

CAIS Poster: Drawing Religious Information Experiences Across Time: Timelines as a Graphic Elicitation Method

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Abstract: Visual arts-based methods are widespread in other social sciences but remain marginal in information science. Applying “timelining” (Sheridan, Chamberlain, and Dupuis, 2011) in information research can expand our understanding of connections among information, time, affect and inexpressible religious experiences, while fostering collaboration between researchers and participants and across disciplines.

Résumé:

While arts-based approaches have become widespread in other social sciences, few information science researchers have adopted visual methods to study how people seek, use, and share information in their lives (Hartel and Thomson, 2011). By reviewing literature on a visual method known as “timelining” (Sheridan, Chamberlain, and Dupuis, 2011), this poster will examine the potential this technique holds for researching information behaviour in spiritual contexts, including the ways in which information practices affect religious conversion experiences. Following Raya Fidel, this poster argues that greater attention to new methods will benefit information science by offering precedents for creatively exploring novel research problems (Fidel, 2012, 159-161). Future research that employs timelining as a data gathering method will extend scholarship on the connections among information, time, and affect; account for the nature of information in inexpressible religious experiences; and highlight a visual technique that fosters dialogue and collaboration between researchers and research participants, and across disciplinary borders.

1. Graphic Elicitation Methods in Information Studies and Social Sciences

In their methods paper on visual approaches to studying information spaces, Jenna Hartel and Leslie Thomson examine visual methods traditions in anthropology and sociology, citing works by ethnographers such as Franz Boas, John Collier, and Gregory Bateson, and sociologists such as Howard Becker (Hartel and Thomson, 2011). Recently, qualitative researchers have used arts-informed/-based techniques to elicit data and facilitate shared knowledge creation with research participants (Bagnoli, 2009; Fenge, Hodges, and Cutts, 2011; Foster, 2012; Wong, 2011). In information science, photography has been used as a data collection method in several contemporary studies (Cooper, 2011; Foster and Gibbons, 2007; Hartel, 2007; Siracky, 2013; Thomson, 2010), and visual research has been recognized as an emerging research area (Angel et al., 2013). However, graphic elicitation methods such as the “draw-and-write technique” (Caraher, Baker, and Burns, 2004; Hartel, Pollock, and Noone, 2013), information horizons (Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, and Harmon, 2001), sketches (Mizrachi, 2011), and picture diaries (Nomura and Caidi, 2013) have not yet been extensively applied in information science research. The following sections will introduce timelining as a data elicitation and collection method, and will investigate how this technique can be used in studying the role of information practices in religious conversion experiences.

2. Timelining as a Data Collection Method

“Graphic elicitation” is a visual data collection method that integrates drawing with interviews (Bagnoli, 2009). This method is based on the assumption that everyday experience is comprised of multiple visual and sensory dimensions that are not necessarily expressed through verbal communication (ibid.). A graphic elicitation technique known as “timelining” (Sheridan, Chamberlain, and Dupuis, 2011) prompts research participants’ reflections on their memories of the past, present experiences, and goals and expectations for the future through a drawing exercise (ibid.; Bagnoli, 2009). Typically, the researcher provides participants with blank sheets of paper and pencils and asks them to draw timelines of their experiences with the phenomenon under study, marking critical events, turning points, and changes that they encountered over the course of their experiences (Bagnoli, 2009, 560).

One limitation of this method is its restriction to primarily visual expression while ignoring other senses through which people communicate and understand the world (Latham, 2013; Phillips, 2014). Naming the exercise “timelining” may prescribe a linear depiction of complex experiences. Researchers need to consider potential affective responses (e.g., anxiety) caused by requests to engage in this activity, especially for participants who feel pressure to draw a timeline that meets perceived aesthetic criteria. Finally, this method presents a learning curve for researchers who are unfamiliar with visual data analysis (Hartel, in press).

Although timelining can potentially lead participants to conceptualize time and life experiences in a linear direction, it offers an engaging and creative way for participants to express spiritual experiences and offers the groundwork for further conversations about participants’ information practices. To address the limitations outlined above, future research on converts’ information practices could introduce a more open-ended variation of timelining, which would ask participants to draw or diagram their spiritual journey or religious experience, in whatever form it may take. This revised approach to timelining can capture evocative data that might not be accessed through other data collection methods, and may be combined with ethnographic methods (e.g., participant observation at public events and retreats) and additional elicitation techniques (e.g., inquiring about participants’ use of spiritual artifacts and documents) to produce a rich ethnographic record.

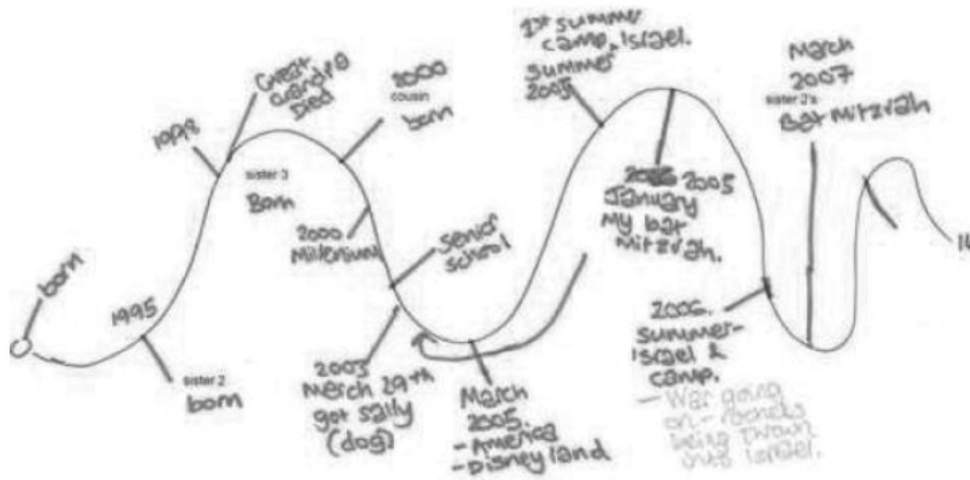


FIGURE 9. *Alicia's timeline*

Fig. 1.

(Figure 9 in Bagnoli, 2009, 561.) An example of a timeline, drawn by one of Anna Bagnoli's research participants in her sociological studies of youth identity and migration experiences in the UK and Italy.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Contributions/ Future Research

New methodological approaches can be advantageous for information science. Not only do they illuminate new concepts and formerly ignored elements of research objects, but they also offer alternatives to the status quo and inspire intellectual cross-pollination (Fidel, 2012, 81). By applying a visual method that may better account for visceral, mysterious, and indescribable experiences, future research that uses timelining will extend scholarship on the affective aspects of information seeking and use (Bilal, 2005; Julien, McKechnie, and Hart, 2005; Kuhlthau, 1991; Mellon, 1986; Neal and McKenzie, 2011), and the role of information in critical life transitions (Baker, 2004; Hultgren, 2009), spiritual growth (Michels, 2012), and other "higher things in life" (Kari and Hartel, 2007). Furthermore, studies that use timelining will build upon existing literature on information and time (Davies and McKenzie, 2004; Hartel, 2010; Savolainen, 2006), frameworks that analyze the temporal dimensions of religious experience (Gooren, 2010), and research that acknowledges the ongoing, continuous processes of self-understanding, spiritual discovery, and the search for meaning in life (Siracky, 2013; Yakel, 2004).

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