

How to ... conduct a walking interview

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Do you or your organisation use interviews for research or evaluation?

If so, this guide to “walking interviews” may help you gain deeper, richer insights from interviewees.

In line with the academic literature, we speak throughout this guide about “walking interviews”. However, it is important to state from the outset that the key notion in this methodology is around movement, not specifically walking, and therefore can be used with disabled people, including wheelchair users.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered about the enduring connection between memory and place? Or how different the flow of an interview might be if you walked with the participant in a space familiar to them? How might walking and talking together lead to deeper insights than a static interview?

Research has shown that memories and place are deeply intertwined, with specific locations often triggering vivid recollections. By becoming immersed in a familiar environment during an interview, it is believed that participants may feel more comfortable and open, leading to a richer and more authentic conversation.

This guide is for anyone considering using walking interviews in their research and evaluation activity to help balance power, promote natural conversation, and gain deeper, richer insights from participants.

Walking interviews allow participants to reflect on their surroundings and draw on sensory cues that may enhance their memory, which can be especially helpful for researchers or evaluators looking at topics related to personal experiences or investigating place-specific projects or events. The potential for incorporating physical activity into the research process as a means of fostering wellbeing and engagement is also explored in this guide.

This guide is split into four sections:

- [1. What is a walking interview \(and why you should use it\)](#)
- [2. Considering the practicalities of walking interviews](#)
- [3. Case study: Lauren Hall and Compass Live Art](#)
- [4. Further reading](#)

What is a walking interview?

An increasing number of social scientists are using walking interviews as a methodology (Evans & Jones, 2011; Kinney, 2017). The approach was developed in the disciplines of anthropology, geography and mobility studies but is now used more widely including in the arts and humanities, environmental studies and health sciences (King & Woodroffe, 2017).

The method, known as a “walking interview”, involves a researcher and participant walking together while the researcher conducts a semi-structured interview.

It can be used in a variety of contexts, including to clarify participants’ connections to particular places, to physically locate study interactions and to examine the geographies of certain places (Holton 2015; Holton & Riley, 2014).



Taken from Compass - ‘walking interview’ footage, Collaborate 2023 (Matt Rogers)

Types of walking interview

There are four types of walking interviews:

The docent walking interview

Developed by Chang (2017), the docent technique places the participant as a knowledgeable tour guide, or expert, who leads the researcher to and through important locations in their lives.

In the docent approach, the participant serves as the teacher, while the researcher is seen as a newcomer and pupil. Chang used this method during her research into the connection between place and health, but it is useful in any context where location has a particular significance for the participant.

The process involves three steps:

A static warm-up interview

The researcher gets to know the participant and concentrates on route planning and rapport-building.

The walking interview

This takes place in a specific location relevant to the participant and chosen by them. Photographs can be taken to document what is observed and discussed.

A wind-down interview

This occurs at some point after the walk and provides an opportunity for further discussion and reflection. Photographs taken during the walking interview can act as prompts.

The go-along interview

The go-along walking interview combines participant observation with an interview. The researcher accompanies the participant on an outing that would have happened even if the researcher hadn't been there.

It is crucial that the researcher observes the participant in their natural setting as they go about their daily business at the customary hour and day (Kusenbach, 2003). While the participant is on the outing the researcher asks questions, listens and watches as they go about their activities.

One of the key benefits of this method is that it can provide insights into how the participant engages with aspects of their physical and social environment and how they react to the demands of their everyday lives or the situation that is being researched.



The participatory walking interview

The participant's choice of route during a participatory walking interview does not have to represent their typical path.

The researcher walks with the participant around a site that the person has chosen and is relevant to the subject of the study (Clark & Emmel, 2010).

This approach seeks to gain access to participants' views and knowledge about a particular geographic location and to shed light on their level of attachment to their local community.

The bimbling interview

Bimbling walking interviews don't use the participant as a guide because the location and route of the walking interview are irrelevant to the results. The crucial part of walking and speaking is the actual movement.

Participants can recall experiences and describe them through the act of walking (Anderson, 2004; Moles, 2008). Walking together relieves the strain of a face-to-face interview allowing for more casual conversation and leading to more authentic responses.

Why use a walking interview

An essential benefit of walking interviews is that they equalise the relationship between the participant and the researcher by allowing the participant to steer the interview **verbally** through the occurrence of natural, spontaneous contacts as well as **physically** along the designated route. Walking interviews become more approachable, inclusive and less scary by altering the conventional power dynamics of research interviews.

With each location serving as a hint to the participant, acting as a physical representation of experience, and "affecting the salience of the participant's identity characteristics" (Holton & Riley, 2014: 59), walking interviews offer a flexible and adaptive approach to a semi-structured interview.

Watch researcher Lauren Hall from York St John University talk about why she decided to use walking interviews to explore the values and impacts for participants of [Compass Live Art](#) projects in Leeds:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gksPBLGM57A>



Taken from Compass - 'walking interview' footage, Collaborate 2023 (Matt Rogers)

Walking interviews are, by definition, mobile in nature and can lead to insights into a participant's sense of self and belonging, in addition to ideas like place attachment, environmental pasts and place identities (Prince, 2014). These are memories, ideas and conversations that might not have come up in a static interview because when we move, engage with our surroundings and think about them, our minds are more receptive to sharing.

A person's place-identities - defined as subsets of their identity that hold attitudes, feelings, beliefs and other cognitions about the physical world in which they are located or have engaged with - are built on the memories and attitudes associated with personally significant places that make up their environmental past (Prohansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). Places can serve as reminders of who we once were, enabling us to compare and contrast our current selves with those of the past and maintain a constant sense of self (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996).

Watch researcher Lauren Hall talk about the differences between static and moving interviews:

https://youtu.be/4hDT-lyu1qE?si=rvA_uqDrDI4rRAzI



Taken from Compass - 'walking interview' footage, Collaborate 2023 (Matt Rogers)

Considering the practicalities

In this section, we explore some practical tips to consider when planning, conducting and evaluating walking interviews.

Before

1. Know **who** you're going to recruit and **how** you will engage them. Research the area you are working in and spend time with existing groups and communities. Consider using deep hanging out (immersing yourself in a group in an informal way) to truly understand the demographic and understand representation in the area and access to opportunities. This will help you to be informed about the most effective ways to recruit participants e.g. social media, gatekeepers, face-to-face.

Walking interviews can take a lot of time so consider this when deciding how many participants you want to enrol. When scheduling interviews, factor in time so you don't feel rushed and have space to reflect and evaluate after each one.

2. Building relationships with participants is crucial before any in-person meetings. The research, what a walking interview is, and how their voice will be used in the study can all be explained while getting to know one another over the phone, in an online meeting or face-to-face. This is also a good time to go over any technical details like cameras and recording equipment and ensure that the participant gives their consent to be recorded.

3. If the participant is guiding the walking interview discuss with them where each walk will take place - this will help to ensure a smooth and efficient process during the interview itself. Additionally, having a clear understanding of the routes will allow for better preparation in terms of logistics and potential obstacles that may arise during the recording.

4. Plan your questions carefully. To conduct a semi-structured interview there should be a few questions that all study participants answer. Make sure you have devised these before contacting participants and share them with participants beforehand if it will be helpful.

During

- 1.** On the day of the walking interview, check that your camera, recording device and sound are working properly before meeting a participant at the agreed location. Take a storage card with room for everything and always carry a spare.
- 2.** Arrive early and wear something that will help others identify you. Don't dive right in when you first meet up with the participant but give them a few minutes to prepare themselves. Remind them of the purpose of the research, the methodology, the reason for their involvement and how their words might be used.
- 3.** Have your semi-structured questions to hand. Amid any silent periods give the participant time to finish their sentence, reiterate a point they just made or pose an open-ended follow-up question. Try to prompt and motivate them to speak rather than direct or lead them.
- 4.** Make room in your schedule for flexibility. The meeting may have been set for 40 minutes but a participant's memory may have been jogged in the final five minutes, meaning they have important information to share with you. Give them room to talk and time to do so.



After

- 1.** Transcribe the interview immediately (or as soon as possible) afterwards and link a GPS of the route of the interview which includes images of important locations ([Strava](#) and [Otter.ai](#) can be helpful apps for this). You'll be able to assess the entire walking interview while the route, dialogue and noteworthy events are still fresh in your mind.
- 2.** Give the participant a copy of the transcription and time to read, think about and add to it if desired - sometimes their reflections will prove to be even more illuminating. Set up a meeting to talk about the transcription while also looking at the route and pictures. Recheck their consent and use this as an opportunity to explain once again how their voice is being utilised in the research.



What else should I consider?

Access Requirements

Work with participants to ensure all routes you are taking are accessible, including considering changes in local architecture, road or footpath closures, and whether there are any public events happening on the planned walking route. This also involves talking to participants to create an enjoyable and accessible experience, including allowing their children to attend if necessary, scheduling late hours/weekend walks or shorter lunchbreak walking interviews.

The methodology concentrates on the notion of movement, not specifically walking, making it suitable for disabled people, including wheelchair users. When Lauren Hall was conducting interviews as part of the Compass Live Arts Project one interview was conducted within a participant's home, an environment they were confident and comfortable in, with little actual walking but much movement and inspiration from inside and outside the house. Talk to people about their access requirements and make a plan that ensures both researcher and participant can fruitfully engage.

Weather

Take into consideration the time of year you are planning walking interviews and be flexible with participants, allowing cancellations or postponed interviews due to adverse weather. If the weather turns bad while on a walk, allow for shortened journeys or an interim coffee shop stop to continue the conversation.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Confidentiality cannot be assured if the walking interview is in a public place. Ensure the participant understands they will be seen alongside the researcher and that some conversations may be overheard by members of the public. Allow participants time to reflect on what they may have said during a stream of consciousness and to feedback to the researcher any redactions they may want to make.

What else should I consider?

Safety of Interviewer

Acknowledge the potential risk of walking alone with a research participant in an unknown area or environment. Some ways to keep safe include:

- working with gatekeepers to access participants who are known within the local area of research
- arrange walks within daylight hours
- inform another person who you are meeting with, what the route is, the time you are meeting and expected finish time. Let them know when you are safely back
- use technology similar to FindMyFriends and LIFE360 and also share your location with another member of your team.

Payment of Participants

It is important for interviewees to be reasonably remunerated for their time and their knowledge. However, do consider the potential implications of payments or incentives and encourage participants to be open and honest in their responses. Bear this in mind also in the framing of questions, making sure that they are non-leading and give space to explore nuanced responses.

Case study: Lauren Hall (York St John University) and Compass Live Art

Lauren Hall was lead researcher on the [Compass Live Art project](#), funded by [the Centre of Cultural Value](#) as part of the [Collaborate programme](#).

The project investigated the values and impacts that are taken away from participating in Compass projects. Here Lauren shares her experience of using walking interviews.

Leeds-based [Compass Live Art](#) has ten years of experience in producing socially engaged, interactive live art in the public realm. Through processes of ‘making with’ – such as co-creation and community participation – Compass produces work in non-art spaces that engages under-represented, traditionally non-arts attending groups in an impactful manner.

As part of the Collaborate research partnership, I investigated the experiences and impacts of ‘making with’ by using participatory and creative research methodologies that mirror the creative practices of Compass. Through ‘researching with’ I explored the cultural values and experiential qualities that both artists and participants ascribed to different relationships of ‘making with’.



Taken from Compass - ‘walking interview’ footage, Collaborate 2023 (Matt Rogers)

The project used dialogical workshops, three-hour collaborative spaces with provocations about co-creation to stimulate conversation and debate between artists and participants. These workshops explored in a co-productive way, diverse experiences, understandings and values placed upon 'making with'.

Meanwhile, a broader group of participants from previous festivals engaged in walking interviews, revisiting the locations of previous Compass Festival events to explore their enduring memories of impact and agency.



Taken from Compass - 'walking interview' footage, Collaborate 2023 (Matt Rogers)

In the Collaborate research project, I used walking interviews to capture data relating to people's understanding and experiences of place, co-creation and community.

Here, the walking interview method was 'participatory' (see [above](#)). The routes were determined by the interviewees but were not necessarily their habitual routes and were thus partially made up on the spot. I interviewed fifteen different individuals who had participated across five different Compass Festival projects, their engagement with the company spanning from just a couple of months to ten years.

Walking interviews are different to static interviews because they can produce quantitative data concerning the routes taken, as well as the more familiar qualitative data derived from the conversational exchange.

In this research, each route was different. Yet, depending on the project, routes could have similar stand-out geographical locations. For example, Leeds' Kirkgate Market held a significant value for numerous participants who had taken part in Compass Festival's [Personal Shopper](#) (2016).

The methodology also demonstrated a highly productive way of accessing a particular community's connection to their surrounding environment and opened up questions of people's relationship with places and current policy issues around sustainability and the legacy of co-creation.

Watch Peter Reed from Compass Live Arts talk about why he was interested in using walking interviews to capture audience insights:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WizDFyQSxG4>



Taken from Compass - 'walking interview' footage, Collaborate 2023 (Matt Rogers)

One participant spoke about his upbringing in Leeds, his daily walking route to work, and his regular lunch spot for over twenty years but his disconnection with the city itself. Through the walking interview, he was able to map out a timeline of reconnecting with the city and the people he regularly interacted with thanks to Compass Festival, including significant geographical locations such as Leeds Banking Quarter, The Leeds Library and Miles & Co Coffee.

A difficulty we encountered while undertaking walking interviews was the recruitment of participants. I think this was largely due to the time commitment involved in a walking interview – including pre-walk chats and route planning. But I also believe some participants felt hesitant due to the unfamiliar form of a walking interview, where they are able to have a lot of control and power, unlike a standard interview.

The walking interview technique allowed for the unlocking of memories across a decade of performances and festivals hosted by Compass. The stories from each person could be woven into the findings from Compass artists to truly understand the interdependent relationship with co-creation, with walking interview participants really amplifying the desire for vibrant and rich engagement during practice.

Even more so, the intimacy and personalisation of each interview illustrated the process of maximum flexibility to develop work as it needs to develop, depending on people, place and a whole lot more – complementing the findings from our dialogical workshops.

Participants noted afterwards how much they had enjoyed the technique as it reminded them of memories and experiences they thought they had forgotten, and felt like sharing a moment with a friend rather than a formal research technique:

Interviewer: Is there anything else you would like to add before we end the recording?

Participant: This was the best lunch hour.

(Public House Walking Interview, 2023)

Further Reading

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About the contributors

Lauren Hall is a Lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University, whose PhD research (submitted November 2023) was in collaboration between York St John University and leading learning disability arts organisation Mind the Gap Theatre Company. The focus of the research is into questions of visibility, career opportunities and leadership development of learning disabled artists.

As part of her research Lauren uses participatory methods including life-narrative interviews and observations at Mind the Gap, walking interviews and dialogical workshops within her research with Compass Live Arts in collaboration with The Centre for Cultural Value.

Ceri Pitches is Director of Impact and Postdoctoral Research Assistant to the Professoriate in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds.

You can learn more about Compass Live Art, and the findings from their [Collaborate](https://compassliveart.org.uk/making-with-researching-with/) project with Lauren Hall, here:

<https://compassliveart.org.uk/making-with-researching-with/>

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