

Short Take: Walking Interviews with Refugee-background Women

Field Methods

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Abstract

Walking interviews generate contextualized dialogs and place-based narratives prompted by sites and routes. We used walking interviews with three refugee-background women in Australia to find out what the act of walking could reveal about notions of home and broader narratives of forced migration. We used a participatory approach to privilege women's perspectives as co-creators of new knowledge on the topic.

Walking interviews (Botfield et al. 2019; O'Neill 2018), go-along interviews (Carpiano 2009; Castrodale 2018), “bimbling” or walking aimlessly (Kinney 2018), or walking probes (De Leon and Cohen 2005) involve exploring perspectives in contextualized environments (Kusenbach 2003) as prompted by landmarks and sites. Mobile methods are situational and flexible. They can support the emergence of more diverse and spontaneous conversations when compared to static, “sedentary” interviews (Garcia

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et al. 2012); highlight people's (dis)connections to their environment; and reduce power disparities in research collaborations (Carpiano 2009).

We were curious to see what talking while walking in situ could reveal about refugee-background women's lived experiences in Sydney, Australia. We used walking interviews as a participatory research approach, where people with lived experiences are co-researchers who actively contribute new knowledge and exercise agency throughout the research process (see Lenette et al. 2019). Academic researchers walk alongside, listen, and observe to co-produce knowledge (Lenette 2019; O'Neill et al. 2019).

As the literature on walking interviews in refugee research is sparse,¹ this *Short Take* outlines an example involving refugee-background women to highlight the method's strengths and how to maximize its potential.

Development and Uses

High citations for peer-reviewed papers on walking interviews point to the growing interest in deploying the method in disciplines like health (Carpiano 2009:840, Google Scholar citations) and geography (Evans and Jones 2011:816 citations). Walking interviews have been used to explore how forensic psychiatric residents transition to community living in New Zealand (Kinney 2018); migrant and refugee-background young people's access to sexual health services in Australia (Botfield et al. 2019); links between neighborhood-based resources, health and well-being in disadvantaged areas of the United States (Carpiano 2009), and people's understanding of place (Evans and Jones 2011). Walking interviews are impactful in social science research to explore topics like: asylum-seeking women's sense of belonging while they experience visa uncertainty (O'Neill 2018); situated socio-spatial experiences and self-identities of people with disabilities (Castrodale 2018); or problematic accessibility planning (Blewett and Hanlon 2016).

Walking interviews can be standalone, or combined with methods like geographic information systems or qual-GIS (Jones and Evans 2011), participatory theater (O'Neill et al. 2019), photography (Kinney 2018), or film (Pink 2007). Walks constitute a "hybrid" tool drawing on the strengths of many qualitative methods (Carpiano 2009). Researchers can undertake several walking interviews with the same person along a predetermined route (e.g., Botfield et al. 2019). The selection of walking methods is intentional; for instance, Kinney (2018:174) made a value-based decision to walk with former psychiatric patients to "capture their uncertain steps." Limitations include: framing questions around a specific place that can be walked,

noting that many are out of reach in refugee studies; and excluding participants due to mobility concerns (Evans and Jones 2011).

Our Approach

We used walking interviews in *Finding Home*,² a project exploring meanings of home in Sydney in collaboration with three refugee-background women co-researchers originally from Iraq who migrated between five and 15 years ago. By walking along familiar routes, we hoped to learn more about women's stories of home-making, diverse meanings of home and relevant metaphors, and factors that help create home, from formal structures and services, to social dynamics and relationships.

The focus on place lent itself to a sensory, mobile method. Based on previous research with refugee-background participants (Botfield et al. 2019), we identified that walking interviews would yield richer data. We documented in-depth narratives, and our co-researchers appreciated discussing at-times difficult topics while walking. We consciously chose a small group of co-researchers, given the time and logistics involved.

Pre-walk Considerations

Walking interviews rarely begin with the walk itself, and it is important not to rush into the walks without careful attention to relationship-building. Building trust and rapport are essential to successful walking interviews, and indeed can emerge more quickly while using mobile methods (Carpiano 2009), but the literature says little on pre-walk considerations.

1. Academic researchers should have a clear understanding of the method and how they will explain the process before approaching co-researchers. We discussed the methodology at length before commencing fieldwork. We agreed on appropriate wording to explain the purpose of walking interviews without imposing our own conceptualizations of home as migrant women. These considerations impacted our thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), which we discuss in a forthcoming paper.
2. Co-researchers should have ample opportunity to ask questions about the process during pre-walk semi-structured interviews, which can give them time to think about the places they wish to visit and the stories they might share. Interviews can be scheduled right before the first walk or on a different day, to identify co-researchers'

concerns or specific requirements. In *Finding Home*, this step was crucial to identify and address two key issues: one co-researcher had a disability that affected her mobility (see Castrodale [2018] on go-along interviews in disability studies); another was not fluent in English and required an interpreter. Both insisted on hosting Josie in their homes with tea and sweets to get to know her and share details of their backgrounds; the third co-researcher was Josie's existing collaborator.

3. While walking interviews may take place in groups, we favored one-on-one walks (i.e., Josie as research associate walked with each co-researcher, except when an interpreter was needed. We felt this was more appropriate than having two academic researchers present, which might affect co-researchers' confidence to lead the way). As Jones et al. (2008) argue, if power dynamics, which are inherent to all forms of research, are overlooked in walking interviews, movement can increase the unevenness and messiness that affects data collection.

During the pre-walk stage, Josie explained that co-researchers could take her to places of their choosing that symbolized home, in any order that felt natural; they could define home in their own terms; there was no right way to undertake the walks; they would walk together for as long as co-researchers wished; and they would talk freely about each place and its significance.

Mapping the Course

Once co-researchers were ready to begin the walk, they decided where to start and the trajectory they wished to follow. They chose familiar places and routes that felt safe walking to, so maps were not needed. All walks occurred during daytime to minimize the potential to walk in places that might be considered unsafe. In participatory projects, co-researchers set the pace both figuratively and literally, and the duration of walks.³ Academic researchers can ask clarifying questions along the way, but their main role is to listen to the stories associated with each place and note visual and auditory prompts.

1. Academic researchers should be able and willing to walk along until co-researchers feel they have visited all relevant sites.⁴ This may require organizing follow-up walks. We suggested that

co-researchers could set aside an hour for the walk. However, Josie spent three hours with our co-researcher with a disability because they took regular breaks on benches across the city and conversed about those sites. Using interpreters means extended time for translation at regular intervals.

2. Conversations may be audio-recorded (Garcia et al. 2012) or video-recorded (Pink 2007) with co-researchers' permission, although recording while walking can affect what is shared or shift academic researchers' focus away from looking and listening with intent. Recording requires technical checks prior to, and quality checks during, walks. Josie did not audio-record the conversations but wrote detailed notes following each walk, using a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) to write her own story, or research text, about co-researchers' narratives. Narrative inquiry acknowledges accuracy limitations. Wherever possible, Josie included co-researchers' own words in the written story, when a phrase or expression accurately described a feeling, a place, or a memory. She remembered co-researchers' particular expressions because of their specificity and relevance to the sites visited. Josie set out her notes using the photographs in chronological order to retrace their steps, and described the context and stories associated with each image in as much detail as she could recollect. The field notes included clear links between places visited and stories told (e.g., we came across a bus stop . . .). This became especially important for the thematic analysis (see Carpiano [2009] for a discussion on analyzing data from walking interviews) and facilitated coding texts to compare co-researchers' narratives.
3. Co-researchers were encouraged to photograph and record soundscapes; they directed Josie to photograph on her phone and record sounds on a digital recorder to capture the memories and atmosphere of different places relevant to their stories. The photographs mapped the sites in a particular order and were used to create short videos with soundscapes (<https://www.projectfindinghome.com/dfg>).

Ethics

Ethical issues linked to walking interviews range from visibility of the encounter to safety concerns (Kinney 2018). The method attracted scrutiny from the institution's ethics board due to concerns about risks to co-

researchers if they were seen walking and taking photographs with academic researchers, and to others who may be inadvertently photographed. It is not unusual for ethics boards to be anxious about creative research methods (Lenette et al. 2018). We reassured the board that being seen together might not be automatically linked to research participation (see Garcia et al. [2012] and Kinney [2018] for different perspectives on this issue), and outlined ways to photograph places while maintaining anonymity. Co-researchers were instructed to photograph places, not people, and avoid photographing anyone in identifiable ways or delete such photographs immediately. The women did not have such concerns. One co-researcher introduced Josie as a researcher to her acquaintances along the walk without discomfort. We focused on addressing issues like disability and language needs, which often preclude women's meaningful research participation.

Conclusion

Our field notes reflected that co-researchers went beyond simply answering questions and felt comfortable elaborating on *both* positive and stressful moments of their past—this only occurred as they walked past landmarks that prompted such memories. Researchers need to carefully consider socio-political contexts before deploying the method with refugee-background co-researchers. However, our experience suggests that there is much potential to expand the use of walking interviews in refugee studies to generate new knowledge on forced migration.

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Notes

1. Diverse socio-political concerns and uncertainty across contexts might account for limited use of this method.
2. This project was undertaken in 2019 with parallel fieldwork in Toronto and London using diverse methods.
3. We note that longer walks do not necessarily equate to richer data.
4. See “toolkit” at Clark and Emmel (2010) and Springgay and Truman (2018).

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