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Using the Lifegrid in Qualitative Interviews With Parents and Substance Abusing Adolescents

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Abstract: This article describes the usability of a retrospective data collection tool called the lifegrid (LG) in exploring adolescent substance abuse from the perspective of mothers and their substance abusing adolescent. We found the LG approach useful in building researcher-participant rapport, enhancing participants' depth and range of recall, and cross-referencing and comparing of events between participant accounts. These advantages are discussed in detail in this article, while we also unpack some of the challenges we faced in using the LG approach in our qualitative study.

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1. Introduction

In qualitative studies, researchers often rely on retrospective data collection methodologies to investigate people's experiences. When the inquiry involves sensitive issues and requires participants to voice descriptive and emotional stories, the use of appropriately sensitive data gathering methodologies is imperative (GUENETTE & MARSHALL, 2009). In this article we describe the utility of using a retrospective data collection tool called the lifegrid (LG) in exploring adolescent substance abuse from the perspective of mothers and their substance abusing adolescent children (hereafter referred to adolescents). [1]

We decided to use the LG approach to complement the case-study research methodology as it has proved useful in previous studies in engaging with participants, supporting them to talk about their experiences and collecting retrospective information (WILSON, CUNNINGHAM-BURLEY, BANCROFT, BACKETT-MILBURN & MASTERS, 2007). In addition, parents' lives and parent-adolescent relationships are profoundly impacted by adolescent substance abuse given the various psychosocial and economic stresses associated with adolescent substance abuse (see for example JACKSON & MANNIX, 2003; JACKSON, USHER & O'BRIEN, 2007; USHER, JACKSON & O'BRIEN, 2007; WEGNER, AREND, BASSADIEN, BISMATH & CROS, 2014). In light of this we surmised that the trauma that adolescents and parents may have experienced could influence the kind of information they are willing to recall. In order to facilitate recall of these events we thought to use a data collection tool that will lend itself to recall and discussion of sensitive events. [2]

In the following sections we provide an overview of the LG and the methodology of our study. We will then discuss our findings in relation to the usefulness of the LG. Finally we outline some of the practical challenges we faced in using the LG and provide some ideas on how to overcome these challenges. [3]

2. About the Lifegrid

The LG is a tool used to construct a visual chronological framework of a person's life (RICHARDSON, ONG, SIM & CORBETT, 2009; WILSON et al., 2007). It generally takes a chart-like structure with several rows and columns, where the rows usually represent the person's life in years (each row is a particular year) and the columns represent significant life events (WILSON et al., 2007). The significant life events are selected aspects of the participants' lives that the researcher wishes to explore. These aspects are closely related to the research questions of the study and can include topics such as family life, friends and social relationships, place of residence, occupation and so forth. For example, the LG was used to explore the life course of cancer patients using selected aspects such as "personal life events," "education, lifestyle," "residence," "occupation" and "other" (NOVOGRADEC, 2009, p.2). A completed LG then allows the researcher to assess how the participant's life has changed over a certain period of time and when these changes occurred. When the LG is used to facilitate qualitative data gathering, it further allows the researchers to unpack how the participants experienced and managed these changes. [4]

The lifegrid tool was developed to address research concerns related to participant recall and validity in retrospective medical studies (BELL, 2005). It has traditionally been used to collect quantitative data on the development of illnesses, pain and health behaviors (BERNEY & BLANE, 1997; PARRY, THOMSON & FOWKES, 1999; RICHARDSON et al., 2009). The core focus of the earlier studies (see BERNEY & BLANE, 1997; BLANE, 1996) was to use the LG to improve the accuracy of the recalled information (BELL, 2005). BERNEY and BLANE's (1997) study assessed the accuracy of older participants' recall of events that stretched over 50 years prior to the interview. The events they

focused on were "external" events like wars and strikes, "family" events such as births and marriages, residential events and occupational events (ibid.). When compared to the historical records of the participants, the findings indicated that residential and occupational information, like fathers' occupation or residential address, was recalled with more accuracy than detailed information on childhood illnesses and dietary requirements (ibid.). [5]

Recent studies suggest that the potential of the LG extends beyond collecting quantitative data and improving recall accuracy. Research by BELL (2005), HARRISON, VEECK and GENTRY (2011), NOVOGRADEC (2009) and WILSON et al. (2007) show the usefulness of the LG to facilitate participant engagement in qualitative interviews. BELL (2005, p.53) however warns that while the LG may improve the quality of the data collected, it could also restrict "the extent to which interviewees feel able to discuss events not covered by the life-grid." In our study, the LG was therefore used to compliment the semi-structured individual interviews conducted with the participants and support them to talk about their experiences. [6]

3. Methodology

3.1 Summary of formative work

The LG approach was piloted on one mother and her adolescent son who had been admitted to a substance abuse treatment center for cannabis abuse (n=2). The aim of the pilot was to determine how, and in what time sequence, we needed to conduct the LG interview with the study participants. Additionally, we were interested in identifying some of the initial significant life event categories that we could include on the LG table for the overall study. Once identified, these categories were included on the LG table as examples of significant events and additional category options were provided should the participants identify other significant events. [7]

Both the mother and the adolescent were interviewed at their home on three occasions over a period of one month. The first interview was structured to build rapport between the researcher and the participant and included questions about the participant's family, school or work background, social relationships and relationship with each other (parent-child relationship). Given that we wanted to use the LG during the second interview, we also included questions that focused on when certain experiences occurred and when relationships changed. For example we asked the mother: "When do you think your son started using drugs?" and "When did you start noticing a change in your relationship with your son?" [8]

3.1.1 Pilot interview with mother participant: Outcomes

Following the first interview with the mother, the interviewer (first author) partially filled in the LG with some of the information that was gathered during the first interview. The partially completed LG was then co-completed during the second interview. In this case, the mother indicated that she would like the interviewer to continue filling in the grid on her behalf as she did not want to do the actual writing but was comfortable to do the activity. [9]

The second interview with the mother commenced with a recap of the LG. This helped ensure that the mother was primed to discuss her experiences in greater depth using the partially completed LG as a guide. The LG approach proved to be useful during this interview both as a means to document information chronologically, and facilitating the recall of events and experiences. It is our experience that the LG was well received, appeared to be easily understood by the mother, and allowed us to ask sensitive questions (described in the findings). [10]

3.1.2 Pilot interview with adolescent participant: Outcomes

The pilot continued with the adolescent participant. Given the favorable outcomes of the interviews with the mother, we decided to incorporate the LG during the first interview with the adolescent to determine how he will respond to a blank LG. The same processes were followed as with the mother: the LG was introduced and explained to the adolescent and was then co-completed. This approach was found to be acceptable because, as in the case of his mother, the LG appeared to have been understood and easy to co-complete. Practically, using the LG in this way also allowed the interviewer to check and therefore capture the information more accurately without having to correct it in a next interview. The findings section of this article will provide a more detailed account of the usefulness of the LG in facilitating participant recall, discussing sensitive topics, and cross checking and validating participant information. [11]

3.2 Study participants

Given the various challenges associated with the accuracy of participant recall in retrospective studies, researchers have since argued that the inclusion of collateral informants are useful for increasing confidence (some would say reliability) in subject self-report (AMODEO & GRIFFIN, 2009). We therefore interviewed five parent-adolescent pairs, each consisting of one mother and her adolescent who had been admitted to a substance abuse treatment center. Discussions centered on issues pertaining to the development of the adolescent substance abuse, experiences of parenting an adolescent substance abuser and being an adolescent substance abuser (respectively) and the strategies parents employed to cope with the adolescent's substance abuse. We were interested in the participants' current experiences and feelings associated with the adolescent's substance abuse, as well as their recollections of the past and how this might have contributed to the way they currently feel. [12]

Each participant was interviewed once using the LG method and the information gathered during the LG interview was discussed in greater detail. Where needed, each participant's LG was used to facilitate these additional discussions. Scheduling of the interviews was also dependent on the availability of the participants. The mothers and adolescents were interviewed separately and confidentiality was strictly adhered to. This meant that none of the information discussed with the mother was shared with the child and vice versa. Separate interview schedules were developed for the mothers and adolescents, although questions pertaining to the development of the adolescent's substance abuse, parent-adolescent relationships, and parental coping strategies for the adolescent's substance abuse formed part of both the interview schedules. This data formed the basis of interviews on the second occasion using the LG. [13]

3.3 Study processes

Following BELL (2005) and WILSON et al.'s (2007) examples, an A3 landscape sheet of paper to map the interview with the mothers and their adolescents children was used. The adolescents' LG comprised eleven columns by roughly 30 rows, depending on the age of the participant. The mothers' LG was eleven columns by about 50 rows. Extra rows were provided in order to have enough space should there be more than one significant event per year to document. In using the LG we were interested in when significant events occurred and how the participants experienced these significant events. We considered events significant when they provided us with information on the development of the child's substance abuse, the effects of the child's substance abuse on his/her well-being, and the effects of the child's substance abuse on the mother and the family as a whole. For example, one of the questions we asked the mothers was: "when did you first become aware of your child's substance abuse?" with follow up questions such as "tell me about how you felt when your child told you that he was using drugs?," "when did you start feeling this way," and "how did you deal with it (a particular challenge)? [14]

The participants generally requested that the interviewer complete the LG. Although this was not planned, it ensured that "completing the grid did not interrupt the flow of the interview" (BELL, 2005, p.56). Participants were then able to engage with the questions and provide responses without being concerned about issues such as spelling and whether they are doing it right. [15]

Given that a blank lifegrid could prove to be daunting to participants with complex narratives (WILSON et al., 2007), we decided to introduce the participants to the LG in the first interview indicating that we would return to it during the course of our meetings. The interviewer explained that the LG will be used during the interview to document particular issues as they emerge. It was also made clear that there is no right or wrong answers and that the information that will be written is fully dependent on what will be discussed during the interview. Lastly, it was made clear to participants that their respective LGs will not be shown to one another as to ensure that confidentiality is respected. [16]

4. Findings

Drawing on extracts from our interviews, this section will discuss our findings on the usefulness of the LG in relation to the following themes: Building rapport, Enhancing depth and range of recall and Cross-referencing and comparing of events. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn followed by a discussion on some of the challenges that we encountered and how we resolved these. [17]

In this article, our interpretations of the themes are illustrated using extracts. In these quotations, square brackets contain material provided by us for clarification. Ellipsis points "(...)" indicate that the participants' thoughts have trailed off and uppercase letters are used to illustrate emphasis. A pause is illustrated by "(.)" and interruptions are indicated by "=." [18]

4.1 Building rapport

We found the LG useful to establish interviewer-participant rapport and "breaking the ice" (WILSON et al., 2007, p.140; see also HARRISON et al., 2011, and PARRY et al., 1999). Following general introductory questions such as "tell me about yourself," the interviewer used probing questions focusing on where and when the participants were born, where they are currently residing, residential movements, academic performance (for adolescents) and occupation (for adults). The interviewer wrote this information onto the LG and the participant checked to see if it was documented accurately. In line with findings presented by HARRISON et al. (2011, p.221) the co-completion of the LG facilitated the interviewer-participant relationship as it could be perceived as "a team working together to complete a common task, much like two strangers collaborating to complete a jigsaw puzzle." WILSON et al. (2007) add that the practical completion of the LG averts the need for continuous eye contact which can further put participants at ease, especially when sensitive issues are discussed (also see HARRISON et al., 2011). Additionally, SHERIDAN, CHAMBERLAIN and DUPUIS (2011) indicates that in using graphic elicitation methods like the LG, the interviewer and participant reciprocally engage in the research which could encourage the participant to become aware of his/her own agency (see also KESBY, 2000). [19]

4.2 Enhancing depth and range of recall

The LG proved an effective approach in encouraging participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences. While the LG was initially completed in a chronological fashion using the biographical information, it was flexible enough to allow participants to move between significant events when discussing their experiences.

> "Researcher: Is that when you went to formal school like big school? Cause that's when you went to grade
>
> Interviewee: grade 1.
>
> Researcher: Uhm, did anything big happen for you during that time? Did anything happen at home, with your family?
>
> Interviewee: [silence] no. I am confused now. I forget in here that my granny died!
>
> Researcher: Oh the year your granny died?
>
> Interviewee: Yes
>
> Researcher: So your granny died somewhere?
>
> Interviewee: Yeah
>
> Researcher: How old do you think you were?
>
> Interviewee: Eight or nine that time" (Winston, 15 years, cannabis abuser). [20]

Similarly, Abigail, a 16 year old girl who had been referred to the treatment center for her harmful alcohol use, was able to control the discussion and talk about her experiences as she remembered them. In this way she was not restricted by a rigidly structured interview approach which may have prevented her from sharing her story as openly as she has. In telling the interviewer about her drinking patterns she is reminded of a particular event that she considers significant that had occurred in the previous year, but had forgotten to tell the interviewer about it.

> "Researcher: Okay I see, so then tell me about the next time you drank again.
>
> Interviewee: Yah, after exams, HEY! I forgot something, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Now we are going very back!
>
> Researcher: Oh Glory! Reverse. Let's go back. Are we going back to last year?
>
> Interviewee: Our last paper, me and my friends were at [a park]. So we buy [vodka], we buy a six-pack, a six-pack of [ciders]. Yah those are the 3 things we bought and we go chill at the park.
>
> Researcher: How many of you were there?
>
> Interviewee: Five.
>
> Researcher: You were five with a bottle of [Vodka], a six-pack of [ciders]
>
> Interviewee: No a six-pack of [a particular brand of ciders] and a six-pack of [another particular brand of ciders]. And we drink the six-packs first. Okay Jess, one of my friends, she didn't drink much. She only drank the six-pack she didn't drink the Vodka. So we decided okay lets drink the Vodka. Now we in [the park] the worst place to [be]! Anyway we didn't think of that at the time. So we drinking and uhm [Laughter]
>
> Researcher: Oh goodness, what did you do?
>
> Interviewee: No, I didn't do anything wrong, I just passed out and the police van came to fetch me and parents were called" (Abigail, 16 year old, alcohol abuser). [21]

This flexibility of the LG is apparent in the way that it allowed the conversation to go back and forth between dates and/or significant events. This was useful as associated events trigger memories that might not have been remembered. This

further allowed the interviewer and participant to document particular events and discuss them in detail later in the interview or in a follow-up interview. This is particularly important for sensitive research such as the current study as it allows the participants the space to pause or return to certain issues when they are ready to discuss those (WILSON et al., 2007). This was also a key finding in timeline research conducted by SHERIDAN et al. (2011) on fatness and weight loss. In this way, the LG also acts as a reminder to the interviewer about the significant issues s/he wishes to discuss in detail which "provides direction to the interview when needed (HARRISON et al., 2011, p.222). For example in the first extract below, Winston talks about the supportive and comforting relationship he felt he had with his cousin before his drug abuse. This conversation soon turned very emotional for him and the interviewer decided to change the focus of that discussion and asked him to comment on the support he received at the treatment center.

> "Researcher: So is that = what did you feel that time?
>
> Interviewee: I felt like I never wanted to talk about it. But you see me and my small cousin we use to talk about it.
>
> Researcher: =Yeah
>
> Interviewee: = we use to talk about our stories cause me and him we almost like the same you see [emotional]
>
> Researcher: I see, so how much younger is than you?
>
> Interviewee: He's in grade 9 now.
>
> Researcher: So you guys are, almost ... you close [in age]
>
> Interviewee: Yeah we close [crying]
>
> Researcher: So you had someone that you could speak to but it was a younger cousin?
>
> Interviewee: Yeah.
>
> Researcher: Is that why you actually enjoyed being at [treatment center] because you had that space to=
>
> Interviewee: =talk to someone yeah" (Winston, 15 years, cannabis abuser). [22]

Later in the conversation, the interviewer was able to ask Winston about his relationship with cousin again.

> "Interviewee: I never use to feel it [abusing cannabis] was wrong.
>
> Researcher: Never felt it was wrong while you were smoking?
>
> Interviewee: No
>
> Researcher: But you felt it was wrong when other people, when this boy was with you?
>
> Interviewee: Yeah, only when my cousin was with me.
>
> Researcher: So why is that? Why do you think you felt?

> Interviewee: No, because I felt, I know me and him were going through the same thing. Now I don't want him to be like me! So I was trying to show him that there= no I'm not in bad stuff and you mustn't do that there!
>
> Researcher: Yeah, so you feel that you wanted to be a role model for him?
>
> Interviewee: Yeah
>
> Researcher: [pause] so this seems to be like difficult for you again, to speak about, especially this particular topic.
>
> Interviewee: I don't know, because when I was drinking ... I never want to show him that I was still at it, I wanted to show him the good way, but I was still at it.
>
> Researcher: And then talking about it now, makes you feel ...
>
> Interviewee: Makes me feel bad" (Winston, 15 years, cannabis abuser). [23]

Furthermore, while some researchers might argue that the information collected in LG interviews can be elicited in conventional questioning, we found the LG useful in encouraging the participants to tell their stories in a less confronting and more innovative way (SHERIDAN et al., 2011; WILSON et al., 2007). WILSON et al. (2007) point out that conventional interviewing have the potential to be boring and repetitive. The LG, they argue, was useful in their work to discuss sensitive issues without confronting participants with a long list of personal questions (ibid.). SHERIDAN et al. (2011) further add that timeline interviews can represent an "aide-memoire, focusing attention beyond what is possible through talk alone, thus becoming not only a piece of data in its own right but a vehicle through which further data were produced" (p.554). In this regard, it is our experience that the LG itself represented the lives of the participants during the interviews in such a way that it became the object of discussion rather than the parents' experiences. This physical focus on the LG might have encouraged the participants to tell their stories more openly as they are perhaps indirectly reflecting on their lives, emotions and experiences through the LG. [24]

4.3 Cross-referencing and comparing events

The LG is usually completed by one participant at a time (see for example BERNEY & BLANE, 2003; HARRISON et al., 2011; NOVOGRADEC, 2009; RICHARDSON et al., 2009; WILSON et al., 2007), although studies have used the LG with couples who completed it together (BELL, 2005). We used the LG with adolescent-parent pairs in which the adolescents and parents completed separate LGs. This allowed us to compare the adolescent and parent's accounts of similar events. In instances where the adolescent or the mother neglect to discuss a significant event (like parents' divorce, death, admission to substance abuse treatment centers, etc.) the interviewer was able to pick this up and discuss it with the other. This was at times a challenging activity as it required the interviewer to probe for significant events that were not mentioned without making the participant aware that she received this information from either the mother or child (bridging confidentiality). The extract below highlights the complexity, and usefulness, of cross-referencing in our study. Jacky, who is the mother of Winston, told the interviewer on a previous occasion that during his drug abuse

Winston had left home for a while to stay with his brother. For us this was significant as his brother was a cocaine user at that time and we were interested in whether living with his brother encouraged his drug use.

> "Researcher: Okay. And you were still with your mommy during that year you never moved anywhere, or visit anybody?
>
> Interviewee: No.
>
> Researcher: Going to visit to?
>
> Interviewee: I don't, only use to go visit my family there, the ones the ones that are in [place], yeah only them
>
> Researcher: And how [were] things with your brother during this time
>
> Interviewee: My brother, he never use to stay here
>
> Researcher: Here, but did you see him at all?
>
> Interviewee: Yeah, he used to come see us.
>
> Researcher: Yeah, and did go visit him at all?
>
> Interviewee: Yeah I use to go visit him cause I use to see his son, cause his son always, his son just use to like me ...
>
> Researcher: Yeah
>
> Interviewee: Yeah use to visit his son.
>
> Researcher: That so cute ...
>
> Interviewee: Then I use to visit his son.
>
> Researcher: Big uncle ... so but you never, you just went visit him but you never use to stay there or anything
>
> Interviewee: I use to stay there but I use to come back home yeah.
>
> Researcher: You came back home. So how long did you used to stay there?
>
> Interviewee: It's about 3 months" (Winston, 15 years, cannabis abuser). [25]

In a similar instance, Margaret, the mother of Abigail, indicated that she only became aware that Abigail had used alcohol hazardously once she was caught drinking at school and consequently referred to the treatment center. However, Abigail's narrative reads differently and indicates that her mother had been aware of her prior drinking habits. She explained that after she had gone drinking with her friends in the park, she consumed so much alcohol that she "was knocked out. I don't know what happened! The police came [and] parents were called."

> "Researcher: So they call the parents to come get the children, so your mother comes in and what does she do?
>
> Interviewee: My mother was in the car and my guardian that comes to stay here kicked and slapped me to wake me up, but I wouldn't wake up.
>
> Researcher: You wouldn't wake up?
>
> Interviewee: No, and they got me into the car. They got me home, I had a bath, and I woke up the following morning, not feeling so good.
>
> Researcher: And what happened with you and your mom?

> Interviewee: She was quite angry with me. Very, very angry with me. That's when she realized that I=
>
> Researcher: You drink?
>
> Interviewee: I drink, but then she thought I stopped, not knowing that I didn't actually. And yes she was angry with me for a few days but then after me apologizing and saying 'I'm sorry I didn't mean to disappoint you' she forgave me.
>
> Researcher: Yes, but were you sorry?
>
> Interviewee: Yes I was sorry. That was an embarrassment" (Abigail, 16 year old, alcohol abuser). [26]

One possible reason why Abigail's mother did not tell the interviewer about this occasion was that she, like Abigail, might have been too embarrassed by Abigail's behavior. What this finding highlights is the significance of cross-referencing and the usefulness of the LG interview in facilitating this process. In the same way the LG allowed us to identify the silences in the participant pairs' accounts; i.e. what the mothers identify as significant compared to what the child does not (and vice versa). Moreover, the LG allowed for a visual cross-referencing of life events where the interviewer was able to probe for the participant's perception of the interrelatedness of certain life events (HARRISON et al., 2011).

> "Researcher: Okay.
>
> Interviewee: I was living at my mother's home.
>
> Researcher: Oh I see. Were your mother and father still together?
>
> Interviewee: Yeah
>
> Researcher: But he [father] was at the farm and you were this side?
>
> Interviewee: Yes and then when they get married that time I was starting to use drug
>
> Researcher: I see ... Oh I see when they got married?
>
> Interviewee: Yes.
>
> Researcher: Do you think that there's, is there ... okay ... so why-why is, why during that time when they got married that you started using drugs?
>
> Interviewee: Hmm (.) mam I didn't start= it didn't really start when they married. I started when they ... after [they got] married.
>
> Researcher: After marriage?
>
> Interviewee: Yeah.
>
> Researcher: Okay. And did it have anything to do with the fact that they got married?
>
> Interviewee: Uhm, no mam.
>
> Researcher: No ... not for you?
>
> Interviewee: No" (Ben, 15 years, whoonga[1] user). [27]

1 Woonga is a highly addictive powder that is mixed with cannabis and smoked. It is consists of low grade heroine and other hazardous additives like rat poison (http://www.kznhealth.gov.za/mental/Whoonga.pdf [Accessed: August 29, 2015]).

This reflection offered us further insights that extend beyond simply reviewing the time-related associations between the life-events, which could be misinterpreted. For example, should this cross-referencing not have taken place, the researchers could have assumed an association between Ben's drug use and his parents' marriage. [28]

5. Practical Challenges and Possible Solutions

We found the LG to be a flexible research tool that is useful in enhancing our understanding of participant's experiences by facilitating discussion, building rapport and allowing cross-referencing of life events and comparisons between participants' accounts. However the LG approach is not without limitations. One limitation of retrospective research in general is related to the accuracy and reliability of the information provided by the participants. HARRISON et al. (2011) propose that "we have no way of evaluating to what extent the memories approximated a true rendering of the experiences of these participants" (p.223). RICHARDSON et al. (2009) have also commented on this debate between realism and constructionism and has argued for a middle-ground or pragmatic perspective. RICHARDSON et al. (ibid.) suggest that recall and reconstruction are interrelated concepts and that in qualitative research, the accuracy of the recalled information is less important than meaning and experience. In our study we were not only interested in when life events occurred, but also the subjective experiences and meanings of these life events, and how these events influenced and changed the lives of the participants. Given our focus on experiences (and with concerns pertaining to recall in the back of our minds) we decided to interview the mothers and adolescents while the adolescent was completing his/her treatment at the rehabilitation centers. It is our experience that this facilitated recall as the participants were reflecting on current and fairly recent experiences. [29]

Furthermore researching sensitive issues, like those discussed in our study, is a challenging task which required us to identify methodologies that are appropriately sensitive while at the same time facilitative. Using the literature as our guide (see for example BUTLER & BAULD, 2005; USHER et al., 2007), we understood that talking about the adolescent's substance abuse would be a difficult task for both the mothers and the adolescents (especially to a "stranger"). In this regard, we were cognizant of the possibility of selective recall where participants are unable (or perhaps unwilling) to recall certain events, or show selective recall bias in favor of what is "easier" to discuss. Studies show that individuals have the tendency to forget information that they perceive self-threatening (for full discussions on these issues, please refer to GREEN, SEDIKIDES & GREGG, 2007; SAUNDERS, 2012). We therefore recognized that participant recall, which was essential to obtain data that is information rich in our study, was intrinsically dependent on our participants' abilities and willingness to tell their stories. As put forth by BROWN and REAVY (2014) recall operates as a shared activity and in our study the LG acted as a quasi-neutral stimulus to the participants memories that accommodated the complexities of recall and

facilitated discussions in a non-threatening and sensitive way and extended the study beyond the traditional 1:1 interview. [30]

Some of the practical challenges (and solutions) we encountered with the LG are also important to note here. Initially, the interviewer used a semi-structured interview guide that posed questions chronologically which, as discussed earlier, did not appropriately lend itself to the conversational and the non-linear way in which the participants recalled their experiences. It is our experience that a formative phase helps allay anxieties about the tool, but also serves to prime the participant in identifying key questions and life events categories, such as relationships, school, work etc. that will be discussed in the LG interview. It might also be useful to identify possible life-events from the literature and incorporate these in the LG interview. In some instances the participants thought that the LG was a way for the interviewer to document aspects of the participants' lives rather than an activity to be co-completed by the participants and the interviewer. Once this was brought to the attention of the interviewer, she was able to explain in as much detail as needed that the LG is way to facilitate discussions. It is therefore useful for researchers to introduce the LG in such a way that the participants are not distracted by the notion of providing the "right answer" but are comfortable to discuss their experiences. [31]

When using the LG with participant pairs (collateral informants) it is important for researchers to be careful not to "take sides" when cross-referencing and comparing events. In our study we respected that the participants' accounts reflected their subjective experiences and perspectives. We certainly recognized the significance of the participants' silences and selective recall as it tells us something about the significance of particular experiences. In cross-referencing or comparing events between the participant pairs we were less interested in whose accounts were "right" or "wrong." Rather we found the LG useful in that it allowed us to use relevant information obtained from one participant (f.e., the adolescent) to probe for more detail from the other participant (f.e., the parent). This afforded us an opportunity to gain a more informed understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. [32]

A further challenge relates to simultaneously conducting and analyzing the LG interviews. Given the fluidity of the participants' conversations, it is important for the interviewer to continually verbally note the dates (in days, months or years) that they are referring to when discussing the life events during the interview. In our study for example, the interviewer sometimes neglected to record time and date sequences which may conflate events in the coding of the transcripts. This is especially imperative for researchers who are interested in tracking changes in life-events and experiences. [33]

6. Conclusion

This article describes the utility of the LG in qualitative inquiries. We found the LG approach useful in helping explore the breadth and depth of events as we were not only interested in when significant events occurred but also the participants' experiences of, and changes in, these selected areas of their lives. While the LG worked well in our study, it is advisable that researchers conduct a formative phase to establish key questions and life event categories so as to ensure that their research questions are appropriately addressed. The LG as a tool and approach will be particularly valuable to qualitative researchers who are interested in retrospectively exploring sensitive emotional events in the development of adolescent risk behaviors. [34]

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