

Collaborative interviews

Collaborative interviews can be an important tool for gathering in-depth information from participating groups. Interview-type conversations can occur in ways that differ from quantitative interviews for data collection or other open formats. This section aims to explore some methods that can be especially useful for investigating and collecting socio-spatial data from local actors and communities by asking about their perspectives.

Walking interviews

The concept of conducting an interview while walking is a method that has been used in different formats by researchers, especially in the field of anthropology and geography (Warren 2017; Anderson 2004; Evans and Jones 2011). Walking is a spatial practice (Certeau 1984); therefore, engaging in conversations or interviews while walking in urban spaces can be a powerful tool in the fields of planning and design. This format of collaborative interview is in dialogue with another tool that we will explore in the following sections, called 'journey', which involves collective walks around the space to be analysed or designed. Here, we are focusing on individual interactions, where one can get a deeper knowledge about the daily practices of certain individuals, about their perceptions of space, about the decisions they make and what influences those decisions.

As Reznikoff (2024: 50) – a master's student who used this method to engage with women in Medellín, Colombia – describes:

[W]alking interviews have been identified as an intimate methodological way of accessing participant's or community's (embodied) experiences, at-

titudes, knowledges, beliefs, habitual practices, and emotions in relation to their environment and to each other.

The format for walking interviews can vary; ideally, the route should be decided by the interviewee rather than the interviewer because the main goal of this method is to understand the individual's spatial practices and choice of route.

Talking about spaces while walking is a completely different experience from answering spatial questions in a static environment. During walking interviews, the interviewer can follow the interviewee for part of the day and experience their mobility challenges or ask about certain decisions. For example, they may ask, "Why did you decide to take this street instead of another? The answers are sometimes not completely rational and might highlight issues of feeling unsafe, informal networks and quality of public spaces, among others.

During her walking interviews with Venezuelan women living in Moravia, a barrio (i.e. neighbourhood) in Medellin, Colombia, Reznikoff (2024: 50) observed that 'walking with women seems especially meaningful, as the presence of gender-specific discriminations built into space were long not considered sufficiently'.

Reznikoff walked with and interviewed four women from different sectors of Moravia. Through their conversations, she understood the gender imbalances experienced by these women, especially as their daily lives comprised basic activities related to providing care for their family members, such as their children or elderly relatives. Therefore, their mobility decisions and the decisions on where and on what to work were highly related to their role as the main caretakers of their families.

In another experience, a group of students working with refugees in Berlin asked a small group of Kurdish teenagers who had just arrived in the city to show them their neighbourhood. While walking with them, the students noticed that the girls oriented themselves in the area through the distinct types of fruit trees that existed along the walking route. This showed the students a completely different spatial narrative and perspective that they had not been aware of previously.

Figure 6: Course Transforming built spaces in Favela Indiana, Rio de Janeiro, 2014.

Source: Abri  



Walking interviews can assume different formats and lengths. They can comprise a short walk around the area to be analysed, where the interviewer asks the interviewees to show them around or show the biggest issues or favourite places. The process can even take a half or full day of dynamically following the subject in their daily life. In both cases, this action requires some sort of advance trust-building preparation to ensure that the interviewees feel comfortable walking and sharing with you; therefore, some form of previous contact should be established.

Biographical narrative interviews

Biographical narrative interviews are used in the social sciences. The concept was developed by Schütze (1983) and further discussed and updated by scholars such as Denzin (1989) and Szczepanik and Siebert (2016). This type of interview consists of asking a few open questions and letting the interviewee talk for as long as they want about their personal stories and create a narrative according to their understanding or perceptions of the topic at hand.

Biographical narrative interviews are an alternative to question-based interviews that intend to place the narrator – or interviewees – at the centre of their stories. The interview is guided by the interviewee, and the interviewer interferes as little as possible. You must allow the subject to talk about their life, origins and whatever they want to narrate regarding their life.

The biographical interview implies the definition of the key participant as narrator rather than as interviewee. Each of the participants, researcher and narrator, plays a specific role – the narrator is at the centre of attention, and the researcher is primarily a listener, whose role in guiding the direction and nature of the issues picked up is a limited one (Szczepanik and Siebert 2016: 286).

The researcher acts as a listener and observer who has a limited role in guiding the direction and nature of the interviewee's narrative. By allowing the narrators to tell their stories with minimum interference, we were confronted with unforeseen aspects that could be hidden in question-based interviews:

The fundamental feature of the narrative interview is that the material obtained is not a sum of answers to questions, but a spontaneous and unin-

interrupted account in which the participant attempts to relate reflexively to their own life experience (Szczepanik and Siebert 2016: 286).

This approach allowed us to unveil common patterns that shape participants' socio-spatial practices while simultaneously giving us the opportunity to create an intimate setting, which made people feel comfortable with sharing more detailed aspects of their personal lives.

This tool is particularly interesting when collaborating with vulnerable groups because it allows interviewees to freely share private aspects of their lives to the extent that they feel comfortable. In our experience working with refugees living in Berlin, walking interviews allowed me to unveil different layers of the living experiences of these interview subjects, which could then be expanded to broader contexts although the interviews were based on individual narratives.

In many cases, the spatial dimension of these stories is permeated by imaginaries, colours, smells and relationships. It can be difficult to convert this information into useful data, but this is a powerful tool for diving into the daily experiences, issues and perspectives of the target communities.

It is important to highlight that this interview format does not work with everyone, as some people are more open to talking about their lives, while others prefer to answer specific questions. Therefore, it can be useful to keep specific questions in reserve if the interviewees are not interested in sharing much about themselves. In addition, where the conversation takes place is key to the success of walking interviews.

