

## ARTICLE

# Can people talk about their past practices? Challenges, opportunities, and practical applications of biographic inquiry for geographic research on consumption

Mary Greene<sup>1</sup>  | Sarah Royston<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Environmental Policy Group,  
Wageningen University, Wageningen,  
The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup>Global Sustainability Institute, Anglia  
Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK

## Correspondence

Mary Greene, Environmental Policy  
Group, Wageningen University,  
Wageningen, The Netherlands.  
Email: [mary.greene@wur.nl](mailto:mary.greene@wur.nl)

## Funding information

Irish Research Council for the  
Humanities and Social Sciences (Grant  
number: GOIPG/2013/458)

## Abstract

Within human geography, there is increasing interest in the application of theories of practice for understanding resource consumption and for pursuing sustainability goals. In stressing the routine, performative, and contextual dimensions of action, research on geographies of practice is faced with particular methodological challenges. A lively debate concerns the utility of talk-based methods for investigating routine practices, such as those relating to everyday consumption. While it has been compellingly argued that people can talk individually or in groups about their practice, as of yet, these methodological debates have not been extended to the question of whether people can talk about past practices over the life course. This is despite the fact that attending to practice dynamics at the life-course scale can reveal important insights into the intersections of structure, agency, time, and space in consumption practices. Seeking to address this gap, this methodology-focused paper explores biographic inquiry as an empirical strategy for research on geographies of practice and consumption. After identifying significant challenges in representation associated with researching routine action in general, and past practices in particular, it outlines key learnings garnered during a biographic study on domestic consumption in Ireland. Central methodological features supporting talk-elicitation include zooming-in-and-out of temporal registers, multi-modality, and phased implementation. The paper concludes that people can talk about past practices in often very detailed, intricate ways and that retrospective talk is a valuable tool for understanding practice dynamics at the life-course scale.

## KEYWORDS

biography, consumption, everyday life, life course, qualitative methods, social practice

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The information, practices and views in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG).

© 2021 The Authors. *Area* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers).

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Human geographers have long been concerned with studying everyday life as a prism through which to understand broader social change processes. With the proliferation of practice-theoretical approaches to consumption, there is increasing interest in how dynamics of routine consumption practices, such as those relating to food, mobility, and energy, play out across different social contexts and temporalities (Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005), with consequences for global issues such as climate change, urban planning, and social inequalities. Emerging research (e.g., Greene & Rau, 2018) suggests that attending to the temporalities of the life course can generate valuable insights into the intersections of structure, agency, space, and time in consumption practices. However, to date there has been relatively little focused discussion of how methodologies can best explore dynamics of practice at this temporal scale.

In this paper, we are concerned with methodological issues that face geographers in researching consumption practices over the life course, with particular focus on the challenges and opportunities afforded by talk-based biographic methods. The paper contributes to ongoing methodological debates within practice-theoretical research (e.g., Browne, 2016; Hitchings, 2011; Spaargaren et al., 2016) and wider debates concerning co-construction, representation, ethics, and instrumentality in life course and everyday geographies (Hörschelmann, 2011; Worth, 2011). It also connects with a movement towards attention to temporality within interpretive geographical methodologies (e.g., Anderson et al., 2020) by integrating insights from time geographies (Pred, 1981a, 1981b) with methodologies for life-course and consumption geographies. We argue that methodological strategies of multi-modality, phased implementation, and zooming in and out of temporal registers can help to develop rich discursive talk on past consumption and provide nuanced insights into practice dynamics across the life course, and how these intersect with other temporal scales.

Practice-theoretical work has explored dynamics of consumption at a range of temporalities. Influential studies have examined societal change over long durations; for example, mobilities researchers have considered practice-histories at a national level (e.g., Oldenziel, 2017); practice cultures that emerge over long time-scales (e.g., Aldred & Jungnickel, 2014); and the intersections of mobility practices with neoliberal governance structures (Spinney, 2016). Practice-historical studies often employ retrospective methods at a population level, for example archive documents and time-use data, to examine change in populations, normative structures, institutions, cultures, and other large phenomena (e.g., Anderson et al., 2020; Browne et al., 2013; Southerton et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, other work has focused on specific moments in a practitioner's consumption; for instance, researchers such as Sahakian et al. (2021) have explored deliberate disruption to people's everyday practices through Living Labs, while Madsen and Gram-Hanssen explore energy consumption associated with "participants' activities during a normal day" (2017, p. 88). Such work, focusing on the present, or short temporal scales, often involves in-depth research with individuals that encompasses qualitative, participatory, and observational techniques. To date, however, dynamics of practice at the temporal scale of the life course have received less attention. That said, a small but growing body of biographic work (e.g., Greene, 2018a, 2018b; Greene & Rau, 2018; Groves et al., 2015; Hards, 2011, 2012; Strengers & Maller, 2017) is illustrating the value of the life course scale for understanding how "the lives of practices and practitioners interact" (Shove et al., 2012, p. 39). This also echoes an increasing interest within geography in life course and biographic approaches for researching change in daily experiences and practices, such as those relating to everyday mobilities (e.g., Chatterjee & Clark, 2020; Mattioli, 2020). Nevertheless, researchers have not engaged in focused debate about methodologies that can be applied to explore dynamics of practices at the life course scale.

Due to the paucity of longitudinal data on the life course, retrospective methods<sup>1</sup> incorporating biographic talk are an important tool in this field. Such methods build on a long-established field of sociological research on the life course (see Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Mayer, 2009). Critically considering the processes, challenges, and opportunities involved in applying retrospective biographic methods is a useful endeavour for geographical research on consumption. To this, we first discuss key challenges associated with researching routine practices through talk-based methods. We then present methodological learnings garnered from a four-year biographic study of consumption practices and discuss research strategies that can be employed to co-construct rich talk on past practices, a process we refer to as discursive co-development. The paper concludes by considering the broader relevance of talk-based biographic methodologies for geographies of practice, consumption, and the life course.

## 2 | TALK-BASED METHODS FOR RESEARCHING PAST PRACTICES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

### 2.1 | Debates on talk-based methods in practice geographies

Debates about talk-elicitation methods for researching routine action have gained some traction in geographical literature (e.g., Hitchings, 2011; Browne, 2016; Sahakian et al., 2021). Rooted in ontologies that stress the corporal, performative, and material, critiques of talk-based methods (e.g., Fadyl & Nicholls, 2013; Nicolini, 2012, 2017; Sweetman, 2009) have focused on what they don't or cannot capture (Browne, 2016). Seeing routine actions as rooted in practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984), practice-based understandings of consumption emphasise non-cognitive elements, such as embodied know-how, competence, and materiality, which may be especially difficult to access via talk-elicitation.

However, those arguing for the value of talk-elicitation methods emphasise their role in revealing meaning-centred elements of practices, including dispositional, teleo-affective, normative, and experiential dimensions (Halkier & Jensen, 2011; Hitchings, 2011; Martens, 2012b). The interview is posited as a situation in which participants can explore the meanings, contexts, and outcomes of personal experiences (Hards, 2011), while focus groups may help uncover shared discourses, social conventions, and meanings of practices (Browne, 2016).

In response to critiques, practice-researchers have developed strategies for improving the effectiveness of talk-based methods; for example, Hitchings (2011) advocates a serial interviewing approach to allow for gradual emergence of discursive reflection. However, most practice-theoretical studies continue to involve single-instance interviews (Maller & Strengers, 2018). Others suggest a value in working with participants during moments of learning, disruption, and change (Giddens, 1984) which offer opportunities for intervening in practices (Sahakian et al., 2021) and developing discursive reflection (see also Rinkinen, 2013).

Concerning particular challenges associated with researching embodied competencies and material contexts, within geography and the wider social sciences, non-verbal, sensory, and observation-based methods are increasingly used (Martens, 2012a; Morris, 2020; Pink, 2011).

Such methods may access more-than-discursive forms of knowledge and “appreciate aspects that actors cannot” (Nicolini, 2017, p. 29). For example, within mobility studies, mixed and “mobile methods” are increasingly used (Larsen, 2014). Such developments have influenced the way talk-based methods are applied. Multimodal approaches often combine talk with non-verbal and creative methods, such as sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), audio-visual, photographic (Strengers & Maller, 2017), and CCTV methods (Martens, 2012a). Within this work, it remains rare to eliminate the talk-elicitation element. Rather, participants' interpretations remain central to analysis, but are complemented by additional data-generation techniques. However, while non-verbal methods generate valuable data in their own right, there has been relatively little explicit examination of their role as tools for developing discursive talk on past practices.

### 2.2 | Talk-based research on past practices: challenges and opportunities

The above debates on talk-based methods and their role in accessing and representing practices have tended to focus on practice that is ongoing or in the recent past. However, challenges in representation are compounded when we consider practice dynamics over longer timescales, such as an individual's life course. Capturing the corporeal, performative, tacit, and material contexts of practice becomes more difficult; the “situation,” as a specific site in place and time, is no longer accessible to direct observation, and sensory and situational methods cannot be used in the same way. For this reason, some claim that a longitudinal approach that involves following practices as they occur in real-time is “impractical but preferred” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 29). However, such longitudinal experience-centred practice data are rarely available, with the result that retrospective inquiry, often involving talk-elicitation, remains a crucial means of studying past practices. Such research on past practice experiences requires particular attention to the design of creative multi-modal methods that go beyond basic talk-elicitation and attend to the more-than-discursive dimensions of practice.

A particular challenge for researchers studying practices in individuals' past life courses concerns how to represent and analyse the different intersecting temporalities at play, including temporalities of everyday performances, of the life course as a whole, and of wider societal transitions. Geographic literature makes a key contribution here, notably through the work of the time-geographic school (e.g., Hägerstrand, 1970; Pred, 1981a, 1981b). Work within this field concerns, among other things, how an individual's daily activity is reproduced or transformed over the course of their life, and how the everyday performances, accumulated knowledges, and “careers” of individuals intersect with trajectories

of practices, societies, and institutions (see Greene & Rau, 2018). Hägerstrand developed an understanding of social time-space that focused on the interplay between contexts and actions, tracing phenomena through time (Sörlin, 2020) and analysing “the how and where of communal life” (Latham, 2020, p. 699). Pred (1981a) developed this further, most notably through a conceptualisation of daily- and life-paths. The daily-path refers to the activities, events, and actions that take the individual through the time-space of their everyday life, whereas the life-path refers to longer-term patterns involving social roles and projects in domains such as family, work, and other institutions. Pred’s idea of a dialectical relationship between these paths, which we conceptualise as two temporal registers,<sup>2</sup> inspires our approach to researching the intersecting temporalities of consumption practice over the life course.<sup>3</sup>

In operationalising these ideas for research on past consumption practice, we also draw on Nicolini’s strategy of zooming in and out (Nicolini 2009, 2012). According to Nicolini “understanding and representing practices requires a reiteration of two basic (methodological and analytical) movements: zooming in on the accomplishments of practice, and zooming out of their relationships in space and time” (2012, p. 213). This strategy has gained traction among researchers seeking to explore different dimensions of practices, from specific practices and communities (e.g., La Rocca et al., 2017) to interconnections between practices (e.g., Spaargaren et al., 2016). However, as of yet, little work has applied either Pred’s time-geographic concepts or Nicolini’s methodological strategy to the task of exploring consumption practices over the life course. We propose that zooming in and out of temporal registers of daily- and life-paths offers a valuable framework for researching past consumption performances and their relation to wider systems of practices. In what follows, we show how this can be applied in practice, and discuss challenges and opportunities that arise.

### 3 | APPLYING BIOGRAPHIC TALK METHODS IN PRACTICE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

#### 3.1 | Introducing the Energy Biographies study research design

The Energy Biographies study was a four-year study conducted by the first author in Ireland (2012–2016) that explored how and why individuals’ consumption practices change over the life course. This study investigated how individuals’ everyday energy practices, including food, mobility, and laundry practices, interact with processes of life course and socio-technical change. A multi-modal biographic methodology generated rich data on consumption biographies and dynamics of practice, detailed analysis of which is published elsewhere (see Greene, 2018a, 2018b; Greene & Fahy, 2020; Greene & Rau, 2018) and of which a summary is presented in section 3.2 below.

The Energy Biographies methodology involved zooming in and out of temporal registers of daily- and life-paths and comprised three interconnected stages (see Table 1). These were implemented with a sample of middle to older-aged Irish participants over a period of one month. First, two stages of narrative interviewing<sup>4</sup> (phase 1) elicited a life-path view of individuals’ domestic practice. Life-course timelines and graph-drawing activities complemented the interview, providing a visual-descriptive reconstruction of individuals’ lives and facilitating discussion of the intersections between biographic context and practice. Following this, participants took part in a two-week semi-structured practice diary task (Phase 2) in which they recorded information on their daily practice and reflected on how this differed from past routines, with a final phase of reflective narrative interviews (Phase 3).

In the remainder of this section, we first provide a brief overview of the type of data generated and then reflect on some specific methodological challenges and opportunities highlighted through this project, which may be of use to researchers considering a biographic approach to consumption geographies.

#### 3.2 | The value of the approach: Insights into dynamics of consumption

The three-phase approach constituted a robust, multi-modal methodology that elicited rich insights concerning how consumption careers develop through the life course and a changing societal context (see Figure 1, adapted from Jones, 2013). While it is not the purpose of this paper to present and discuss the data generated, it is useful to highlight the type of nuanced insights that can be co-created through the biographic-practice methodology.

The data provided insights concerning both *how* and *why* practices evolve. In relation to *how*, the methodology facilitated a detailed descriptive analysis of spatio-temporal patterns of practice performance and their development over time. The participatory visual methods (life graphs, timelines – discussed further below) identified critical

TABLE 1 Overview of the methodological process

## Overview of methodological process

Research phase	Materials generated	Temporal registers and analytical 'frame'
<b>Phase 1(A)</b> Biographic interview 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practitioner's life history</li> <li>Life history timeline; narrative biography</li> </ul>	Zooming out <i>Life-path</i>
<b>Phase 1(B)</b> Biographic interview 2 Practice career timelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Energy practice career graphs</li> <li>Narrative discussion on life-path practice careers</li> <li>Narrative discussion on daily practice at previous life stages</li> </ul>	Zooming-in-and-out <i>Life-path, Daily-path</i>
<b>Phase 2</b> Practice diary + survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Material, temporal, social and spatial contexts of current practice</li> <li>Practice modes, meanings and competences</li> <li>Socio-demographic questionnaire</li> </ul>	Zooming out <i>Daily-path</i>
<b>Phase 3</b> Biographic interview 3 Walking interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Narrative walking interview discussion of daily practice</li> <li>Narrative discussion of daily practice at previous stages</li> <li>Further reflection on life-path careers in practice and relation with macro changes</li> <li>Reflection on methodological process</li> </ul>	Zooming-in-and-out <i>Daily-path, Life-path</i>

transitions and turning points in participants' careers that corresponded with dynamics in family, work, and education careers. Periods of stability generally corresponded with distinct phases within a life in which institutional and domestic roles and routines were held stable or when life-course circumstances represented significant social constraints on the ordering and rhythm of daily life (e.g., parenting children). In contrast, other periods of life, in particular emerging adulthood, the transition to "empty nest," and the work–retirement transition, were characterised by manifold and frequent transitions and turning points in consumption practice careers. These phases were identified as "critical periods" during which key life decisions, events, and milestones had the effect of shaping the trajectory of practice careers thereafter.

In addition to facilitating analysis of *how* performances of practices develop throughout the life course, the data also allowed for more nuanced inferential exploration of *why* practices evolve, and the role of complex processes at a range of interacting scales. At the life course scale, socialisation experiences and continually evolving personal relationships, social roles, material contexts, and forms of capital all worked to shape energy practice dynamics over time, with gender playing a key role in configuring these life course dimensions. Beyond this, the data provided important insights into the broader socio-technical processes shaping practice careers, including evolutions in social norms, technologies, infrastructures, and economic and political contexts.



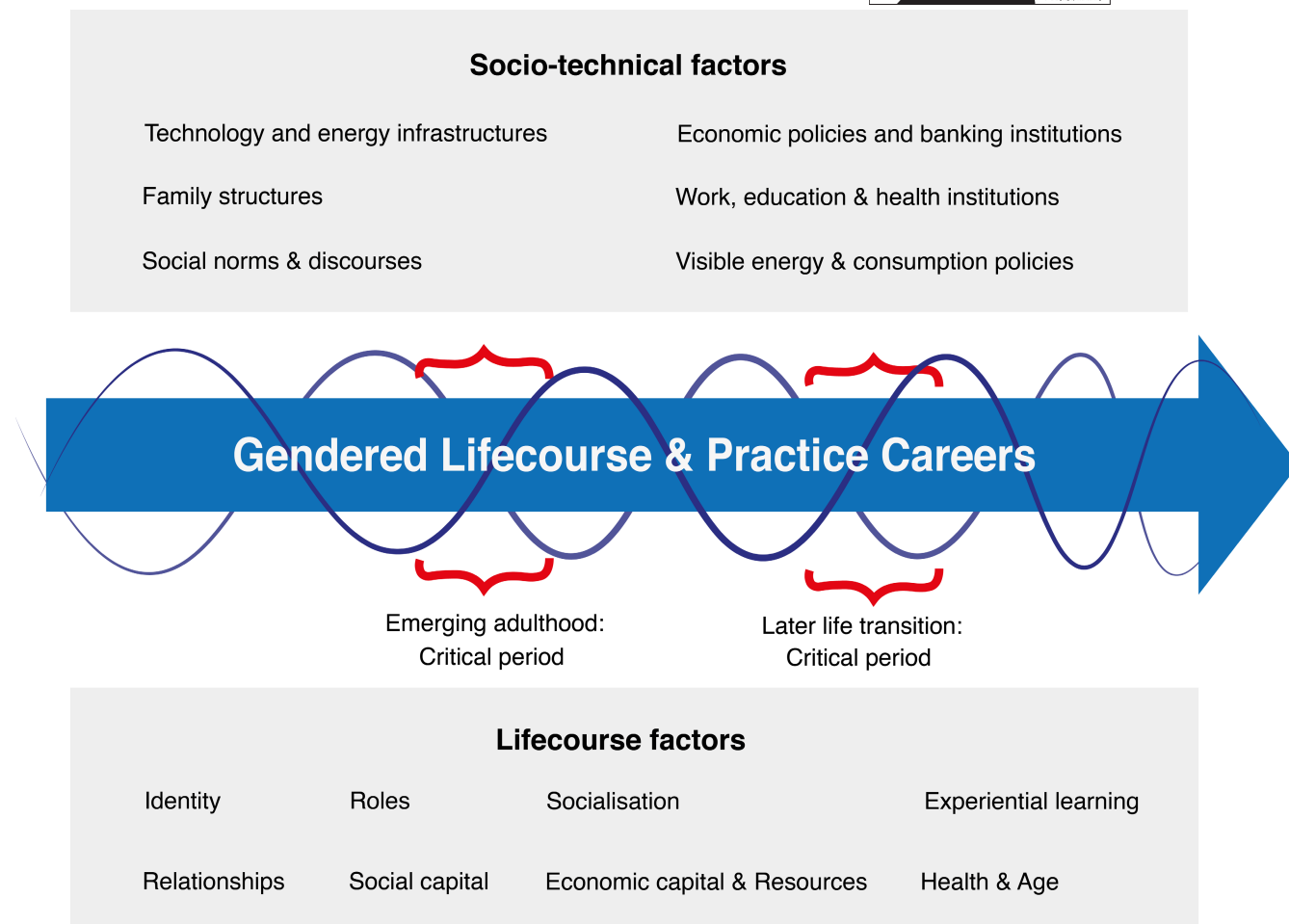


FIGURE 1 Mapping how and why consumption practices evolve

### 3.3 | Key methodological features facilitating discursive talk

Three features of the methodology emerged as particularly important in talk-elicitation: (1) zooming in and out of temporal registers; (2) multi-modality; and (3) phased implementation. Together, these provided participants with opportunities to build discursive reflection on the research topic. We refer to this process as “discursive co-development.” The term “co-development” here refers to the fact that (a) this is a co-constructive process involving both the researcher and participant in building a shared understanding and also (b) the development of discursive reflection occurs not solely through talk-based methods applied in isolation but also through the integration of a range of complementary methodological approaches, including participatory visual methods, diaries, and walking interviews.

*Zooming in and out:* As outlined in Table 1, an evolving iteration between life-path methods (including biographic interviewing, timelines, and graphs) and daily-path methods (narrative interviewing, daily diary, walking interviews) characterised the approach. The phased framework involving deliberate switching between the temporal registers of daily- and life-paths was an important technique structuring the process of discursive co-development. Specifically, life-path methods enabled “zooming out” to capture broader dynamics, while the daily-path methods facilitated “zooming in” to elicit more concrete discussion of daily-path dynamics, including consumption routines during stages of stability and phases of transition identified in participants’ consumption biographies.

The *multi-modal approach* combining a suite of different methods was a second key strategy. Different methods had distinctive talk-generating effects. For example, unstructured and more structured interviewing styles were developed to elicit narratives of both daily- and life-path transformations. These techniques prompted talk on concrete examples of daily experiences as well as their relation to broader shifts in social contexts. Furthermore, walking interviews around participants’ homes were a useful strategy for instigating discussion on changing material contexts of action.

Visual-biographic drawing activities (Hards, 2012) were additional effective tools for promoting discursive reflection on practices. Timelines and graphs (see Figures 2 and 3) were important tools for prompting discussion on contexts of change, helping people to sequence the order of events in their lives. During the construction of these graphs, participants continued to develop their narratives and articulated new logics, contexts, and experiences of practices, including information that was otherwise difficult to talk about (e.g., concerning temporalities of change).

## TIMELINE

### Macro events

Marriage bar    Enter European Union  
 Infrastructural development  
 Changing provision of services

### Residency

Childhood home    Travelling with army    Buy house    Move to new house

### Work and Education

School    Enter Army    Leave Army    Change jobs    Frequent travel to USA    Change jobs  
 Start new job    Part-time degree    Part-time Masters

### Lifecourse

Childhood    Emerging adulthood    Marriage    Health diagnosis    Parents aging  
 Father dies    Mother dies

FIGURE 2 Example of participant timeline

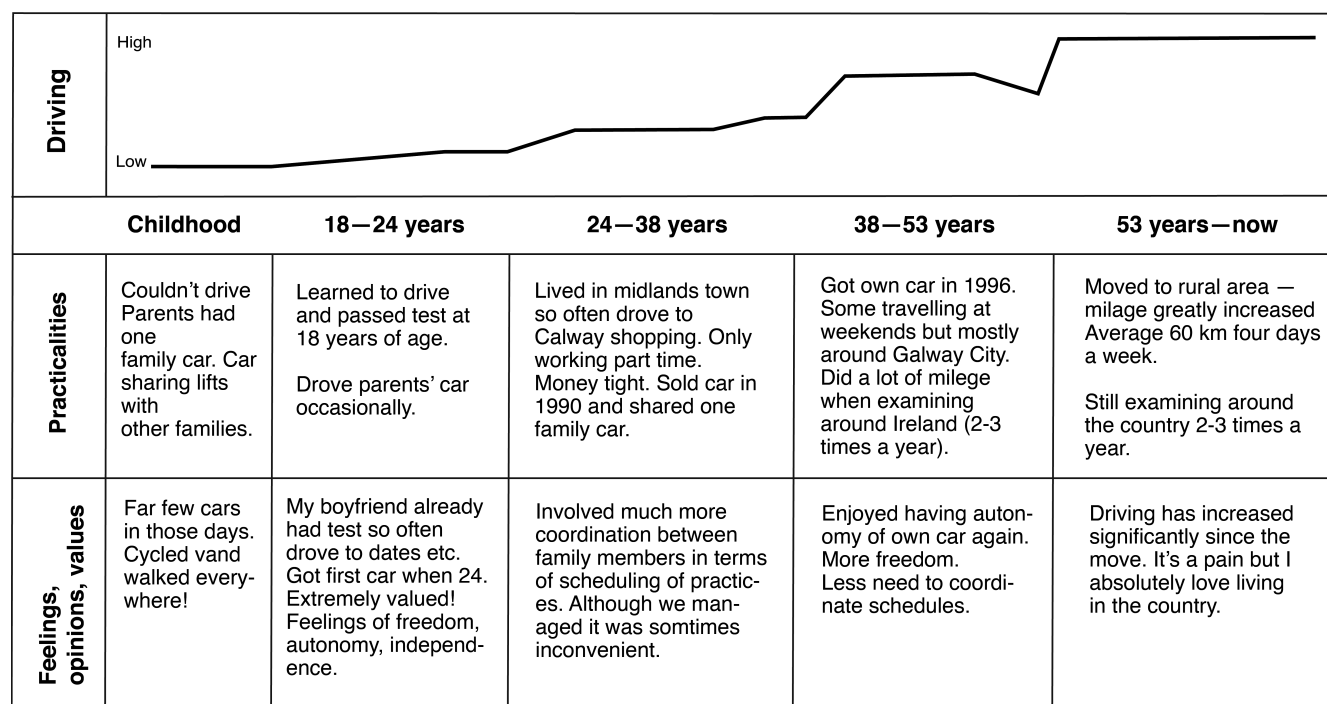


FIGURE 3 Example of female participant's car-driving graph

Zooming in on daily-path dynamics in the present proved to be a useful aid to exploring daily-path dynamics in the past. The diary was structured to explore participants' present-day action in terms of its performative, material, temporal, social, and spatial contexts as well as prompt comparison with previous life stages. Combined with the walking house-tour, the diary was a crucial prompt supporting detailed discussion on past routines in the final interview.

Finally, *phased implementation* through a series of research situations over an extended timeframe was another strategy supporting discursive co-development. Periods in between research encounters acted as "incubator" phases, following which participants often returned to the next stage of the research with additional reflections. The period of sustained reflection facilitated by the diary method emerged as a particularly powerful "incubator" tool stimulating discursive co-development.

### 3.4 | Dealing with differentiation

Unsurprisingly, participants showed differing responses to specific methodological tools, and varying willingness or ability to provide detailed reflective talk in this research setting. These differences (likely shaped by previous experiences and linked with age, gender, and education), influenced how discursive co-development played out. For example, two participants who had studied social science degrees readily articulated academically informed views of the role of social structures in shaping their action. Some others found that their thinking around causal processes and relationships became elaborated during the research process more gradually. While certain individuals narrated freely, others required more prompting. Tasks such as the diary activity and visual-biographic graphs were also experienced differently. Those who had never kept a diary before sometimes found it burdensome, with one participant indicating he found it "strangely intrusive." Some participants, most notably older women, found the graph-drawing activities particularly challenging.

These differences, structured by fault lines of socio-economics, demography, and power, highlight the importance of sensitivity to how research is encountered differently among individuals. Investigating personal biographies necessitates careful consideration of human wellbeing, emotions, and trust, and consideration of the politics and ethics of everyday life research is crucial (see also Browne, 2016). The phased approach used here supported the evolution of trust in the researcher-participant relationship and more "intrusive" methods were positioned later in the process. Furthermore, although the topic of this study was not particularly sensitive, the process of biographic reflection resulted in a number of individuals revisiting difficult periods of life, with emotional impacts. Being sufficiently prepared to encounter and respond to such instances is a crucial competence for geographers engaging with biographic methods.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

This paper set out to advance methodological debates in geographies of consumption, practice, and the life course by considering the important but underexplored question of whether people can talk about their past practices. We have shown that eliciting talk on past practices brings particular challenges in representation. Methodologies must be capable of addressing the performative, contextual, and dynamic nature of past consumption routines. They should support the building of discursive reflection on (long) past experiences and be sensitive to differences in how individuals experience research processes. Despite these challenges, we have argued that people can talk about their past practices, often in very intricate and detailed ways, and that biographic approaches offer great opportunities for researchers and participants to collaboratively develop insights into the evolution of consumption practices. To this, we have offered practical insights into techniques for eliciting rich discursive talk on past practices, including strategies of multi-modality, phased implementation, and zooming in and out of temporal registers, as reflected in a visual representation of the paper's contribution in Figure 4.

Multi-modal biographic inquiry is an intensive and demanding process, both for researchers and participants. Various competences of the researcher play a role in steering the discursive co-development process and, as such, it is important for researchers to engage in reflexive deliberation on how their own skills and positionalities impact on, and evolve through, the research process (as highlighted by recent work on reflexivity in geographic practice more broadly; for example, Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015).

Recognising that all research is a form of intervention (e.g., McNamee, 1988), it is also notable that the kind of biographic inquiry outlined here often has impacts on participants' ongoing practices, prompting them to reflect on



Can people talk about past practices?

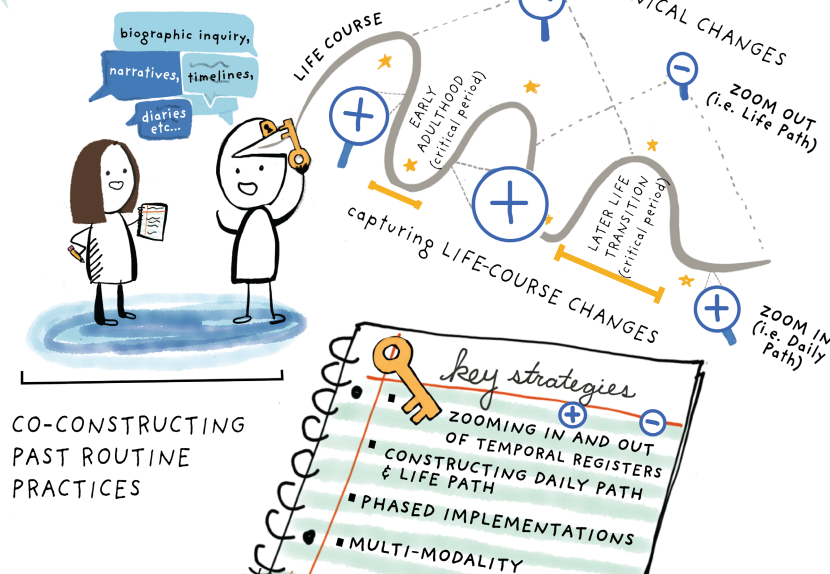


FIGURE 4 Co-constructing talk on past practices

and possibly make changes to their routine action (see Greene, 2017). Biographic approaches could hold value within a broader suite of intervention tools to promote sustainable consumption, or other normatively guided shifts in practice. While much has been written about the role of future-looking visioning and scenario-forecasting based methods as tools for intervention (e.g., Davies et al., 2012), as of yet, the interventionist potential of retrospective experience-centred methods has not been adequately explored. We note that this potential for intervention, while not the focus of this paper, offers a rich avenue for further inquiry. Further research could also usefully explore the potential of biographic methods in investigating consumption practices among individuals who live in differing circumstances and contexts.

In concluding, we propose that biographic methodologies could be fruitfully deployed in future research to represent and understand practice dynamics, and to support ongoing advances within geographies of practice, consumption, and the life course. The methodological insights here will help researchers respond to calls by Pearce (2018), Bailey (2009), and others for greater empirical attention to geographies of the life course, across a wide range of topic areas. In particular, we have illustrated one way of applying the well-established time-geographic concepts of Hägerstrand and Pred to analyse intersecting temporal registers in people's lives. Finally, we speak to a thriving field of research on geographies of consumption, including innovative practice-theoretical work in this area, and hope that these learnings, drawn from our experiences of biographical inquiry, will support researchers in continuing to develop rich, creative ways of studying the temporal and social dynamics of consumption.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge research funding from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the participants involved in the Energy Biographies project. The first author would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Frances Fahy for her guidance during the fieldwork underpinning this project. The authors would also like to thank the editors and reviewers for their constructive comments and feedback on the paper.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

Mary Greene  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4397-0923>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a summary of the advantage of retrospective methods over longitudinal ones, and a discussion of issues around accuracy of memory (which we do not have scope to consider here), please see Müggenburg (2021).
- <sup>2</sup> Our use of the term “registers” here is inspired by Berry and Palladino, who employ it as a way of “capturing the different ways in which time can be framed or understood and the effects of that framing” (2019, p. 230).
- <sup>3</sup> We are interested here in the idea of daily- and life-paths as temporal registers within which to analyse social practices of consumption, rather than applying the original time-geographic notion of spatio-temporal paths.
- <sup>4</sup> Narrative interviewing is a technique involving open-ended questions that is often employed in qualitative research to explore aspects of an individual's past experiences, their meanings, and how they unfold over time (Abell et al., 2004).

## REFERENCES

- Abell, J., Stokoe, E. & Billig, M. (2004) Narrative and the discursive (re)construction of events. In: Andrews, M., Sclater, S.D., Squire, C. & Treacher, A. (Eds.) *The uses of narrative*. New Jersey, NJ: Transaction. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351302005>
- Aldred, R. & Jungnickel, K. (2014) Why culture matters for transport policy: the case of cycling in the UK. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 34, 78–87. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2013.11.004>
- Anderson, B., Grove, K., Rickards, L. & Kearnes, M. (2020) Slow emergencies: temporality and the racialized biopolitics of emergency governance. *Progress in Human Geography*, 44(4), 621–639.
- Bailey, A.J. (2009) Population geography: lifecourse matters. *Progress in Human Geography*, 33(3), 407–418. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508096355>
- Berry, D.J. & Palladino, P. (2019) Life, time, and the organism: temporal registers in the construction of life forms. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 52, 223–243. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10739-018-9513-3>
- Browne, A.L. (2016) Can people talk together about their practices? Focus groups, humour and the sensitive dynamics of everyday life. *Area*, 48(2), 198–205. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12250>
- Browne, A.L., Medd, W. & Anderson, B. (2013) Developing novel approaches to tracking domestic water demand under uncertainty—A reflection on the “up scaling” of social science approaches in the United Kingdom. *Water Resource Management*, 27(4), 1013–1035. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11269-012-0117-y>
- Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J. & Wengraf, T. (2000) *The turn to biographical methods in social science: comparative issues and examples*. London: Routledge. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203466049>
- Chatterjee, K. & Clark, B. (2020) Turning points in car ownership over the life course: contributions from biographical interviews and panel data. In: Scheiner, J. & Rau, H. (Eds.) *Mobility and travel behaviour across the life course: qualitative and quantitative approaches* (pp. 17–32). Broadheath: Edward Elgar. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789907810>
- Davies, A.R., Doyle, R. & Pape, J. (2012) Future visioning for sustainable household practices: spaces for sustainability learning? *Area*, 44(1), 54–60. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2011.01054.x>
- Fadyl, J.K. & Nicholls, D.A. (2013) Foucault, the subject and the research interview: a critique of methods. *Nursing Inquiry*, 20, 23–29. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12011>
- Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: The Polity Press.
- Greene, M. (2017) *Energy Biographies: Exploring the intersections between lives, practices and contexts*. PhD Thesis, NUI Galway, Ireland.
- Greene, M. (2018a) Paths, projects and careers of domestic practice: exploring dynamics of demand over biographical time. In: Hui, A., Day, R. & Walker, G. (Eds.) *Demanding energy: Space, time and change*. Chennai: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Greene, M. (2018b) Socio-technical transitions and dynamics in everyday consumption practice. *Global Environmental Change*, 52, 1–9. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.05.007>
- Greene, M. & Fahy, F. (2020) Steering Demand: exploring the intersection of policy, practice and lives in energy systems change in Ireland. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 61, 1–10. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2019.101331>
- Greene, M. & Rau, H. (2018) Moving across the life course: the potential of a biographic approach to researching dynamics of everyday mobility practices. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 18(1), 60–82. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540516634417>
- Groves, C., Henwood, K., Shirani, F., Butler, C., Parkhill, K. & Pidgeon, N. (2015) Energy biographies: narrative genres, lifecourse transitions and practice change. *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 41(3), 483–508. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243915609116>
- Hägerstrand, T. (1970) What about people in regional science? *Papers of the Regional Science Association*, 24, 7–21. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01936872>
- Halkier, B. & Jensen, I. (2011) Methodological challenges in using practice theory in consumption research. Examples from a study on handling nutritional contestations of food consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(1), 101–123. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540510391365>
- Hards, S. (2011) Social practice and the evolution of personal environmental values. *Environmental Values*, 20(1), 23–42. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327111X12922350165996>
- Hards, S. (2012) Tales of transformation: the potential of a narrative approach to pro-environmental practices. *Geoforum*, 43(4), 760–771. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.01.004>

- Hitchings, R. (2011) People can talk about their practices. *Area*, 44(1), 61–67. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2011.01060.x>
- Hörschelmann, K. (2011) Theorising life transitions: geographical perspectives. *Area*, 43, 378–383. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2011.01056.x>
- Jones, H.N. (2013) *Understanding walking and cycling using a life course perspective*. [Doctoral Dissertation]. University of West England.
- Kohl, E. & McCutcheon, P. (2015) Kitchen table reflexivity: negotiating positionality through everyday talk. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 22(6), 747–763. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.958063>
- La Rocca, A., Hoholm, T. & Bjørn, E.M. (2017) Practice theory and the study of interaction in business relationships: some methodological implications. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 60, 187–195. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2016.04.002>
- Larsen, J. (2014) (Auto)Ethnography and cycling. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 17(1), 59–71. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2014.854015>
- Latham, A. (2020) Diagramming the social: exploring the legacy of Torsten Hägerstrand's diagrammatic landscapes. *Landscape Research*, 45(6), 699–711. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2020.1749579>
- Madsen, L.V. & Gram-Hanssen, K. (2017) Understanding comfort and senses in social practice theory: insights from a Danish field study. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 29, 86–94. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.05.013>
- Maller, C. & Strengers, Y. (2018) Studying social practices and global practice change using scrapbooks as a cultural probe. *Area*, 50(1), 66–73.
- Martens, L. (2012a) The politics and practices of looking: CCTV and domestic kitchen practices. In: Pink, S. (Ed.) *Advances in visual methodology*. New York: Sage, pp. 39–57.
- Martens, L. (2012b) Practice 'in talk' and talk 'as practice': dish washing and the reach of language. *Sociological Research Online*, 17(3), 103–113.
- Mattioli, G. (2020) Towards a mobility biography approach to long-distance travel and 'mobility links'. In: Scheiner, J. & Rau, H. (Eds.) *Mobility and travel behaviour across the life course: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789907810.00015>
- Mayer, K.U. (2009) New directions in life course research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35(1), 413–433. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134619>
- McNamee, S. (1988) Accepting research as social intervention: implications of a systemic epistemology. *Communication Quarterly*, 36(1), 50–68. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463378809369707>
- Morris, N.J. (2020) Teaching sensory geographies in practice: transforming students' awareness and understanding through playful experimentation. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 44(4), 550–568. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2020.1771685>
- Müggenburg, H. (2021) Beyond the limits of memory? The reliability of retrospective data in travel research. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 145, 302–318. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2021.01.010>
- Nicolini, D. (2009) Zooming-in-and-out: studying practices by switching theoretical lenses and trailing connections. *Organization Studies*, 30(12), 1391–1418. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609349875>
- Nicolini, D. (2012) *Practice theory, work and organization: an Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nicolini, D. (2017) Practice theory as a package of theory, method and vocabulary: affordances and limitations. In: Jonas, M., Littig, B. & Wroblewski, A. (Eds.) *Methodological reflections on practice oriented theories*. Berlin: Springer. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52897-7>
- Oldenziel, R. (2017) Cycling in China and the sustainability challenge, 1955–Present: mode of the past or promise for the future? *Studies in Contemporary History*, 14, 465–486. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok.4.1073>
- Pearce, J.R. (2018) Complexity and uncertainty in Geography of Health research: incorporating life-course perspectives. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 108(6), 1491–1498. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1416280>
- Pink, S. (2009) *Doing sensory ethnography*. Chennai: SAGE. Available from: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446249383>
- Pink, S. (2011) Ethnography of the invisible: energy in the multisensory home. *Ethnologia Europaea*, 41(1), 117–128. Available from: <https://dx.doi.org/10.16995/ee.1082>
- Pred, A. (1981a) Social reproduction and the time-geography of everyday life. *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 63(1), 5–22. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.2307/490994>
- Pred, A. (1981b). Of paths and projects: Individual behavior and its societal context. In: Cox, K. & Golledge, R. (Eds.) *Behavioral problems in geography revisited*. London: Routledge, pp. 231–255. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315668314>
- Rinkinen, J. (2013) Electricity blackouts and hybrid systems of provision: users and the 'reflective practice'. *Energy, Sustainability and Society*, 3(25), 1–10. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/2192-0567-3-25>
- Sahakian, M., Rau, H., Grealis, E., Godin, L., Wallenborn, G., Backhaus, J., Friis, F., Genus, A.T., Goggins, G., Heaslip, E., Heiskanen, E., Iskandarova, M., Jensen, C.L., Laakso, S., Musch, A., Scholl, C., Vadovics, E., Vadovics, K., Vasseur, V. & Fahy, F. (2021) Challenging social norms to recraft practices: a Living Lab approach to reducing household energy use in eight European countries. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 72, 101881. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101881>
- Shove, E., Pantzar, M. & Watson, M. (Eds.) (2012) *The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes*. Chennai: SAGE. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446250655>
- Sörlin, S. (2020) Hägerstrand as historian: innovation, diffusion and the processual landscape. *Landscape Research*, 45(6), 712–723. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2020.1790506>

- Southerton, D., Olsen, W., Warde, A. & Cheng, S.L. (2012) Practices and trajectories: a comparative analysis of reading in France, Norway, the Netherlands, the UK and the USA. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 12(3), 237–262. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540512456920>
- Spaargaren, G., Weenink, D., & Lamers, M. (Eds.) (2016) *Practice theory and research: Exploring the dynamics of social life*. London: Routledge. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4324/978131565690>
- Spinney, J. (2016) Fixing mobility in the neoliberal city: cycling policy and practice in london as a mode of political-economic and biopolitical governance. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 106(2), 450–458. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2015.1124016>
- Strengers, Y. & Maller, C. (2017) Adapting to 'extreme' weather: mobile practice memories of keeping warm and cool as a climate change adaptation strategy. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 49(6), 1432–1450. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17694029>
- Sweetman, P. (2009) Revealing habitus, illuminating practice: bourdieu, photography and visual methods. *The Sociological Review*, 57(3), 491–511. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01851.x>
- Warde, A. (2005) Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5, 131–153. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540505053090>
- Worth, N. (2011) Evaluating life maps as a versatile method for lifecourse geographies. *Area*, 43(4), 405–412. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2010.00973.x>

**How to cite this article:** Greene, M. & Royston, S. (2022) Can people talk about their past practices? Challenges, opportunities, and practical applications of biographic inquiry for geographic research on consumption. *Area*, 54, 268–279. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12773>