Geographies on the Move: A Practical and Theoretical Approach to the Mobile Interview

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To cite this article: Jessica M. Finlay & Jay A. Bowman (2016): Geographies on the Move: A Practical and Theoretical Approach to the Mobile Interview, The Professional Geographer, DOI: 10.1080/00330124.2016.1229623

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2016.1229623

Published online: 20 Oct 2016.

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Geographies on the Move: A Practical and Theoretical Approach to the Mobile Interview

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University of Minnesota

This article considers the mobile interview method’s utility to geography through five strengths: the ability to (1) produce spatially grounded and place-specific data, (2) access subtler and more complex meanings of place, (3) create opportunities for flexible and collaborative conversation with participants in situ, (4) build rapport and adjust participant–researcher power dynamics, and (5) efficiently produce rich geographic data. Practical, technical, ethical, and epistemological considerations are discussed. We expand methodological exploration of disempowered individuals’ experiences of home, neighborhood, and urban space. The mobile interview offers a valuable, underutilized method for geographers to better understand the coconstitutive relationship between self and place. Key Words: lived experience, mobile methods, neighborhoods, place, qualitative.

Guided by the notion that place matters (Massey 1984), the mobile interview generates rich spatial observations and theories grounded in lived experience. Researchers can experience places that matter to participants in situ (Kusenbach 2003). The method involves interviewing “on the move” through any mode of transit, including by foot, bicycle, car, and public transportation. Researchers ask questions and observe while exploring participants’ streams of experiences and perceptions with the surrounding environment (Evans and Jones 2011). The method might be used alone or in tandem with other methods, such as immersive interviews and geographic information systems (GIS; Jones et al. 2008; Carpiano 2009). The flexible format creates a rich nexus of narrative, geographic, and visual data (Bergeron, Paquette, and Poullaouec-Gonidec 2014). This article expands methodological exploration of disempowered individuals’ experiences of urban space through intimate mobile interviews with elderly participants. The fieldwork serves as a platform to consider the method’s utility specifically to geography. We propose five strengths: the ability to (1) produce spatially grounded and place-specific data, (2) access subtler and more complex meanings of place, (3) create opportunities for flexible and collaborative conversation with participants in situ, (4) build rapport and adjust participant–researcher power dynamics, and (5) efficiently produce rich geographic data. Practical, technical, ethical, and epistemological considerations are discussed. We conclude that the mobile interview offers a valuable, underutilized method for geographers to better understand the coconstitutive relationship between self and place and suggest avenues to further enrich geographic applications.

Theories and Applications of Mobile Methodologies

Place is central to geography, and the concept continues to be studied and theorized in increasingly complex ways. Beginning in the 1970s, humanistic geographers drew from phenomenologists to argue that place finds meaning through the quotidian (Rose 1993; Peet 1998; Cresswell 2004; Seamon and Sowers 2008): The significance of place can be found in every aspect of a person’s life and experience (Rose 1995). Understanding an individual’s sense of place, therefore, requires eliciting subjective responses to social and physical environments (Cresswell 2004).
The mobile interview interrogates sense of place as respondents articulate their own subjectivity in real time. Their ideas and emotions are articulated differently first-hand, as opposed to by recall (Evans and Jones 2011). The method further investigates how places are diversely experienced. Empowered and able-bodied individuals often use and experience public spaces as they are originally designed, but disempowered individuals, such as youth and the disabled, must negotiate the space to create a safer affective environment (Imrie 1996; R. Butler and Parr 1998; Kitchin and Law 2001; Chouinard, Hall, and Wilton 2010; Duff 2010).

Building from humanistic geographers’ recognition that sense of place is deeply personal, feminists and critical geographers sought to understand how social hierarchies influence an individual in place. For example, latent verbal and physical racism for African Americans fundamentally changes the experience of public space (hooks 1990). The self–place relationship is not just one of reciprocal influence; it is “more radically, [one] of constitutive co-ingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect, there is no place without self and no self without place” (Casey 2001, 684). The advent of increased speed in global transit and social media alters our experiences of place. With spatiotemporal compressions (Harvey 1990), our sense of place is not limited to immediate surroundings. Rather, it includes previously far-flung places. Our lifeworlds might include the streets of a major city that is only a plane ride away (M. Davis 2006).

The passages of ourselves and communications central to our sense of place spurred a new mobilities paradigm:

A set of questions, theories and methodologies that seek to transcend the dichotomy between transport research and social research, putting social relations into travel and connecting different forms of transport with complex patterns of social experience conducted through communications at-a-distance. (Sheller and Urry 2006, 210)

Understanding sense of place on the go, as we travel through the world and have it filtered back to us through digital and social media, requires dynamic mobile methodologies (Fincham, McGuiness, and Murray 2010).

Social scientists employ a variety of mobile methods to complement “a-mobile” research (Sheller and Urry 2006; Middleton 2011). Lynch (1960) first documented “walk-alongs” when interviewers equipped with tape recorders joined participants along routes previously identified in seated interviews. The novel investigation explored how urban U.S. residents interpret environmental images throughout daily activities. Kozol (1991) narrated experiences of impoverished children in South Bronx neighborhoods: Walking with them accessed intimate sociophysical experiences and interpretive understandings. Kusenbach (2003) conducted “go-alongs” to investigate perception and socialization in daily routines in a three-year ethnographic study. It explored how residents in Hollywood perceive local issues and how their daily routines and social exchanges inform understanding. Carpiano (2009) extended the application of go-alongs to study place–health interconnections in neighborhoods of Milwaukee. The walk-alongs and ride-alongs, many with socioeconomically marginalized participants, exposed complex experiences and considerations of health and place. Building on these seminal works, additional mobile methodologies include walking interviews (Jones et al. 2008; Clark and Emmel 2010; Garcia et al. 2012; M. Butler and Derrett 2014; Holton and Riley 2014; Finlay et al. 2015), ride-alongs with police (Herbert and Beckett 2009), and trips with car commuters (Laurier and Lorimer 2012), on ferries (Vannini 2011), and on bicycles (Spinney 2009, 2011; Spinney and Brown 2009).

In this article, we discuss the utility of interviewing “on the move” specifically for geographers. Geographic applications to date remain limited and underutilized. Notable exceptions include Anderson (2004), who conversed while walking with participants to study places of protest produced by radical environmentalists. Bissell (2009) explored perceptions of time, space, and location that unfolded during railway journeys in Britain. Evans and Jones (2011) measured differences between seated and walking interviews’ ability to produce place narratives: The latter generated higher quantities of place-based observations and spatial specificity. Lindeke (2015) video recorded ride-alongs with bicycle commuters in Minneapolis–St. Paul to document class and race differences in city space usage. In this article, intertwined fieldwork excerpts and photographs generate novel geographic dimensions of place and self in later life. We extend discussion of disempowered individuals’ experiences of space through mobile interviews with understudied elderly populations. The fieldwork provides the platform for this original methodological guide to geographic applications of mobile interviews.

Methods

Observations are based on a mixed-methods study in the Minneapolis metropolitan area (Figure 1). It involved 125 adults aged fifty-five to ninety-one living independently to investigate how home and neighborhood affect well-being in later life (Table 1). We conducted seated interviews to discuss daily routines, social interactions, experiences of the home and neighborhood, health, and quality of life. Immediately following the seated portion, participants provided a short “tour” for the mobile interview. After establishing rapport in the seated portion, the mobile interview offered a natural extension of the visit to experience participants’ homes and neighborhoods firsthand.
Figure 1  Case study areas in Hennepin County, Minnesota. (Color figure available online.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1  Participant demographic information</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Entire study sample (n = 125)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range:</strong> 55–91 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average:</strong> 71.1 years (median: 71.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male:</strong> 32.8% (n = 41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female:</strong> 67.2% (n = 84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-identified race or ethnicity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White:</strong> 56.8% (n = 71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black/African American:</strong> 24.8% (n = 31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic/Latin American:</strong> 0.8% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>American Indian:</strong> 0.8% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asian:</strong> 0.8% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong>: 16% (n = 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-identified debility</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong> 40.8% (n = 51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience one or more physical impairment(s):</strong> 32% (n = 40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience one or more cognitive impairment(s):</strong> 8.8% (n = 11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Mobile interviewee sample (n = 96)**       |
| **Range:** 55–91 years old                   |
| **Average:** 71.1 years (median: 71.0)       |
| **Gender**                                   |
| **Male:** 31.3% (n = 30)                     |
| **Female:** 68.8% (n = 66)                   |
| **White:** 61.5% (n = 59)                    |
| **Black/African American:** 21.9% (n = 21)   |
| **Hispanic/Latin American:** 1% (n = 1)      |
| **American Indian:** 0% (n = 0)              |
| **Asian:** 0% (n = 0)                        |
| **Other**: 15.6% (n = 15)                    |
| **Self-identified debility**                 |
| **Total:** 36.5% (n = 35)                    |
| **Experience one or more physical impairment(s):** 27.1% (n = 26) |
| **Experience one or more cognitive impairment(s):** 9.4% (n = 9) |

a“Other” self-identified races and ethnicities include (in alphabetical order) African, Arabic, Bohemian, French, German, Irish, Jewish, Norwegian, Polish, Scottish, and Swedish.
Among the study sample, 76.8 percent (n = 96) participated in the mobile interview (Table 1). They determined the route, speed, duration, and mode of travel most comfortably. Most chose to walk, and some used a wheelchair or motorized scooter (Table 2). To balance the formal nature of the seated interview, we purposefully chose an open-ended and nonstructured format for the mobile interview. In contrast to the seated interview, we did not have any prepared questions and did not use an audio recorder. Instead, we employed a hybrid of casual conversation and observation. Ethnographic strategies unobtrusively engaged participants in their natural settings and routines (Kawulich 2005). Putting away the recorders after lengthy targeted questioning provided relief in the session’s intensity with vulnerable elderly interviewees and deeper immersion into participants’ worlds (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). This generated more natural behavior, spontaneous social situations, and events (Marshall and Rossman 1995; DeMunck and Sobo 1998) unhindered by an audio recorder. Participants did not receive instructions on what to discuss, and researchers only occasionally pointed out nearby features to prompt conversation. The open format put participants at ease and “in charge” after extensive targeted seated questioning.

Researchers used notebooks to record observations and statements and a digital camera to document features and scenery. We tracked duration, distance, route, and speed through a Global Positioning System watch. Interviewers individually wrote comprehensive notes within twenty-four hours to describe the route, participant mobility, observed features, social interactions, and discussion. These structured observations provided systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts (Marshall and Rosman 1989) in participants’ socioenvironmental settings: a “written photograph” (Erlandson et al. 1993). The data were organized with qualitative software NVivo and analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Researchers employed member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation, and reflexive memoing to enhance transparency and credibility (Marshall and Rosman 2016).

**Table 2** Summary of mobile interviews (n = 96)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of transit</th>
<th>Walking unaided*</th>
<th>Walking with a cane or walker</th>
<th>Seated in a motorized wheelchair or scooter</th>
<th>Seated in a motorized wheelchair or scooter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walking unaided</td>
<td>90.6% (n = 87)</td>
<td>7.3% (n = 7)</td>
<td>2.1% (n = 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1:02–42:40 minutes</td>
<td>Average: 17:07 minutes</td>
<td>Median: 16:00 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>Range: 0.14–3.44 km (0.09–2.14 miles)</td>
<td>Average: 0.86 km (0.53 miles)</td>
<td>Median: 0.67 km (0.42 miles)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environments toured</td>
<td>Inside home area/residential building</td>
<td>Only: 9.4% (n = 9)</td>
<td>Inclusion of areas outside the home (i.e., around the neighborhood): 90.6% (n = 87)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Of those walking unaided, four participants walked with his or her dog(s), one participant with coffee, and one participant with a fire poker for protection against neighbors’ dogs.

**Discussion and Fieldwork Excerpts**

The majority of participants (76.8%, n = 96) engaged in the mobile interview: 73.1 percent of men (n = 30) and 78.6 percent of women (n = 66). More white interviewees participated (83.1%, n = 59), in comparison to 67.7 percent of African Americans (n = 21) and 69.6 percent of other racially self-identified participants (n = 16). Most participants walked unaided (90.6%, n = 87), and others walked with a cane or walker (7.3%, n = 7) or seated in a motorized wheelchair (2.1%, n = 2). The mobile interviews lasted on average seventeen minutes for 0.86 km. The vast majority of participants led researchers through their home and immediate neighborhood (90.6%, n = 87), with the remainder (9.4%, n = 9) staying within the home and residential building area (often due to mobility limitations or bad weather). Based on this fieldwork, we discuss five strengths of the mobile interview for geography. The flexible format generates a rich nexus of narrative, geographic, and visual data grounded in lived experience.

**Production of More Place-Specific and Spatially Grounded Data**

Geographical context of interviews is often overlooked despite the established relationship among spatial identity, behavior, and understanding (Anderson 2004; Murray 2009). Qualitative researchers allude to spatial context but rarely specify how it informs the research (Holton and Riley 2014). It is intuitively sensible to ask participants to talk about significant and interesting places while in that place (Evans and Jones 2011). The mobile interview enables deeper investigation into participants’ everyday lives “in place”: their biographies and experiences framed by geography:

Dennis (age sixty-five) discussed his relation to place in limited terms during the seated interview. In contrast, the mobile interview generated rich information about his everyday life, health, and experiences. Due to medical disability, Dennis has severe mobility limitations. Leaving the apartment was a multistep routine to gather belongings and hoist into a motorized wheelchair. Once outside, Dennis speedily navigated the tangle of downtown indoor skyways with intimate familiarity. unprompted, he gestured toward and enthusiastically discussed favorite shops and services along the route (Figure 2). We learned that without these skyways Dennis would not be able to leave his home during the winter due to the impassable ice and snow outside.
The mobile interview elicited essential information and directly identified spaces where Dennis finds his social sustenance. The method enabled broader understanding of how participants locate sociospatial networks and understand sense of community (Carpiano 2009; Clark and Emmel 2010).

In-person encounters with environmental aesthetics produced richer conceptualizations of the neighborhood (Clark and Emmel 2010; Middleton 2011). Sensory ethnography incorporated in the mobile interview encouraged participants and researchers to be more attuned to previously ignored or unnoticed experiences that shape well-being (Sunderland et al. 2012). We formed more complete understandings of each participant’s relationship to his or her local environment and its impact on well-being:

Chris (age seventy) articulated his corporeal struggles navigating the local area. He pointed to difficult street crossings, potholes, and uneven surfaces that cause him to fall (Figure 3). Chris found it easier to convey his perceptions and experiences with on-hand examples, and we witnessed firsthand how Chris’s lifelong cognitive disability exacerbates physical age-related declines of balance and mobility. Though Chris carefully abided by pedestrian rules and focused on obstacles in our path, he labored to walk and expressed confusion navigating the downtown.

By pointing to exact features, the mobile interview captured often- unnoticed microfeatures of the built environment that significantly impact Chris’s sense of confidence outside the home. He expressed and contextualized experiences and values more naturally while walking with us (Bergeron, Paquette, and Poullaouec-Gonidec 2014). Reflecting Kusenbach (2003), the method stood apart from the seated interview in its ability to access reflexive and unrefined lived experiences in situ. Participants literally navigated us through the contexts of everyday later life.

Access Subtler and More Complex Meanings of Place

The mobile interview offered rich insights into place and self: It attended to participants’ rich realities and places in the world. In contrast to the seated interview, we could engage with our senses and comprehend places for ourselves (Evans and Jones 2011). The study attended to specific issues of disempowered older people’s relations with place. Effects of age cut across traditional power structures (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomic status) to affect how participants positioned themselves. We witnessed ageism firsthand, such as hearing rude remarks on the street or feeling invisible in a sidewalk crowd. Participants often reflected on local circumstances that made them feel less important, confident, and in control:

We slowly walked with Deborah (age eighty) along her suburban street with large trees and manicured lawns (Figure 4). Deborah has a complicated relationship with her neighborhood: She appreciates the tranquil atmosphere but feels that she no longer fits in. In the past she felt at the center of vibrant social activities and her children’s lives, but now she lives a “quiet and lonely life on the periphery.” Deborah struggles to maintain her home since widowed: She does not have the strength for repairs and maintenance and cannot afford professional services as her savings dwindle. As we walked, Deborah commented that her
neighbors will likely be happy to see her move into a nursing home: “I am bringing down the neighborhood … [with my] unkempt yard.”

Deborah illuminated the social architecture of her neighborhood and made visible to us the complex web of embedded connections. The method captured nuanced spatial practices, rich personal biographies, and situated social architectures (Kusenbach 2003). It gained access to deeply personal and emotional experiences of place in later life.

Participants provided place-bound narratives and revealed intimate landscape values. They shared with us microgeographies of aging:

Eight participants lived in a three-block area of newer high-rise condominiums and low-income senior apartments. Their mobile interviews often included a well-traveled pedestrian zone (Figure 5), where they displayed diverse perceptions and experiences. Stephanie (age seventy), a low-income woman who uses the buses regularly, loved the pedestrian zone because it is well-shoveled in winter and can be traversed using little to no stairs. Sandy (age eighty), in comparison, feared the space because she was attacked there in an attempted robbery and feels vulnerable. Richard (age seventy-five) does not like the pedestrian zone because it only serves to remind him that he is not where he wants to be: living back in Asia closer to friends and youthful aspirations. Brad (age eighty) and Susan (age eighty) have privileged gated access to the pedestrian zone but rarely use it. Their mobile interview focused on the many facilities of their private complex. When asked about the pedestrian zone while peering at it through the gate, Brad replied that they rarely do things in the immediate neighborhood.

The heterogeneity of this neighborhood and diverse sociospatial understandings of the elderly were effectively communicated. Affective responses to place—ranging from joy to fear, resentment, and indifference—were forcefully communicated. The method articulated how experience is embodied and emplaced. We could feel for ourselves what it is like to live and age in these places.

Create Opportunities for Flexible and Collaborative Conversation with Participants in Situ

The mobile interview’s flexibility put participants at ease. It was conducive to frank conversation with natural breakpoints involving stories and personal experience (Anderson 2004; Carpiano 2009; Garcia et al. 2012). Participants were less concerned with trying to give the “right” answers as in the seated interview (Evans and Jones 2011) and often engaged in more fluid open dialogue:

Brady (age sixty) lived comfortably as a bachelor in North Minneapolis. His seated interview responses were often brief and straightforward. During the mobile interview, Brady walked his dogs and became noticeably more comfortable as he settled into his well-worn routine. Brady’s affection for the dogs made him feel more at ease to discuss his personal life. He expressed sadness that a friend recently passed away and his own struggles and fears with aging.

This vital information, although difficult to discuss, came when Brady was at ease without formal questions or audio recording. He spoke more about himself in relation to place (echoing Evans and Jones 2011) and spontaneously...
provided more personal information. Reflecting Kusenbach (2003, 466), this helped us reconstruct personal guiding “relevances” for participants. The interaction with his dogs and sight of neighbors’ homes revealed complex layering and filtering of perception.

The mobile interview often unfolded naturally with changing surroundings (Sunderland et al. 2012). Shorthand body language and gestures conveyed meaning quickly (Kelly et al. 2011), and the spontaneity of unplanned encounters elicited deeper reflection and remembrance of the past (Bergeron, Paquette, and Poullaouec-Gonidec 2014). We captured streams of perception and emotion that, as Kusenbach (2003) noted, participants often keep to themselves:

Nicola (age eighty-five) and Steve’s (age eighty-five) deep attachment to their long-time home shone through the mobile interview. Due to Steve’s severe mobility limitations, they gave an interior tour. Steve participated by taking frequent breaks in chairs throughout the house. They spoke movingly of treasured belongings, sentimental artwork, and family photos (Figure 6) and showed recent aging modifications (e.g., walk-in shower with grab bars). Moments of silence to pause and gather thoughts were valuable, such as smiling at photos of grandchildren and departed loved ones.

Broadening the research to often slower and more limited daily rhythms of the elderly created opportunities to better appreciate their lives and contexts. Love for home and family became more apparent as it reverberated through actions and words: communicating the embodiment of experience as they interpreted the places, objects, and people of their accumulated lives (K. Davis 1997; Pink 2008; Sunderland et al. 2012; M. Butler and Derrett 2014).

Build Rapport and Democratize Participant–Researcher Power Dynamics

The mobile interview offered intimate views of landscape, life history, and layered meanings of place. Participants were empowered to become the “tour guide” and expert (Garcia et al. 2012). We could reduce situational disparities (e.g., age, education, race) and interact on a deeper level through a more egalitarian connection. The method helped us convey respect, interest, and enthusiasm (Carpiano 2009):

Georgia (age seventy) built trust and felt comfortable sharing guarded intimate details of her life. An interviewer attentively listened to Georgia’s stories about growing up as an African American in the South and inquired further about her frequent moves around northern industrial cities. The interviewer learned that Georgia’s decision to live in her apartment and precarious sense of safety are profoundly influenced by a traumatic event forty years earlier. When asked why she chose this particular building, Georgia stopped walking and thoughtfully looked at the interviewer. “I chose to live here”—as she pointed to her newly built complex—“because it doesn’t look anything like that.” She gestured across the street to dilapidated blocks of inner-city development. “Places like that remind me of [an American city], where I was raped.” Georgia emotionally explained that she continues to recover from the trauma and cannot comfortably live in particular types of built environments. Certain urban architecture—store fronts, parking lots, and even sidewalks (Figure 7)—vividly recall her trauma.

The unstructured nature of the mobile interview with only pencil and paper enabled Georgia to guide the conversation and develop a relationship with the
interviewer. Georgia felt more comfortable to recall significant past experiences that profoundly influence her. The method assisted rapport-building across socioeconomic and age divides. Many were initially wary and guarded during the audio-recorded seated interview. The more democratic nature of the mobile interview reduced situational disparities. Participants guided us to “become old” with them and corporeally experience life through their lens.

The collaborative approach enabled more democratic coconstruction of knowledge in which participants shaped the literal and metaphorical direction of the mobile interview (Holton and Riley 2014). Instead of directed questioning and participants striving to find “correct” answers, we tapped into less categorized discussions of identity, emotion, and complicated person–place relationships. Through this personalized approach, some participants were able to better recognize and articulate sources of struggle (Carpiano 2009) as they age in their community:

Layla’s (age eighty) belabored body movements and vibrant facial expressions conveyed deep affection for the park near her home and increasing struggles to visit her favorite bench (Figure 8). The sadness etched across her face as she described needing to move soon into institutional facilities due to declining health and personal security. Layla no longer feels safe in the subsidized building since it eliminated the age minimum. She feels victimized and fearful of “rough men” moving in. Layla quietly pointed to some of these young men who were lounging and drinking outside. Though immensely sad to leave her long-time home, Layla expressed that safety was her top priority.

Layla’s narrative told through situated experiences added rich details to our understanding. We grasped her embodied struggles and deep fear of vulnerability in old age. Sessions often became intimately personal, and many expressed gratitude to have a supportive opportunity to share. Too often seniors are marginalized and silenced (especially those already disenfranchised by traditional power structures), and the mobile interview encouraged participants to feel more important and valued.

Efficiently Produce Rich Geographic Data

The mobile interview can be efficient for time commitment and resources. The costs are minimal, with as little as a pencil and notebook needed. The method offers many of the advantages of participant observation and “hanging out” without the intensity or time commitments of ethnography (DeLyser and Sui 2013):

With Nadine (age sixty-five), we learned more walking around a single residential block than all of our interactions during the seated interview beforehand. Nadine repeatedly mentioned during the seated interview that she did not feel safe at night because of the “loud people” in her neighborhood. When asked to clarify these statements, Nadine would not elaborate. During the mobile interview we witnessed an open-air drug market at the end of her block. We halted our conversation and quietly put our camera and notepads away. Nadine averted her eyes and meekly walked by. When we arrived back to Nadine’s yard, she told us, “Those are the loud people that I don’t like.”

Although the seated interview contained multiple open-ended questions about safety and well-being, Nadine did not feel comfortable elaborating on tape about her concerns. The mobile interview enabled us to quickly and unobtrusively understand her fear of illicit activities just six doors down from her house. It articulated sources of problems facing some participants (Carpiano 2009) by swiftly clarifying underlying circumstances.

Accompanying more than one participant at a time, such as couples and neighbors, produced plentiful information with minimal time commitment:

A fifteen-minute mobile interview with Michelle (age seventy-five) and Kurt (age eighty) revealed great depths about their relationship and experiences of aging and place. They showed us around their suburban condo complex and its various amenities. Michelle walked briskly ahead and commandingly relayed information. She did not pause to look back at her husband who struggled to keep up. He leaned worryingly on his cane and breathed heavily with exertion (Figure 9).

Their actions and commentary communicated multifaceted insights and quickly contextualized statements made...
during the seated interview. The method also probed for confirmation and incompatibility between methods, such as what participants stated during the seated interview versus how they behaved during the “tour.” Corroboration and incompatibility are easily found with methods such as immobile interviews, photo-voice participatory action research, focus groups, and GIS (Carpiano 2009; Evans and Jones 2011).

**Methodological Constraints and Considerations**

The mobile interview involves practical, technical, ethical, and epistemological considerations. Limited research to date critically evaluates its strengths and weaknesses. Notable exceptions include Garcia and colleagues (2012), Evans and Jones (2011), and Carpiano (2009) for go-alongs and walking interviews. This section elaborates and extends discussion of methodological shortcomings and analytical considerations regarding mobile interviewing.

Preinterview discussion sets the epistemological grounding for the session. Mobile interviews are often unfamiliar and participants seek guidance. Prescriptive instructions and strict geographic boundaries can be limiting and diminish participant individuality. Researchers generally aim for a balance to provide enough guidance so that appropriate data can be obtained but remain open enough to enable participants to guide researchers through spaces as they want them to be seen and understood (Gardner 2011). We asked participants to take us anywhere they thought appropriate for approximately twenty minutes on a normal route of their choice. Route selection can never be completely spontaneous: As Bergeron, Paquette, and Poullauque-Gonidec (2014) noted, it involves some degree of coconstruction between researchers and participants. Some studies involve researchers setting the route in advance to focus on specific places of relevance (e.g., Paulos and Goodman 2004; Inwood and Martin 2008; Jones et al. 2008). This approach generates pertinent data but can make it less authentic as participants might engage in activities beyond their usual habits (Jones et al. 2008; Evans and Jones 2011). Other studies encourage more participant autonomy to select the route (e.g., Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009; Gardner 2011; Finlay et al. 2015). This prioritizes “naturalness” to see and experience habitual areas and routines.

The mode of travel also influences observations and findings, of which walking and driving are the most common forms to date. Walking can enable rich immersive experiences through direct exposure and detailed multisensory accounts of specific places (Bergeron, Paquette, and Poullauque-Gonidec 2014). The car can be an efficient and practical way to view and discuss a wider variety of spaces, but reduces direct exposure. Multisensory data collection is reduced primarily to vision with less tangible experiences in place (e.g., smells, sounds). This could be remedied by exiting the car together in key places along the driven route. Depending on time of day and driving ability, the participant might solely focus on the mechanics of driving (e.g., observing traffic and driving safely) rather than attending to the surroundings. Driving also reduces spontaneous social encounters, which can be an important element. Alternative modes (e.g., bicycling, public transit) could be useful to efficiently experience a variety of places in situ. Bicycling and public transit are underutilized forms of mobile interviewing to date (exceptions include Khan 2006; Bissell 2009; Spinney 2009, 2011; Spinney and Brown 2009; Vannini 2011; and Lindeke 2015). Sessions can cover more ground than walking but still enable immersive multisensory experiences and spontaneous social interactions. Seasonal weather conditions largely beyond researcher control are also a factor. Depending on the location, sessions during winter can be cold, difficult to navigate with snow and ice, and dark. Summers can be humid and hot and influence participants’ willingness and ability to participate (Carpiano 2009; Garcia et al. 2012). Researchers can begin to account for this issue by purposefully timing sessions to occur during different seasonal and weather conditions or use travel modes that are more sheltered (e.g., cars, public transit). Interior mobile interviews can also be interesting and valuable. Downtown-living participants in our study who were unable to navigate exterior environments often chose instead to take us through the Minneapolis “skyways” network. Others chose to stay inside and gave interior tours of their home and building. When participants did not go outside it was, for our research purposes, as interesting as when and where they did.

Time of day is another important methodological consideration. Mobile interviews generally capture a brief snapshot of local daily rhythm. The type and frequency of activities often differ throughout the course of the day and week (Carpiano 2009). We experienced some neighborhoods at quiet times and others during busy periods. We purposefully conducted mobile interviews at varied times on different days of the
week to experience diverse rhythms. Researchers could repeat mobile interviews at a range of times along the same route to further take this into account. Advance planning and testing are required for mobile interview equipment. Audio recorders can be less effective in high-traffic, construction, and crowded areas. Wind, loud noises, microphones falling off, and outside people entering the conversation can reduce audio quality (Carpiano 2009; Garcia et al. 2012). Cameras are weather-sensitive and can shut off in extremely cold temperatures. Researchers need to check batteries regularly and carry ample backup battery power. In rainy conditions, notebooks can become waterlogged, wet pens can stop writing, and camera lenses can blur from condensation. We found that smaller notebooks and cameras were easier to shield, and pencils wrote best in the rain.

The visible recording mechanisms can compromise participants’ privacy and confidentiality. In some instances, we put recording devices away for safety. As Carpiano (2009) noted, there can be fear of repercussions if a participant seen walking and pointing with researchers is construed as reporting illicit activity. When engaging with others in the street, it is imperative to carefully manage recording devices to preserve the anonymity of speakers. Confidentiality is a constant concern (Garcia et al. 2012). We heeded participant direction when encountering others and, unless explicitly introduced, remained as inconspicuous and discreet as possible.

Participants need to be in control and feel empowered to stay within their personal parameters for safety and comfort. This includes physical comfort. Participants of any age can become tired. It is important to check in regularly with participants and watch for any signs of fatigue, dizziness, or soreness. Interviewer safety is also essential. All of our researchers carried cell phones with location services during fieldwork. We wore comfortable shoes, carried water and snacks, and brought appropriate clothing. If participants suggested travel by car, protocol required a valid driver’s license and confirmed driving ability. Researchers constantly scanned surroundings and obeyed traffic laws. Clear guidelines should be established before beginning the mobile interview to ensure participant and researcher well-being and security.

The value of data collected depends on the inclusion of sufficient locational identifiers to situate and ground the interview. Echoing Carpiano’s (2009) observation, we found that participants could be vague when describing surroundings given the conversational nature of the session. Participant gestures were difficult to capture, and we reminded some participants to verbalize (Garcia et al. 2012). Without any guidance, the mobile interview can turn into a social visit. We used surrounding environmental features as conversation prompts when needed to reground the discussion in a sociospatial context. Our notes included specific locations and geographic identifiers such as streets and public landmarks. Observations are based on visual (photograph), geospatial (mapped routes), and textual (detailed notation) data. As discussed previously, our decision not to audio record the mobile interviews provided valuable flexibility, deeper personal reflection, and emotional connection. We do not have verbatim quotes from the mobile interviews, though, and much of the information is derived from researcher recall and descriptive accounts. To minimize any loss of data, researchers used notebooks in progress to jot down observations, key statements, and notes about surroundings. While the experience was still fresh in their minds, interviewers recorded detailed field notes immediately after the session. With proper documentation and diligent multimodal observation, we feel that researchers can capture the richness of participants’ sense of place.

Conclusion

The mobile interview highlights the fundamental reflexivity of human engagement with sociospatial surroundings. Shared real-time fieldwork makes visible some of the filters that shape participants’ life worlds (Kusenbach 2003). By grounding the research in participants’ lived experiences, the method offers innovative ways to better understand how place and space matter (Carpiano 2009). It accesses more mundane and less easily storied spaces that can be overlooked (Holton and Riley 2014).

Further investigation employing the mobile interview can broaden the field of geography. There are opportunities to engage with research “on the move” beyond conventional mobility, such as athletic (e.g., swimming, boating) and in-home activities (e.g., cleaning, cooking, caregiving). Cyberresearch could explore virtual mobility through different types of electronic connectivity (e.g., first-person computer game simulations). The method could span broader geographic areas and time periods, such as pilgrimages and refugee movements. Multimethod approaches could further contextualize real-time perspectives and experiences (e.g., wearable GIS technology, time-space diaries, multisensory data capture). In summary, there are numerous avenues for the mobile interview to capture multifarious ways of being in, and moving through, the world. The method innovatively challenges geography to investigate and (re)construct understandings of self and place.

Acknowledgments

We thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments.

Funding

This work was supported by the National Science Foundation (Grant No. 1558577), Queen’s University Alfred Bader Fellowship, and University of Minnesota Interdisciplinary Doctoral Fellowship.
Note

1 Participant’s pseudonym and age at the time of the interview rounded to the nearest five-year interval.

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