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# The “River of Life”: Researching Migration Trajectories through Elicitation based on Participants’ Drawings

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## **Abstract**

Funding pressures mean that researchers can rarely experiment new methods, particularly less conventional ones such as elicitation based on participant drawings. As a student, one can certainly be bold, hence I wish to inspire you with my experience. The research discussed in this case study was conducted in 2022 and explored the migration trajectories and housing experiences of Romanian migrants in the UK. International migration is a complex life experience shifting one's relationship within labor markets, families and communities, housing arrangements, cultural and institutional landscapes as well as the very constitution of self. In order to capture these complexities, I had the privilege of freely exploring the potential of the "River of Life" metaphor as a graphical representation of migration trajectories. I heard about this method being used as a warming-up technique in focus groups but I thought that practice was rather thin. I wanted to give participants time to truly reflect on their journeys. Hence, I asked them to draw, prior to the interview, their migrant life as if it were a river, with bends and boulders, smooth or rough passages, while marking down the events and persons that have influenced its course and how they felt along the way. I hoped that drawing their lives on paper would stir reflection, thereby supporting a more in-depth discussion during the interview. But their drawings made me "see" that which I could not have grasped from words alone: repetitive motifs, shorter or longer timelines of representation, faster or slower rhythms of change, socially isolated or fully embedded lives. I observed how this variation allied with structural determinants (e.g. economic status, migration regime, gender). In order for you to adapt this visual method for your own purpose, I will: describe the instructions given to participants; encourage you to prompt during elicitation (including through silence); and signpost four key directions for data interpretation. During my discussion, I also highlight some methodological challenges. My final word: if it fits your particular topic, take a leap of faith and apply this method; you have nothing to lose and much to gain

## **Keywords**

River of Life, Visual methods, International migration, United Kingdom, Research method.

## **Author's biography**

Dr Adriana Mihaela Soaita is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the University of Bucharest, Romania, and an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom. She received her PhD degree from King's College London in 2011 and worked in British academia until she returned to Romania, her native country, in 2022. Adriana's research has focused on some of the ways in which housing and home are permeated by, and shape our ideas of politics and power, space and place, emotions and embodiment. Her prestigious 2022-24 EU Horizon-funded project investigates the experiences of private tenants and landlords in Romania, which she examines through the theoretical lenses of affect. Adriana has been interested in visual methods, having used elicitation based on photographs sent and drawings made by participants in some of her projects. She has published more than 25 articles in renowned academic journals, including *Geoforum*; *Environment and Planning A*; *Habitat International*; *Housing Studies*; *Housing Theory and Society*; *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*; *Journal of Youth Studies*; *Urban Studies*.

## **Learning outcomes**

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

- Evaluate the potential of the 'River of Life' to stir participant reflection prior to the interview and collect a different kind of data akin to the methodological approaches of life history and the sociological biographical interview.
- Give instructions to participants in order to contextualize their experiences (i.e. linking to the 'bigger picture' of their world) and offer examples, including those based on essential self-piloting.
- Learn to be alert in prompting during elicitation in relation to both what is drawn/said as well as what is not drawn/said, including through silence.
- Observe some starting directions for data interpretation based on repetitive motifs, shorter or longer timelines of representation, faster or slower rhythms of change and text density.

## Introduction

We live in a world on the move, where beings, things and ideas travel within and across countries. As a Romanian migrant in the United Kingdom (UK), I was a tiny particle of this never-ending flux. I am also a housing scholar, interested in both mobility and immobility in the ways we (dis/re-)place ourselves and (un/re-)make home. It just felt ‘natural’ and deeply personal to propose a study on the migration and housing experiences of Romanian migrants in the UK, which the University of Glasgow and its UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence generously funded.

There were, of course, further reasons for relevance. A focus on migrant housing is sparse in the migration literature; Europe-to-Europe migration is understudied within a global perspective; the new migration waves from the new Eastern to the older Western European Union’s (EU) states is still under-researched, particularly those of Romanians (and Bulgarians) who received freedom of movement 10 years later than their other post-communist counterparts (in 2014 vs 2004). In the UK, this meant just two years before the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum, which decided the country’s exit from the EU. Estimates show that Romanians are the only EU migrant group that has increased after the Brexit vote, becoming the second largest in the UK (after Poles, followed by Irish and Indians). Besides, the overlap between the COVID19-pandemic and the UK’s exit from the EU posed a dilemma to EU migrants in that those who arrived more recently, as most Romanians have, would lose the right to stay/work in the UK if they return to their home countries for longer than six months (a pre-settlement status condition).

Hence, taking the case study of one of the least studied, most recent and larger waves of Eastern European migration in the UK, I invited my colleagues Moira Munro and Sergiu Gherghina to join forces in order to explore the ways in which Romanian migrants’ inequalities of labor and migration-status and their cultural values, gendered and ageing bodies shape their experiences of housing and home in post-Brexit/post-COVID UK.

This was a multi-method study. With my colleagues’ feedback, I designed and ran online (Oct-2022/Mar-2023) a qualitative questionnaire, which I referred to elsewhere as the Online Written Interview for the rich data it collects. This method was paramount in reaching the geographically dispersed Romanian communities in the UK and worked amazingly well again. In our main co-authored report (<https://housingevidence.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Adriana-Briefing-Paper-v2.pdf>), we draw almost exclusively on the 88 responses received. The questionnaire invited

respondents to participate in a follow-up interview, prior to which they were asked to send photographs of their homes (to understand their housing experiences) and draw ‘the River of Life’ (to grasp their migration trajectories). Interviews were proposed purposefully for visual elicitation as a means to co-create data with participants, to offer them a space to speak of what is important to them. That was my exclusive work-package. To acknowledge my positionality as a Romanian migrant in the UK, I also draw on auto-ethnographic insights. In total, 20 interviews were conducted, including my grueling own (courtesy of my Romanian fellow Dr Olimpia Mosteanu)! The study was ethically approved by the University of Glasgow and participants were able to select the terms of use of their data (words, photos and drawings). Let’s now focus on my experience with the ‘River of Life’ method in the remainder of this case.

### **Section summary**

- We live in a world on the move where beings, things and ideas travel within and across countries. International migrants are constitutive particles of this never-ending flux.
- Taking the case of one of the least studied, most recent and larger waves of Eastern European migration in the UK, this project explored the ways in which Romanian migrants' inequalities of labor and migration-status and their cultural values, gendered and ageing bodies shape their experiences of housing and home in post-Brexit/post-COVID UK.
- This was a multi-method study involving an online qualitative questionnaire (i.e. the Online Written Interview), auto-ethnographic reflections and online interviews with visual elicitation based on photographs of home (to understand housing experiences) and drawings of the 'River of Life' (to grasp migration trajectories).

### **Research Design and Practicalities**

In housing studies, the idea of residential mobility has been framed under the concepts of the lifecycle, career, life-course and pathway. The first two concepts were rather simplistically centered on people progressing through the ages of childhood, youth, adulthood, and retirement with their housing careers developing linearly. The last two concepts have better linked the experience of housing to events experienced in the job markets, the states of the economy, welfare systems, demographic (mis)happenings but also to cultural values, preferences, expectations, desires. These life dimensions could work harmoniously (expecting what one could achieve because of a good job market and good health) or clash (divorcing in time of economic crisis while

also losing one's job and home). The concept of housing pathways has perhaps been the most sensitive to the chaos brought about by such ill-fated events.

In migration studies, reasons for migrations, types of migratory movements (e.g. back-and-forth, temporary or permanent, return) and overall migration trajectories were seen as (dis)harmoniously shaped by different life domains, particularly border regimes and labor markets as well as migrant desires and capabilities (socioeconomic and cultural capital, cultural norms, health). The fact that migration trajectories are more chaotic, less planned and non-linear has long been accepted. As a Romanian, it took a revolution and a border-regime change for me to be able to migrate. Moreover, I too am well-aware that I actually never planned to migrate, each step taking me to another one that I could have not foreseen because the new experiences of migration changed me in unexpected ways, opening up new pathways. As both migration trajectories and housing experiences intersect all those broader life dimensions, which are always in flux, I thought that the 'River of Life' metaphor would help capture their complexities and movements.

### **Alternative Approaches**

Of course, I could have just asked questions about the links between housing and migration and everything else (all those 'structures' of education, job market, family, health, history, politics) but it seems to me that would have made a very dull online interview, certainly tiring the participant. Approaches to understand such complex links between different life dimensions - personal, social and historical - exist, most notably in the life history method. The life history method consists of a deep in-person engagement with just one participant (or a few), interviewing them many times, discussing photographs and artefacts, using diaries and any other means to stir recollection and critical reflection. Another approach is Bernard Lahire's (2019) sociological biography method, which aims to excavate the tensions and dilemmas faced by people across their different social roles (e.g. a migrant in the destination country, a missing family member in the original country, new and discarded professions, new and old social norms). Both are of merit to any interdisciplinary enquiry.

Closer aligned with the latter and building on my interest for visual methods, it seems to me that the image of a river that may flow peacefully or tumultuously through clear or dark waters, passing obstacles or delightful landscapes under stormy or sunny days is a good metaphor to represent visually one's migration journey with its moments of struggle and accomplishment. And that the

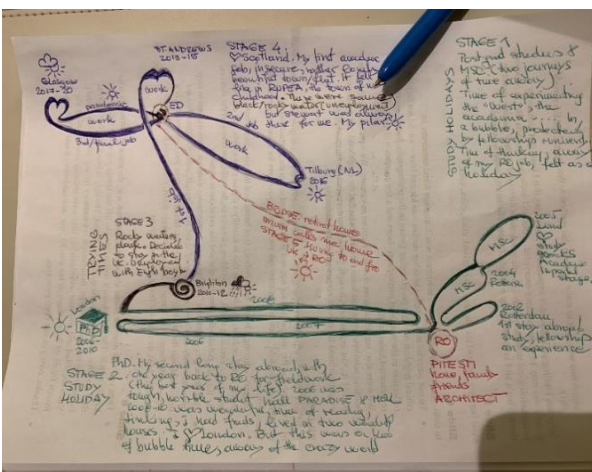
drawing, drawn prior to the interview, will stir participants' reflection while giving me direction in asking relevant questions about what was most important in my participants' lives rather than probing about everything. To note, there are other similar metaphors involving drawing-based methodologies, of which the River of Time and the Tree of Life have similarly strong potentials to research biographies in time of social change (see further readings).

### Giving Instructions to Participants

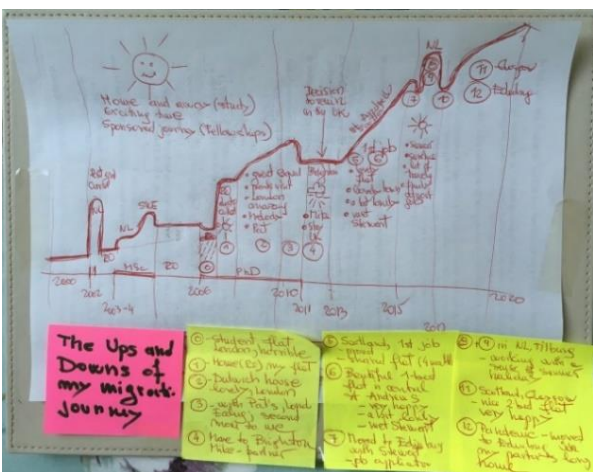
I only had a vague idea that the method was called the 'River of Experiences' or the 'River of Life' so, as a first step, I searched the expressions in Scopus, Google and Google Scholar, finding very few relevant results, which honestly surprised me. Was that because the method does not really work in practice? The method seemed to have been used only in focus groups, which also surprised me, given that I was seeing it as eliciting very personal insights and requiring time for reflection.

As a second step, I self-piloted as part of my auto-ethnography. This took me a lot of time, a lot of versions (Figure 1), and a lot of effort to try to put on paper my migration trajectory despite being a trained architect supposedly gifted at drawing! And I read that focus group participants were only given 5 to 15 minutes to draw their rivers! I immediately thought that participants would merit a Thank You (£15) voucher for their effort, which University of Glasgow generously funded. However, please do not be disheartened if, as a student, you are unable to offer incentives; I am currently using the method in another project without incentives and participants are still willing

**Figure 1** The River of Life: auto-ethnography (self-piloting)



#1a: The river of my life



#1b: The path of my life



to draw. During self-piloting, I noticed my need to add textual notes and use weather symbols for emotions (rain, sun, clouds). Drawing #1a in Figure 1 represents a simplified version of my river (the 4th!) where I tried to suggest geographical distances and stages of my migrant life. Drawing #1b represents my migration trajectory in the form of a path, which was much easier to draw.

The third step was conceiving instructions. Given the difficulties I faced in deciding what to represent or not along my river but also to suggest participants reflect on the complex interactions between different life domains, I decided that instructions and examples were required. On the first page of my instructions, I briefly explained why I need the drawing; offered the option to draw a river or a path; warn participants that it may take 15 minutes or much more (depending on the detail they would want to convey); suggested to focus on their migration period or the last 10-20 years; asked for a timeline (in years or age); advised the use of explicative notes or photos; and assured them that the drawing need not be 'beautiful'. I also showed three examples. I aimed for the first page to be informative enough, a kind of summary, however, on the second page I offered more detailed instructions. Inspired by Ziad Moussa's (2009) "Tips for trainers: the river of life", I suggested five steps:

1. Reflect: Think of your life by trying to respond to the following questions: If your life were a river (or a path), what shape would it take? Think particularly about your period of migration (or the last 10-20 years): When did the river change course? Where were the path's ups-and-downs? Was the transition smooth or abrupt? Were there stones or boulders i.e., obstacles that changed the course of your river, the direction of your path?
2. Plan: Begin to trace the river/path of your life with its turns: Label your age or calendar years along the river/trail; Identify various significant events in your life that have shaped your migration trajectory, the boulders and bends in the river, the ups or downs of the path. If you were to divide your migration journey into sections, where would the divisions occur? Name each section of the river/path. Since this study is about housing, you can mark the housing you have lived in, for example (1), (2), (3). You can add explanatory notes, attach or prepare a photo for our discussion.
3. Influences: Think about the different people who have accompanied you along your journey or influenced its direction. You can write down a keyword in the appropriate place on the river/path. You can also record thoughts and feelings related to these relationships/events. Please think: What relationships have been significant at different

times in your life, particularly regarding your migration journey? Who shaped/influenced you the most? What groups or communities of people were most important?

4. Contextualize: Using words and/or symbols, place life events or defining moments to the appropriate locations in the chart. Please think: Were there times of significant pain or joy (yours or others), lucky or unlucky events that shaped the course of your river/path? Was anything happening in the world (locally, regionally or globally) that influenced the direction of your river/path, particularly regarding your migration journey?
5. Evaluate: Reflect on what was most important to you. For instance: What values, commitments, areas of life were most important to you at any given moment? Were these in harmony or at odds with others? Towards what goals have your efforts (and those of others) directed the course of your life? Were these goals/efforts in harmony or at odds? As you finish drawing your river/path, please review the entire chart. Do the symbols and words seem to describe what has happened to you, what have you thought and felt? Is there any important element left out? Add a note if necessary. Remember that no chart can capture everything, you can explain omissions during the interview.

Finally, pages 3 to 6 contained nine other examples (two more of my own), ranging from very simple lists and sketches to more elaborate drawings. You can find some of these online; please make sure you obtain the right to use them if they are not in the public domain. Finally, I also thought that it was ethically fair to recognize that not everyone is able or willing to draw, and while I may have slightly insisted in participants making the drawing by saying how much we appreciate this research element, I was also open to explore a few narrativized versions of the ‘River of Life’ through questions close to those asked in the instructions above, preferentially framed under river-related metaphors. My key findings were, however, opened up by the drawings.

Of my 20 participants, 17 sent drawings (12 of the river and five of the path); additionally, one sent a CV-like biography. Some submitted several versions or a series, making the total number of drawings 27. Many told me during the interview that drawing their river/path made them recall events, relive emotions and generally reflect on their life: that was exactly what I hoped the method would do!

However, sending instructions and receiving the drawings was clearly the easiest part of the method. The actual elicitation and particularly the interpretation of data are far more challenging, reasons for which I wish to share in the next section some practical lessons I learnt.]

### **Section summary**

- Both housing pathways and migration trajectories are suitable to being understood at the individual level under the metaphor of the River of Life. The method seemed to have been used exclusively in focus groups, which I thought misses its true potential in recalling life events and reflecting on one's own life journey, hence I opted for mobilizing it in in-depth interviews.
- To tailor the method to my topic and for (online) interviewing, I learnt from existing approaches and self-piloted to see the effort it takes and the challenges it poses. I then conceived detailed instructions and offered examples of both the river and the path of one's life.
- Of my 20 participants, the take up was particularly good. However, recognizing that not everyone is able or willing to draw, I remained open to explore narrativized versions of the River of Life by framing my interview questions under river-related metaphors.

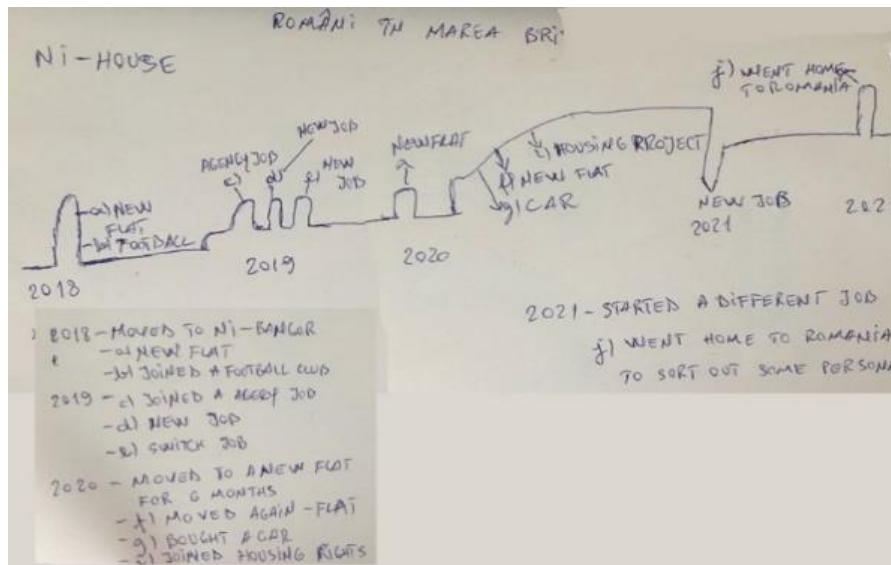
### **Method in Action and Practical Lessons Learnt: Elicitation and Data Interpretation**

So, one by one, 18 participants – Romanian migrants in the UK – emailed me their (one or several) River of Life compositions, totaling 27 pieces. Twenty were (beautifully) colored drawings and seven black-and-white sketches; a few displayed multiple axes of composition; some were particularly elegant in their simplicity (some of these drawings are shown in Figure 2, 3 and 4). Of course, I carefully scrutinized each drawing before the interview, thinking of some specific, individually-targeted questions to ask during the interview. This section gives you first some insight on how to conduct elicitation and then discusses four directions for data interpretation, more exactly on the significance of: (1) repetition or repetitive motifs; (2) shorter or longer timelines of representation; (3) faster or slower rhythms of change; and (4) density of representation, particularly that of explanatory text.

## Elicitation

The first drawing received (see Figure 2) was a path. It wasn't particularly revealing as a visual but quite informative in terms of events even though their contexts and subjective experiences did not find expression on the paper. But I knew from my previous experience with photo-elicitation (2021, with my colleague McKee) that participants will lift the veil of my ignorance and tell me what was important in the drawing they made.

**Figure 2** The first drawing I received



“Please take me through your river and tell me about the events that you have pinned down”, was my invitation. Thereafter I tailored questions to what participants were mentioning. I also enquired about what was obviously missing, particularly the influence of other people and the broader context of their migration decisions, such as social networks, changing political and border regimes. I paid attention (and probed in relation) to moments of struggle and achievements, the learning of a new culture and a new institutional landscape. I purposefully asked whether and how different aspects of life concurred in harmony or conflicted in disharmony. I observed body language as revealed through the computer screen. Often, I just ‘probed’ through silence to give participants time to reflect. As the topics discussed were deeply personal, I left the discussion to flow at ease, which meant the interviews became longer than initially thought, hence I sought additional funds for transcription for an extra 30 minutes per interview, which University of Glasgow again provided. The alternatives of reducing the number of interviews or cutting off

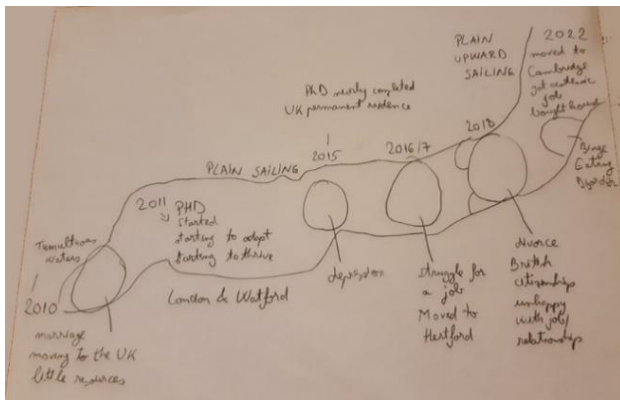
participant's discussion were not appealing to me. So, please be aware that the method requires time and be mindful on how to focus your research on what matters to you while leaving participants time to talk about what matters to them.

### Directions for data interpretation

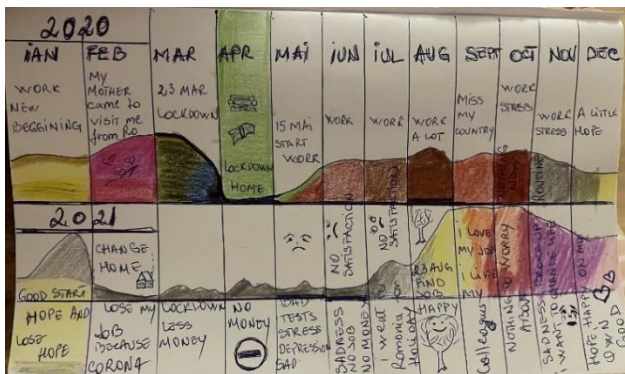
It was the second drawing received (#3a in Figure 3) which opened up my awareness of the importance of repetition and repetitive motifs, which I don't think I would have ever noticed in a word-alone interview.

Observing repetition is an important direction for data interpretation. I could see repetitive struggles over a long period of time in many of my participants' drawings due to clashes between different life domains: border regimes, rights to employment, marital life, health, eviction. While the migration literature tends to understand such ill-fated events in isolation, it fails to fully

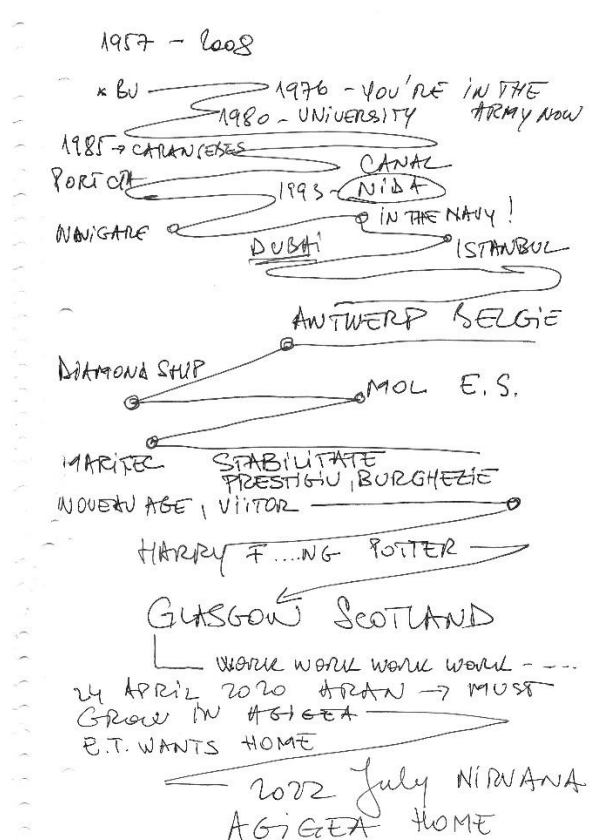
**Figure 3** Observing directions for interpretation: repetition, timeline and rhythm of change



**#3a:** repetition and repetitive motifs



**#3b:** short timeframe of representation



**#3c:** life as a cruise

understand how they affect a migrant's wellbeing when they occur in repetition and for a long time until the horizon clears up (for the case of social mobility) or not (for the case of prolonged precarity). It is also important to understand that repetition always comes with a difference and as an analyst, it is important to observe and explain that difference: What life dimension(s) has(have) generated hardship (or achievement) and to what extent, how and for how long has it/have they affected other life domains and migrant's wellbeing?

Of course, the work of comparison makes an excellent analytical tool. Comparing drawings #3a and #3b in Figure 3, I noticed similarities (both depicted multiple moments of struggle) but also key differences. The former displayed the timeline of 12 years (2010-22), the latter just 2 years (2020-21). At a superficial look that might have reflected a longer vs a shorter migration history – as I did instruct participants to focus on their migration period (or on their most recent 10-20 years of life). Yet, during the interview it surfaced that the author of drawing #3b had a much longer history of migration, having been an undocumented migrant in Italy from 2005 to 2013. These personal choices regarding the timeline of representation were not random in my sample: those experiencing precarity focused on the present, their drawings displaying just a few years of their lives whereas those who have become or have always been better off drew their lives in longer swathes of time.

These two particular drawings and related elicitation showed how social mobility (#3a) and precarity (#3b) were structured by education (having a recognized PhD degree vs a high school qualification) and border-regimes (allowing for legal or just undocumented work) but they were also amplified, particularly in the case of women, by partnership formation: both women experienced hardship when in partnership with undocumented nationals or when single. Horizons fully cleared up for 'upward sailing' only when participant #3a constructed a partnership with a British national, anchoring her in homeownership and helping her navigate the British institutional landscape. Partnership formation with fellow nationals, Britons or other nationalities clearly helps migrants not only for pooling economic-, but also affective resources.

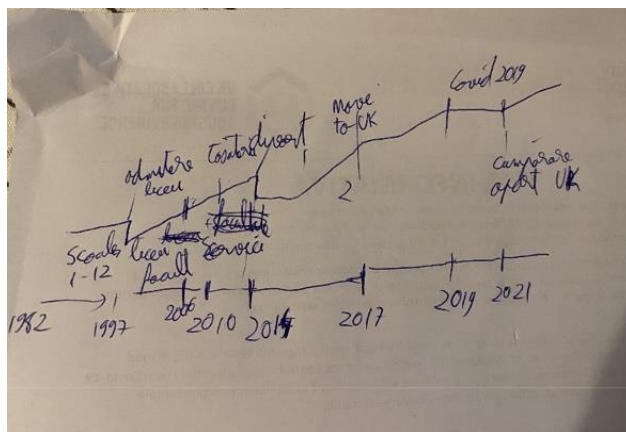
Drawing #3c in Figure 3 opened up my understanding of a different type of repetition that was slow and curving, happy and peaceful, described by my participant as "life as a cruise", whose harmony was supported long-term by many regimes of power: specialized education in Romania led to executive positions in the labor market, allowing choice in migration; patriarchal values in

the family meant that his wife was ready to de-skill (i.e. give up her own managerial position in Romania to take up child-minding work abroad) in order to follow her husband's career. This river, meandering across the world with halts in famous European cities, made me aware that in our hurried world, experiencing slowness (i.e. life as a cruise) indicates power and privilege. Compared with the drawing #3b, I understood that graphical representations of deep precarity do not only focus on the short-term but moments of struggle and hope succeed each other in the faster rhythms of a few months (as #3b) rather than years (as #3a).

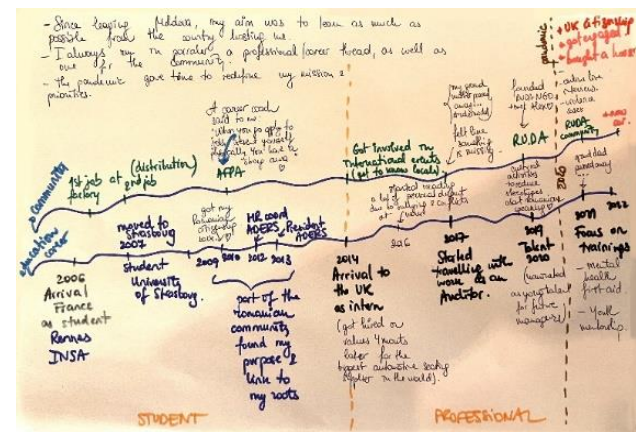
A final analytical direction I wish to highlight is the density of representation, particularly that of explanatory notes. When I received the drawing #4a in Figure 4, I confess I felt rather disappointed; this was the only participant to whom I emailed back to ask if he could add some more detail. He sent me another drawing instead representing the floorplan of his flat. During the interview he explained there was nothing else to put on the paper as his life was eventless.

Conversely drawing #4b in Figure 4 showed a participant's life well embedded in communities of work, place, church, nationals and transnational families with one river bank dedicated to her professional life and the other bank to her personal life. I noticed during many interviews that social isolation or embeddedness often came intertwined, which can shape traumatic experiences of split belonging (i.e. living isolated in the UK while missing one's dense social network in Romania or belonging to one's nuclear family while cutting off all old or any new social ties). I

**Figure 4** Observing directions for interpretation: density of representation



**#4a:** social isolation



**#4b:** social embeddedness

also noted transnational and trans-dimensional belonging (as in drawing #4b) that is to both countries and to different spheres of life, which clearly boosted participants' wellbeing.

Regarding drawing #4a, I feel like giving you a note of caution: an 'empty' drawing does not necessarily mean an 'empty' life. This participant represented his life equally empty in his UK present and his Romanian past, nonetheless, elicitation (remember to ask questions about what is not represented in the drawing!) showed how different these periods of his life really were. He was socially isolated in the UK (and suffered for that) while he was indeed fully socially embedded in Romania through those little things and gatherings that matters but thought not worth of indicating in a drawing: family meals and chats, strolls and drinks with friends, TV evenings with friends, which he deeply missed. I conceptualized these small things that matter and cannot really be named as they seem too trivial as the mingling components of an 'atmosphere'.

Of course, the way you interpret your data (both the visual and the elicited text) will be shaped by your thematic focus and your view of the world but I like to believe that you will venture further than that to truly include your participants' worldviews and experiences. The empirical insights certainly led me to a new field: from migrant housing I jumped laterally to the sociology of the self. I also realized that the metaphorical ideas of (dis)harmonious ways of navigating one's 'River of Life' through stormy or sunny days, turbulent or peaceful waters, dangerous or delightful landscapes as well as participants' experiences of repetitive motifs resonate well with Henri Lefebvre's (2004) arguments presented in his landmark book "Rhythmanalysis: theory of timespace". If you are interested, you can consult my article (Soaita 2023) titled "A rhythmanalysis of the (de)/(re)territorialisation of self in international migration" on which I draw exclusively on this method.]

### **Section summary**

- Remember, the drawing is a means to stir participants' recollection and reflection prior to the interview as much as a means for elicitation during the interview. Be attentive to participants' talk and carefully construct your probing questions (you can make use of river-metaphors); allow time for participants to reflect on what is important to them.
- I highlighted four directions for data interpretation, more exactly on the significance of: (1) repetition and repetitive motifs (e.g. moments of struggle/hardship, hope/success); (2)



shorter or longer timeframe of representation (e.g. two short years or decades); (3) slower or faster rhythms of change (e.g. the length of a pause in the chain of struggle or the persistence of a horizons of achievements); and (4) density of representation, particularly that of explicatory notes (e.g. indicating social isolation or embeddedness

## **Conclusions**

Having been internally funded by the University of Glasgow and its UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, I enjoyed the privilege of working outside the pressure of big research funders. This allowed me to follow my passion for visual methods and experiment with elicitation on the ‘River of Life’, a drawing made by participants prior to the interview to be used for discussion during the interview.

Conceiving one’s life in the form of a river or a path is a common metaphor in many cultures (indeed, very common in the Romanian culture) and it is also a warming-up technique used in focus groups. However, as I saw its potential in charting the complex interaction between different life domains, I wanted to apply it in a more in-depth, reflective manner: giving participants the opportunity to draw it on their own time before the interview, and used it for elicitation during the interview. I hoped this approach would stir participants’ recollection and reflection prior to the interview and would guide me during the interview to ask questions relevant to the course of their lives rather than tediously probing each life dimension possibly implicated in their migration journeys (e.g. education, social network, border-regime, economy, job market, and so on and so forth). It certainly fulfilled my expectations and for these outcomes alone is it worth taking it onboard in your research.

But participants’ drawings made me “see” that which I could not have grasped from words alone: repetitions and repetitive motifs, shorter and longer timelines of representation, faster and slower rhythms of change in the chain of repetition and different densities of representations which became testimonies of socially isolated or fully embedded lives. I observed how such variations allied with structural determinants (e.g. economic status, migration regime, gender) and framed migration trajectories of precarity, social mobility, or privilege.

In order for you to adapt this visual method to your own purpose, I described the instructions given to participants; encouraged you to prompt during elicitation (including through silence); and

signposted four key directions for data interpretation. During my discussion, I also highlighted some methodological challenges, particularly the effort and time required by participants to make the drawing prior to the interview (which I was able to recompense with a £15 Thank You voucher), the longer duration of the interview if you want to leave participants time to talk about what was important to them without cutting off their flux of memory and reflection (which means additional time/funds for transcription), the need for careful and sensitive probing during the elicitation and, indeed, the challenges of data interpretation.

Clearly, in my case the method worked well, making me increase my research repertoire from migrant housing to the sociology of the self. I am now employing the method in a new research project asking my participants to draw their housing histories. Though I also heard of cases when the method was not particularly revealing, the reader may rest assured: this was in a focus group, which did not surprise me. In my view, discussing one's river of life in-depth is a deeply personal experience much more appropriate to a participant/researcher than to a collective discussion.

My final word: if it fits your thematic focus, take a leap of faith and go for the River of Life method, you have nothing to lose and much to gain

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Discuss the ways in which you could adapt the method of the 'River of Life' to a research project you would like to undertake for different research topics or fields (e.g. whether education, employment, health). Are there any key conditions for the method to make sense to participants or to fit a research topic, and if so, which ones?
2. Discuss the thematic conditions under which the metaphor of the 'Tree of Life' is likely more fitting than that of the 'River of Life'.
3. Discuss the different life dimensions or domains (i.e. 'structures') which are likely to shape participants' experiences related to your research topic/questions and try to specify them in the form of instructions to participants for drawing the 'River of Life', or alternatively their path, route, itinerary, tree, etc?
4. Discuss some advantages and limitations of using the 'River of Life' method, generally or in a research project you would like to undertake.

## Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. What method most closely resemble that of the 'River of Life' among the options given below?
  - a. Semi-structure interviews
  - b. The sociological biography
  - c. Photo-elicitation
2. Why is it advisable to give instructions to 'River of Life'-research participants?
  - a. The act of drawing could be intimidating
  - b. To help them chart the multiple dimensions of life into the course of the river, as relevant to your topic
  - c. Participants should not draw whatever they want
3. Why is it advisable to give examples to participants?
  - a. The act of drawing could be intimidating
  - b. To help them chart the multiple dimensions of life into the course of the river, as relevant to your topic
  - c. Participants should not draw whatever they want
4. What is the best way to conduct elicitation?
  - a. In-depth (carefully tailoring your probes to what participants say, including with silence)
  - b. In a structured way (preparing a list of questions before interview and ask them in the exact same wording and order to each participant)
  - c. In a semi-structured way (preparing a list of questions before interview and ask them in the exact same wording but in an order that fits the discussion)
5. What are some key starting directions for data analysis?
  - a. Comparing the color scheme across drawings
  - b. Comparing the time and date when the drawings were sent to you
  - c. Comparing the timeline of representation

## Further Reading

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## Web Resources

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- Center for Participatory Research at UNM Health Sciences (accessed May 2023) "Discussion on the CBPR Model" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQXjX8DRIDs>
- Training.350.org (accessed May 2023) "River of Life: This personal reflection tool uses drawing, storytelling, and sharing to help a group get to know each other better. It is a great way to connect and deepen people's commitment to the issue and movement" <https://trainings.350.org/resource/river-of-life/>

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- Soaita, A. M., Gherghina, S., and Munro, M. (2023). *Finding housing, making home: Romanian migrants in post-Brexit/post-Covid Britain*. CaCHE, University of Glasgow, <https://housingevidence.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Finding-housing-making-home-report.pdf>