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Confidence and the effectiveness of creative methods in qualitative interviews with adults

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# Abstract

This paper examines two contrasting creative methods; a drawing task and a Lego building task used in a study exploring the gap between policy and practice in widening participation to higher education across two different types of university in England. These creative methods were used within sixteen semi-structured interviews in seven universities to attempt to explore deeper understandings of everyday policy and what they mean in practice and to make comparisons across types of institutions. This paper examines the role that creative confidence played in the effectiveness of both methods through exploring the successes and failures of each arguing that understanding these barriers can improve the successful use of these methods, especially with adults. When these barriers are overcome, the paper also demonstrates how creative methods encouraged more reflective discussion of everyday issues, increased levels of rapport, and shared engagement in the interview process.

Keywords: drawing; creative methods; Lego; interviews; visual methods

# Introduction

Certain areas of practice in higher education such as widening participation are governed by national and local policies. These policies direct what institutions do for under-represented groups in terms of pre-entry outreach work, the support offered within the institutions during study, support into further study and employment, and targeted financial support offered. As in the case of education policy more broadly, these policies are often written by individuals disconnected from frontline practice and can be subject to varied interpretation and implementation (Forrester and Garratt, 2016). This can lead to variation in how policy is enacted in different institutions and therefore being able to research across difference is important in order to understand how gaps between policy and practice develop. Previous research examining widening participation policy has primarily focused on the individuals who develop policy as opposed to the practitioners that enact it (e.g. Graham, 2011; Harrison, Waller, & Last, 2015) . However, studies of policy enactment in compulsory schooling have have highlighted recurrent issues of discord between policies and practices (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2007, p. 590) identified there is often a gap between ‘words and deeds’ in relation to university diversity policies and practices. Creative methods offer a potential way to explore these issues as there is the potential to make the familiar strange (Mannay, 2010) and to elicit deeper thought on the topics being discussed (Kara, 2015). This offers the potential for deeper insights than questioning alone which may simply regurgitate institutional policy positions. Creative methods have often been favoured by those working with children and young people, especially those which adopt drawing as their focus (Robinson and Gillies, 2012). Whilst drawing methods are less common with adults (Kara, 2015), the use of creative methods more generally with adults is increasingly common (e.g. Bagnoli, 2009; Brown, 2019; Kearney and Hyle, 2004; Mannay, 2010; Schubring, Mayer, & Thiel, 2019).

When considering creativity more holistically, Kelley and Kelley (2012) introduced the concept of creative confidence and highlighted four key barriers to creativity in adults: fear of the unknown, fear of judgement, fear of the first step and fear of losing control. Through a discussion of the challenges and opportunities that two contrasting creative methods presented, this paper examines the impact of those barriers and I argue that the creative confidence of adults played a role in the successful use of creative methods in this study. Through examining these potential barriers this paper seeks to help researchers maximise the effectiveness of creative methods, especially those that such as drawing which require higher levels of confidence and are less commonly with adult participants.

# Background to the study

Whilst this paper focuses on methods and methodological issues, setting a context for the study is important to underpin why creative methods were employed. As a condition of charging tuition fees in excess of the basic amount (£6000 in 2016-17), universities in England were required to submit plans and conduct work to provide support for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds prior to entry (OFFA, 2015). The wider study sought to explore the similarities and differences between how traditional selective universities approached this work compared to newer less selective universities approached this work and how policy compared to the experiences of the practitioners (Rainford, 2019). Phase one of the study examined institutions’ access agreements (policy documents setting out plans for work done to widen access to and success within higher education) using a critical discourse analysis. The analysis highlighted two key themes worth exploring further: who the targets of work to widen participation were and the ubiquity of the use of the term ‘raising aspirations’ to describe a diverse range of practices. This was followed by phase two in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen practitioners employed to deliver pre-entry widening participation work in seven universities in England to further explore differences between policy and practice. Each interview lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and was structured around questions relating to: life history, career and their job role. Additionally, within each interview, two creative tasks were used to explore the themes of targeting and aspiration and it is on these that the rest of the paper focuses.

# Why Creative methods?

Creative methods can take varied forms as exemplified throughout this special issue and highlighted in the editorial. Creative Methods can encompass a wide range of often visual or arts based methods (Mannay, 2016), for example drawing (Literat, 2013), photography (Vigurs and Kara, 2017), and the use of found objects (Brown, 2019) amongst many others. Despite often being synonymous with arts based methods, the term ‘creative’ has been problematised by Kara (2015) who highlighted that there is also scope for the use of creativity within traditional research methods such as oral interviews and focus groups. However the need for creative methods in this study was to stimulate discussion of everyday practice that allowed for participant reflection and deeper consideration than a question-answer format. This was important as in conducting the discourse analysis of the access agreements, it was evident that certain policy terms had become ubiquitous yet were interpretated in varying ways in different institutions.

One such term was ‘raising aspirations’. The need for intervention to improve the aspirations of disadvantaged groups is premised on the idea that groups under-represented in higher education lack aspiration and this is why they are less likely to progress to higher education. This is also underpinned by the idea that career aspirations and aspirations for higher education are synonymous (Rainford, 2019). Despite extensive research debunking the idea of a poverty of aspiration (i.e. Allen and Hollingworth, 2013; Archer, DeWitt, & Wong, 2014; Baker, 2016), all ten institutions’ agreements mentioned work to ‘raise aspirations’. However, this work was often heterogenous in its nature and not necessarily underpinned by a poverty of aspiration agenda. Phase one analysis also highlighted that ’raising aspirations’ was often used uncritically. As such it was important to understand if its use in policy differed from individual practitioners’ conceptualisations. In order to understand what it meant to these practitioners to ‘raise aspirations’, understanding how they personally viewed aspiration was important; did they mirror policy in feeling there was a hierarchy of jobs with professional occupations at the top and manual occupations at the bottom, or did they conceive of it in different ways.

Furthermore, the term ‘widening participation students’ was often used as a short hand for students with very different characteristics based on institutional framings of under-representation. Nationally, institutions are guided to target individuals from geographical areas of low higher education participation, low income backgrounds, and those with protected characteristics such as ethnicity and disability (OFFA, n.d.). Whilst the lists of target groups upon which different institutions said they would focus were in many cases almost carbon copies of the national guidance lists, the actual students different institutions worked with were often much more narrowly framed due their selection criteria for targeting interventions. Having worked in this field for several years, I was aware of how targeting is a balance of the desirable and the pragmatic. As Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 107) has previously asserted in relation to diversity practitioners, this is the:

 gap between words and deeds, between what the organisations say they will do, or what they are committed to doing, and what they are doing.

This study therefore attempted to delve beyond the rhetorical usage of language into the principles and realties of targeting that underpinned it. To simply ask a question about targeting would likely have resulted in a regurgitation of the institutional line and this, would tell us no more than policy analysis alone. Creative methods allowed for discussions and deconstruction of the underpinning assumptions framing the ‘typical’ students they worked with.

Creative methods can allow for co-construction and a playful approach to data collection which is why they are often used in research with children and young people (Literat, 2013). It is through the act of play that that different ways of thinking can be opened up (Gauntlett, 2007), reinforcing the idea that creative methods can help developing thinking about everyday concepts beyond recitation of standard discourses. Their use can be more, or less participatory but where the parameters of the task are set by the researcher, there are still unequal power relations related to what can be created (Mannay, 2016). Whilst creative methods can enhance reflexivity within interview situations (Bagnoli, 2009), their use can also create barriers due to participants lack of creative confidence (Kearney and Hyle, 2004). Creative methods can also be a way in which to explore common sense terms and allow for critique of the everyday through enabling discussions in a more engaged manner (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006). As Kara (2015) has argued, these methods offer a way of going beyond categorical or binary thinking and to explore issues in a more nuanced way. This resonates with the idea that producing a visual artefact circumvents more linear, organised thinking that speech encourages (Gauntlett, 2007). Given the embeddedness of some of these terms and their uncritical usage, this lack of critical thought has similarities to binary ways of thinking. Therefore, adopting creative methods offered a way to attempt to break through this rhetorical barrier. The primary focus from this study was still the oral narratives surrounding these issues, therefore the artefacts created were not intended to be the focus of the analysis; instead the activity was, as Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006, p. 82) propose a ‘starting point for developing thoughts about personal experience’.

# Selecting methods

Despite their being many possible creative methods to consider those considered were ones which could tap into often unspoken narratives, taking the focus away from direct questioning. These tended towards more visual methods as these offered potential for a shared focus allowing for abstract discussion surrounding key concepts. Gauntlett (2007) has argued that using creative methods creates time and space for participants to reflect on complex issues. In addition, I argue that a shared focus between researcher and participant whilst talking about abstract concepts, allows for a space to deconstruct common sense assumptions. Unlike a question-answer interactions, creative activity moves from a relationship where the researcher is trying to draw information from the participant to one in which the conversation becomes constructed in the interview setting in the same way that the artefacts are constructed. This causes participants to not only think about what their answer is, but why they have approached it in such a way.

Whilst photography is often used as a visual method (Harper, 2012), there are significant methodological issues surrounding who selects the photos. If participants were asked to provide these, there are ethical issues of consent and if the researcher provides them, how far these can be representative of the real experiences of practitioners could be questioned. Furthermore, widening participation is about working with people and there is the potential for vignette images to have likenesses to real people practitioners might have known. Collage (e.g. Mannay, 2010) and photo-elicitation methods (e.g. Vigurs and Kara, 2017) are well documented as being used in interviews, yet in using photorealistic representations of people there is a danger of participants focusing upon specific people they may have encountered in their responses as opposed to talking more generally about issues of demographics or careers as the interview demanded. The use of photography has been highlighted to allow for participants to give nuanced representations of the their own activities (Mannay, 2010). For example Lomax (2012) use of participant-led photography with children offered a valuable shared approach to knowledge production. However, in the case of widening participation, issues of consent relating to the young people these practitioners worked with prevented further consideration. Despite its constraints, photography as a method has useful qualities and allows for ‘bridging the worlds of the researcher and the subject’ (Harper, 2012, p. 138). This bringing together of worlds is not restricted to the use of photography. Therefore, the eventual methods adopted were also informed by this notion which frames the participant as the expert, by creating a need to explain the artefact to the researcher making the research encounter not about creating an artefact but generating a narrative surrounding the issues being researched.

Bridging and framing of participants as experts was therefore the central element that needed to be captured within the study’s methods through creating a shared focus on an artefact. To achieve this, drawing was a method which was felt to be suitable. Often used in research with children and young people (e.g. Literat, 2013), the use of drawing with adults in a research context is something that has had more limited coverage in the literature. More commonly, tasks requiring lower level of creative skill such as concept mapping (Prosser and Loxley, 2008) or emotion mapping (Gabb, 2010) have been used with adults due to less reliance on drawing ability.. Mannay (2016) highlighted the role artistic ability played in the participants engagement with drawing tasks within her research with mothers. A reason for this could be the level of creative confidence needed to enable participants to feel comfortable with drawing. As Kelley and Kelley (2012) assert, self-censoring and a fear of being judged are barriers to adult creativity. This fear of being judged seems to be the issue that is most common within previous studies that has limited participant engagement with creative methods (e.g. Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Kearney and Hyle, 2004). This is more than a simple skill-based judgement by participants, but is based on their fears that others will negatively judge their skill levels. If artistic ability is conceptualised as the barrier, then it is unlikely that those with lower skill levels will ever participate in drawing-based activities. If this is re-considered through a framing of creative confidence, by building participants confidence, these methods may become more accessible to participants, independent of their skill levels.

Developing the methods for this study strategies for limiting the impact of creative confidence in non-participation were considered. The approach taken was twofold. Firstly, adopting two different methods: one which required more creative confidence (a drawing task) and one which required less (a Lego construction task). Whilst various approaches were considered for the second task, Lego was adopted due to its familiarity to most participants and its abstraction from the level of reality photographs offer whilst still allowing different job roles to be clearly visualised. Secondly, scaffolding the drawing task to offer options for participants regardless of their perceived drawing ability allowing for participants to engage with the drawing task at a level appropriate for their confidence levels.

# Methods

Whilst both the typical student task and the ladder of aspiration tasks had creative elements, they required different levels of skill and thus demanded differing levels of confidence. The engagement with the tasks showed no clear patterns in engagement based on the type of institution where the interviews were conducted thus a post-interview survey was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the participants experience of the methods. The interview data was anonymised, and pseudonyms assigned to the participants and as such these are used throughout the paper. The follow up survey completed by seven of the sixteen participants was conducted anonymously using an online survey tool; as such responses from this are not attributed to any specific participant. Whilst in some cases participants did discuss their experiences of the methods with me following the interview, any face to face feedback may have been shaped by the Researcher-Participant dynamic which may have limited their critique of the experience, thus offering a route to provide this anonymously was important. However the survey did not foreground that being asked to engage with the tasks had negatively impacted their experiences, if anything they felt it enhanced their ability to reflect on the questions being asked in the way Gauntlett (2007) argued such methods have the potential to do.

## Typical Student Task

The first task used a drawing-based method. To understand how targeting was realised in different institutions, it was important to explore who these practitioners saw as a typical pre-entry widening participation was student in their setting. Drawing a ‘typical student’ is a task often delivered by practitioners with young people to break down stereotypes about studying at university and to help them consider university life holistically, including what students do for work and in their free time. There was therefore an anticipated familiarity with this task and it was anticipated that it would allow for a more three-dimensional understanding of the students they work. Whilst institutions use similar terms like low income in their policy documents, understanding the complexities underpinning how practitioners identify what a low-income student is was important. Mindful of the barriers creative confidence may create, the task was scaffolded using a template worksheet (fig.1). Similar scaffolded approaches have been deployed in other research (Wall, 2008) and it was anticipated scaffolding would encourage and support engagement at a level commensurate with the participant’s level of confidence and offering an outline of a person would allow those less confident with drawing to focus on the detail of their student. The sheet included a number of framing questions to explore the wider context of typical students lives to help inspire their drawings.

[Insert fig.1]

This visual task was supplemented by further questions to facilitate a more general discussion of targeting and how practitioners and the institution actually select students to participate in their outreach work. The timing of this task was also carefully considered. Whilst providing the worksheet in advance of the interview might have resulted in more detailed images and reduced the fear of the unknown and judgement whilst drawing this could also have led to self-censorship of what was said, or an overly deep focus on its content. By introducing it in the interview and giving the participant a few minutes to complete it, this was allowed for a more spontaneous response. On balance, the value provided by allowing for discussion during the process of creation and the more spontaneous nature of the response from completing the task within the interview was seen to outweigh the value of providing it before hand and the limitations this might place on what was portrayed. However, the overwhelming amount of information on the worksheet may have invoked the fear of the first step and thus encouraged focusing on the text-based questions over the drawing itself.

## Ladders of aspiration

In order to unpack the term ‘raising aspirations’, a task was designed in order to understand participants’ conceptualisations of aspiration. Institutions used ‘raising aspirations’ as an all-encompassing term for outreach work relating to information advice and guidance given in relation to careers, subject and institutional choice. When considering how to approach discussions of aspiration in the interview setting, the notion of social mobility as a ladder to be climbed that has been portrayed in policy and the media (Littler, 2018) seemed a useful starting point. The use of the ladder as a metaphor was not a tacit agreement with there being a hierarchical ranking of better and worse jobs. In fact, if anything the hope was participants would critique this approach through their engagement with the task. That being said, the premise of a need to ‘raise aspirations’ is based on some career aspirations being higher than others, assuming that groups under-represented in higher education have lower aspirations. Whilst this deficit model of aspiration has been extensively critiqued (i.e. Allen and Hollingworth, 2013; Archer, et al., 2014; Baker, 2016; Harrison and Waller, 2018), if this view did underpin practice, then the assumption was that practitioners would have been able to rank different jobs and careers in a hierarchical way. Through discussion of the rationale of their choices, this task was anticipated to offer insights into how participants conceptualised aspiration and success.

Each participant was provided with a Lego ladder and ten figures (fig.2) representing a range of different jobs. These were selected based on a number of factors including: the pre-requisite level of education, potential level of skill needed, competitiveness of entry to courses, resultant salary and occupational status (such as employed/self-employed).

[Insert figure 2]

These jobs were:

* Self-employed decorator
* Builder
* Computer games designer
* Artist
* Scientist
* Primary school teacher
* Investment banker
* Doctor
* Footballer
* Lawyer

It was also important to encapsulate a range of traditional and newer occupations to mirror the range of aspirations practitioners were likely to encounter in practice. To balance the range of roles that could be exemplified and the constraints of time within an interview context, ten jobs were represented in the model. Whilst the range of jobs was limited, exploring different roles which exemplified different types of work, salaries and values was anticipated to generate discussion surrounding what it meant for a job to be ‘good’ and what made aspirations more or less positive. Like the ‘typical student’ task, the focus was not on the visual artefact as an output to be analysed but the narrative about the artefact using it as a ‘starting point for developing thoughts about personal experience’ (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006, p. 82). The use of the ladder as a construct potentially could have limited participants to a binary or categorical thinking. Whilst I acknowledge that the power relations in an interview for some participants may have encouraged them to conform with the task, alternative approaches did emerge such as that adopted by Emily who placed all the figures on the top step to resist this categorical thinking. Furthermore, the narrative discussion surrounding their decisions allowed the participants to verbalise where their own thoughts were incompatible with the task presented to them or to highlight the nuanced thinking.

Whilst Lego has been used in more metaphorical way within training and development as in the Lego serious play model (McCusker, 2014; Peabody and Noyes, 2017), this study utilised Lego more representationally. However, the lack of real features is seen as a useful way of reducing biases through likenesses to real people. Nonetheless, Lego figures are gendered so conscious choices were made not to reproduce gender stereotypes. There are limitations of what pre-made Lego can permit researchers to achieve but the doctor and scientist were consciously coded as female through visual elements such as hair. Other roles were less explicitly coded for gender adopting short gender-neutral hair styles or role appropriate headwear. During the interviews, the gender of the figures was not mentioned by most participants. However, Andrea struggled with the non-stereotypical genders referring to the female doctor as ‘the nurse’ and also referring to the scientist as ‘he’ demonstrating how some gendered assumptions are deeply ingrained. The study used solely traditional yellow Lego figures as Lego states that their use of yellow is a ‘neutral skin colour’ (LEGO, 2018). In recent years, Lego created for Sports, TV and film franchises has introduced explicitly racialised skin colours and this has brought that assumption into question (Cook, 2017). As Johnson (2014) has argued, the introduction of skin tones has made visible the ‘normative whiteness’ (p.322) of the previously homogeneity of yellow minifigures. However, given that all non-franchised Lego is still produced in yellow, a pragmatic choice was made for this study to follow the Lego tradition.

# Challenges and Opportunities

The overall reaction to the use of creative methods in the study was positive, both as noted through the reactions to the tasks and post interview conversations. Despite the possibility of this being shaped by the unequal power-relations of the Researcher-Participant dynamic, the anonymised post interview survey reinforced the value participants placed on these for enabling them to reflect on the issues being researched. Within the survey, respondents were asked to rate their creativity on a scale of 1-10, to say if they enjoyed the task and to offer qualitative comments in relation to each task and the interview overall. Seven of the sixteen participants completed a survey, and all said the creative tasks made the interview more enjoyable. This enjoyment of the tasks was despite variable level of self-report on how creative they felt they were. Furthermore, their engagement with the two tasks and the reaction to them was variable. The typical student task resulted in meaningful discussions from all sixteen participants but not the engagement with drawing that was anticipated. This contrasted with an extremely positive reaction to the Lego tasks that created laughter and increased the rapport with the participants.

## Reluctance to draw

The typical student task was completed with most reluctance. Whilst out of the survey respondents, five out of the seven rated their creativity highly, not a single participant drew on their figure, all choosing to write on the sheet or to answer the framing questions verbally. There was therefore clearly a barrier to their engagement with the drawing as a form of creativity in the interview context. The reflection in one post interview survey that ‘It didn't occur to me to draw’ was interesting, and it is therefore worth reflecting on how the participants’ assumptions of what an interview should be drove their actions. A similar issue was highlighted by another participant who felt the drawing task was too time consuming. This relates to the notion of a fear of the unknown, highlighted by Kelley and Kelley (2012) as a barrier to creativity.

Whilst the fear of the first step was addressed in the planning of the activity through the creation of a scaffolded worksheet to help reassure and guide the participants, this instead seemed to create a way in which to avoid the creative aspect of the task. As Carol said when presented with the options: ‘I’ll probably just talk around it’. In the post interview survey, three of the seven respondents highlighted concerns about their drawing ability, suggesting fear of judgement might have been the reason behind why they chose not to draw. In attempting not to allow for choice, a wealth of different drawing materials were offered which may have been overwhelming. Hannah for example chose a biro over a range of drawing materials available to her. This focus on familiarity reinforces the idea that a fear of the unknown may have been an overwhelming determinant of the approach of some participants. This could also relate to the fear of taking the first step as the amount of choice may have been overwhelming. Furthermore, the textual elements on the sheet, seemed to make some participants approach it as a structured questionnaire. In hindsight, removing these from the sheet may have encouraged more drawing, but given the post interview feedback and the level of general discomfort with drawing, it could have created an uncomfortable interview setting and therefore restricted the quality of the rapport and data generated through discussion. Given the use of a second creative task, exploring the participants approaches to this offered insight into whether creative tasks in general or the specific requirements of the task were the barrier to engagement. In fact, the other task was consistently successful. However, rapport builds over the course of an interview therefore it may be that as the interviews progressed and rapport developed, that the participants fear of judgement and fear of the unknown decreased.

## Development of rapport

The ‘ladders of aspiration’ task evoked a much more positive reaction from the participants. In addition to positive ratings of enjoyment, the participants who completed the survey felt it ‘aided their reflection’, ‘offered a nice change from other interviews’ and ‘got them thinking’ aligning with the arguments for adopting creative methods put forward by Gauntlett (2007) One participant who I met a few weeks after the interview spoke of how she had done a similar exercise with her colleagues following the interview to explore their views, demonstrating a high level of engagement with the task. In the follow up survey, one participant felt the value in the task was that it ‘subverted the typical means of getting information in an interview’. This acknowledgement that they felt the use of creative methods offered them a different way to think about these issues was valuable as it suggests they enhanced the data generated over adopting a traditional semi-structured interview format. Yet for some participants, there were evident concerns of being judged and fears of completing a task which was not within their comfort zone. Whilst all sixteen participants engaged with the Lego, some were more enthusiastic than others. Beverley initially responded to the task with a nervous laugh and a categorical exclamation of ’Oh No!’. Drawing this back to the barriers to creativity highlighted by Kelley and Kelley (2012), this could be read as a fear of the unknown but also as a vocalisation of the judgement she felt she may be subjected to. In the field notes, I noted her lack of comfort in the task in comparison to the relative ease she spoke about some of these issues. Within the interview she exclaimed ‘gosh, I am really not good at this!’. Other participants were less worried about the judgement placed upon them. In these cases, the play element of the task also helped create shared experiences (Gauntlett, 2007) with laughter being common across several interviews. In contrast to Beverley’s concern,  Mel broke the ladder but laughed it off saying ‘you are never going to get anywhere on the aspiration ladder if you fall apart’. This shared experience involving laughter lightened the mood and resulted in more frank answers than anticipated. This is valuable when trying to get practitioners to offer honest answers to complex issues that are often entwined with moral positions or driven by institutional norms and values. One reason the use of Lego was so successful appeared to be that for many the interview process became fun and focused on construction akin to an activity of play. In contrast, for other participants such as Beverley, breaking the structure became a worry and thus possibly exemplifies one of the other barriers highlighted by Kelley and Kelley (2012), the fear of losing control.

## Making thinking visible

Where barriers to creativity had been overcome, the use of a physical task proved invaluable for the definitive nature of some decisions to be differentiated from the tentative nature of others.  As Gauntlett and Holzwarth (2006) have argued, encouraging participants to create within an interview often causes them to think about things in a different way and as other researchers have suggested to express things they might not normally do so with direct questioning (Guillemin and Drew, 2010). Capturing the reasoning behind answers to complex questions is important if research is to explore the space between institutional narratives and the decision making that underpins them. Peabody and Noyes (2017) contended that their use of Lego brought their participants to a higher level of self-disclosure. Whilst the Lego serious play model they used allowed more time for reflection and creativity, the feedback following the interviews in this study suggests that similar space for reflection was created. The task also allowed participants to reflect on their initial assumptions; in some cases, this involved working and reworking the model until they were happy. This space to think and reflect both allowed for the discussion of the issues and for a deeper understanding of how definitive their decision making was. Other things that became visible in the process were the ways in which some decisions were made rapidly and some required deeper contemplation, suggesting areas that needed to be explored in more detail during the follow up questions.

Additionally, the task foregrounded the contradictions between actions and beliefs. This came out in the explanations that participants offered for their choices. For example Carol, who created a hierarchy based on potential salary and career prestige stated:

I kind of just feel bad about what I’m saying I think because that’s not necessarily how I would talk about it with my children.

It was interesting how despite this comment, she had taken to the task without questioning it. In doing so, it allowed for contradictions between thoughts, actions and self-presentation to be demonstrated in ways that would be unlikely to come through within a traditional semi-structured interview. Similarly, another post interview respondent stated:

I don't really believe that professions can be ranked in this way and hoped not to come across as thinking this was the case. That being said it was an interesting reflective exercise, and I remember questioning why I had such clear ideas for where some professions should stand, while others were less clear.

Whilst this could be seen as evidence for the task constraining thinking, it is also evident that these constraints enabled reflection and resistance to discuss complexity, creating space for participants to reflect on their thoughts, something which the wider interview data showed these practitioners rarely had time and space for in their everyday practices.

## Limitations of representation

Whilst adopting Lego as a tool created less barriers to creativity, there are important methodological considerations over participant generated artefacts such as drawings. Pre-made Lego pieces limit what can be visualised. Issues of gender and ethnicity in the Lego task were considered in its development however, upon presenting an earlier iteration of this paper it was clear that following Lego’s premise that yellow was a ‘neutral skin colour’ (LEGO, 2018) sat uncomfortably with some delegates at the seminar and was challenged as ‘whitewashing’. This concern is valid and one suggestion from the delegates was that allowing participants to build their own characters with a selection of different skin colours and gendered hairstyles might have been a more participatory approach allowing for a wider range of intersectional identities. Whilst this would have extended the interviews beyond the time constraints available it would be an approach worth exploring further as it would have allowed exploration of the gendered and raced perceptions of different careers. Certainly, there is a balance to be created between what is desirable and possible, but in working with visual methods, these sorts of concerns are important to consider as they have the potential to impact upon the data that can be generated through the tasks.

# What this means for maximising the effectiveness of creative methods with adults

Within this study the benefits of employing creative methods outweighed the challenges, but there are a number of lessons that could be applied to future studies through examining the role of creative confidence and the four potential barriers Kelley and Kelley (2012) highlighted. The reluctance to draw, in contrast to the overall enthusiasm the Lego brought, suggests there is a balance to be found between enabling creativity at a level which is commensurate with a participant’s creative confidence. Where fear of judgement is an overwhelming concern, tasks that require higher levels of skill such as drawing may limit participants engagement. However, I argue that there is space for developing the use of drawing-based methods with adults. Whilst support is needed to address fears of the unknown, the approach taken in this study was overly structured and may have reinforced the reluctance to engage with drawing in an interview setting. Despite the scaffolded sheet removing some of this fear of the unknown, the fear of judgement in many cases still prevented engagement with the task. Reducing this through building rapport may be one way to achieve this, as may more explicit reassurances that the drawing is not expected to be perfect and making clear why the drawing is taking place may also reduce these fears. Similarly, removing the researcher from the gaze of the participant may reduce their concerns of being watched. There are some participants who may still feel the judgement of their drawing is an insurmountable barrier. Similar methods could be used to account for lower levels of creative confidence such as plasticine modelling as has been successfully used by Abrahams and Ingram (2013).

Timing may also be a consideration in the use of creative methods. Building rapport is an important part of effective interviewing, but it could be considered that when using creative methods, building up confidence in creative abilities over time may also be useful. This is likely to be more possible in longitudinal studies or ones involving more than one round of interviews. In this case, beginning with activities requiring low levels of creative confidence and working up to activities such as drawing may increase their successful use. Furthermore, addressing the fear of the unknown by clearly explaining to participants why the methods are being used may further increase their engagement with them. Given the central role of creative confidence, developing a sense of shared understanding with participants that the creative method is part of the process and not intended to be a judged outcome is important. Even with the ladders of aspiration task which required a relatively low level of skill, participants still highlighted their concerns about getting it wrong or breaking the model representative of both fears of judgement and losing control. For many adults who do not get a chance in their everyday lives to get involved with creative tasks, building this confidence to experiment and fail when using these methods is arguably as important as that of building rapport in traditional interviews.

Overcoming these barriers to creativity, whilst creating challenges, can yield significant benefits to researchers. The creative methods used in this study allowed a space for reflection for the participants that was both felt to be valuable for them and allowed for deeper discussions of complex issues than a traditional semi-structured interview, giving space to reconsider and reconstitute their thoughts. These practitioners are often so busy carrying out the multitude of roles they are required to undertake that they have very little time to stop and reflect which both tasks enabled them to do.

In focusing on the potential pitfalls of these methods that creative confidence and its barriers can invoke, it is worth revisiting the relative importance of the actual artefacts in the generation of data. Creative methods in studies relating to policy can allow, as demonstrated here, a discussion of issues that goes beyond a repetition of institutional narratives and thus it is the discussion surrounding the creation of the artefacts as opposed to the creative outputs themselves that is most valuable. This meant that the failure to draw typical students did not negatively impact the data produced, however an approach focused on analysing these outputs would have been precluded by the participants’ response to the task. Therefore, when designing studies, it is important to keep in mind the potential failures of method from the outset.

# Conclusions

This study demonstrated many benefits afforded by adopting creative methods, yet some of the barriers to creative confidence foregrounded by Kelley and Kelley (2012) clearly impacted on their relative success. All four fears had varying impacts and created barriers to participation. Despite taking measures to minimise these barriers, they impacted both methods to some extent. Whilst measures were taken to reduce the fear of the unknown by scaffolding the drawing task, this led to most participants writing, possibly to avoid judgement surrounding their drawing ability or due to being overwhelmed and fearing the first step. It should be considered whether it is the task that needs simplifying, or more time needs to be taken to reinforce the role of the methods and the low levels of significance placed on the quality of the creative outputs. In contrast, the Lego method whilst being more positively received still demonstrated that some participants had a fear of judgement and losing control. These fears where not addressed have the potential to impact upon the rapport with participants and therefore need addressing within both the design and in conducting the interviews.

Where the task requires a level of skill, the researcher needs to consider how to account for these fears. Whilst scaffolding tasks requiring more skill seems like a logical solution, this may not fully address these fears. Anticipating these and ensuring participants adequately understand the reasons these methods are being used may be a way to increase the creative confidence of participants. Even well-planned tasks may leave participants with unaddressed fears which will limit their ability to engage creatively so this process of reflecting on the barriers needs to be ongoing throughout the research process. Whilst many participants fears are often driven by concerns relating back to ability as manifest through a fear of judgement, thinking about this not in terms of artistic ability but creative confidence means that considering how to build this confidence enables researchers to think about how to deploy a wider range of creative tasks, irrespective of participants actual skill levels. Despite these challenges this study demonstrated that these methods afford the benefits outlined in methods texts such as disruption of linear thinking and creating spaces for reflection (Gauntlett, 2007; Kara, 2015; Mannay, 2016).

Returning to the wider literature and the lower levels of engagement with adults using drawing based methods, it can be seen how considering the barriers highlighted by Kelley and Kelley (2012) may be the key to better enabling their use with this demographic. The benefits afforded by creative method such as having the potential to build rapport, to offer time and space to reflect more deeply on issues and to enable thinking to be made visible proved invaluable in discussion of complex concepts in this study. Future study design that mitigates these barriers could enable greater use to be made of creative methods, especially those requiring greater skills that researchers may currently be less inclined to use.

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Figure 1. Typical Student worksheet.



Figure 2. Ladder of Aspiration.