



Methods for Change

**Participant Packs:
A Flexible, Inclusive and
Accessible Method**

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Participant Packs: A Flexible, Inclusive and Accessible Method

The Participant Pack is a flexible and open-ended research method which includes non-prescriptive prompts for engagement. A Participant Pack might include photographs of a place from some point in the past or present to encourage reflection; a notebook in which participants may write ideas or sketch; coloured pens; news articles; a disposable camera; a Dictaphone (voice recorder); leaflets; worksheets; or crafting materials.

The pack may be created with a specific intention (left with the participant with a specific set of tasks and activities in mind), or it could be used in a more exploratory and open-ended way (left with the participant with prompts to engage with the materials in the pack at their own behest). It is down to the researcher to decide how focused or open the Participant Pack is.

I developed the idea of using a Participant Pack whilst researching with older people in Greater Manchester. I used it alongside other participatory methods to better understand the changing relationships between older people and the places in which they live. Creating a Participant Pack was intended to make researching older people's experiences of place more accessible and inclusive for those who may be unable or prefer not to walk. Indeed, some participants preferred to not walk for reasons including a dislike for cold and rainy weather, other time pressures, the need to use a walking aid, bodily pain, or health conditions. Moreover, although walking is often the 'go-to' method when researching place, I was conscious that walking may not be the ideal or easy choice for older participants and that those who were less mobile were likely to call into play very different associations with place. The Participant Pack was therefore developed as an alternative and inclusive method to walking, to allow participants to communicate their experiences of place without necessarily being physically in the place itself. In this way, Participant Packs are a useful method to increase the inclusivity of other methods that might require physical mobility and moving around place. Within this collection Participant Packs could be used as a supplementary method to [Photo go-alongs](#), [Walk-along Interviews](#) and [Mobile Visual Methods](#) with people from a range of ages, abilities, genders and cultural backgrounds who might not be able, or not feel safe to, engage in public space

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How do Participant Packs create or contribute to change?

In academic research, impact or change is often expected to occur once research has finished or at the point of dissemination, where research is explicitly and purposefully brought into conversation with a range of non-academic stakeholders. With the Participant Pack, change also happens during the process of researching through capacity building. Indeed, participants might act as gatekeepers, distributing Participant Packs to their family, friends, and local community, thereby forging new social connections and enabling people to talk about their lives and interests. In this sense, the pack can become a reason for participants to engage with people they might otherwise never have spoken with. These new connections often enhance participant's relationships with other people and places, though the opposite may also occur.

When used in combination with other ethnographic and participatory methods, the Participant Pack can contribute toward creating a rich collage of knowledge about the experiences of an individual or group in relation to a theme. These findings can help policy communities or researchers to understand how people's lives are lived on the ground. The experiences and findings generated may also be of interest to local history or culture groups, such as libraries and museums because of their reference to local places and histories. The flexibility, inclusivity and accessibility of the Participant Pack method itself may also be of interest to policy communities who work with those for whom walking may not be a preferred choice, or for those who cannot commit to meeting at a set time.

What ideas or concepts influence this method?

A lot of participatory research across the social sciences has used and developed Participant Packs but has perhaps not discussed them as a discrete method before or named them as such. Participant Packs might also be referred to as toolkits or equipment boxes, for instance. I used Participant Packs as an alternative to walking methods. Despite it being well documented that talking whilst walking can generate collages of collaborative knowledge, it is inevitable that certain people, particularly those who are less mobile, will always be excluded. Moreover, the debate about mobile methods in the social sciences risks privileging methods whereby the participant physically moves with the researcher as opposed to a focus on the diverse array of methods which can get at movement in various ways.

The challenge therefore was to develop a method which can get at those fleeting qualities evoked by the unfolding everyday but without necessarily being in the place of focus. To put it differently, I wanted to emphasise how you do not need to be physically mobile to be sensitive to movement.. I wanted to show how experiences and understandings of place are not dependent upon the movement of the body alone. But rather, the movement of other things, people, sounds and smells have the capacity to blur places into one another.

This attention to movement and to those aspects of life which are difficult to represent is influenced by a recent turn to 'more-than-representational theories' in Geography. For example, for those older people who spend a large amount of time in the home, the stories visitors tell, a source of local news, the memories of a lifetime, continuously shape their senses of place. As such, just because a person may be more or less 'static' in a physical sense does not mean they are immobile in a cognitive, sensory, and emotional sense.

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Why might I want to use Participant Packs?

- The flexible and open nature of this method makes it inclusive and accessible. Having the freedom to engage with the different elements of the pack (which might include photographs, notepads, cameras, dictaphones, and craft materials) as little or as much as the participants please, means that this method is led by their unfolding needs. For instance:
 - While some participants may be unwilling or uncomfortable writing about their experiences, they may wish to draw or sketch as an alternative.
 - While some may not have the time to go out and take photographs of a place themselves, they may be happy to engage with photographs they already have or those you have provide in the pack to offer reflections.
 - While some participants may view taking the pack home as homework to complete, others may embrace the freedom, preferring to engage with the pack independently.
- The Participant Pack is not restrictive. It is this sense of openness that makes the Participant Pack suited to more grounded forms of theory making, whereby knowledge comes from the participants.
- Participant Packs can be used when face to face research is not possible. The pack can be posted to participants and received back through the post. If the researcher and participants are digitally literate, there may also be ways that this approach could be mimicked in an online environment or combined with digital methods.
- This method moves academic research away from text-based methods, granting participants the freedom to creatively engage with the pack as they wish. Some participants may create a collage, others might choose to write stories and memories in the note pad, while others may simply use it as a reason to engage with others.
- The Participant Pack challenges ableist tendencies in academic research by offering a flexible, open, and inclusive method for researching with those for whom walking may not be an ideal or easy choice. The flexibility of the Participant Pack means that those who are perhaps housebound, have mental ill health, or who may be unable to read or write are able to partake in research in a way which suits them. It also means that participants do not have to travel or talk at length, which other methods demand.

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Step by step guide to using Participant Packs:

- 1. Source participants.** Pick a research topic or theme you are interested in and identify who you would like to work with. Reach out to them and recruit participants.
- 2. Assemble the Participant Packs.** Decide what to include in your packs. This needs to be shaped by what you are hoping to find out and the nature of the material you are trying to gather. Items you might like to include are pens, a notepad, a disposable camera, a dictaphone and photographs both old and new.

It is a good idea to include an information sheet in your Participant Pack which explains to the participant what they can find in the pack and what you hope to get out of it. Be careful to not present this in a restrictive way, leaving it open to interpretation.

If you want to include photographs in your Participant Pack, there is scope to make this more participatory. Why not work with a local history group and ask them to source the photographs, for instance. Again, the point here is to use the pack in a way which suits the research and which allows you to speak to those who might otherwise be overlooked. Think about what might make these groups more likely to engage.

- 3. Distribute the Participant Packs.** The Participant Packs can be distributed in a number of different ways, and this will depend on your participants. Perhaps some participants have volunteered to be gatekeepers and have

offered to distribute packs amongst their networks. This is a particularly good route to take as it means the packs are likely to reach those who you might not be able to reach alone, allowing the research to snowball. Alternatively, you might want to distribute them at a community event or meeting. You might also send them out by post.

Be aware that you might face rejection or resistance to the Participant Pack and remember that this is okay. Some participants may interpret the pack as homework and not want to participate. If this is the case, maybe the participant would prefer to talk around photographs in the pack, or maybe a different method all together is more appropriate. It is important to emphasise that participants can use the pack flexibly, in the manner they want to.

- 4. Retrieve the Participant Packs from your participants.** Again, this can be done in several ways and will depend on the nature of your relationship with participants. You could ask for participants to post their packs to you (with the researcher covering postage costs); perhaps arrange for them to be dropped off at a mutually convenient community facility; maybe the gatekeepers will collect them for you; or, if you are meeting the participant for another reason, maybe collect it then. There might be ways that the information collected in the pack could be shared digitally (eg., photos taken of the outputs) to reduce costs of postage. The point again is to be flexible and responsive to what works for the participant.

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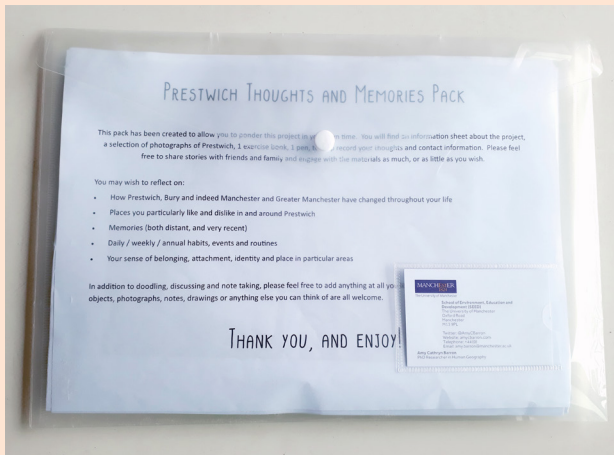


Examples of using Participant Packs in social science research

More-than older age: *making sense of place*

Researcher: Dr Amy Barron, The University of Manchester

This research used the Participant Pack alongside several other participatory and ethnographic methods whilst researching with thirty-two older people from Prestwich, Greater Manchester. One aim of this research was to foreground the lived dimensions of older age against the policy backdrop of creating what the World Health Organisation call 'age-friendly cities'. I was, in part, concerned with understanding older people's lived experiences of place, but I did not want to restrict who could and who could not take part on the basis of whether they would be comfortable walking around a place.



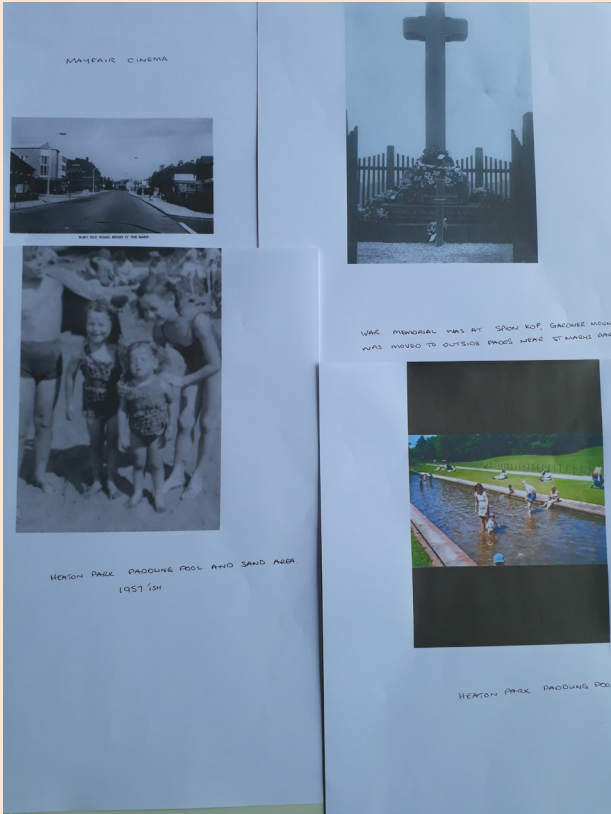
A Participant Pack

The initial idea was that participants would be given a pack containing a notepad, a selection of local photographs, and a pen to take home for them to consider and reflect on themselves or discuss with friends and family.

The photographs included in the pack were of Prestwich from various points in the 20th and 21st centuries. The most recent photographs included were taken by myself whilst exploring Prestwich as a potential site for my research, whilst the older photographs were sourced online from Google Image searches. Photographs of varying ages were included to avoid assuming nostalgia and placing older people in the past. Moreover, I did not use the photographs to guide discussion as in photo-elicitation. Rather, they served as prompts for participants to engage with should they wish.

Although the pack was initially intended to be for participants who were unable or unwilling to walk and as a means to engage without my presence being overly imposing, the pack developed a life of its own with its uses becoming more diverse than initially anticipated. For example, the photographs in the packs were used by participants to prompt group discussion, while others explained how they took some packs to various classes and groups they were involved in and used them as an excuse to speak with people they would not usually converse with. Comparatively, other participants took the pack for it never to be seen again, some cautioned that they could not comfortably read or write, while others stressed that they 'did not have time to do homework', despite it being made clear that there was no obligation to engage with the pack at all.

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*Photographs collected by
a research participant*

Although I encountered older individuals who were unwilling or unable to walk for various reasons, the flexible approach meant that this was never an obstacle as I simply arranged with participants to do something with which they were comfortable. For example, whilst speaking with James on the phone, he explained how he spends a lot of time in Prestwich Clough (a local wooded green valley) and so I asked whether he would like to walk around there with me. James explained how, because of a heart condition and the cold weather, he would prefer to not walk and to meet somewhere indoors. James and I arranged to meet at the Church Inn Pub which is a protected building located on the edge of Prestwich Clough. Because this was the first time that I was meeting James in person, I took the Participant Pack as a conversation prompt as it included several photographs of the Clough. As it happened, James also brought his own collection of books, photographs and maps and we used these resources to talk around.

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Where else could Participant Packs be used?

Participant Packs might be useful where face to face research is not possible, such as when participants are unable to commit to meeting in person. The pack could be sent out and returned back to you by post (with the researcher covering any costs), perhaps followed up with a telephone or video call if needed. This method might be particularly useful when researching with those for whom walking is not an ideal or easy choice, this could therefore include researching with those who have mental or physical ill health. It might also be used to include people who are socially and physically isolated or housebound, or to expand the geographical reach of a project and to minimise costs. One context in which it may be particularly useful is when researching with older people who are socially isolated or lonely. It might also be useful in care homes, for instance.

Top tips

1. Include a range of different materials and provocations in the Participant Pack. This will be more likely to engage the widest group of people - but be careful not to overwhelm.
2. Remember that flexibility can reap benefits. Rather than predefining how you think the pack should be used, why not let the participants take a lead.
3. It might be a good idea to include a list of things that can be found in the pack, along with a summary of your intentions for providing the pack. This can serve as a useful reminder for participants, especially when researching over a longer timeframe.

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Further reading

- More-than-representational approaches to the life-course
- Creative care kit: keeping well with creativity
- The methodological potential of scrapbooking

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