SA participants include that SA participants appeared less involved or interested overall in creating timelines than SIY participants. This may be due to written-language difficulties, and possibly as a result of lack of familiarity with visual methods. Further, SA participants appeared to be more concerned with considering their children's futures than their own, as reflected by their family-centered responses on illustrating or describing their personal future trajectories. This suggests that tailoring of the timeline method to not be limited to personal future trajectories, but to potentially include participant perspectives on the trajectories of their family, as this may be beneficial for certain participant groups. More involved coaching of participants through their creation of timelines may enhance engagement of participants unfamiliar with visual modes of expression and to enhance rapport by decreasing discomfort and uncertainty. The implementation of timelines should thus include consideration of participants' levels of familiarity with visual methods, as some groups may require more involved coaching in order to more effectively engage with timeline methods.

Other general contributions of timelines include capacity for triangulation of data through enhancing interviewer understanding. The chronological sequencing of events in timelines allows for comparison within the participant's life story to confirm or complete their description of their story (Patterson, et al., 2012). The findings of the current study show that the use of researcher reflection notes acted as another component of data triangulation through sharing the reflexive process of evaluating the implementation of timelines and analytical consideration of how timelines and verbal interviews inform one another, as well as by making visible the research process through the eyes of interviewers themselves.

The critical emancipatory and feminist approach of this project guided our interest in using the timeline to act as a middle ground between the interviewer and participant, giving marginalized participants a voice through nonconventional forms of communication, as well as through their increased control in directing the interview. This research approach, in combination with a focus on resilience, resulted in highlighting the coping strategies, strengths, and ingenuity of SIY and SA groups, thereby moving beyond much extant research which remains restricted to documenting marginalization, victimization, and deviance of SA and SIY. Under a critical emancipatory and feminist approach, it was important for the research team to give back to the community of participants and to debrief participants to ensure no harm. As such, access to

counseling was provided post-interview to ensure that any prolonged distress that may have arisen as a result of the interview process could be addressed. Further, participants were encouraged to debrief with counselors or the SA/SIY collaborating agency co-coordinators if they wished to do so, and to contact researchers if they had any questions regarding the project outcomes. Upon research completion, researchers disseminated results in a newsletter designed for SIY, and met with SIY clinic employees to provide a question and answer session regarding the research process and outcomes. For the SA group, peer audit was utilized for discussion of findings with the collaborating agency; the agency staff also shared the findings with their clients at their discretion. More is available on post-research engagement with SIY and SA participants and collaborating agencies in published articles (Ahmad et al., 2013; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012). In future research, in order to encourage the timeline being seen as a creative and self-exploratory project, we suggest providing original timelines to participants, while researchers retain a copy of timelines. However, this is only possible if the research is conducted with persons who will be seen on more than one occasion, and in the case of one-time interviews such as our own, where copying or scanning facilities are available.

Two limitations need be mentioned here. First, this study examined the integration of timelines with qualitative interviews with two groups. Readers should not assume that the advantages and issues explored in this article apply equally to all groups. The study was not intended to be automatically transferable to diverse groups, but to inform readers and researchers who are considering using timelines in their own work of issues for consideration. Second, we have made clear that the research conducted here is limited to application in one-time interviews; experiences of and issues with implementing timelines in repeat interviewing may differ.

To conclude, it cannot be overemphasized how central the topics of investigation and selection of research approaches are for informing the implementation and analysis of timelines. On their own, timelines do not inherently provide a more equitable research medium. Rather, as illustrated in this article, timelines hold this potential when mobilized with particular goals in mind, including managing and maintaining awareness of power relationships between interviewers and participants, and engaging in issues of representation and voice for marginalized groups. Similarly, the resilience focus in the overarching project facilitated the expression and documentation of experiences of nonconventional coping and achievement for SA and SIY participants through the use of timelines and verbal interviews; without this resilience focus, the use of timelines does not necessarily provide positive closure. When combined with power-conscious epistemologies and a research focus that facilitates critical engagement with the representation of experiences of coping and success of marginalized groups, timeline methods may greatly supplement investigation of complex constructs through a life-story approach, the use of visual aspects, and increased participant control of the interview.

References

Ahmad, F., Rai, N., Petrovic, B., Erickson, P., & Stewart, D. (2013). South Asian Immigrant Women and Resilience as Survivors of Partner Violence. *Journal of Immigrant & Minority Health, 15*, 1057-1064.

Bagnoli, A. (2009). Beyond the standard interview: The use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods. *Qualitative Research*, *9*, 547–570.

Berends, L. (2011). Embracing the visual: Using timelines with in-depth interviews on substance use and treatment. *Qualitative Report*, *16*, 1–9.

Crouch, M., & McKenzie, H. (2006). The logic of small samples in interview-based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, *45*, 483-499.

Goodrum, S., & Keys, J. (2007). Reflections on two studies of emotionally sensitive topics: Bereavement from murder and abortion. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *10*, 249–258.

Gringeri, C., Wahab, S., & Anderson-Nathe, B. (2010). What makes it feminist? Mapping the landscape of feminist social work research. *Affilia: Journal of Women & Social Work*, *25*, 390–405.

Harper, D. (2003). Reimagining visual methods: Galileo to Neuromancer. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (2nd ed., pp. 176–198). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Holland, J. (2007). Emotions and research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *10*, 195–209.

Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (1997). Eliciting narrative through the in-depth interview. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *3*, 53–70.

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2000). *Constructing the life course*. Dix Hills, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

Horsfall, D., & Titchen, A. (2009). Disrupting edges - opening spaces: Pursuing democracy and human flourishing through creative methodologies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *12*, 147–160.

King, N., & Horrocks, C. (2010). Interviews in qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kolar, K. (2011). Resilience: revisiting the concept and its utility for social research. *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction, 9*, 421-433.

Kolar, K., Erickson, P.G., & Stewart, D. (2012). Coping strategies of street-involved youth: exploring contexts of resilience. *Journal of Youth Studies, 15*, 744-750.

Kuzel, A.J. (1999). Sampling in qualitative inquiry. In B. Crabtree & W. Miller (Eds.), *Doing Qualitative Research* (pp. 33-45). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mason, J., & Davies, K. (2009). Coming to our senses? A critical approach to sensory methodology. *Qualitative Research*, *9*, 587–603.

Maxwell, J. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research. *Harvard Educational Review, 62*, 279–300.

Nicholls, R. (2009). Research and indigenous participation: Critical reflexive methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *12,* 117–126.

Osei-Kofi, N. (2013). The emancipatory potential of arts-based research for social justice. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 46*, 135–149.

Patterson, M., Markey, M., & Somers, J. (2012). Multiple paths to just ends: Using narrative interviews and timelines to explore health equity and homelessness. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 11*, 132–151.

Preventing Violence Across the Lifespan [PreVAiL] Research Network. (2010). *Theme 2: resilience.* Retrieved from: http://prevail.fims.uwo.ca/theme2.html

Sheridan, J., Chamberlain, K., & Dupuis, A. (2011). Timelining: Visualizing experience. *Qualitative Research*, *11*, 552–570.

Smith, D. (1990). The conceptual practices of power: A feminist sociology of knowledge. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Umoquit, M., Dobrow, M., Lemieux-Charles, L., Ritvo, P., Urbach, D., & Wodchis, W. (2008). The efficiency and effectiveness of utilizing diagrams in interviews: An assessment of participatory diagramming and graphic elicitation. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *8*, 53–65.

Ungar, M. (2004). *Nurturing Hidden Resilience in Troubled Youth.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

White, J., & Klein, D. (2008). The feminist framework and poststructuralism. In J. White & D. Klein (Eds.), *Family Theories* (3rd ed., pp. 205–240). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.