Come Take a Walk With Me: The "Go-Along" Interview as a Novel Method for Studying the Implications of Place for Health and Well-Being

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Come Take a Walk with Me:
The "Go-Along" Interview as a Novel Method for Studying the Implications of Place for Health and Well-being

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Abstract

This paper aims to serve as a four-part introductory primer on the "go-along" qualitative interview methodology for studying the health issues of neighborhood or local area contexts. First, I describe the purpose and different types of implementation of go-alongs. Second, I discuss its advantages for studying how place may matter for health (particularly in terms of the participants) and how it may facilitate researchers' understandings of local knowledge as well as the social and physical context. Third, I consider the method's strengths and limitations for population health research on neighborhoods and local areas. Fourth and finally, I discuss how go-alongs may be used in tandem with other qualitative and quantitative approaches for multi-method research. Informing this discussion are my own experiences with a particular type of go-along interview—"walk-along" interviews—during a study of social capital in Milwaukee, Wisconsin neighborhoods.

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Studies of health and place have utilized a range of methodologies to explore the complex ways in which neighborhood contexts may shape health. Motivated by this tradition, this paper aims to introduce "Go-Along" interviews as a novel qualitative method for studying the health issues of neighborhood or local area contexts.

The sheer volume of research on neighborhoods and health has exploded in the past few years, yet a significant proportion of this work has relied upon census-based or other "off-the-shelf" measures (Cummins, Macintyre, Davidson, & Ellaway, 2005), that, alone, are insufficient for elucidating our understanding of the numerous ways in which such places matter for health and well-being. Often, these measures are either based on simple aggregation of individual characteristics or global indices (e.g., of area deprivation) and, thus, are limited in capturing the neighborhood context in which people live (Weden, Carpiano, & Robert, 2008; Cummins et al., 2005; Frohlich, Potvin, Chabot, & Corin, 2002).

Though far less cited than their quantitative counterparts, qualitative health studies of neighborhood and local areas continue to become ever more prevalent—in particular, due to researchers' needs to:

(a) study local areas with specific social, cultural, or historical contexts (e.g., ethnic enclaves) (e.g., Cattell, 2001; Altschuler, Somkin, & Adler, 2004),

(b) understand and address facets of local contexts for which standard survey methods are insufficient or incapable of measuring (e.g., Frohlich, Corin, & Potvin, 2001),

(c) develop (from inductive and interpretive standpoints) and refine theories that are firmly grounded in the lived experiences of the people who inhabit these contexts (see Cummins, Curtis, Diez-Roux, & Macintyre, 2007; Airey, 2003),

(d) generate knowledge on place and health (from a postpositivist standpoint) that relies on an evidence base obtained from a variety of theories and methods, each of which complements the strengths and limitations of the others (Carpiano & Daley, 2006a; 2006b; Carpiano, 2007).

Consistent with these needs, the "go-along" interview method is a variation on qualitative interviewing techniques that has great utility (either alone or in conjunction with other methods) for exploring—and subsequently improving understanding of—peoples' experiences of their local residential context. Here, my use of the term "context" refers to a relational perspective on place and space that attempts to consider the health implications of not only neighborhood environment(s) (as is commonly examined in existing "contextual effects" research), but the larger local area in which a neighborhood may be part and in which people move about in conducting their activities or practices—a conception that Cummins et al. (2007) have referred to as an "action space."

The present discussion aims to serve as a four-part introductory primer on the go-along interview method for health researchers interested in studying place. First, I describe the purpose and different types of "go-alongs" and their implementation. Second, I discuss its advantages for studying place effects on health (particularly in terms of the participants) and how it may facilitate researchers' understandings of local knowledge as well as the social and physical context. Third, I consider the method's strengths and limitations for public health research. Fourth and finally, I discuss how go-alongs may be used in tandem with other qualitative and

quantitative approaches for a single multi-method study. Informing this discussion are my own experiences with using a particular type of go-along interview—the "walk-along" interview—to conduct a study of social capital in Milwaukee, Wisconsin neighborhoods.

The Purpose and Forms of the Go-Along Interview

The go-along method (hereafter "go-along") is a form of in-depth qualitative interview method that, as the name implies, is conducted by researchers accompanying individual informants on outings in their familiar environments, such as a neighborhood or larger local area. The go-along can be conducted as a "walk-along" (i.e. conducted while walking with the participant), a "ride-along" (i.e. conducted while driving), or a "mixed" form combining the former two types (Kusenbach, 2003). Though the means by which such go-alongs occur may vary by the neighborhood context (e.g., a city neighborhood may be more walkable than a neighborhood in a more rural area) or participant needs, fundamentally, all go-alongs involve interviewing a participant while receiving a tour of their neighborhood or other local contexts. In this regard, the researcher is "walked through" people's lived experiences of the neighborhood.

Through asking questions and observing, the researcher is able to examine the informant's experiences, interpretations, and practices within this environment. Thus, as a means of obtaining responses from participants while they actively inhabit specific contexts, the go-along is a unique tool for meeting the challenges posed within the health and place literature—as well as social sciences in general—regarding the need to examine how physical, social, and mental dimensions of place and space interact within and across time for individuals (e.g., Cummins et al., 2007; see also Lynch, 1960; Rugg, 1972; Hiss, 1990; Lefebvre, 2000; Gieryn, 2000).

In terms of epistemology, the go-along method is compatible with a range of classical and contemporary theoretical approaches within sociology. It is consistent with classical social theorist Max Weber's (1947) definition of sociology—"a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order to… arrive at a causal explanation of its course, and effects" (p. 88)—as well as his methodological conception of verstehen ("understanding"), which aims to focus attention on how people understand and apply meaning to social structures and processes (see also Ritzer, 1996; Turner, 1998; Thomson, 2006). Likewise, the go-along reflects Georg Simmel's relational perspectives on how space (e.g., distance) serves as a context for individual and group action, as well as the creation of social types (e.g., stranger) and social forms (e.g., exchange and conflict) (Wolff, 1950; Lechner, 1991; see also Cattell et al., 2008).

From the perspectives of more contemporary theoretical orientations, the go-along is consistent with interactionist and phenomenological concerns for studying direct and indirect social experiences as well as the creation and maintenance of intersubjectivity (i.e. why and how actors acquire common subjective states in a situation)—thereby being a method consistent with Schutz's contention that the processes by which actors come to share the same world can only be discovered by observing people in interaction, not abstraction (Weiss, 1994; Turner, 1998; Mann, 2008; Schutz in Kivisto, 2008; see also Goffman, 1963; Berger & Luckman, 1966). In addition to a phenomenological perspective of studying what people think, the go-along reflects the aim of ethnomethodology to understand the range of methods that people employ in navigating and maintaining a sense of order in various contexts (Ritzer, 1996, p. 217; Turner, 1998; Mann, 2008).

Collectively, these theoretical orientations provide important foundations for guiding empirical inquiry into the interplay between structural conditions and individual agency for shaping action. This interplay has been a focus for theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, whose respective ideas on habitus and structuration have received increasing attention in the health literature (e.g., see Frohlich, Corin, & Potvin, 2001; Carpiano, 2006a; Veenstra, 2007; Cockerham, 2007). Therefore, the go-along, as a method reflecting these orientations, provides a unique way for the researcher to not only observe people's neighborhood environments, but to also study people's perceptions, processing, and navigation of their environments.

Prior Uses of Go-Alongs

Despite its great utility for studying the interactions between humans and their environments, one will be quite challenged to find a significant number of studies in public, population, or community health as well as non-health areas such as community and urban sociology that describe and/or use the go-along method (at least explicitly). Nevertheless, three excellent examples demonstrate its relevance for health researchers. Although not focused on health, urban planner Kevin Lynch (1960) employed walk-alongs in a multi-method project focused on understanding how residents of three US cities interpret environmental images in the course of their daily activities. In this project, a subsample of participants was accompanied by interviewers (equipped with tape recorders) along routes previously identified by the participants in prior traditional (sit-down) interviews. Each participant was asked to take the lead in walking and discuss with the interviewer (a) why a particular route was chosen, (b) what he viewed on the walk, and (c) whether he felt confident or lost.

In chronicling the experiences of children living in neighborhoods within the severely impoverished South Bronx of New York City, social activist and non-fiction writer Jonathan Kozol (1995) describes observations and interactions that resulted from taking walks with children around their neighborhood. Through these walk-alongs, Kozol gains insight into how children interpret and navigate the local social and physical landscape, which abounds with hazards such as litter, drug activity, and violence.

Sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach (2003) offers, to my knowledge, the most extensive methodological discussion of the go-along. She details her experiences with all three types of go-alongs described above while conducting an ethnography of Hollywood, California neighborhoods focused on how residents' daily interactions relate to understanding and perceiving local problems. In addition to introducing and evaluating the method, Kusenbach offers an excellent discussion of its epistemological foundations and motivations (particularly for interpretive sociology). This method proved particularly important for her assessments of the role of place in social problems. In elaborating upon her experiences with this method, Kusenbach identifies five themes for which the go-along is well-suited for exploring and illuminating: (1) perception (i.e. informants' knowledge and values that guide their experiences of their everyday social and physical environments); (2) spatial practices (i.e. the ways in which people engage their environment); (3) linkages between biography and place; (4) the social architecture of natural settings (i.e. the various types or forms of relationships between people and how informants situate themselves within this social setting; and (5) social realms (i.e. interaction patterns and how place shapes the nature of interaction).

My own experiences with go-alongs—specifically, walk-alongs—are drawn from my recent research on social capital in two Milwaukee, Wisconsin neighborhoods. These

neighborhoods were predominantly African American in terms of demographic composition, but socioeconomically contrasted: one was primarily disadvantaged (Harmony Heights) and another was significantly more affluent (Parkwood).[1] Informed by Bourdieu's conception of social capital as "the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to… a group," (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248; see also Carpiano, 2006a, 2007), the study aimed to explore (1) what residents identify as neighborhood-based resources, (2) how residents access (or are restricted from accessing) these resources, and (3) the implications of these network-based resources for residents' health and well-being? At a fundamental level, I was interested in exploring how social capital—resources (e.g., economic, cultural, political, symbolic) that inhere within social network ties—is nested within local community contexts and how community social capital was used (in positive and negative ways) for pursuing personal and collective goals. I conceptualized social networks as more than simply ties between residents and thus considered connections between residents and informal and formal organizations located in the community (e.g., neighborhood block clubs organized by residents and professionally-run community-based organizations).

Overall, a substantial focus of the interviews concerned local physical and socioeconomic problems (such as crime/delinquency, housing maintenance and repair issues, city tax policies, and gentrification) that impacted personal and collective quality of life and how social capital was used in efforts to address these issues. Given the need to understand how these problems were perceived by residents, the walk-along method proved to be a unique means for facilitating the gathering of such data.

In addition to using walk-alongs to interview residents, I also relied upon field observations of local areas and community meetings and standard in-depth ("sit-down") qualitative interviews with residents and service providers as well as a background survey for

residents (Carpiano, 2006b). Thus, the project as a whole relied upon multiple methods—the interrelationships of which I discuss in a later section. I will use my experiences and findings from this study to provide practical detail to the ideas described herein.

Defining the Term "Neighborhood"

Before proceeding, the use of the word "neighborhood" in the following discussion requires clarification. Both Harmony Heights and Parkwood are each recognized as Milwaukee "neighborhoods" that have officially identified (albeit contested) geographic boundaries. Like many officially recognized Milwaukee neighborhoods, these are rather large areas (e.g., when mapped, each neighborhood encompassed several census tract areas). However, each resident whom I interviewed described his/her own neighborhood as consisting of a much smaller area within these larger official neighborhoods (which, while designated by organizations as neighborhoods, can, for the sake of parsimony, be termed a "local area"). Participants offered a variety of reasons for why they viewed particular streets as encompassing their own neighborhood. Nevertheless, a theme of uniqueness characterized these discussions: that the issues facing each resident's particular neighborhood made it unique compared to adjacent neighborhoods (i.e. areas several blocks away from where the respondent lived). While there was some interplay between residents' perceptions of their neighborhood versus the larger, more officially designated neighborhood, discussion of how this interplay mattered is outside the scope of the present discussion. Thus, the word "neighborhood" will hereafter be used to connote an area identified by each resident as being personally salient.

Benefits of the Go-Along Method for Studying Place and Health

The go-along is a highly flexible method that can be tailored to the needs of a particular research project. But what does the conduct of a go-along entail? In this section, I review the go-along in terms of its design and discuss how it draws from the strengths of other qualitative methods, thus making it a beneficial "hybrid" method for studying place and health.

Interview "Structure"

The go-along can be designed to rely upon different interviewing formats. It can be conducted using an *open-ended* format: providing participants with little direction regarding what to discuss (i.e. leaving the participant free to comment on whatever they see fit) and/or only occasionally pointing to nearby features of the environment to hear one's thoughts on that feature (see Lynch, 1960; Kusenbach, 2003). Alternatively, it can also be conducted using more of a *semi-structured* format, which can be potentially more conversational in nature. For example, the walk-alongs I conducted were semi-structured and used both prepared and ad hoc questions. I ventured out on each of my walk-alongs with a list of prepared questions/topics to discuss with the participant. Aside from ensuring that some basic topics/issues germane to the study (e.g., interaction between neighbors) were discussed for purposes of triangulation, these questions were also useful for sparking conversation at the outset and during any rare lull periods in the walk-along. Nevertheless, the majority of guiding and clarifying questions were crafted ad hoc by me depending on the topic or feature of the social or physical environment for which a participant was discussing. Thus, a variety of interviewing formats can be useful with the go-along.

Relationship to Other Qualitative Methods

The go-along draws upon—and yet complements—two other qualitative methods used commonly in health research for studying place (including geographic communities): field observation and interviewing. In many respects, the go-along allows for some of the contextual insights of traditional ethnographic methods without the long-term, intense pattern of fieldwork typically associated with ethnography. In this regard, though certainly not a simple substitute for ethnography, go-along interviews may serve as a means of enhancing the contextual basis of qualitative research conducted by those unable to commit the time and resources necessary for traditional ethnographic research.

By fusing the two traditional methodological techniques of field observations and qualitative interviewing, the go-along simultaneously takes advantage of each method's strengths, while employing both to compensate for each other's limitations. Thus, because of its ability to examine a participant's interpretations of their contexts *while experiencing these contexts*, the go-along offers a number of potential benefits for studying how place may matter for people's health and well-being—benefits that emerge in part from the method's capacity for assessing what Lynch (1960) describes as "environmental image," that is, "the generalized mental picture of the exterior physical [and social] world" held by an individual that is "the product both of immediate sensation and of the memory of past experience and… [that] is used to interpret information and to guide action" (p. 4).

In an effort to elaborate upon these benefits, I will first draw upon my own research experiences to raise attention to some strengths and limitations of both field observation and (sit-down) interviewing for studying place and, next, proceed to highlight how the go-along offers a way to overcome such limitations. To be sure, the purpose of the first of this two-part discussion

is only to highlight benefits of the go-along and is in no way intended to discredit the utility of field observation and sit-down interviewing.

Field Observation: Field observation (sometimes termed "naturalistic observation") refers to a researcher entering into a natural setting, such as a neighborhood, to observe (and ultimately learn) about the social life of this environment (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This method is ideal for a researcher interested in familiarizing her/himself firsthand with a location being studied. Field observation differs from the method of participant-observation typical of intensive, long-term ethnographic research (e.g., Whyte, 1997; Small, 2004). Nonetheless, in studying neighborhoods, field observation is incredibly useful for assessing or mapping features of the social and physical environment (Berg, 1998), such as:

1. availability and location of local resources (e.g., schools, grocery stores and other shopping, levels of police patrol/presence),

2. extent and maintenance of public spaces and their uses (or lack of use)

3. natural or built landmarks (e.g., street intersections, monuments, park/recreational space)

4. degree of local community (e.g., frequency and intensity to which people interact on the street), and

5. extent to which people from different ethnic, age, and other demographic groups are observed as present within the community as well as interacting (e.g., see Kelly & Munoz-Laboy, 2005; Cattell et al., 2008).

Thus, some key strengths or advantages of field observation are that it provides a natural way for the researcher to acclimate her/himself with a particular locality, raise research questions in an inductive manner, and observe phenomena that may often escape awareness of people who inhabit a particular setting (Patton, 2002; Berg, 1998). Nevertheless, field observation is limited

by the researcher's own interpretive framework, accounting primarily for what the researcher sees and hears. Thus, field observations (even when conducted in a more intensive manner as a participant observer) (Neuman, 2006) are limited in examining *residents'* perceptions and experiences of the environment (Patton, 2002; Kusenbach, 2003).

Two situations in my own research highlight this issue. Prior to beginning any interviews with residents in Harmony Heights, I spent some time walking around the local area. I made a point to record in my field notes how one major street within Harmony Heights had a bookstore with a window display of African American titles/authors, an African American-owned coffeehouse/cafe, and other African American-focused businesses (clothing, hair salons). I concluded that the area had a very African American cultural "feel" akin to other ethnic enclaves like the Chinatowns and Little Italy's I had visited in many North American cities. However, upon interviewing residents, I found that no one made much mention of patronizing these stores. In fact, one participant indicated that these stores were too expensive for him. Thus, field observation was insufficient for properly identifying various class issues within this particular area where the local problems, resources, and potential were often viewed only in terms of race/ethnicity. Ultimately, I was unable to examine how features (or apparent amenities) of the local area were interpreted by residents of different class backgrounds in terms of their utility and accessibility.

A similar situation existed with respect to the presence of "drug houses" (i.e. houses or apartments from which drugs are sold), which have been a common occurrence/residential hazard throughout Harmony Heights. As an "outsider" who did not live in the area, I found that my many hours of field observations conducted via walking through Harmony Heights were insufficient for (a) recognizing and mapping current or former drug houses for my own

familiarity of the local area and (b) assessing how residents viewed drug houses near to their own

homes. Only by conducting field observation at monthly community forum meetings hosted by

a local community-based organization was I able to find out that many residents were aware of

drug houses in their neighborhoods and knew their specific locations. Observing these meeting

was quite informative for hearing how some residents felt about drug houses (i.e. only when they

publicly voiced them to police department representatives and other city officials in attendance).

Nevertheless, it was only useful for hearing the perspectives of a particular group of people—

those who felt significantly threatened by drug house activity and were sufficiently

empowered/outspoken to stand up and voice their concern. Through my walk-alongs, however, I

found out that residents had varied perceptions regarding their presence: while some residents

(like many of the attendees at these community meetings) viewed drug houses as significant

threats to their safety and quality of life that needed to be eliminated, other residents viewed

them as hazards for which they needed to be mindful, but could live with them in a manner of

co-existence. Also, I was able to explore their interpretations in greater depth (as well as observe

their interactions with their environment, which contained such houses) than what was possible

via observing some people voicing opinion at a meeting. From an interpretive perspective,

assessing such perceptions have implications for better understanding residents' experiences with

drug houses and their actions for dealing with them—including engagement in collective

behavior to eliminate them from their neighborhoods (which some residents did). Therefore, the

point I wish to emphasize here is that field observation could only provide a certain amount and

type of information—other methods would also be required.

(Sit-Down) Interviews. Qualitative interviewing refers to "conversation with a

purpose… to gather information" (Berg, 1998, p. 57). Unlike a typical conversation, however, in

a qualitative interview, "the respondent provides information while the interviewer… directs the respondent to the topics that matter to the study," thus obtaining greater detail about a situation than permitted via brief responses in a survey interview (Weiss, 1994, p. 8). Nevertheless, given its conversational nature, interviewing is (not surprisingly) conducted typically in a "sit-down" format, whether in a public place (e.g., restaurant, coffee shop) or private location (someone's living room).

Such "sit-down" interviewing is an ideal method for exploring people's biographies and perceptions of self, others, and place. As noted by Schatzman and Strauss (1973), interviews "reveal people's constructs of themselves and their worlds as symbolically developed and rendered: people tell *what* they do and *why* they do it" (p. 6).

Nevertheless, sit-down interviews also pose limitations for thinking situationally about people and examining informants' lived experiences of place (Kusenbach, 2003; see also Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Kusenbach (2003) identifies two related issues. First, participants often will not discuss issues or ideas for which they are not immediately aware (Patton, 2002). In other words, participants may more readily access the salient features of their lives during an interview versus discussing the contexts in which their lives play out. Second, given that the focal activity in sit-down interviews is talking, the interview situation discourages context-sensitive reactions of the interviewer and interviewee. Interview aids or props such as photos, maps, and drawing exercises can be excellent tools for triggering thoughts and reactions (particularly when interviewing children) (e.g., Irwin & Johnson, 2005; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006), but even these tools are unable to fully compensate for the fact that sit-down interviews separate participants from their routine experiences and practices in the

participants' contexts (Kusenbach, 2003)—two key facets for understanding how place is interpreted and relates to well-being.

These problems were exemplified in my own research where I was forced (due to participants' schedules and other factors) to interview some participants via sit-down interviews instead of walk-alongs. In the sit-down interviews I conducted with residents of the same block, some common themes across these interviews were the concerns of safety, protection, and fear of being harmed. These residents discussed conducting outdoor activities. However, due to the interview being conducted indoors and removed from the experience of the location, it was difficult for me as a researcher to gain an adequate appreciation of these people's experiences with respect to the nature, severity, locations, or even potential ramifications of these dangers. For example, what strategies and navigation were used by one resident who walks his dog every day? Conversely, to this day, I can only conjecture what other issues might have been raised or observations made had my participants and I conducted this discussion outside.

One particular example of this limitation of sit-down interviews for studying neighborhoods occurred as I arrived at home of one of these abovementioned participants to interview her and her male neighbor. This interview with two middle aged and working class participants had an urgent tone. The discussion, which included mention of local problems such as delinquency, drug activity, and drive-by shootings, could be characterized in terms of vigilance and being "under siege."

RESPONDENT 1: I watch out for people's houses. And if I see somebody that's unfamiliar, like when I came up and walked out of the driveway and I saw the gray car out here, I thought, "Oh, he's (the author) got to be here already because that's an unfamiliar

car on my street." But if I see an unfamiliar car on my street, I keep an eye out as to

where it came from… you know, to make sure that nothing's going wrong.

RESPONDENT 2: [later in the interview] Our biggest concern as far as this block is

concerned is crime rate and the kids.

I was quite surprised to hear these issues of concern. When I had initially arrived at the home of

this interview, I recall noticing how their street and adjacent blocks seemed rather quiet,

peaceful, and, in terms of the houses, well-kept and middle-class. All things considered, this

location did not appear nor feel threatening—in fact, it appeared and felt rather serene.

Field Observation, Sit-Down Interviewing, and Go-Alongs: In summary, while field

observation allowed me to experience the local area and its features (including resources and

hazards), it was insufficient for providing many necessary insights about how residents

interpreted and made use of (or did not use) their "action space"—particularly in terms of social

capital that was the central focus of the study. For example, what places and situations were

interpreted by residents as safe or dangerous and why? Where did people regularly meet and

interact? Conversely, while sit-down interviews were rich with insights regarding local issues,

they were unable to provide the neighborhood outings necessary to appreciate my participants'

experiences interacting with and interpreting the local social and physical environment. For

example, what individual and collective strategies and resources were used by various residents

to navigate their local space? How do residents individually and/or collectively cope with or

transform various local problems or hazards?

Consideration of these issues highlights the benefits of the go-along as a hybrid of these

two methods. The go-along builds upon Weiss' (1994, p. 1) reflection that interviewing is an

opportunity to learn. Given the contextually sensitive nature of the go-along, researchers learn

from the respondent not only in terms of the ideas and perspectives, but in terms of experiences as well. While more traditional interview techniques allow for the researcher simply to be verbally "led along" by the respondent only in terms of discussion, the go-along allows for being led along a spatialized journey as well—learning about the local area via the interplay of the respondent's ideas and the researcher's own experience of the respondent's environment. Consequently, the go-along allows a more inclusive process where the respondent becomes more of a *participant* in the interview than simply a *subject* that is being interviewed. The strengths and limitations of the go-along—for both the researcher and the participant—are considered in the following sections.

Strengths of the Go-Along Interview for Public Health Research

The go-along has a number of strengths that are useful for all stages of a research project—from conception through conclusion.

Rapport Builder

As noted above, the go-along provides an opportunity to increase the participation of a respondent. Given that the respondent serves as a "tour guide" for the researcher, the go-along helps to reduce typical power dynamics that exist between the interviewer and interviewee (as subject). The importance of reducing the disparities within the interview context has been noted by ethnographers who have conducted long-term research with marginalized populations (Agar, 1976; Kirsch, 1999; Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006). I found this feature to be advantageous in many respects, particularly as a white male academic conducting research in two predominantly African American communities.

Furthermore, the walk-along helped me to convey my interest, respect, and willingness to reciprocate in a reasonable manner—features identified as important for establishing rapport (Agar, 1996). In particular, I found that the go-along was an important element in establishing rapport in two areas that are essential to the conduct of any community research: (1) gaining legitimacy with community "gate-keepers" and subsequent entrée to the community and (2) gaining legitimacy with residents.

Gaining Entrée to the Community. Prior to beginning my study, I was informed that the disadvantaged community, Harmony Hill, had been a repeated recipient of "drive-by research," which is a colloquial phrase used to describe studies conducted by researchers who are only interested in their own study (i.e. usually collecting a survey) and, whether intentional or not, provide nothing in return to help the community, aside from maybe a few dollars to compensate individual respondents for participating in the study.

While at an initial 2005 meeting trying to arrange a point of entrée into the community, I was informed by the director of a Harmony Heights community-based organization (CBO) that he and his staff had helped facilitate numerous graduate theses, but yet had received little in return that was useful for helping the community. Thus, he and his staff were, understandably, skeptical of my interests and reluctant to use their very limited resources to assist me with what they were convinced was yet another community survey project.

Reflexively speaking, I had significant concerns about my ability to effectively convey that: (1) I was sincerely concerned about the problems facing Harmony Heights and (2) my population health focused research (an inductive pilot project) could provide something useful for helping either this CBO or the community at large address Harmony Heights' problems. However, as I proceeded (quite nervously) to explain to the CBO director and his staff the focus

of my proposed project, I was surprised to witness a quick change in facial expressions from skeptical or disinterested at best to curious and intrigued. Some of this change in attitude toward me began to occur during my initial explanation of how I approach the study of community health problems—that is, as a product of social and economic conditions and not simply as a consequence of individualized health behaviors and risk-factors. (Convincing community service providers that I was not a "risk factor epidemiologist" was a common challenge that I faced in conducting this project.) However, when I began to discuss how I would study these issues— that is, via actually asking residents what they thought about these conditions while walking around the community with them (and not administering a typical survey of neighborhood perceptions)—my audience of initial skeptics was seemingly convinced (or at least convinced enough to give me the access to their staff and help facilitate my interactions with community residents).[2] Thus, the go-along method helped convey that I was genuinely interested in involvement with the residents and the community itself and that, regardless of the utility of the information I obtained for helping the community, I was at the very least going to take the time to listen to residents and see the community with my own eyes.[3]

Building Rapport with Residents. Similar to how mentioning my use of go-alongs helped convey to the community service providers my concern for the community and its issues, the go-along was useful to build rapport with and support from the residents whom I interviewed. My walk-along participants seemed to genuinely enjoy the process. Related to this, the walk-along was a way to *show concern and respect to residents/participants* and, as noted by Kusenbach (2003), promote a more egalitarian connection than is typically encountered in more traditional interview formats.

The go-along provides a natural forum for participants to share their thoughts on the community. Rather than simply running through survey questions, which, by nature, can—and in many cases should—be rather unengaged (at least from the stand-point of the interviewer), the walk-along provided a unique way to engage the participant. Via asking people to show me their neighborhoods, participants seemed to derive validation and even pride. Consistent with Agar's (1996) reflection that most people enjoy telling their story to someone who is interested in listening, one particular participant, over the course of his walk-along, actually developed a gait and posture that seemed more consistent with the appearance of tour guide than a typical walking companion. Overall, most participants would not require much guidance in terms of talking— pointing out and opining about a plethora of positive and negative features of their neighborhood all on their own. Indeed, there seems to be an intuitiveness to the task of showing and discussing one's neighborhood with an outsider. No walk-along participant rushed the process or ended the interview early. Furthermore, given the changing environment, there were few lulls in these conversations unlike those that can be encountered during sit-down interviews.

Personal and Community Empowerment

Related to the above discussion of go-alongs helping residents derive pride and/or validation, the potential of this methodology for generating personal and community empowerment cannot be overlooked. From a "conscientization" perspective (Minkler & Wallerstein, 1997; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003), go-alongs can be used to help residents better recognize the sources of the problems facing their neighborhood and larger local area—both proximal (e.g., drug houses) and distal (e.g., city government; city, county and state economy). In turn, the method can, in conjunction with other individual and collective activities, be used to

help people realize their role in changing those conditions and confronting power, inequality, and structural violence (Farmer, 1999).

My own research did not involve follow-up interviews with any of my walk-along participants. Hence, I am unable to comment on whether my go-alongs contributed to any empowerment.[4] However, it is easy to envision how this method can be useful in community-based participatory research (CBPR) projects that explicitly aim to involve community members and other local "experts" (e.g., community organization representatives) in various facets of the research, including helping identify community problems and devising ways to address them (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Minkler & Wallerstein, 1997).

Recruitment of Participants

As noted by Kusenbach (2003), go-alongs are advantageous for examining the social architecture of settings and the interactions between residents. Likewise, they provide unique opportunities to meet and recruit additional participants. As might be expected, a common event during the conduct of my walk-along interviews was for participants to encounter other neighbors and residents. These interactions provided wonderful opportunities to interact with other residents and, in some cases, resulted in my recruiting them for interviews as well. From my experience, these opportunities were advantageous for several reasons.

1. Foot-in-the-Door. The go-along permits a researcher to avoid some of the awkwardness of approaching strangers. This aspect is particularly advantageous in places where low trust of strangers exists due to high crime rates and/or the past practice of "drive-by research." Being introduced by the participant to someone else helped me establish a certain level of legitimacy with others. In one situation, I recruited a married couple to participate after walking by their home during the course of my walk-along with their neighbors. After a friendly

interaction between the neighbors ensued, I soon found myself receiving a tour of this couple's
renovated home.

2. *Opportunities to meet a wider range of residents and networks*. Community meetings
were a common way in which I met residents and recruited them to participate in my study.
However, I was cognizant of the potential problems that this strategy posed in terms of sample
homogeneity. Thus, walk-alongs offered a way to recruit a more heterogeneous sample—that is,
via meeting residents who are less active in such activities. In one walk-along, the participant
turned to some strangers walking past to ask them a question about some new construction. In
the course of this exchange, the participant (a middle-aged African American male living
primarily on government disability compensation) introduced me to the strangers (a white
married professional couple pushing a baby stroller), which resulted in me recruiting this couple
to participate in my study. Thus, this situation facilitated my ability to access residents whom at
that point I had experienced difficulty meeting—in this case, white professionals who lived in a
gentrifying area of contested space that the newly emerging white professional community was
claiming as being distinct from Harmony Hill (much to the chagrin of some Harmony Hill
residents).

3. *A way to observe the social life of the participant's neighborhood*. The go-along offers
a unique way to observe the degree and intensity of the participants' interactions with others they
encountered on the street or while passing by someone's front porch steps. In the
abovementioned case of being invited into the home of a couple who were neighbors of my
walk-along participants, using a walk-along to interview was useful for far more than just
recruitment. Observing events like this helped me to contextualize the interview comments I
received regarding the level of community people in this particular neighborhood shared with

each other. A few months later, I would have a *sit-down* interview with a white professional

from this same neighborhood who would talk passionately about his views on the importance of

establishing community ties to address problems facing many areas of Milwaukee. The

opportunities to observe the level of interaction in his neighborhood firsthand via prior walk-

alongs with his neighbors provided further texture to these comments. Additionally, it provided

context to his comments concerning how he felt a part of (and, conversely, was viewed as a

respected part of) a predominantly African American neighborhood that was near to a rapidly

expanding gentrifying area of affluent white young urban professionals.

Limitations of the Go-Along Interview for Public Health Research

Although the go-along interview offers a number of strengths, it still possesses many

practical, ethical, and epistemological limitations that must be considered relative to other

methods that might be better suited for investigating a particular research question or situation.

Mother Nature

Obviously, the utility of go-alongs (particularly walk-alongs) will be influenced by many

conditions outside the control of the researcher, such as the weather and physical health of the

respondent. For example, an elderly respondent may be very knowledgeable about the local

area, but physically unable to walk most of it with an interviewer. (Of course, in this case, the

respondent's inability to walk may be telling about her/his sense of place.) In my project, I

unintentionally ran into the unfortunate problem of the interviews continuing into the winter

months. In Wisconsin, winters can be brutally cold, involve significant snow fall, and, thus, be

completely incompatible with conducting walk-along interviews (although, to be fair, the hot and

humid weather of summer can pose restrictions as well). Conducting ride-along interviews may

be a way to overcome this obstacle. However, in my situation where I was the lone researcher,
ride-along interviews would have been difficult to implement—both logistically and in the
interest of safety—because they required conducting an interview while either myself or the
respondent were driving in high traffic areas (sometimes on icy or dark roads). Hence, being
forced at the time of the year to rely upon typical sit-down interviews and my own field
observations (conducted on foot or from the warmth of my car) reminded me of the advantages
of go-alongs—particularly as some respondents discussed (during sit-down interviews) how they
managed the dangers they encountered on their local streets that (from my own field
observations) seemed quiet, safe, and peaceful.

Nevertheless, I recognize that not conducting walk-alongs during the winter months was
a limitation of this study, as doing so would have provided some important insights into how
residents who do not drive make use of their local space amidst inclement weather. All hindsight
clichés aside, it may have been possible to accompany a participant on an outing for grocery
shopping and/or other chores. Such outings would have illuminated a number of issues
regarding participant's action space. For example, do such conditions limit the choices of places
to shop for groceries and other items? What is the availability of public transit near to a
participant's home and how accommodating is it? Are neighbors with cars relied upon for such
chores? Does bad weather curtail opportunities for social interaction and thus promote isolation.
If so, what are the implications for health, safety, and well-being (e.g., Klinenberg, 2002)?

Time of Day

In addition to weather, the time of day in which the interview is conducted also matters.
The type and frequency of social activity may differ not only in different locations within a
community but also throughout the course of the day. This situation, in itself, is not a limitation.

Nevertheless, respondents are often only available to talk with you at certain times of the day due to work, family, and other demands. These times can be at periods when their neighborhood may be rather quiet or busy. Also, they may be at times when walking outside is simply unsafe (more details on this follow in the next section).

The importance of time of day became quite salient to me early in my project when, after I arrived one mid-morning to conduct a walk-along interview, I noticed that this particular neighborhood within Harmony Heights was quite active with people walking up and down the street and going in and out of homes. Upon closer examination, I noticed that nearly all the people on the street were young (late teens to late 20s) African American males—something I had not noticed at other hours of the day (or in as much frequency on other street blocks within Harmony Heights). Given that this time of the day was during prime work and school hours, this observation spoke volumes about the lack of economic opportunities of which residents and service providers complained in their interviews were absent from the area. It also complemented my observation of the large number of daycare centers that lined the main street (and business area) running through Harmony Heights as well as statistics documenting high rates of single parent families.

Safety

Related to this issue of time is the subject of safety for the respondent and the researcher. For a place experiencing high violent crime rates and drug activity like Harmony Heights, safety was an important factor to consider. At the community meetings I attended, residents often voiced their fear of repercussions from reporting drug or other criminal activity to the police (an activity that carried the stigmatized term "snitching"). The fear of being identified as snitching on someone was so significant that it even prevented some residents from calling the police to

report crime (as the police often ask for the name and address of the person calling to make the complaint and often appear at the plaintiff's residence prior to dealing with the problem). Thus, walking at dusk with a resident who is pointing out aspects of the neighborhood to me (i.e. a white male in his early 30s—a rare demographic in many areas of Harmony Heights as well as some areas of Parkwood), could have (at least in theory) been potentially viewed in some places as a resident talking to a member of the police or even the district attorney's office, which was devoting considerable attention to fighting crime in that area.

Equipment

The type of equipment chosen will impact the quality of the recording from any type of interview—the go-along is no exception. I equipped my participants with a cassette recorder that could easily fit in a jacket pocket and a small microphone that clipped on a lapel or collar (both items were purchased from an inexpensive electronics chain store).

In terms of recording quality, this inexpensive microphone was quite effective in picking up not only the respondent's comments, but my questions and interactions as well. However, it was less effective when conducting the interview on busy streets with either high traffic volume or on-going construction. Further, the effectiveness of this microphone declined once additional people entered the conversation. For example, I conducted one walk-along with a participant whose spouse decided to also participate in the walk-along at the last minute. I equipped the initial respondent with the tape recorder and microphone. Even though we all walked in close proximity to each other, I found later that it was difficult to understand the comments of his spouse as well as difficult to interpret the many interactions that this couple had with their neighbors as we strolled through their neighborhoods (incidentally, a great qualitative indicator of the cohesiveness of people who live in the local area).

Fortunately, I had sufficient funding to use an excellent professional transcription service that was capable of translating a good portion of such seemingly indecipherable recordings. Nevertheless, given these experiences, it is advisable that anyone planning to conduct go-alongs should consult with an electronics expert to determine what equipment may be most optimal for recording conversations in outdoor environments—particularly environments that contain significant noise.

Analytic Issues

In addition to good interviewing skills, the utility of go-along data hinges on the inclusion of adequate levels of location information to situate and ground the interview (e.g., streets, stores, and other identifiers). To be sure, though, these are not limitations per se; rather, they are issues for which the researcher needs to be mindful as they could present significant limitations when analyzing the data.

Given the conversational nature of the go-along, it is understandable that study participants will often use vague language in describing features of the environment (e.g., "Those houses over there…" or "That street down there…"). Likewise, a researcher may use such language in the course of asking about a particular issue (e.g., "How do you feel about that new construction at the corner"). During the actual go-along, such statements are typically more than adequate for pointing out a specific object of consideration. When analyzing the transcription or audiorecording of that go-along at a later date, however, such statements may make it difficult for the researcher to recall what those specific objects were and why a participant commented in a particular way about them. Which houses? Which street? Thus, without more precise location information, such language can problematize analysis; making coding and comparison difficult and, ultimately, limiting the utility of go-along data.

To help overcome this potential problem, the researcher needs to take note of specific locations or landmarks encountered *during* the conduct of the go-along. A researcher can ensure the inclusion of such information by oral and written means. When audio-recording a go-along, one can make sure that significant landmarks are explicitly mentioned either in the course of conversation (e.g., "So I see we have just turned south at the intersection of Main Street and University Boulevard—how often do you walk this way?") or in a narrative manner [e.g., (during a pause in conversation) "We have now turned south at the intersection of Main Street and University Boulevard."]. Aside from providing a physical location for the on-going interview, such information allows the researcher to map specific issues raised by participants. Likewise, making handwritten notations on a map during the conduct of the go-along can also be useful. I recommend using both procedures simultaneously as a way to ensure that adequate information is obtained that facilitates analysis of the interview.

The use of other methods can also facilitate such linking of commentary/narrative to place. As mentioned previously, my walk-alongs were complemented by a two-step mapping exercise that also facilitated linking interview data to actual locations. Prior to setting out on a walk-along, I handed the participant a sheet of paper and pen and asked her/him to draw me a map of what they perceived to be their neighborhood—that is, drawing and labeling the major streets that constituted their neighborhood's boundaries. While drawing this map, participants would (to my initial surprise) articulate specific reasons for why they considered specific streets. Therefore, it was useful to have my cassette recorder turned on during such musings. Once they completed this exercise, I would flip over the sheet of paper to reveal a photocopy of a map of their local area (i.e. an area far larger than what one might typically consider their neighborhood and larger than Harmony Heights). I handed participants a yellow "highlighter" marker and

asked them to trace the streets on the map that constituted the boundaries of their neighborhood. This mapping exercise not only "set the stage" for the walk along (i.e. by getting the participant thinking about her/his neighborhood in terms of physical space and establishing the locations in which we would walk), but also provided two great reference sources for the interview data when it was later analyzed.

In addition to procedures used prior to and during the go-along, data quality can also be strengthened by steps taken at the immediate conclusion of a go-along. Consistent with traditional ethnographic approaches, detailed field notes or other observations by the researcher that are either written/typed or audiorecorded for later transcription can also be advantageous (see Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Complementarity with Other Methods

As found with the neighborhood study detailed herein, it is important to recognize that go-alongs are perhaps most useful when they are used in conjunction with other methods. Although my study only used a handful of walk-alongs, they were used in combination with field observations and sit-down interviews, which created an opportune situation for comparing its advantages and limitations relative to these other, more traditional qualitative methods. Nevertheless, given the go-along's complementarity with these methods, one can only imagine its utility when used with a variety of other qualitative and quantitative methods, rather than simply standard neighborhood or community surveys. As such, it is important to consider how it might be used with other methods.

Go-alongs offer a potentially powerful ally to the photovoice participatory action research method. In this method, people take photographs and discuss them with others as a

means of bringing about personal and community change (Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998).

As Wang and colleagues (1998) have shown, the photographs and corresponding narratives can

be quite powerful when presented to policymakers. My colleagues and I have taken an initial

step at attempting to incorporate these two methods for a participatory study of neighborhood

safety involving children and adolescents in Madison, Wisconsin. These youth were given

cameras and ventured outside to take photos of various positive and negative features of the local

area (as interpreted by the youth, not the researchers). The researchers accompanied some youth

(particularly younger children) on these outings. Whenever a photograph was taken, the

researchers asked the child to explain why they took a photograph of the particular object upon

which they focused. In addition to the insights we obtained from accompanying (and interacting

with) children on these photography outings (e.g., how the child interpreted an object or feature

of the neighborhood), the photos themselves were used to generate discussion within focus

groups of children and adolescents. These collective findings were ultimately presented to local

community stakeholders and city officials in an effort to promote awareness of issues and serve

as a motivator for guiding strategies for action.

Given its utility for mapping one's social space, go-alongs offer a way to complement

geographic information systems (GIS). Using GIS, it is possible to configure maps to

incorporate narratives from qualitative interviews alongside quantitative spatial data (e.g., see

Steinberg & Steinberg, 2006). The perspectives obtained via go-alongs can be incorporated and

shown at corresponding coordinates on the GIS map. For example, consider this in light of

Fullilove's (2005) work on the deleterious health influences of urban redevelopment and

displacement. A GIS map showing spatial quantitative data on new construction and area

residential demographics (both cross-sectionally and longitudinally) could be greatly augmented

by incorporating perspectives on gentrification obtained via walk-alongs from residents and other key informants. Related to this discussion, go-alongs could also offer potential utility when combined with both GIS and network analysis to investigate socio-spatial knowledge networks (SSKNs) regarding how people obtain information regarding chronic disease prevention and care (see Cravey, Washburn, Gesler, Arcury, & Skelly, 2001).

Lastly, it is possible to envision how go-alongs may be incorporated with focus groups. A "group go-along" may provide a way to generate discussion among a group of people on an outing in a particular location. The group itself could potentially consist of only residents, residents and local community stakeholders (e.g., service providers), or even residents and policymakers. Such a method may be particularly useful way for residents to communicate opinions and ideas regarding community development initiatives to policymakers and stakeholders (hence facilitating the empowerment issues raised earlier). Likewise, the go-along can potentially accommodate two researchers interviewing one or more respondents. Furthermore, in terms of teaching either this methodology or qualitative interviewing in general, the go-along format can easily accommodate a researcher and one or more student trainees— provided, of course, that a group activity does not make a respondent feel uncomfortable in expressing opinions.

Conclusion

This paper serves as an introduction to the go-along interview method and its uses in the study of place and health. The go-along method is a unique means of obtaining contextually-based information about how people experience their local worlds and the effects these experiences have on health and well-being. While the go-along takes advantage of the strengths

of both field observation and (sit-down) qualitative interviews, like all methods, it has limitations that must be considered as well.

All things considered, whether used alone or alongside other methods, the go-along offers a novel way to better understand how place and space matter for individual and collective health and well-being. Incorporating this method in the population health research "toolkit" can aid academics and practitioners in three ways. First, the go-along can be used to assess features and processes of local area contexts for which common approaches like survey methods and census data are insufficient for assessing. Second, its use can help in developing more refined theories of place and health that are grounded in the lived experiences of people being studied. Third, it is a robust means of community participatory research that may both further invest the researcher in the community and the community in the research. Ultimately, the go-along method can greatly contribute to population health efforts to generate a strong evidence base on place and health that relies on a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives.

Endnotes

1.   For the sake of anonymity, all names of neighborhoods, organizations, and persons have been changed to pseudonyms.

2.   My point of mentioning these issues is simply to document my experiences. In no way am I trying to either offer a debate regarding the relationship between method and rapport/gaining entrée or imply that my experience should be expected by researchers if they use this method in their research. Rapport and entrée are discussed frequently in the literature on qualitative methods (particularly ethnography). However, explicit discussion on how method may influence gaining entrée and establishing rapport is much harder to find. Nevertheless, some authors have certainly alluded to this issue in their discussions of entrée and rapport (e.g., Agar, 1996; Berg, 1998; Kirsch, 1999)

3.   A proper discussion of the applied or "giving back to Harmony Heights" aspects of my project is beyond the scope of this paper. However, to be sure, I did ask residents in their interviews if there was anything that they would like me to convey to their local community-based organizations. Also, through interviews with representatives from two Harmony Heights community-based organizations/service providers, I was able to identify common goals and issues faced and recommend/facilitate potential collaborations.

4.   In an effort to disclose my biases, I feel compelled to note that I hope my interviews did empower the people I interviewed. However, given that many residents I interviewed using walk-alongs were recruited from community meetings, many demonstrated through their interviews that they were already quite aware of many structural issues confronting them and their community.

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