

Realities Toolkit #13

Using walking interviews

Andrew Clark, University of Salford

Nick Emmel, University of Leeds

August 2010

Introduction

There is a long history in ethnography of researchers 'walking alongside' participants in order to observe, experience, and make sense of everyday practices. More recently there has been an increasing interest in the use of 'walking and talking' methods across the social sciences. Here we discuss our experiences using walking interviews in outdoor urban environments, focusing on the practicalities of conducting these interviews and on ways of thinking about the data produced in the method. This toolkit draws on experiences from *Connected Lives*, a research project of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods: Real Life Methods node. *Connected Lives* was an investigation of networks, neighbourhoods, and communities, with a focus on what happens on, and passes along, these networks. It sought to understand how networks are built, maintained, and break down and explore the dynamic, processual, and contingent nature of relationships along a network¹.

Why did we conduct walking interviews?

Walking interviews are interviews conducted on the move. We developed the method in our research as a way of understanding senses of place and neighbourhood attachment, and the extent to which social networks are contextualised and reproduced spatially. The aims of the walking interview in the *Connected Lives* project were threefold:

- To understand how individuals conceptualise their neighbourhoods
- To understand how individuals think about and articulate their neighbourhoods as well as create them through socio-spatial practices
- To understand how individuals locate their social networks and express their sense of community in relation to (local) places.

There are several reasons why a walking interview might be chosen over a static, typically room-based, interview.

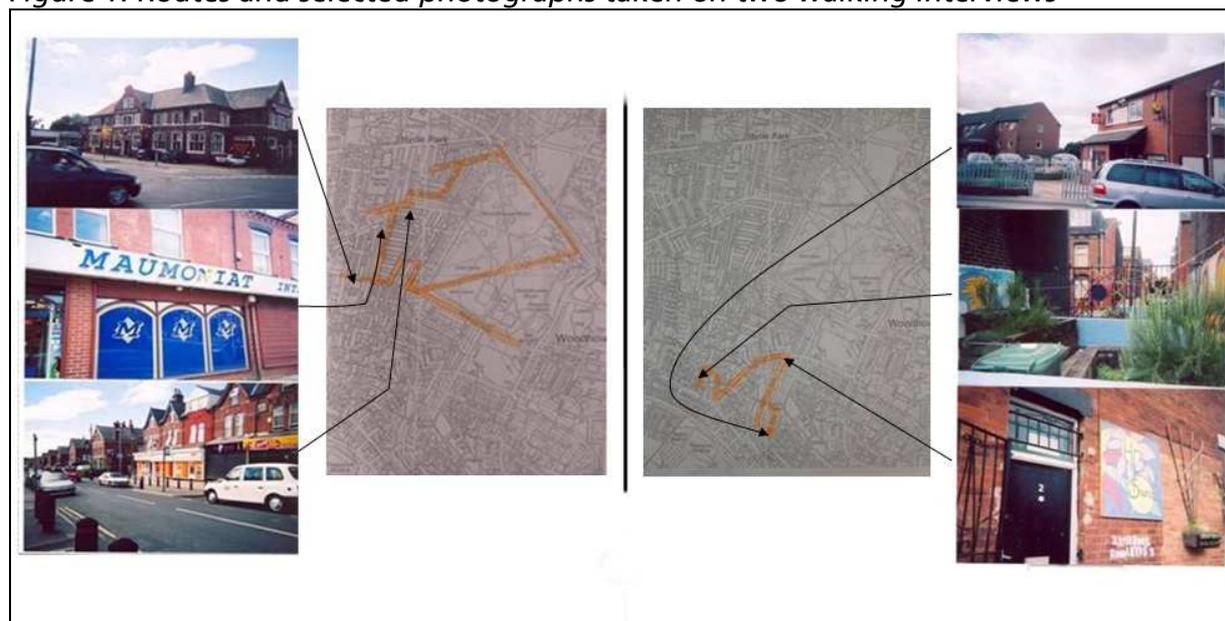
¹ See Emmel, N and Clark, A (2009): *The Methods Used in Connected Lives: Investigating networks, neighbourhoods and communities*. ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, NCRM Working Paper Series 06/09. Available from <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/800/>

- The method can afford participants a greater degree of control over the research process, deciding where to take the researcher for example.
- The participant gets to show rather than describe the environments that the researcher is interested in, or which make up the spaces that are significant to the participant.
- Placing events, stories and experiences in their spatial context can help participants to articulate their thoughts.
- The participant's narratives told in their lived environment can add detail to the researcher's understanding and insight.
- The environment and locations walked through can be used in an elicitation process to prompt more discussion or encourage further questioning that may not occur in room-based settings.
- The method can provide opportunities for the serendipitous and the unanticipated. Walking interviews can throw up issues of contradiction. For example, in one walking interview in the Connected Lives project we came across racist graffiti that prompted discussion about cohesion and tolerance that may not necessarily have been considered in a room-based interview.
- The method can be adapted to fit in with a participants' everyday life, while also revealing some of their everyday practices. For example, one participant in Connected Lives incorporated a trip to a local nursery to collect her children, and many included visits to friends. In this way the method provided opportunity to demonstrate the ways in which local spaces were implicated in real life networking practices.

Developing a walking interview method

We did not offer prescriptive instructions to participants about how the walking interviews should be completed, though we did provide some instructions and information beforehand. We found that the guidance we provided prior to the activity needed to be clear enough as to ensure appropriate data can be obtained, but also open enough to allow participants to present their neighbourhood(s) as they wanted it to be seen. We told participants we were interested in finding out about their neighbourhood, without imposing a definition of neighbourhood. Nor did we make any reference to specific geographical boundaries. Participants could take us to any places they thought appropriate, take as long as they wanted on the walk, and take whatever route they wished. We gave participants disposable cameras to take photographs and asked them to take photographs as they wished during the walk. In this way, the walking interviews produced a 'neighbourhood commentary' consisting of participant narratives of their lives in and beyond the neighbourhood, and answers to questions provoked by the narrative and the spaces and landmarks considered important by the participant. Our data comprised an audio recording of the walking interview and, sometimes, a photographic record produced by the participant.

Figure 1: Routes and selected photographs taken on two walking interviews



The interview

We discussed the walking interview in advance with participants, explaining the rationale and what was expected of them. This included an explanation of our research questions. Participants chose where the walk began and ended, and the routes we would follow. As we walked we talked about the places we were passing through and their relative significance to participants. The bullet-point list below is from our interview schedule. The capitalised comments in square brackets outline the rationale for each point.

[Introduction to research questions and walking interview method] The aim of this activity is to try to understand the neighbourhood(s) you associate with. It is up to you where we go. We would like you to walk us around your neighbourhood and tell us about the place. We can go where ever would like to show us, and take whatever route you think appropriate. However, we can only go on foot at this stage. I have brought a disposable camera. As we go around, you can take photographs if you like.

[suggested questions to prompt discussions] As we walk around, think about what these places mean to you: What memories do you have of different places? Where do you go? Where would you not go? Where might you meet people you know? Do you use any of the services in the area? Do any of your friends, acquaintances, or other contacts live or work in the area? What do you like and not like about the area? Where are your favourite places? Where are your least favourite places? Do you know people in this area? Are there people who you greet or acknowledge? [It is important to stress the embedded nature of this questioning in habitual spatial practices: for example, we even asked questions like, do you always walk on this side of the road?]

[consent and confidentiality] I want to just tell you a bit about what you might be required to do, and issues around confidentiality etc. This is quite important.

[obtain verbal informed consent].

[recording the interview] You can see that I have brought along a recorder. Do you have any objections to this activity being recorded?

[participant led exercise] We can do this walk in whatever way you think best; we are interested in how you think about your neighbourhood, as well as where we actually go. I can prompt you and offer advice, but I am keen that you use your own ideas... I will ask

you some questions about where we are going and about the sorts of people, landmarks and activities you mention. And I will seek clarification about how you feel connected to these spaces; why these are important to you.

[timing] The exercise is scheduled to last for 1 hour. Then, depending on circumstances, how you feel, whether you have to leave etc., we could continue with the exercise or we could postpone it for another convenient time, or we could finish. If it takes less than this time to complete, don't worry!

[support] Do you want to ask me any questions before we get started? – You can of course ask me questions as we go along.

At the end of the walking interview:

[gaining feedback on the method and return to consent and issue of confidentiality]

What did you think about the method? Is there anywhere we couldn't go to? Is there anything you had rather not shown or told me? Is there anything you would rather not have included in the recording?]

Equipment and recording

We recorded the interview using a digital recorder. A good quality small microphone (such as a lapel microphone) with wind guard is essential, but even with this equipment researchers should be prepared to accept that not all discussion will be recorded because of traffic noise, wind, the voices of passers-by and other sounds. We chose not to video record these interviews, even though they may provide a visual record of the route taken and make it clear where along a route the discussion takes place. A video camera may make a participant feel self-conscious or uncomfortable and decisions have to be made about who should do the filming (the researcher or the participant), what to focus in on etc. It is also important to recognise that a video camera will not necessarily be filming the same thing that is being talked about and if using a video recorder, a separate sound recorder may also be required to ensure adequate recording of dialogue. Instead we gave participants disposable cameras to take photographs as they wished.

At the end of each walking interview it is important that the researcher records the route taken, for example on a street map (see the example above), though more sophisticated technology such as a Global Positioning System (GPS) could be used to map routes and locations. When interviews are transcribed it is useful to provide as much detail as possible to the transcriber, including for example, the names of places, streets and institutions encountered or discussed during the walk. After transcription, we 're-wrote' the route of the interview onto the transcript, including providing annotations about features in the environment being discussed, the approximate location of the route, and the point at which photographs are taken during the interview. It is important not to underestimate the time taken or the potential difficulties of re-inserting this information.

Lessons learnt

- **Putting participants in control:** Driving the development and implementation the walking interview method was our desire to offer participants more control of the data collection process. We approached participants as 'local experts', free to choose what aspects of their neighbourhood (and their lives within it) they reveal to us. However, not all participants embraced this expert-identity. By encouraging participants to walk us around their neighbourhood, some suggested that we were assuming that they would have something worth saying, and that they

thought there was something worth showing to us. Others suggested that they would feel self-conscious showing a researcher around the area. Of course, not all methods are appropriate for all participants, and the walking interview method is no different in this respect.

- **Variations on the walk:** Participants in Connected Lives were free to take us where they wished. On many occasions participants had arranged to conduct the walk with other people which meant the interviews became group walks. These inevitably produced different kinds of interactions in the data to the walks with lone participants, but the group dynamics, and decisions about where to go and different meaning and practices associated with the places we passed through added to the richness of the data. For others, walking around the neighbourhood was not something they customarily did because they drove or cycled. Here, a walk would be a somewhat meaningless activity. For these participants, we conducted the walking interviews by car. While this meant we covered greater geographical distances, it also provided insight into the ways in which these participants experienced their neighbourhood.
- **Length of time and distance:** Since each walk was tailored to each participant they were all unique. The shortest walk lasted around 40 minutes and the longest a little over 5 ½ hours. We found that 1 ½ hours is the longest most participants were able to complete the task in comfort and while maintaining interest. However, we noted in our analysis that there was no relationship between the length of a walk and the richness of insight into spatial practices.
- **Ethical issues:** The walking interviews raised some important ethical issues. First, it was not possible to maintain the confidentiality of the participants involved in the study given the potential to be seen in the company of the researcher. In many walks we encountered people who knew the participant and who invariably wanted to know what we were doing. In a minority of instances, this had an impact on whether a participant wanted to be involved with the method. Second, as we were recording the walking interviews it was important to gain informed consent from those we 'bumped into'. This meant remaining vigilante to the need to remind participants that the interactions were being recorded, and a need to give a brief outline of the research to those we encountered. However, on many occasions when we came across people known to the participant, participants themselves took responsibility for negotiating consent, outlining the research, and highlighting the presence of the recorder.

Analysis: Roots not routes

Analysis was done as with any qualitative research interaction through immersion, organising the data, and identifying categories, typologies, and concepts. Researchers reading this toolkit will have their own strategies for analysis. The narratives we moved along stretched beyond the specific routes we traversed, providing accounts that were an interweaving of personal biography and individual experiences with collective (social) memories and spatial histories. We also heard stories situated in other places, located at multiple scales that reminded us that neighbourhoods are constructed and understood relative to other places – such as neighbouring districts, other towns and even other countries that tie the neighbourhood we walked through into a far wider networks of scales and locations. Thus we did not consider the routes to be somehow representative of peoples' actual everyday spatial practices and habits but rather indicative of how people thought about and moved through their neighbourhoods in different contexts. As a result, we would stress that the routes, photographs and narrative do not stand

alone as discrete pieces of data but rather should be considered within their epistemological and methodological contexts.

To read more about the methods used in the Connected Lives research see:

- Clark, A and Emmel, N (2009): Connected Lives: Methodological challenges for researching networks, neighbourhoods and communities, *Qualitative Researcher*, 11, 9-11
- Emmel N (2008) *Participatory mapping: an innovative sociological method*. *Real Life Methods Toolkit*. Available at <http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/publications/toolkits/2008-07-toolkit-participatory-map.pdf>
- Emmel N and Clark A (2009) *The methods used in Connected Lives: investigating networks, neighbourhoods, and communities*. ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. NCRM Working Paper Series 06/09. Available at <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/800/>
- Emmel N and Clark A (2008) User-engagement with community groups: the nature of engagement *Qualitative Researcher* 8: pp 5-7 June 2008

Feedback welcome! If you have any comments on this toolkit or if you can tell us how you have used it in your research or teaching please do drop us a line at realities@manchester.ac.uk and let us know.



Join our **email newsletter** for updates on our toolkits, events and other activities: www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/aboutus/newslist



Realities is part of the National Centre for Research Methods, which aims to improve research methods across the UK social science community. We are based in the Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life at the University of Manchester.

Realities, Morgan Centre, Sociology, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL
+44 (0) 161 275 0265 | realities@manchester.ac.uk | www.manchester.ac.uk/realities