

# Talking whilst walking: a geographical archaeology of knowledge

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Revised manuscript received 2 March 2004

*This paper explores how understandings of the knowledge and lives of individuals can be gained through making geographical context more explicit within qualitative research methods. The paper will focus on 'conversations in place'. More particularly, it will suggest that conversations held whilst walking through a place have the potential to generate a collage of collaborative knowledge. Drawing on the work of Casey, the paper builds upon the notion of the 'constitutive co-ingredience' of place and human identity, and, through using documentary and empirical examples, will argue that 'talking whilst walking' can harness place as an active trigger to prompt knowledge recollection and production.*

**Key words:** place, methodology, knowledge production, talking, bimbaling

## Introduction

Geographers within the social sciences have a long-standing interest in the relations between peoples and places. At an ontological level, the methodologies that explore these relations are commonly determined by how we configure the world 'out there'. As Graham (1997) generalizes, this debate dichotomizes between the ontological poles of realism and anti-realism. According to Graham, realism is a philosophical position that holds that there is a 'real' world of existence out there, independent of human conceptualization, and it is this world that research methodology seeks to understand. Alternatively, the 'anti-realist' position denies this configuration, arguing that humans create the world we know through our mental capacities. From this standpoint it is the goal of method to explore how human constructions are made, developed and valued. Beyond the philosophical merits of both positions, and as practical considerations bear an influence on research projects, it is the investigation of these cultural creations that is often the goal of social science research. As Graham states,

we might . . . remain agnostic in relation to whether or not a world exists beyond our mental constructions of it but nevertheless argue that all we can come to know are these mental constructions. (1997, 18)

This paper argues for a new approach to excavate and access the meaning of human constructions of the world. Following the writings of Casey (2000 2001), it outlines the notion of the 'constitutive co-ingredience' of people and place and argues that this set of relations can be harnessed to access deeper insights into these human constructions of the world. One aim of the paper is thus to argue that social constructions of knowledge can be enhanced through harnessing the inherently socio-spatial character of human knowledge. Secondly the paper explores a method for harnessing these socio-spatial relations. Evidenced with documentary and empirical examples, it argues that conversations in place – more particularly 'talking whilst walking' – offers the potential to bolster and add new layers of understanding to social science research.

Exploration of the ways in which meanings, emotions and values come to constitute our world have been pioneered by the humanistic tradition of

geography (see Ley 1974; Seamon 1979), and a variety of qualitative research methods have been used to excavate these knowledge constructions (see Clifford and Valentine 2003). One commonly used method is that of the semi-structured interview. As Valentine (1997) notes, this method is capable of eliciting important information about human knowledge constructions. The aim of an interview, as Valentine explains,

Is . . . to understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives. The emphasis is on considering the meanings people attribute to their own lives and the processes which operate in particular contexts. (1997, 126)

Social constructions of knowledge can also be accessed through the ethnographic option of participant observation (see Burgess 1995; Bell and Roberts 1984). Participant observation involves researchers 'deliberately immersing' themselves in the worlds of cultural groups, to participate as well as observe the 'everyday rhythms and routines' of these communities (Cook 2003, 127). Both semi-structured interviews and participant observation attempt to produce rich, detailed and empathic understandings of cultural groups through various levels of involvement and participation. Both also, albeit implicitly, make note of the importance of geographical context in knowledge constructions. Researchers 'go out' into the context of the 'field' (see Amit 2000) to meet with groups under study and become cognisant of the context-specific practices that form the meanings and knowledges in question. However, as Elwood and Martin (2000) have noted, there is little explicit attention paid to the influence of place on knowledge formation, particularly with regard to the method of eliciting that knowledge in practice. Concern with the 'microgeography' or place of interview (see Elwood and Martin 2000, 652) is limited to its role in ensuring all parties feel at ease during the potentially intrusive interview process (see Longhurst 2003). The role that place may play in influencing the knowledge produced during this process (see Preston 2003), or how place could be harnessed to elicit information on social identity or power relationships, is often ignored (Sin 2003). This paper proposes a method that is capable of broadening the tools available to excavate individual's constructions of the world around them – a method that can be used in tandem with or in isolation to semi-structured interviews and/or participant observation. This method is noteworthy because

it is explicitly premised upon and seeks to harness the relationship between humans and place to uncover meanings and understandings of the life world.

## The co-ingredience of people and place

It is a mark of contemporary philosophical thought, especially phenomenology, to contest the dichotomies that hold the self apart from [ . . . ] place. . . . we can no longer distinguish neatly between physical and personal identity . . . place is regarded as constitutive of one's sense of self. (Casey 2001, 684)

As Casey notes, there is growing acknowledgement of the role that place plays in forming and influencing human identity. This acknowledgement stems in part from existential accounts of 'Being-in-the-World' (Heidegger 1988) and the exploration of perception through phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1962). It has also been extended through geographical adventures 'in the dialectic between people and places' (Davidson 2003) recorded by Tuan (1974), Relph (1976), Seamon and Mugerauer (1985), Sack (1997), Hillier (2001) and Preston (2003), to name several. In general, these works posit that the human condition is a profoundly spatial, or indeed *patial*, one, with identity both influencing and being influenced by its inhabited material places. As Casey states:

The relationship between self and place is not just one of reciprocal influence . . . but also, more radically, of constitutive coingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect, there is no place without self and no self without place. (2001, 684)

Such a standpoint, as Crang and Travlou (2001, 163) identify, rejects conventional views of space as inert background and views of time as fecundity. Rather it recognizes geographical context and the passage of time in place as integral to human existence. From this perspective places are not passive stages on which actions occur, rather they are the medium that impinge on, structure and facilitate these processes. As Tilley states, places are 'involved in the action and cannot be divorced from it' (1994, 10). Places then, are not only a medium but also an outcome of action, producing and being produced through human practice.

It follows then that through inhabitation and dwelling, a person–place relationship is inevitably

developed. As Casey suggests, the human body physically encounters places (through a process he titles 'outgoing') and simultaneously inscribes traces of location on the human self by laying down 'incoming' strata of meaning (see Casey 2001, 688).

**Reciprocally and over time, this process also influences the meaning of places.** As Halbwachs (1992) argues, and Crang and Travlou (2001) concur, due to the co-ingredience of self and place, the spatiality of memory links the social and the personal. Time alongside practice sediments meaning onto places, with personal memories meshing with cultural meanings on an individual and (potentially) societal scale. This fusion or meshing of place and identity thus illuminates the agency of the human self in relating time and space. As a consequence of the reciprocal relations between place, human identity and time, individuals engender meanings and significances for particular places. As the medium and outcome of personalized events and activities, human memory and identity become bound to places by different degrees and extents. As a result, as Casey points out, 'places [can] possess us – in perception, as in memory . . . insinuating themselves into our lives' (Casey 2000, 199).

### Co-ingredience in the case of radical environmentalism

The insinuation of place into human identity occurs through all cultural activity, from the spectacular to the mundane. Examples will be illustrated here, however, from the case of radical environmentalism. Through my own experience and research, radical environmentalists clearly demonstrate the co-ingredience of people and place in both their perception and their practice. The insinuation of place into activist's identity is sometimes articulated through recourse to academic theorization – most commonly deep, transpersonal or social ecology<sup>1</sup> (see Naess 1989; Bookchin 1995; Fox 1995). For these activists, the human 'self' is configured as part of a larger ecosystemic 'Self' that includes geographical place alongside other inhabitant species. In the lexicon of transpersonal ecology this configuration is an 'identification' constituting identity as part of a relational community including place (Fox 1995). As Fox outlines, this community identity includes,

our family, our friends and distance relations, our pets, our *homes*. . . . We experience these entities as part of 'us', as part of our identity. (Fox, in Gottlieb 1991, 414, emphasis added)

Place for these individuals is thus insinuated into their configuration of self, particular places are considered an extension, or indeed co-ingredient, of their identity.<sup>2</sup> Over time, these places become integrated into activist's personalized worlds of meaning. The following examples, alongside the work of writers such as Leopold (1949) and Lopez (1998), go some way to illustrate this point. The first and third examples come from my own experience of radical environmentalism at Ashton Court, near Bristol, UK (see Anderson 2002), the second from an individual's account of their connection to the area now covered by the A34 Newbury bypass, UK:

Whilst the big Beltane fire got going, Scott said Nancy felt that the earth was anxious, they promised to help save it – you can sense that the 'vibe' from the land/ in the area is not good, there is a peculiar feeling in the air. This 'anxiety' reminds me of Chris Gillham comparing Twyford Down to an 'ill friend' and the importance of continuing to support it – 'if someone we love is terminally ill' he said, 'that is no reason to walk away' . . . (Author's Field Diary)

When I was seven, my mother taught me the names of all the trees I climbed in the Great Pen Wood. I caught minnows in the River Enbourn . . . I kissed my first boyfriend when I was 14 on Snelsmore Common and 4 years later I lost my virginity in the Chase. My place of Clearwater, my place of learning, is being razed by a process that calls itself democracy. (in Griffiths and Vidal 1996, 23)

When we return [to the protest camp] people are stripping naked and jumping over the fire (its Beltane Eve): what a sight! Watch those flying embers! The fire pit is full of people – fiddles, guitars, accordions, witches. Belle shouted out that I should strip too – I gave the traditional finger reply. Much drunk, and many songs played and sung . . . Lyrics: 'someone told us / we own the land / but the one thing I've learned is / we are the land / and the land is us'. (Author's Field Diary)

Thus although the same rhetoric may not be employed, the merging of self and place that can be identified in the example of radical environmentalists is akin to the process identified by academic theorists, including Casey. In both, individuals 'no longer distinguish neatly between physical and personal identity . . . place is regarded as constitutive of one's sense of self' (Casey 2001, 684). There are many significant potentialities offered by the identification of this relationship between people and place. This paper continues by outlining one of

them: the opportunity to harness the co-ingredience of humans and place to explore knowledge constructions through a socio-spatial methodology.

## Harnessing co-ingredience through methodology

Aristotle, acknowledging with Archytas that 'everything is somewhere and in place', adds that 'if such a thing is true, the power of place will be a remarkable one'. (Casey 2000, 184)

How can we, as social science researchers, harness the power of place in our methodology? This paper continues by briefly noting the ways in which existing qualitative methods strategies (as outlined above) could incorporate the issue, then by suggesting a specifically new way to answer this question. As stated above, in terms of general qualitative methodologies, researchers become literate of the cultural activities through which researched groups practise their identity. For semi-structured interviews or participant observation these cultural practices then become the object of further questioning and/or inspection. With the co-ingredience of person-place in mind, however, it is important to supplement this literacy with an explicit awareness of the ways in which these practices are tied into places. Researchers can become aware of the key routines, habits and practices through which people inscribe their knowledges into places. Following processes of rapport-building between the researcher and the researched group it would be possible to re-create or step into these practices to harness the co-ingredience of the place-person relationship. Becoming literate in this way is therefore a process that identifies which practices and places will be useful to harness in methodology. These placed-practices, in the words of James (quoted in Casey 2000, 186) are the key 'contiguous associates' that can become important cues for prompting and recalling personal knowledge. A process harnessing these placed-practices has the effect of developing social understandings into socio-spatial understandings of knowledge.

The paper continues with a specific example of how this process of spatializing social knowledge plays out in the case of radical environmentalism. It will illustrate how the cultural practice of 'bimbling' (or aimlessly walking) through a co-ingredient environment can be harnessed to prompt theretofore unstated or unrecalled knowledge of the life-world.

## Harnessing co-ingredience in the case of radical environmentalism

Through my own research in the places of protest created by radical environmentalists (see Anderson 2002) I became aware of the need for activists to periodically have time away from the often stressful life on protest sites. This time away was fulfilled through local visits to the homes of supporters, to squats, alternative cafes, or through simply taking a walk away from the action camp. Evans (1998), in her motivating cartoon book of environmental action, also identifies the role of walking as an opportunity for letting off steam. She titled this practice 'bimbling' and in her glossary of terms defines it as follows:

To 'bimble': to go for a walk or wander around aimlessly. Like 'amble' but sounds more twee. (Evans 1998, 205)

Having bimbled myself on numerous occasions, both alone and with other activists, I experienced how this practice offered the opportunity to not only get a break from the monotony or stress of site life, but also to re-connect with the surrounding environment that you were there to politicize and protect. This combination of practice and place formed a useful synergy for methodological innovation. By harnessing the practice of bimbling in this co-ingredient environment I was able to not only engage in discussions with activists without disrupting and affecting (my position within) the site itself, but also use both the practice and the place to prompt the recall of activist knowledges.

I am not intending to present the practice of walking, or more particularly bimbling, as an essentialized one. Kay and Moxham (1996) alongside Edensor (2000) have outlined the multiplicity of cultural connotations associated with walking practices.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it was clear to me that this activity did have a philosophical and physiological potential that could be exploited. In the first instance, bimbling's particular cultural meanings offered many opportunities reminiscent of the peripatetic tradition (see Wallace 1993; Leed 1991). In many cases, bimbling functioned as an opportunity for activists to refresh their 'ideological space' (after Jarvis 1997, 28), to get time away from site and re-experience their connections to the wider landscape. Because of this inter-connection with the wider environment, itself overlain with recent memories of protest experience, bimbling afforded the opportunity to reminisce and be reminded of these

events, or to prompt other life-course memories associated with that individual's relationship with place. Coupled to this, writers advocating the peripatetic tradition also argue that the physiological aspect of walking helps to prompt such reminiscent behaviour. Long (in Jarvis 1997) comments that the bodily movement of walking invokes a 'rhythmic relaxation' of both body and mind that 'frees the imagination'. Solnit concurs and furthers this point of view, stating that:

Walking . . . is the intentional act closest to the unwilling rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. . . . Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord. (2001, 5)

According to the peripatetic tradition, therefore, bimbles offers the opportunity to not only open a dialogue between the body and mind of activists, but also between the activist and place. It was thus a form of bodily movement that, in 'outgoing' to the environment, new as well as old inscriptions of meaning could be created and, more interestingly for research, re-encountered. As key areas, landmarks and places were bimbled through, the relaxing, relatively aimless purpose of the exercise could open up the senses to allow the re-calling of incidents, feelings and experiences that were constitutive of that individual's understanding of the life world. It was possible therefore to harness not only the 'conditions, qualities and rhythms of the body in motion' (Jarvis 1997, IX), but also the associations created by these individuals in this place, to excavate levels of meanings both the researcher and researched may theretofore have been unaware of. As Hazlitt states, through this practice it is possible that 'we remember circumstances, feelings, persons, faces, names, that we had not thought of for years' (Hazlitt, quoted in Jarvis 1977, 193). Solnit details this point further; she states:

the rhythm of walking generates a rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. A new thought often seems like a feature of the landscape that was there all along, as though thinking were travelling rather than making. (2001, 5)

Having gained literacy on the nature, purpose and potential of bimbles for radical environmentalists, this practice was harnessed to see whether it could effectively access activist's knowledge constructions. I asked individuals if they wished to 'go for a bimple', adding that it may present a useful opportunity to talk about the protest and their feelings surrounding it. As my participation in protest had established a level of rapport with activists, the exercise being purely voluntary and – due to the nature of bimbles itself – might be quite enjoyable, I envisaged this practice would be successful in gaining a different level and point of access to activists' knowledges. In practice, an intimate bond was created between the individuals involved and this facilitated conversation. It was possible to overcome traditional interviewer/interviewee power relations to forge something uniquely collaborative.

Thoughts, 'pangs of memory' (after Harrison 1991) and emotive connections would come to us through conversation, prompted not only by questions, but also by the interconnections between the individuals and the place itself. In practice, it was therefore possible to exploit the potential of the environment to hold activist's knowledge and trigger memory. 'Talking whilst walking' became, in de Botton's words, 'a midwife of thought' (2002), as the following extended examples go some way to illustrate. This first example is from the transcription of a recorded bimple across an Ashton Court wild flower meadow, near Bristol, UK, which was eventually to become a limestone quarry:

– We stop our bimple as we re-cross the meadow, 40 yards or so from the quarry fence (it is currently being re-erected) as it turns out so Kath can tell me this story –

Kath: It reminds me of times like a few weeks ago, after the summer gathering, we went down to [the] quarry . . . and we walked in there! There was only about 40 of us, so it wasn't that big [an action], but there were more of us than there were people to stop us, so we walked in and got on all their machines, jumped on and off their weigh-bridge, and we could even talk to the owner since she was driving up in her car as we were there, and without a word we all just spread out across the road to stop this executive type car driving towards us!

And it was like, well okay in the long term it might not have achieved much, but just for that morning they couldn't blast any more rock out of the earth and [pause] I think there's a long term battle and a short

term battle, and people are always saying ‘yeah but you can’t win can you?’ And maybe, maybe, we can’t actually stop them from destroying this meadow, but then I don’t think the council are going to lease off any more of this land, they are not going to be able to extend this quarry any further, I’m sure of that, and that’s a victory.

– We continue our bimble –

‘Cos next they’ll be wanting this bit [she points across the meadow we are traversing], they’ll be wanting a bit of the woods [she points ahead of us, where the camps are] so I think it does work . . . and that’s why I feel that I’ve got to do something and it might not be completely effective but its the only thing I can do.

JA: No more travelling then?

Kath: No way! I used to go off every summer on a long haul flight! For fuck’s sake, I think, you were destroying the planet! I used to care about the planet, and I saw such beautiful places, and I think that’s one of the main reasons which have made me determined to fight for all the beautiful places that there are on the planet, ‘cos that’s what is being destroyed, purely for profit.

– We are approaching the camp and Kath stops and sits down in the calf-high grasses and flowers, she asks –

Can I rant a bit more?

My grandma’s always saying, you’ve got a good brain, you should be doing this that and the other and if you’re intelligent or whatever and do well at school and go to university you end up in this quote unquote ‘good job’ perpetuating the system, and I think the finest brains are being co-opted into perpetuating things that are going wrong, and I think the best way I can use it [my intelligence] is pointing out how they’re doing it wrong, and why I think it should be changed.

My grandma went, ‘Don’t you think you should be contributing something to society?’ and I was thinking, ‘How many jobs contribute anything to society?’ You sell petrol, you sell tobacco, you sell alcohol (although I quite like alcohol) but I don’t think the people selling it are contributing that much to society, it kills people! Cars kill people! Building roads kill people! So the jobs don’t contribute anything, and my Gran says ‘well you should pay taxes’, and well, you pay taxes to fund the policies that are killing the planet. (from *Bimble with Kath*, Author’s (transcribed) Field Diary)

The second example is taken from an account of a bimble along a route in Berkshire, UK, which was to become the Newbury bypass:

Several months after that last stand at Castle Wood, Merrick, Ed and I returned to Newbury on our way home from Solstice at Avebury. I’d meant to return sooner, but even now I was unsure if I wanted to see my beloved home as the muddy, scattered mess it had become. We ended up dropping some acid and walking the quarter of a mile or so from Castle Wood to Go-Tan. It took us seven hours! Nearing the end of our adventure, and coming down now, I had the most profound experience I have ever felt, tripping or not. I sat at the edge of Snelsmore and cried, I cried like I’ve never cried before in my whole life. At first I thought it was tension between me and Merrick that was upsetting me, it wasn’t. Slowly, totally, I released all the pain, emotions, terrible pain I had accumulated whilst watching the trees of Newbury being hacked to pieces and ripped out of the earth, watching them kill my home, our home, our earth as we know it. And still I cried, but now with energy and agony that could not have come from me. It was like the earth was crying through me, I was releasing the bottled-up pain of every tree on the route, felled and standing. The earth was crying through me. I truly believe that this is what happened to me . . . you can feel it for yourself just by standing where I stood, or anywhere along the route. Anyone with a heart, with a soul, can see the destruction, the outrageous destruction, and feel the pain. It’s in the air, it’s pulsing through the ground, it’s in the gently whispering leaves and creaking branches. (Helen, published in Merrick 1997, 129)

## Towards a conclusion

This paper argues for an addition to the repertoire of qualitative methodologies aimed at excavating human constructions of the world. Building on the interconnections or ‘constitutive co-ingredience’ of people and place, it proposes that social science can do more to harness this relationship as a strategy to access knowledge. There are many tactics that could be used to this end: virtual tours, photographic evidence and perhaps hypnosis. It is also possible physically through employing the body. This paper has concentrated on one bodily tactic: the embodied art of walking through particular co-ingredient environments for recollection, in short: talking whilst walking.

Using the body in this way has the capacity to access the relationship between people, place and time. As meanings are sedimented in and through

this processual nexus, the physiological movement of the body through place offers the opportunity to literally and metaphorically, ‘wander from plans to recollections to observations’ (Solnit 2001, 5). **A personal, peripatetic understanding of place is excavated as key contiguous associates prompt memories and excavate meanings.** In the words of Calvino, these sites become like an

armature, a honeycomb in whose cells each of us can place the things he [sic] wants to remember. . . . Between each idea and each point of the itinerary an affinity or a contrast can be established, serving as an immediate aid to memory. (1986, 15)

Talking whilst walking does not perhaps function cognitively and rationally in the ‘arts of memory tradition’ (see Crang and Travlou 2001). Nonetheless, **it can successfully tap into the non-mechanistic framework of the mind and its interconnections with place to recall episodes and meanings buried in the archaeology of knowledge** (see Larsen 1996; Mackenzie and White 1982). This geographic methodology may have more significance in some research and social projects than others (for example, those that focus on overtly politicized environments such as protests, battles or crime scenes). However, the person–place co-ingredient offers opportunities for all projects to **gain access to personalized knowledge constructions.** This practice of talking whilst walking is also useful as it produces not a conventional interrogative encounter, but a collage of collaboration: an unstructured dialogue where all actors participate in a conversational, geographical and informational pathway creation. As a consequence, **the knowledge produced is importantly different: atmospheres, emotions, reflections and beliefs can be accessed, as well as intellects, rationales and ideologies.** As a result, talking whilst walking is **part of a wider post-modern project that seeks to ‘challenge . . . “externally” generated knowledge and [find] ways to create more equitable and collaborative forms of knowledge’** (Mohan 1999, 42). It is one answer to Wiseman’s request for a ‘context sensitive methodology’ (in Josselson *et al.* 1997, 37). So, through talking whilst walking, by conversing and traversing pathways through an environment, we are able to create worlds of knowledge (or pathways of knowledge through the world) by talking meanings and understandings into existence. By exploiting the co-ingredient of people and place we can re-experience our knowledges as we return to the places where we live them.

## Notes

- 1 As one activist told me, ‘I developed an environmental and political awareness through studying very orthodox economic and political ways of doing things. I then came across Zakin, Paul Watson, and Deep Ecology and these reflected the way I really felt about things’ (Activist conversation with Author).
- 2 As a consequence of this co-ingredient, many feel a personalized pain when these landmarks are damaged. As the following excerpt from reportage at a site of EDA (in this case the Newbury bypass construction, Berkshire, UK) illustrates: ‘Brette, who defected to the protesters’ side last week, said he was “upset” when he saw three big trees cut down, and the protesters were in tears: “It gets to you, seeing the trees cut down”. Graham, another defecting security guard, agreed: “I saw a couple of big trees being cut down, that triggered something within me”’ (Griffiths 1996, 14).
- 3 Indeed, ‘bimbling’ itself was not always a relaxed or stress-free practice. Altercations with security guards or police occasionally interrupted the activity. Bimbling itself was thus defined, and also subverted, by both individual as well as collective sets of practices.

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