Walking interviews

Exploring urban heat on the go

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Abstract *Walking interviews have been part of urban research for more than twenty years. They are used to observe the socio-spatial practices of the participants and to access their local knowledge, memories and experiences. In addition, walking interviews try to ensure a higher degree of participation or even emancipation of the participants. Several techniques exist, such as go-alongs, interpretive walks, or shadowing. They differ in their methodological design regarding the researcher's and participant's role, the routes of the walks, and the types of data being collected. However, walking interviews still seem novel and have not been widely adopted in the social sciences. In this book chapter, we first review the literature to trace the method from the historical roots to the current application areas. We then introduce important methodological premises and practical considerations related to walking interviews. Our own research on urban heat in the city of Vienna (Austria) serves as an example for the potentials of walking interviews to identify and better understand participants' perceptions, spatial practices and local social capital. Against the background of these experiences, we discuss the method's advantages, challenges and critique, particularly in comparison with stationary interviews. We conclude with an outlook on potential future developments and applications of the method in the field of interdisciplinary urban research.*

Keywords *walking interviews; mobile methods; interviews in motion; urban research; urban heat*

Introduction: Walking interviews in urban research

Walking interviews have been used in urban research for more than twenty years to access participants' experiences, perceptions and local knowledge (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009). As a counterpoint to stationary interviews (Mackay et al. 2018), the dynamic interview setting enables a unique kind of self-reflection in interplay with the socio-spatial environment (Kusenbach 2018; Sattlegger et al. 2023). By considering participants as experts, walking interviews also aim to reduce power imbal-

ances between researchers and participants (Anderson 2004; Garcia et al. 2012; Finlay/Bowman 2017) and can thus be promising to capture the perspectives of some marginalized groups (Kinney 2017; Marcotte et al. 2022). The method roots and is applied in different disciplines, making it highly relevant for interdisciplinary urban research, which is exemplified in this book chapter by our own interdisciplinary research on urban heat in Vienna. The contribution is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of the variations of walking interviews that have developed over the past two decades. Second, we look at the method's historical roots and manyfold application areas. Third, we introduce the methodological premises and practical questions to consider when conducting walking interviews. Fourth, we present our own experiences with the method. Fifth, we discuss the advantages, challenges and points of criticism related to walking interviews. We conclude with an outlook on potential future applications and developments of the method in the field of interdisciplinary urban research.

Variations of walking interviews

Walking interviews are part of the canon of qualitative empirical research methods. Several variations of the method have been described in the literature. A fundamental distinction exists between investigative and mediating or affecting purposes. The former want to collect specific data in a research context and are common in fields such as geography, social sciences, and health research (Anderson 2004; Evans/Jones 2011). Here, the subject of the walking interview is the flow of information from the interviewee to the interviewer, aligning with the requirements of qualitative social research like reflexivity and (inter-)subjectivity and its aim of investigating patterns in social behavior (Flick 2022). In contrast, the latter serve to directly change participants' attitudes, preferences and awareness. For example, targeted information could be provided to sensitize participants (e.g. raising awareness regarding health or environmental impacts) or to achieve and measure effects on behavioral changes. Psychological-therapeutic walking interviews are a special case of mediated interviews with the purpose of facilitating therapeutic interventions. The participants relive burdensome experiences during the walk, helping them to process these experiences and therefore overcome the psychological consequences. Examples include walking groups for people affected by certain diseases or behaviorally challenging youth (Doucette 2004; Ireland et al. 2019). Although these application areas can provide interesting opportunities for interventions in the field of action research, we focus on the investigative and explorative application of walking interviews.

Researchers have employed various terms to characterize the method of walking interviews. These designations include: 'walking interview' (Evans/Jones 2011; Warren 2017), 'mobile interview' (Finlay/Bowman 2017), 'go-along' (Carpiano 2009;

Kusenbach 2003), 'ride-along' (Chin et al. 2020), 'guided walk' (Ross et al. 2009), 'interpretive walk' (Mackay 2018), 'Walking & Talking' (Stals et al. 2014), 'bimbling' and 'talking whilst walking' (Anderson 2004), 'on the move survey' (Kelly et al. 2011), 'accompanied visit' (Macpherson 2016), 'shadowing' (Ferguson 2016; Trouille/Tavory 2016), and likely many others. These variants are all interviews in motion but differ in two main aspects. First, the mode of mobility can range from walking to cycling, driving, or riding, among others. Second, the interview formats differ in their specific researcher-participant engagement: on 'trails' the participant chooses the route and the timing, and the researcher accompanies them, while on 'tours' the structure is more determined by the researcher (Kusenbach 2018).

Historical roots and application areas

The history of walking interviews can be traced back to various disciplines and research traditions. The method has a strong interdisciplinary characteristic, drawing insights from disciplines like sociology, geography and psychology. Walking interviews are embedded in the canon of mobile methods that have been systematically used and increasingly institutionalized since the 2000s (Kusenbach 2018). Over the last two decades, walking interviews were applied in different thematic contexts, e.g., perception of neighborhood issues (Kusenbach 2003), implications of place for health and well-being (Carpiano 2009), people's encounters with landscape (Macpherson 2016), local geographies of farm tourism (Mackay 2018), or critical disability and mobilities (Bell/Bush 2021), as well as different geographical contexts, e.g., cities and neighborhoods across various continents, peri-urban areas, or farm settings, among others (Sattlegger et al. 2023). Several journals, such as the International Journal of Qualitative Methods (Marcotte et al. 2022), and manuals deal with the relatively young method (Adey et al. 2014; Bates/Rhys-Taylor 2017; O'Neill/Roberts 2020).

There are some early 'pioneer' examples using walking interviews before the method was in systematic use (Carpiano 2009; Kusenbach 2018). In the field of urban planning, Kevin Lynch (1960) was one of the first to conduct walking interviews to study how people create mental images of three US cities. In his book *Image of the City*, he describes how the participants were asked to guide others on walks, explain the routes and talk about their ability to orient themselves. Social activist and nonfiction writer Jonathan Kozol's (1995) walking interviews with children in the South Bronx of New York City are another example of an early application of the method in the field of education research. His book *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* provides an insight into children's interpretation of and navigation through their hazard-ridden neighborhoods (Carpiano 2009).

One of the main roots of the method can be traced back to the field of ethnography, where researchers enter in the everyday environment of participants to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, practices and behaviors. Recognizing the limitations of observations and stationary interviews, researchers began exploring ways to capture more dynamic elements and generate context-rich data. These limitations include a lack of knowledge about explicit experiences of social practices during observations and the exclusion of unconscious or seemingly unmentionable aspects in stationary interviews (Sattleger et al. 2023). Sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach's article *Street Phenomenology* (2003) is often credited with providing the first systematic methodological approach to walking interviews in the ethnography of urban spaces. In her dissertation project, she exemplifies and applies the 'go-along' method to explore how residents' daily interactions contribute to the perception and understanding of local issues in two neighborhoods in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles. Compared to the ethnographic practice of 'hanging out' with participants, Kusenbach describes walking interviews as "more modest, but also more systematic and outcome-oriented" (ibid.: 463). Using the method provided her the opportunity to explore "the role of place in everyday lived experience" (ibid.). Her 50 walking interviews with residents on their everyday trips covered different variations, such as walk-alongs, ride-alongs and mixed types.

Across different disciplines, e.g., phenomenologically minded philosophy (Casey 1993), geography (Relph 1976) or sociology (de Certeau 1984), researchers have already argued for "more complex and phenomenologically sensitive ways of collecting data" (Kusenbach 2018: 6) to explore how individuals interact with their environment and the role of space in shaping experiences. Kusenbach's methodological discussion of walking interviews is also embedded in the wider context of the Spatial Turn of the social sciences and the new 'Mobilities Paradigm' (Sheller/Urry 2006). Since the early 2000s, John Urry, Monika Büscher and Mimi Sheller, among others, have drawn attention to the exploration of movement in social life and societies. As movements of people, objects, information and ideas constitute social practices, new forms of investigating these settings were required (Büscher/Urry 2009). Since then, a growing interest in mobile methods can be observed across various disciplines. In recent years, this has led to different application areas as well as further development and critique regarding walking interviews, which are discussed in more detail below.

Methodological premises and practical application

Considering the critique of the 'placing of interviews' (Elwood/Martin 2000), walking interviews leave stationary settings and are situated in various outdoor locations. Hence, researchers can gain more dynamic and unexpected insights in so-

cial situations, physical environments and local knowledge (Carpiano 2009; Mackay 2018). As participants can refer to the environment while walking, memories and experiences are stimulated and self-reflection is encouraged (Sattlegger et al. 2023). From a phenomenological point of view, walking interviews are an excellent way of exploring such experiences, events, or circumstances in the lives of the participants. They can be used to reconstruct everyday worlds and research the course of social processes (Schütz 1964). Compared to stationary interviews or participant observation, Kusenbach (2003) identifies five themes particularly suitable for using walking interviews: environmental perception, spatial practices, biographies, social architecture, and social realms. She argues that walking interviews can impose a meaningful pattern on otherwise random and disconnected phenomena by better accounting for the "three-dimensionality of the life world" (ibid.: 478). Casey (2001) developed the term 'constitutive co-ingredience', which means that place and human identity are inseparable counterparts (Ross et al. 2009). Therefore, considering both when using walking interviews is essential in any phenomenological investigation (Kusenbach 2018).

In her later work, Kusenbach (2018) further characterizes walking interviews as place-based, person-centered, symbolic, interactive, and systematic. They are place-based, firstly because they are located at places with significance for the participants' everyday lives, and secondly because place itself becomes a crucial part of the conversation. 'Person-centered' means that the exploration of places reaches out only as far as these places have meaning for the participants. Walking interviews also include symbolic elements in trying to understand how participants "both shape places and are shaped by them" (ibid.: 10). Lastly, they are interactive and systematic, as cohesive data sets are obtained through personal relationships and conversations between researchers and participants. This data retrieves better the everyday life context of the participants and their biographies by taking a spatial approach. Another premise of walking interviews is that power relations can be shifted when participants guide the researcher. Compared to stationary interviews, a more collaborative knowledge production is fostered as the participant becomes less concerned about finding correct answers (Finlay/Bowman 2017).

After choosing the proper methodological foundation for the research topic and prior to conducting the walking interviews, we advise researchers to reflect upon a range of practical questions. Some of these questions pertain generally to the choice of walking interviews as a method, while others are practical considerations for their implementation.

One general question on the application of walking interviews is whether they are used alone or, as in most studies, in combination with other methods. Walking interviews have been conducted alongside stationary interviews (Bell 2019; Hodgson 2012), field observation (Carpiano 2009; Ferguson 2016; Rogojanu/Wolfmayr 2024 in this book), photo elicitation (Clark/Emmel 2010; Resch et al. 2021; Haase/Eberth

2024 in this book), and geospatial analysis (Bergeron et al. 2014; Jones et al. 2008; Kajosaari 2024 in this book). Most commonly, walking interviews are audio recorded and the transcripts subjected to qualitative content analysis alongside the data generated with these other methods, such as photos, observer notes, or GPS data. This can produce a rich and diverse set of data but may come with challenges regarding data analysis and triangulation. Thus, a second important question is which data should be collected during walking interviews and how. In some cases, recordings might not be favorable and substituted by detailed interview protocols, e.g., when the recording device would attract unwanted attention. But even when walking interviews are recorded, notes on observations, GPS route tracking, or photos of specific places can prove useful in some research contexts (Finlay/Bowman 2017). The research questions at hand will also determine the interview structure, i.e., unstructured, semi-structured, or structured, and the choice between tours and trails.

Once these questions are addressed, various practical and technical aspects of conducting walking interviews should be considered. These aspects can be grouped as follows: a) mobility limitations, b) weather, c) interview timing, d) equipment, and e) wellbeing of participant and researcher.

a. *Mobility limitations:* Particularly for research with certain social groups, limitations in individual mobility can strongly influence the process of conducting walking interviews. Thus, the method has been specifically used to better understand these limitations, e.g., in the case of elderly people (Finlay/Bowman 2017; Lager et al. 2015; Resch et al. 2021) or visually impaired people (Bell 2019; Bell/Bush 2021). However, studies that are not directly related to individuals' different mobilities should also take them into account. Other types of mobile interviews, e.g., while driving or cycling, can serve as alternatives, but are likely to produce different place-based experiences and thus interview results (Chin et al. 2021; Clark/Emmel 2010).
b. *Weather:* Depending on the geographical context, seasonal weather conditions can also be decisive. Low temperatures and icy or snowy streets in winter and high temperatures, humidity and sun exposure in summer can make walking interviews more challenging for both participants and researchers. Conducting interviews during specific seasons can partly account for this, but short-term weather events such as heavy rainfall may still lead to rescheduling interviews and demand flexibility from researchers and participants.
c. *Interview timing*: Particularly in urban areas, places on the route of a walking interview and the overall neighborhood may look or feel different depending on the weekday and time of day (Carpiano 2009). The daily rhythm and routines of participants should also be considered, e.g., if there are places that they only feel comfortable visiting at certain day- or week times. Scheduling walking in-

terviews appropriately can also be a strategy to overcome other limitations, e.g., in the early mornings to avoid excessive heat in summer.

d. *Equipment:* Walking interviews in urban areas often cross noisy surroundings, posing a challenge for audio recorders. In addition, microphones have to be positioned not to fall off while walking. Visible recording devices might evoke skepticism from other passersby and diminish the confidentiality of participants (Clark/Emmel 2010; Finlay/Bowman 2017). Generally, technical devices as well as notebooks may be sensitive to rain. Thus, choosing the right equipment and testing it beforehand is indispensable for conducting walking interviews (Garcia et al. 2012).
e. *Wellbeing of participant and researcher*: Even more than in stationary interviews, researchers should be mindful of participants' wellbeing, e.g., offer to take breaks, obey traffic rules, or double-check if they feel comfortable on the chosen route (Finlay/Bowman 2017). In some areas, knowing about criminal activities or other local issues, such as construction sites, might be necessary to ensure the safety of both participants and researchers (Carpiano 2009).

Walking interviews on urban heat in Vienna

Our own experiences with walking interviews were made in two research projects on urban heat in Vienna (Austria) between 2021 and 2023. The consequences of climate change in cities affect certain social groups disproportionately (Bulkeley et al. 2013; Steele et al. 2015), making it particularly interesting to investigate their understanding of the issue. We thus conducted walking interviews with representatives of social groups classified as vulnerable to heat in the literature, e.g., elderly people or people with a low income (APCC 2018), and residents that considered themselves vulnerable to heat. Our research focussed on participants' experiences with heat in their neighborhoods and their individual adaptation strategies, including changes in daily practices and social activities. As this required an understanding of how participants perceive their environment, we conducted all interviews during the summer months to "explore the context with the participant in real time" (Garcia et al. 2012: 1395). This approach provided us with more contextual insights than stationary interviews, without the lengthy and intense fieldwork of a traditional ethnographic approach (Carpiano 2009). The other important consideration for choosing walking interviews was the sense of codetermination associated with the participants guiding us on tours through their everyday lifeworlds. In this way, the method could be integrated well into our participatory research designs, including focus groups and different types of citizen workshops.

In preparing our walking interviews, we addressed most of the practical questions mentioned above. We offered participants with mobility limitations a station-

ary interview with the same semi-structured guide instead of the walking interview. Although we accounted for excessive temperatures by scheduling interviews in early morning or late evening hours, some participants also preferred stationary indoor interviews due to the outdoor heat. Most walking interviews also involved stationary sections, e.g., beginning the interview in a participant's apartment before going out, or stopping to rest on a park bench or in a coffeehouse. Such variations in the interview settings should be made transparent and reflected in the research process. We recorded all interviews using a dual channel wireless system with one discreet lavalier microphone each for the participant and researcher. For additional notes, we used a clipboard with a printout of the interview guide. This may have made the interview situation more obvious, but our participants were neither concerned about confidentiality nor safety within their neighborhoods. As one interview period overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, at the time the walking interviews were arguably even safer than the (indoor) stationary alternative.

The walking interviews provided us with place-based information, e.g., adapted routes to avoid direct sunlight or particularly hot and cool spots in the city. The interview situations also fostered insights into local social capital when participants directed us to community meeting places, or when they encountered and engaged with other residents. Similar place-based references were also made in stationary interviews, but the information did not have the same contextual quality. Generally, participants seemed relaxed and comfortable during the walking interviews, exemplified by taking short breaks to buy bread or cigarettes in stores on the way, or to chat with other passersby. Some participants even highlighted that they enjoyed the walking interview and did not feel like they were part of a research process.

Advantages, challenges and critique of walking interviews

Based on examples of the application of walking interviews in different disciplines and research fields, including our own experiences investigating urban heat and social capital in Vienna, the following advantages can be summarized.

First, walking interviews ensure a specific sensitivity to the socio-spatial context they are situated in. Emphasizing this context and its qualities "clarifies the importance of place as a fundamental category of everyday experience and practice" (Kusenbach 2003: 478), making the method attractive for place-based research as well as research on various social phenomena, e.g., social capital (Carpiano 2009; Lager et al. 2015), social networks (Clark/Emmel 2010; Hodgson 2012), or social inclusion (Resch et al. 2021). Compared to stationary interviews, the stories generated 'on the go' are inevitably embedded and enriched by the physical and social environment (Sattlegger et al. 2023; Širbegović 2018). Exemplified in our research on urban heat, participants switched the side of the street to stay in the shade and ran into

neighbors, prompting them to talk about how they would help each other during heat waves – experiences we would not make during stationary interviews.

A second advantage of walking interviews is grounded in their specific setting in motion. As the activity of walking itself is often perceived as enjoyable and even liberatory (Warren 2017), researchers using the method have observed a more-free flowing dialogue that seems to entail less pressure to perform (Garcia et al. 2012; Kinney 2017; Rosset al. 2009). Walking interviews have thus been denoted as intuitive and accessible, compared to stationary interviews (Carpiano 2009; Resch et al. 2021). In our own research, we shared the impression that some participants "seemed to genuinely enjoy the process" (Carpiano 2009: 268). However, it is important to recognize that walking can also constitute a barrier for certain people, which we discuss in more detail below.

Thirdly, since the participants of walking interviews become 'expert guides' (Garcia et al. 2012) and co-constructors of knowledge (Holton/Riley 2014), the method has a more egalitarian nature and can build trust between researchers and participants (Finlay/Bowman 2017). This can increase the legitimacy of the research process, which may serve as an entry point to certain local communities and support the recruitment of further participants or the same participants for further research activities (Carpiano 2009). By inviting participants to take a more active role than in stationary settings, walking interviews are also suitable for participatory and transdisciplinary research approaches (Garcia et al. 2012; Sattlegger 2023). In our own research, we used results from the walking interviews, such as measures to cope with heat stress suggested by the participants, to design the following citizen workshops. Several participants of the walking interviews also took part in these workshops and were even willing to advocate for their elaborated measures in a follow-up science-policy workshop with decision makers in the city of Vienna.

Walking interviews also entail specific methodical challenges. One of these challenges is the greater effort involved in recruiting specific target groups for walking interviews, e.g. in research on the socio-spatial environment of mobile and active older people (Resch et al. 2021). When identifying participants for our own research, we also had to navigate a fine line between heat vulnerability, e.g., due to age or lack of mobility, and the basic requirements of the method. Depending on the research topic, there may also be concerns about accessibility to the field: walking interviews may not be suitable for places that are too private, too dangerous, or otherwise difficult to access (Kusenbach 2003). In addition to the effort involved in preparing the walking interviews, conducting them can also be demanding. While walking, researchers are challenged by simultaneously asking questions, listening, reacting to the dynamics of the interview situation, possibly taking photos, processing impressions and paying attention to traffic (Kinney 2017; Resch et al. 2021). Depending on the research field, walking interviews can also be emotionally demanding for both

interviewees and interviewers, as certain places can have specific meanings for the participants (Bartlett et al. 2023).

The main critique of walking interviews is being raised from an intersectional perspective, as the normative view of walking is increasingly being questioned (Bell/Bush 2021; Macpherson 2016; Parent 2016; Warren 2017). The term 'walking interview' and its inscribed "ideal of able bodiedness" (Parent 2016: 523) is criticized in the field of critical disability studies: as not everyone is able to walk, the method can have an exclusionary effect, even when offering alternative modes of mobility (Bartlett et al. 2023). Furthermore, walking can have different implications in diverse sociocultural research contexts. From a Eurocentric perspective, the roots of walking as a leisure activity are linked to the ideal type of the 19th century flaneur (Middleton 2010). Framing walking as an everyday leisure activity can exclude people for whom this is not the case, as Warren (2017) points out in her research with Muslim women in the UK. The visibility of walking interviews in public space can also be challenging for marginalized or stigmatized groups. Therefore, ethical considerations such as risks or burdens to participants and researchers could be addressed more in the literature (Bartlett et al. 2023). A greater consideration of aspects of social difference, such as gender, ethnicity, faith or physical condition, in walking interviews is decisive (Macpherson 2016; Marcotte et al. 2022; Warren 2017). In order to take the different embodied experiences of both researchers and participants and their social distinctions, e.g., appearance, fitness or socio-spatial practices, more into account, the method of walking interviews could be further diversified (Macpherson 2016; Warren 2017).

Outlook

The examples presented in this book chapter demonstrate the versatility of walking interviews both in methodical design and application areas. Due to its novelty, the method is still under continuous development and various potentials for further advancement can be identified. These include the repetition of walking interviews with the same participants at different times (Finlay/Bowman 2017), or with the same routes but with experts, e.g., urban planners (Garcia et al. 2012). Carpiano (2009) suggests 'group go-alongs' that could include both residents of an area and stakeholders with formalized knowledge about it. Furthermore, researchers could do exploratory walks of the research areas prior to walking interviews or repeat routes afterwards to deepen their understanding of these areas (Resch et al. 2021). Visual tools for representing spatial knowledge, such as cognitive maps and mental maps (Dangschat/Kogler 2019; Kogler 2024 in this book), could be combined with walking interviews (Resch et al. 2021). Lastly, expanding the scope from cities to broader ge-

ographic areas, walking interviews could also be used to study refugee movements or pilgrimages (Finlay/Bowman 2017).

Our own research suggests the method's suitability for exploring questions around urban climate change and social capital, displaying its potentials beyond primarily place-based research. Taking into account the necessary practical considerations, advantages and challenges as well as the critique of walking interviews presented in this book chapter, they can be a valuable supplement to the range of methods in the field of interdisciplinary urban research. This contribution serves as an inspiration for researchers from different disciplines and urban practitioners to experiment with and develop the method in various research contexts.

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