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social research Update

Walking Interviews

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- **The use of the walking interview is increasing within social research and is been used to explore the connection between self and place**
- **The walking interview takes various formats, but all entail the researcher accompanying a participant (usually on foot) around a given location while interviewing them**
- **Advantages of the walking interview include helping to reduce the power imbalance and encouraging spontaneous conversation because talking becomes easier with walking**
- **Practical and ethical considerations must be anticipated and accommodated to ensure the interview is safe for both the participant and the researcher**

Walking interviews are emerging as a distinct qualitative research method within the mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006) and are increasingly being used to explore the link between self and place (Evans and Jones 2011). This *Update* outlines and focuses on four different formats of the walking interview, explaining how each format is used and what its purpose and focus is. It then examines the value of the walking interview as a data collection method for social researchers and outlines practical and ethical challenges when undertaking walking interviews.

What are walking interviews?

A walking interview is when the researcher walks alongside the participant during an interview in a given location. Various formats of the walking interview have been described (Anderson 2004; Carpiano 2009; Clark and Emmel 2010; Kusenbach 2003). Each has a slightly different focus, purpose and aim, but they all involve the researcher talking with a participant while accompanying them, usually on foot, around a specific location. The walking interview is recorded and transcribed later. Cameras can also be used during the walk to capture data to be explored in subsequent face to face interviews.

Walking interviews can be seen as being on a continuum from researcher driven, that is, the researcher decides on the location and the route to be taken, to the walking interview being participant

driven, that is, the participant selects the location and the route for the interview (Evans and Jones 2011).

The docent method was developed by Chang (2017) during her research into the connection between place and health. Each participant is regarded as an expert guide, a docent, who escorts the researcher to and around specific areas in their lives that are significant to them. In the docent method the participant is the educator while the researcher is regarded as a novice, follower and learner. This method has three stages. The researcher initially meets the participant in a warm up interview which focuses on route planning and rapport building. The second stage is the walking interview around the specific place where photos can be taken to record what is seen and discussed, and finally a wind-down interview occurs and the photos are used to provide prompts for discussion.

The go-along walking interview is a mixture of an interview and participant observation. It occurs when the researcher accompanies the participant on an outing that would have normally occurred even if the researcher were not present. It is important the researcher accompanies the participant in their natural environment, while completing their usual routines at the normal time and day (Kusenbach 2003). During the outing the researcher asks questions, listens, and observes the participant while they go about their usual routines. The interview occurs in a similar fashion to the traditional sit down interview. Open ended questions are used and the researcher is prepared with a range of questions they want answered, although ad hoc questions may also arise as the interview progresses (Carpiano 2009).

Carpiano (2009) used the go-along interview to explore health issues within the local environment. He found it to be useful for exploring the physical, mental and social dimensions of place over time for an individual. It provided insights into how an individual engages with their social and physical environment and how well they tolerate the demands of their usual activities.

In the participatory walking interview the route chosen by the participant to walk is not necessarily representative of a route the participant normally follows, nor does it represent the participants' usual routines or habits. The researcher accompanies the participant on a walk around a geographical location that the participant has selected which is related to the topic being investigated (Clark and Emmel 2010; Emmel and Clark 2009). The purpose of this format is to enable the researcher to access the participants' attitudes and knowledge about a specific geographical area (Evans and Jones 2011). It aims to provide insight into the sense of attachment a participant has with their neighbourhood.

Emmel and Clark (2009) developed a toolkit to enable researchers to use as guides when using the participatory walking interview which does not aim to provide prescriptive instructions but rather insights into what researchers should consider. What is key, is that participants make all the decisions, including the route to be followed, the length of time the walking interview will take and what they would like to show the researcher. The participant is in control of the interview; they are regarded as experts in their geographical area and act as tour guides.

The fourth walking interview format does not use the participant as a tour guide because the route and the geographical area that the walking interview occurs in is not important to the outcome. It is the process of walking and talking that is important.

Bimbling has been described as the practice of going for a walk with no clear aim other than to blow off steam (Anderson 2004). Bimbling, within walking interviews, has been used to explore topics such as activism when it is important to take participants away from a highly politicised environment (Anderson 2004; Hein et al. 2008). This talking while walking interview is conducted in a similar fashion to the previous formats, however, the route taken is not necessarily known to either the participant or the researcher. It is the act of walking that allows the participant to recollect experiences and to articulate them (Anderson 2004; Moles 2008). Concern is not with the geographical location where the walking interview is occurring (Jones et al. 2008), rather the walking allows conversation to occur about a specific topic and allows talking to flow naturally because the pressure of a face to face interview has been removed.

Advantages of the walking interview

Walking interviews provide the researcher with opportunities to observe the participant in interactions with others in their community (Carpiano 2009). Walking interviews also provide insights into the relationships with others or the sense of alienation or loneliness that the participant experiences; such insights are less obvious in sit down interviews (Butler and Derrett 2014). In my research I found talking becomes easier when walking. Unnatural pauses that occur in a sedentary face to face interview can be replaced with natural occurrences on the walking interview. For example, when crossing the road or walking up a hill it would be expected that conversation would cease until those activities are completed, which gives time for the participant to ponder what they want to say next.

When wanting to explore the participants' understanding of place

the walking interview provides the researcher with an opportunity to observe and not just hear an account (Jones et al. 2008). Walking alongside a participant is regarded as an inclusive process compared with the traditional sit down interview because it is viewed more as a partnership, thus reducing power imbalances. It allows participants to feel more comfortable with the research because it is being conducted in a geographical location that they are familiar with (Trell and Van Hoven 2010). Because this method of interviewing allows the interviewer and participant to walk side by side rather than being situated directly opposite each other, the walking interview has the potential to benefit participants who are regarded as vulnerable, have a suspicion of or anxiety about those in authority or have difficulty with spontaneous verbal communication.

Although walking interviews are increasingly being used when exploring the connections between place and a person, they offer benefits to other studies also. Potentially, studies exploring the needs of people in regards to town planning, the links between identity and community, transitions and the community, and how place influences people's roles could all benefit from the use of walking interviews. Previous studies which have used walking interviews include undergraduate students' lived experience of higher education (Holton and Riley 2014); how social connectivity is maintained (Hodgson 2012); and inequitable walking conditions for the older person (Grant et al. 2010). Talking while walking was also used for researching mobile artists' work (Heddon and Turner 2010).

Practical and Ethical Considerations

The practical organisation of the walking interview and the ethical considerations that researchers must be mindful of are intrinsically linked. A number of researchers (Butler and Derrett 2014; Carpiano 2009; Chang 2017; Clark and Emmel 2010; Jones et al. 2008; Moles 2008) have outlined the lessons they have learnt during the process of completing walking interviews. There are factors that are out of the control of the researcher but will significantly impact on the walking interview which require consideration. The weather is the most significant factor, driving rain, strong winds or icy conditions all have the potential to disrupt the walking interview. It is important for the researcher to make alternative plans, which may include changing the day or time of the interview, and if that is not practical, changing the mode of transport to using a car or a bus. Any alterations in the mode of transport will bring their own safety concerns. For example, as a sole researcher driving during heavy rain or icy conditions while trying to interview a participant raises safety concerns in itself. What is key, is that the researcher makes plans for these possible occurrences (Carpiano 2009).

The researcher will need to ensure they have assessed the physical capability of their participant for the walking interview and make any necessary adjustments. Walking in secluded areas, in or around people's homes, in or around bars or when the light is dim could be unsafe (Jones et al. 2008). Discussions on appropriate places and times to complete the walking interview needs to occur as early as possible.

How to record the walking interview is also a decision that the researcher needs to consider. From small hand held digital recorders with lapel microphones to large complex recorders, the researcher will need to determine which is best for their project. Whichever recording method is used it is likely that not all of the interview will be captured. Weather, traffic and other people talking can all impact on the recording quality so researchers need to be mindful they may not hear all of the interview (Emmel and Clark 2009). Small hand held digital recorders with a lapel microphone should be used when the researcher would like the walking interview to be inconspicuous, or the researcher would like the participant to wear the lapel microphone and operate the digital recorder, or if there is concern the recorder may get wet as the smaller recorder is simpler to protect. Larger recorders, which have features for removing background sound, should be used if the audio quality is an important factor for the researcher.

The structure of the interview can be similar to that of a sedentary interview. Structured or semi-structured formats can be used, but carrying documents or a pen and paper may not be appropriate, so the researcher will need to consider how they will ensure they remember to cover the questions they want to focus on.

Ethically, confidentially is to the forefront in walking interviews. Confidentiality cannot be assured if the walking interview is in a public place. Ensuring the participant knows they will be seen alongside the researcher is an important part of the informed consent process and should also be repeated prior to the walking interview commencing. It is also likely that members of the public may overhear the conversations occurring during the walking interview, so the participants need to be made mindful of this too. Discussions need to be held with the participant prior to the interview on what they would like to do if they bump into people they know (Emmel and Clark 2009). It is important this is planned before setting out so that confusion does not occur during the interview.

Conclusion

This *Update* has outlined the features of the walking interview,

focusing on four formats. The walking interview offers social researchers an opportunity to gain insights into their participants' connections to place and to their social environments within their neighbourhoods. Talking becomes easier when walking. The act of walking allows participants to recall memories and/or experiences they may not have in a sedentary face to face interview. The walking interview offers opportunities to vulnerable and marginalised populations to be included in research by reducing the power imbalance. The walking interview does have a number of practical and ethical considerations that must be addressed to ensure the safety of both the participant and the researcher, but these are manageable and can and should be addressed to ensure the voices of vulnerable and marginalised populations are included in the research. Literature on the use of walking interview and the mobility paradigm is growing and this *Update* provides a range of references to use as a starting point for researchers interested in incorporating walking interviews into their projects.

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