



Methods for Change

# Walk-along Interviews

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# Walk-along Interviews

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*In walk-along, or go-along interviews, the researcher-participant interaction is taken out of the more traditional sit-down context into a more active and conversational setting. The concept is based on the idea that the movement across different spaces, for example a neighbourhood or town centre, exposes both the participant and the researcher to changing infrastructures, meanings and relations which can stimulate conversations in varying ways.* Doing Walk-along Interviews means that the researcher gets immersed in the participants' world and in their 'journey'. In the process, the researcher-participant dynamic of asking and answering questions fades into the background in favour of a rather conversational encounter between two people. Walk-along Interviews are inexpensive and, in many ways, easier to set up than many other methods, including sit-down interviews. They are particularly useful to establish a holistic, in-depth understanding of how people relate or do not relate to the spaces that they inhabit and what their day-to-day experiences of inhabiting this place are like. Walk-along Interviews can be used alongside traditional sit-down interviews and meaningfully combined with other methods such as photograph elicitation and diary writing.



## How do Walk-along Interviews create or contribute to change?

On an individual level, Walk-along Interviews impact research participants differently, as they involve the participant a lot more than traditional sit-down interviews. Rather than the interviewer asking questions along a pre-set guide, Walk-along Interviews are conversational, with the participant taking the lead in terms of the walking route, as well as the topic of conversation. At the same time, the knowledge about the research topic and conversation with the researcher can trigger processes of reflection in participants. Through the research process, the participant becomes more aware of their surroundings, they might be triggered by what is happening around them, looking out for things and making connections between the research topic and their day-to-day life.

On a wider, societal level, this method brings out the voices of those who inhabit a space, and provides a platform to talk about their space in a way that is meaningful for them. By shedding a light on these individual experiences, this method can be helpful to shift fixed views and perceptions on what a certain neighbourhood or town is like. Participants' voices help to look at places from a different lens, through the things that participants point out, rather than the things the researcher considers significant. Walk-along Interviews with people who grew up locally can even challenge established ideas of the history of a place.

## What ideas or concepts influence Walk-along Interviews?

This approach sits within an intersectional approach towards research problems related to the everyday lives of marginalised groups: the idea that aspects of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, etc. intersect and that different intersections of those identities impact how people interrelate with different spaces. It is further inspired by Jennifer Mason's (2011) facet methodology, which is based on an overall bigger question, but paying attention to the over- and under-arching themes that run through it. Mason uses the visual metaphor of the gemstone as the overall research enquiry, turned one way or another, the gemstone reveals many facets, or different methodological planes which illuminate the overall research project in various ways. Some of the criticisms regarding intersectionality concern the fact that researchers often end up using a specific method and focusing on one or two intersections only, which could be race and gender, for example, but without focusing on other identities that people have as well. Since Walk-along Interviews are more open and experimental, they are perfectly suited to reveal complex, but often less obvious intersections in people's day-to-day lives.

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## Why might I want to use Walk-along Interviews?

- Walk-along Interviews are well suited for the researcher to get a situated, and bigger picture, understanding of a place. While there are pre-existing views on what a certain region, town or neighbourhood is like, each local area has its own specific sort of story as well as its own needs. Walking around a place, guided by the participants' individual views on and experience within that place provides the researcher with grounding, in-depth insights which help to build nuanced insights about the 'bigger picture' of a place.
- Walk-along Interviews give both participants and researchers time to reflect. While it is normal in day-to-day conversations that people take moments to pause and reflect, doing this in sit-down research interviews can feel uncomfortable or inappropriate. The dynamic, conversational, and thus perhaps less pressured context of Walk-along Interviews allows people more space to think and reflect in different, more open ways.
- On Walk-along Interviews, you never know where research participants will take you. Walk-along Interviews reveal aspects of people's lives that researchers might not be looking for. People might take a route that is comfortable to them, or attached to a historical meaning; they might take slightly unusual routes to go from A to B, in order to avoid or pass a certain area. This can prompt personal and biographical revelations which often significantly enrich the research, but can also be emotionally challenging.

*Be aware of the environment in which the interview takes place and how this environment impacts the research process. Entering a participants' home as a researcher can cause power shifts in terms of the researchers' position in relation to the participant. On the flip side, interviews in public places such library cafes, can be limiting as well, as people might feel uncomfortable sharing personal stories. This is where the Walk-along interview can help. Walk-along Interviews create a dynamic in the relationship between researcher and participant that is wholly different from sit-down research interviews in public spaces or in people's homes. You will likely use Walk-along Interviews alongside other forms of data collection, which all provide different sets of opportunities and challenges.*



## Step-by-step guide to using Walk-along Interviews:

- 1. Participants are generally most familiar with the format of a traditional sit-down interview.** Organising a sit-down discussion in a setting where participants feel comfortable can be a good way to begin the research, and to establish whether participants are willing to engage in a Walk-along Interview. In this initial face-to-face contact, as a researcher, you may guide the participant through the steps and explain the different parts of the research. The participant then decides what aspects they are comfortable with. Some may, for different reasons, only engage through the sit-down interview and talk the researcher through a place, but generally people feel more comfortable doing a walk than a sit-down interview.

*Be prepared to go at the pace your participant wants to go and for the walk to take as long as the participant is keen on walking. You can prepare for this by making sure you charge your dictaphone batteries etc.*

- 2. Allow the participant to choose the day and time of the Walk-along Interview.** Some people might prefer to have some time between the initial contact and the Walk-along Interview. There might be repeated walks as well. It is important to give participants the space to think about it and to choose what and how they are willing to share.

*While it is important to make the research participant familiar with the research process, make sure you are not pushing the participant into one direction – instead allow them to take over the process and guide you.*

- 3. Meet for the Walk-along Interview at the place chosen by the participant.** This may be their home, a place of significance, or a central meeting place in town.
- 4. Once the walk has come to an end, make sure you debrief.** Let them know that the research part has come to an end, and ask for any last or common thoughts that they want to share at the end. This part is crucial, not only to show appreciation, but this is also often the moment when participants add really interesting reflections which can add further detail to the conversation you have had. At this point participants will have shared many thoughts and made lots of different connections, but asking this specifically at the end can trigger more reflections on the overall process.



## An example of Walk-along Interviews in social science research

**Challenging discourses on BSA Muslim women through an intersectional analysis of everyday experiences across spaces of home, work and public space**

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Walk-along Interviews were applied to challenge dominant discourses of British South Asian (BSA) Muslim women through an intersectional analysis of everyday experiences in Oldham, a large town in Greater Manchester, across spaces of home, work and public spaces.

A feminist methodology was employed, to specifically highlight the ways in which research could forefront marginalised voices by recognising and valuing narratives which had been subsumed within dominant or pathologised discourses of Muslim women. Because of the vastness of the 'everyday', such a concept could not be researched through just one research method. In particular, the aim was to focus on the embodied aspect of everyday lives, and the idea of fluidity and movement, to understand how a body is interpreted or looked at or seen, from different perspectives, or within different spaces. The same body within an ethnic minority community would be seen very differently from a wider public space context (the tram, a café, the local park) with a wider group of people.

Therefore, a number of methods including traditional sit-down interviews with photography and diaries were employed. Walk-along Interviews constituted one of these methods, as they proved helpful to explore the complexities of BSA Muslim women's lives, and the everyday spaces they would encounter

and move through. There are inherent complexities of space and place that British Muslim women are embedded in.

In an active process, Walk-along Interviews involved listening, observing and participating through asking questions. Applied in the context of this research, Walk-along Interviews helped negate some of the awkwardness that can be present in sit-down interviews, whilst requiring the researcher to be continually engaged with not only the conversation but also the dynamic environment of the streets in which the conversation takes place. The dynamic and almost unscripted nature of the Walk-along Interview has the potential to elicit



*A picture of the derelict mills of Oldham taken from the photo album of a research participant who grew up in the town.*



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rich material, as it can illuminate not only how British Muslim women negotiate and contend with their everyday spaces in Oldham, but also how these spaces are re/made through everyday interactions in their wider social environment.

One key finding established through Walk-along Interviews in Oldham was the sense of disconnection BSA Muslim women felt from the history of Oldham, despite the fact that they have been living there all their lives, as many of their parents or grandparents would have migrated to Oldham to work in the cotton mills. Through Oldham's history as a mill town and its historical colonial links to Empire and migration, ethnic minority communities have a long, historical connection to specifically Oldham, and the wider UK. However, the Walk-along Interviews that took place in Oldham revealed that this history is not reflected in BSA Muslim women's sense of connection to this town. As such, it became apparent that this history of migration to Oldham from the former Commonwealth needs to be unearthed, preserved and shared with future generations.

The Walk-along Interviews inspired a range of further activities. The findings from these interviews led to a conversation with the curator of Oldham's local archives and history centre, and the idea of building a resource for younger generations of Muslims living in Oldham so that they have something that connects their history to the history of the town. Through oral history workshops it is hoped that ethnic minority residents of Oldham are empowered to make themselves and their place in the history of the town visible. Conducting oral history interviews with older members of their family and within the wider community will help the minority group



*A sweets machine in the streets of Oldham. Just like the derelict mills, the sweets machine represents a wider narrative of Oldham's industrial past, but also the sense of personal memory which affects how/why people feel a sense of belonging in/to Oldham. A combination of research methods which combines Walk-along Interviews with photo-elicitation and other methods can unearth these stories in holistic and meaningful ways.'*

and the wider population learn of migration and create connections between the past and present, and the growth of the South Asian community in Oldham. It will help BSA Muslim women cement their own sense of belonging to the town and make this belonging visible to society as a whole.



## Where else could Walk-along Interviews be used?

Walk-along interviews are well suited to gain insights into a local area from the perspective of people who inhabit it. Through this method, we can learn more about the participants' daily life encounters and experiences, but also about the social life of a place itself. This method could be applied by many different institutions, such as councils, charities or businesses who want to learn more about people's habits and needs, the services that they use and the places that they frequent. Follow up activities from this form of data collection can help institutions such as councils to be more in touch with the communities that they are trying to work with and people in the communities can be aided to establish a sense of connection and belonging.

## Top tips

1. Make Walk-along Interviews as conversational as possible. People are always wary of research settings and the presence of the dictaphone. Even if they know the purpose of the meeting and that you are not deceiving them in any way, it makes a huge difference when you put the dictaphone away and just have a conversation.
2. Be flexible. You are not going to have the question sheet with you. You might have your questions in mind, but you will be guided by the conversation, and the walking!
3. Be open and willing to explore. People will take you where they want to take you and you're getting a really privileged insight into people's lives.
4. Be excited about the process. You will get a lot out of it, if you let yourself be guided by what people do and by how they do it. It will provide you with different views and almost certainly with some surprises.
5. Walk-along Interviews (and go-along methods in general) can be challenging for people with disability and mobility restrictions. Pick the mode and pace of 'walking through' space that suits your participant. If walking really is not possible for your participants, you can explore alternatives, such as (a) asking people to draw/map their community and/or the routes they take, (b) use digital maps (eg., google maps, open maps) or (c) virtual environments (eg., virtual reality) to explore places and experiences within them.



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## Further reading

- Pluralising the walking interview: Researching (im)mobilities with Muslim women.
- Forgotten Women: The impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women.
- Ethnic minority 'ghettos' to be investigated'.

**To reference:** Bibi, R. and Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Walk-along interviews', in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



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