The Outdoor Guided Walk as a Culturally Sensitive Research Method

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Abstract

A guided walk is a mobile research method in which interviews occur over the course of a walk with participants. This mobile method can enable complex connections between people, and between people and places (Sheller & Urry, 2006). The researcher used a three-stage outdoor guided walk, with emphasis on recommendations to advance this method. An outdoor guided walk can encourage open and pressure free dialogue, which can be especially useful in building rapport with culturally diverse participants. Future researchers wishing to employ an outdoor guided walk must consider weather, privacy and noise, and building a balanced relationship with participants. The guided walk offers many benefits in contributing to a dynamic and context-rich research environment and contributing to both research and participant wellness.

Keywords: mobile methodology, guided walk, outdoor

Résumé

Une promenade guidée est une méthode de recherche mobile dans laquelle des entretiens ont lieu au cours d'une promenade avec les participants. Cette méthode mobile peut permettre des relations complexes entre les personnes, et entre les personnes et les lieux (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Dans cet article, je décris une promenade guidée en plein air en trois étapes, en mettant l'accent sur les recommandations pour faire progresser cette méthode. Une promenade guidée en plein air peut encourager un dialogue ouvert et sans pression, ce qui peut être particulièrement utile pour établir des relations avec des participants de cultures différentes. Les futurs chercheurs souhaitant utiliser une promenade guidée en plein air doivent tenir compte de la météo, de la confidentialité et du bruit, et établir une relation équilibrée avec les participants. La promenade guidée offre de nombreux avantages en contribuant à un environnement de recherche dynamique et riche en contexte, et contribue à la fois à la recherche et au bien-être des participants.

Mots-clés: Méthodologie mobile, promenade guidée, plein air.

The Journey Begins: Introduction

Outdoor spaces can provide a unique and context-rich research environment particularly suitable for mobile methodologies. A guided walk is a mobile research method in which interviews can occur over the course of a walk with participants. Sheller and Urry (2006) pointed to “the ‘mobile turn’ within the social sciences,” which includes emergent mobile theories and methods (p. 207). Mobile methods, such as “walking with” participants, can enable complex connections between people, and between people and places (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 218).

The researcher used a three-stage outdoor guided walk method to understand the outdoor recreation expectations and experiences of international students at a university in Northern Ontario, Canada, as part of doctoral work at Nipissing University. The first section of this paper, highlights the unique attributes and considerations in using an outdoor guided walk, including: (a) logistics, (b) participant size, (c) timeline and on-going analysis, and d) use as a culturally sensitive approach. The second section provides lessons on the guided walk method, including (a) challenges, (b) benefits, and (c) recommendations to advance in future research.

The Outdoor Guided Walk

Other researchers have incorporated walking into the interview process through walking interviews (Dubé, Schinke, Strasser, & Lightfoot 2014; Evans & Jones, 2011; Jones, Bunce, Evans, Gibbs, & Hein, 2008; Ross, Renold, Holland, and Hillman (2009). A guided walk can ease participants into interviews by building rapport and situating the importance of place in the conversation (Evans & Jones, 2011). Guided walks encourage open and pressure-free dialogue, and a balance of power between participants and researcher (Jones et al., 2008). Instead of a more traditional face-to-face seated interview, in an outdoor guided walk, the researcher, walked alongside participants through interviews. As Ross, Renold, Holland, and Hillman (2009) described, “interactions that took place on the move were dynamic, characterized by a more free-flowing dialogue, moving from topic to topic, returning to previous topics, allowing unstrained gaps and pauses” (p. 619). Dubé, Schinke, Strasser, and Lightfoot (2014) used guided walks in their qualitative exploration of the experiences of 12 third year medical students in Northern Ontario. According to Dubé et al. (2014), “the guided walk made it easier for participants to take part in the study, provided context-rich research interactions, and led to serendipitous encounters” (p. 47). The on-the-move interactions between the researcher and the participant created open and comfortable conversations and help situate place in the interview. In this study, the same principles of a walking interview were observed, but the researcher moved the research setting to the outdoor environment as was important in the context of the study.

Logistics

The guided walks began at a mutually convenient location, then the route was guided either by the researcher or co-determined with participants, in order to situate the interviews in familiar areas and help participants learn about new routes to promote their further exploration, as recommended by Evans and Jones (2011). Alternative locations or formats were available

based on accessibility needs or comfort of the participants (e.g., indoor track or sitting outdoors in a natural space). A guided walk must consider appropriate weather, time of day, safety, and equipment to ensure the comfort and well-being of participants (Carpiano, 2009).

A guided walk is similar to a sedentary interview and requires checking of technology (e.g., microphone digital recording devices) before and during the interview. In a guided walk, participants may need reminding to clarify observations verbally instead of physically pointing to areas, which could be unclear in data processing phases (Garcia, Eisenberg, Frerich, Lechner, & Lust, 2012). The interviews were audio recorded with two clip omnidirectional microphones feeding into two digital recorders (one on researcher and one on participants). The participant recorded audio was the main source for transcribing and the other served as a backup.

Participant number

Seidman (1991) noted that it is appropriate to set a goal for participant number ahead of time, but the progress through the research stages can help determine if a researcher has met with “enough” participants (p. 45). In order to determine the appropriate participant size, Morse (2000) pointed to five main considerations: (a) the scope of the study, (b) the nature of the topic, (c) the quality of the data, (d) the study design, and (e) the use of shadowed data. Incorporating multiple interviews in the study design allowed participants to reflect and focus on the scope of the study to generate rich data and help reach saturation of data even with fewer participants (Morse, 2000). For Morse (2000), in a phenomenological design with multiple interviews, it is appropriate to select between 6-10 participants since “one has a large amount of data for each participant and therefore needs fewer participants in the study” (p. 4-5). In this study, seven participants were part of the three-stage guided walks.

Timeline and on-going analysis

The stages of research were part of approved ethics protocols from both the researcher’s home institution and the participants’ institution. Prior to the guided walks, all new international students were invited to participate in a quantitative survey to help orient the researcher to the research context. The survey included participant profile information related to nationality, year of study, languages, and any previous experiences studying in Canada. After the profile information, the participants were asked about their home country outdoor experiences and expectations of their outdoor recreation in Canada. The final question of the survey asked for interest in the guided walk stages.

The guided walks were set in international students’ first year in Canada, with the first interview occurring approximately four weeks (mid-October) after the initial survey to clarify data related derived from the survey. The second interview occurred after the midterm break (late November) to revisit expectations and open a discussion on experiences to date. The third guided walk occurred in the winter (late January), when participants reflected on their expectations and experiences with attention to the benefits and barriers of their experiences. Prior to each guided walk, semi-structured interview questions were emailed to participants for consideration.

After the completion of each interview stage, data was analyzed and reduced by reading the transcriptions from start to finish for an initial search for meaning. The search for meaning, as described by Janesick (2003), was to illuminate participants' perspectives and occurrence of events over time, and to consider "points of tension" in conflicting evidence between the participant views. As Seidman (1991) described, the "interpreting and analyzing are not processes the researcher does only near the end of the project" (p. 101). Instead, the meanings that were gathered from analyzing the first interview transcripts helped tailor the interview questions in the next stage to clarify and probe ideas further with participants. The second interview phase was informed by the first interview data, and the third interview was informed by meanings drawn from the second interview data. For example, in interview 1, participants shared concerns about the impact of their language ability and the weather on their participation in outdoor recreation. This led to further probing in interview 2 with specific questions related to how language and weather influenced the way they participate in outdoor recreation. The return to participants to co-construct interpretations add trustworthiness in the inquiry (Janesick, 2003).

At the completion of the three-stage interviews, the researcher transformed the data by creating categories. The creation of categories came from an intentional search for patterns and connections between the questionnaire data and the interview categories revealed by the data (Seidman, 1991). In an inductive analysis, detailed by Thomas (2006), text was re-organized by placing similar meaning into labelled categories. The grouped sections were then re-read to make sure the category label described the text groupings. The text was reduced based on the necessary intentionality of a researcher to define where their study starts and ends, as Clandinin and Connelly (1994) described. The researcher went back to the text several times to resolve some of the "the messy complexity" of studying lived experiences that Clandinin and Connelly (1994) pointed to as they encouraged researchers to be intentional in their search for meanings (p. 416). The data was verified by confirming the categories and the associated text with participants in the post-interview phase for additional co-construction and trustworthiness. Participants were sent the categories and associated text by email for their reflections and clarifications.

Finally, the interpretation of the data led to the discussion as the researcher aimed to make sense of the findings in relation to the research question and the related literature. The findings are drawn from both the quantitative and qualitative data to assess how international students' Canadian outdoor recreation experiences confirmed and disconfirmed their expectations and what other unanticipated experiences they lived.

In Table 1, a summary of the research process timeline is provided.

Table 1: Overview of Research Process and Interview Stages

<u>Research Stage</u>	<u>Timeline</u>	<u>Goal</u>	<u>Information Shared by Researcher</u>	<u>Participant Documents</u>
Piloting survey	July	Pre-test survey with English faculty for appropriate language and wording, as per Ethics protocol	Survey questions	None
Quantitative Survey	Early September (Week 1-2 of new semester)	Context building; preparing for interviews	Study purpose, expectations of participation	Participation and consent letter
Quantitative Analysis	End of September	Analysis of survey results to inform interview phase	None	None
Pre-interview warm up	October	Set the stage; introductions	Building trust; situating myself in the context; research purpose and guided walk process	Participation letter
Interview #1.	Mid-October (after Fall Break)	Clarifying student expectations	Interpretations of survey results	Copy of interview guide and consent letter
Interview #2.	End of November (before Final Exams)	Revisiting expectations relative to experiences	Interpretations of first interview	Copy of interview guide and consent letter
Interview #3.	End of January (after Add/Drop period)	Reflecting on expectations, met or unmet, in evaluating first semester experiences	Interpretations of first and second interview	Copy of interview guide and consent letter
Post-interview wrap up	February-March (after Winter Break)	Member checking	Transcripts and emerging themes	Transcripts; themes
Qualitative Analysis	On-going to April 2017	Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts	Final themes	Final report and presentation

A cross-cultural approach

The researcher-participant relationship in a cross-cultural context relies on trust and comradery, and in approaches that minimize the power imbalance (Milligan, 2014). Guided walks can encourage a balance of power between participants and researcher (Jones, Bunce, Evans, Gibbs, & Hein, 2008). This balance of power is especially useful in studies with participants from diverse cultures. From a cross-cultural perspective, walking side-by-side also helps reduce cultural misinterpretations of different uses of eye contact or physical distance. Kinloch and Metge (2014) described challenges in communicating across cultures, including diverse uses of eye contact across cultures to express honesty, respect, opposition, conflict, or sexual invitation. Throughout the guided walks, the researcher adhered to guidelines for cross-cultural interviewing, including offering more interview time and allowing participants to use translation devices if needed (Cortazzi, Pilcher & Jin, 2011).

Lessons on the Guided Walk Method: Advancing the Tools

Naturalist, John Muir (1918), wrote “in every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.” The guided walks offer an entry to a context-rich research environment. In this section, the challenges and benefits of the guided walk method are considered to offer recommendations to leverage the potential of outdoor guided walks in future research.

Challenges of the guided walk. Researchers should consider several challenges in using the guided walk methodology including, (a) weather, (b) privacy and noise, and (c) maintaining a balanced relationship with participants.

Weather. The weather was an important consideration in the guided walk interviews, especially in the context of interviewing international students who had just arrived in Canada. Some participants arrived at the interviews unprepared for the weather even after email reminders to dress warmly.

As per the approved ethics protocol, the researcher offered to move the interviews inside when if it was suspected that the participants were uncomfortable. One interview was moved inside to a quiet area of the campus near a window after a brief walk outside when one participant seemed cold. The indoor contingency plan was useful in continuing the interviews comfortably.

Carpiano (2009) also found that walking interviews could be influenced by weather, finding that winter months and snowfall could be incompatible with walking interviews. Conducting interviews in the winter provided important insights into how participants interact in the environment during inclement weather. The researcher observed a limited awareness from the cultural diverse participants about how to dress for Canadian winter conditions.

Recommendations for future researchers include providing advice to participants about preparing for outdoor conditions with specific examples of appropriate apparel. Researchers should have extra supplies available for participants, if needed, such as gloves, mitts, tuque and scarf in winter, or a water bottle, hat and sunscreen available in hot weather.

Privacy and noise

Outdoor guided walks in familiar areas could lead to a lack of privacy. The participants and the researcher both recognized other pedestrians while walking, signalling to them with small waves and nods but not stopping to talk. The experiences reinforced the work of Dubé et al. (2014) who noted that one of the limitations of the guided walk method is in maintaining the confidentiality of the participants and the need to inform participants of the likelihood of encountering others as part of the consent phase.

The participants did not seem bothered by encounters with others, but the random meetings did pose a greater challenge to the quality of the audio recording. As others walked by, or rode by on bikes, the audio recording picked up some background voices and noise that made transcription more difficult sometimes needing repeating four or five times to decipher the participants' words. Carpiano (2009) also noted that traffic or pedestrians noise could affect the quality of the interview recording.

It is recommended that future researchers using the walking interview method pause the conversation when others are approaching to help maintain the privacy of the conversation as well as to maintain quality audio recordings.

Relationships with participants

Walking outside together created an open and comfortable space and the three-stage interviews meant spending extended periods with participants. By the third stage of interviews, the researcher developed a positive relationship with participants, facilitated through the guided walks. After the interviews, the researcher shared practical advice with some participants, directing them to outdoor equipment and opportunities, but future researchers may want to consider the boundaries of their sharing and their approach to giving back to participants.

In Swartz's (2011) work with impoverished youth in South Africa, a case was made for researchers to exceed ethical standards when studies include vulnerable youth participants. Swartz (2011) used outings and adventure camps with participants to help build trusting relationships with participants, noting that the informal outings allowed her to give back to participants. As Swartz (2011) explained, there was value in mutual sharing between the participant and the researcher: "informal conversations were frequently revisited during subsequent interviews as young people gathered courage to provide more details" (p. 54).

Future researchers are encouraged to consider how much sharing they will do in building trusting relationships with participants. In the context of this study, recommendations for participant follow up include sharing a list of local free outdoor trail systems and equipment lending programs. For example, the researcher followed up with all survey participants to express thanks and offer links to campus and nearby recreation opportunities, and shared instructions with guided walk participants on how to access the free snowshoe-lending program at the local public library.

It would have been beneficial to include someone from the campus recreation office in the participant recruitment presentations to help follow up regarding campus outdoor recreation opportunities, locating equipment and local recreation clubs, since the presentation generated

some interest in these activities even among those who did not participate in the study. An additional recommendation is to offer a free outdoor fun activity to participants, in coordination with the international student or campus recreation offices, such as a day for participants to try canoeing and stand up paddle boarding as a way to give back to participants.

Benefits of the guided walk. There were numerous benefits to the guided walk identified by participants and by myself as researcher, including (a) free-flowing dialogue, (b) dynamic environment, and (c) contributions to overall researcher and participant wellness.

Free-flowing dialogue. Through the interviews, participants shared that they enjoyed the open and comfortable space that the walks provided for one-on-one sharing. More importantly for researchers, the guided walk provided a space that facilitated trust building with the participants. A culturally diverse participant described it this way:

Walking is better because when you sit it's face to face, and when you are walking it's side by side. I think side-by-side feels more close. When you are close to some people, we will talk more and speak more sentences or you open more comfortable...Before I started I thought it's going to be very difficult for me and now I feel it's okay, I can do it. Because there is only two people and we talk just directly to each other and it's not like in the class. It's more like just two people talking.

Another participant shared a similar thought, summarized this way, "it's like talking to one of my friends." The researcher also experienced this easy back and forth sharing with participants. Vannini and Vannini (2017) considered walking as a wilder way of knowing, advocating that the walking interview method can help researchers be open to perspectives and less predetermined by a certain research direction. The guided walks created an open environment for participants to share their experiences and perspectives allowing me to gain a depth of knowledge, and new and unexpected insights into their experiences. Carpiano (2009) described similar benefits in using walking interviews, noting the unique perspectives that can be gleaned by examining "a participant's interpretations of their context while experiencing these contexts" producing both an "immediate sensation" and a time to reflect on memories of past experiences (p. 12).

Future researchers can use outdoor guided walks in their goals of developing an open and in-depth one-on-one relationship with the participants. This method feels less formal than traditional seated interviews, and the reduction of eye contact and other barriers (such as a desk between the researcher and participant) allows free flowing dialogue and building open and trusting relationships. With the development of these relationships, researchers must consider how they will give back to participants, as described in the previous section, relating to balancing the relationship with participants.

Dynamic environment

As per the guided walk protocol, the researcher met participants at a designated location and then either the researcher or the participant choose the direction on the trail. In reality, participants looked to the researcher to guide the location of each walk. This was beneficial for participants to discover new trails. The guided walks were part of the cultural learning that occurred. Participating in the guided walks was part of learning about Canada and taking part in an experience in the Canadian natural environment.

It is recommended that future researchers who use an outdoor guided walk be familiar with the trails, including the distance, terrain, and possible loops back to the designated meeting spot, to help participants learn about the trails. Adding highlight points on the walk, such as a highpoint view or lake, is also valuable for participants to learn about returning to these spots on their own. Researchers can also use guided walks indoors as Dubé et al. (2014) did, still finding that walking side by side in a specific environment provided rich and open dialogue.

Researcher and participant wellness

Many researchers have pointed to the calming effect of walking in the woods. The Japanese concept of Shinrin-yoku, as described by Park, Tsunetsugu, Kasetani, Kagawa, and Miyazaki (2010) and Lee et al. (2011), demonstrated the physical and mental benefits of being in the forest, which positions the forest as medicine. Being in a natural environment can help reduce stress, prevent disease and contribute to overall wellness. The guided walk provided an opportunity to be outside and participate in physical activity, which contributed to both the researcher and participants' overall wellness. The researcher resonated with one participant's words: "when you are walking maybe you breathe fresh air that makes you have more ideas." Being in nature helped bring new ideas and walking throughout the research process was an important way to help organize and digest what participants had shared. Bates and Rhys-Taylor (2017) summed the experience nicely,

Walking is a brilliant form of exercise for our stiff bodies and a way of reinvigorating our engagement with the social world. It induces a mobile, grounded perspective and foregrounds corporeal, sensual and affective matters. Walking collects together visions, smells, tactilities, sounds and tastes with various degrees of association and intimacy (p. 6).

On a physical level, during the interview weeks, the researcher averaged over 10 kilometers of walking per day. It is important for researchers, and their participants, to seek out opportunities to exercise and maintain a healthy balance between studies, work, and life, as Martinez, Ordu, Della Salla and McFarlane (2013) found. As the researcher compared the guided walk format to previous research in a traditional seated format, the guided walk method had the advantage of the researcher being ready to get back to seated indoor work such as transcribing to keep the research progress moving.

Future researchers should consider their own physical wellness in scheduling guided walks, considering how much time they are ready to spend outside on their feet as a guide to

whether to schedule multiple interviews in one day. Also, consider extra time to walk alone at the end of the interview to help organize thoughts and generate ideas reflecting on the interview. Future researchers may also be interested in specifically quantifying the guided walk in terms of number of steps, kilometres, pace or calories burned as a way to evaluate the physical impact of using the guided walk method, which does not currently exist in the literature. Table 2, provides a summary of recommendations to advance the guided walk method.

Table 2

Summary of the recommendations to advance the guided walk method

<u>Condition</u>	<u>Recommendation</u>
Weather	Offer alternative indoor locations for participant comfort
	Remind participants of appropriate dress for conditions, with specific examples of the required types of clothing and footwear
	Have extra layers of clothing available to lend to participants, appropriate for conditions
Privacy and noise	Alert participants to lack of privacy and likelihood of encountering others that can accompany guided walks
	Pause conversations while others are approaching to maintain privacy and quality of audio recording
Balanced relationship with participants	Establish how much sharing and interaction with participants is appropriate related to directing participants to available activities and equipment
	Organize a free outdoor activity at the conclusion of the study to thank participants for their participation, in coordination with the international student or campus recreation office
Free-flowing dialogue	Use guided walks to develop open and in-depth one-on-one relationships with participants and consider language level and cultural approaches to one-on-one conversations
Dynamic environment	Be familiar with the environment to introduce participants to new or convenient trails and highlight spots

Researcher and participant wellness	Be ready for an increase in physical activity, using guided walks to maintain a healthy study-life balance (10km/ interview day)
	Determine the number of interviews that can be completed in one day based on the time the researcher is ready to spend outside; allowing extra time post-interview to reflect
	Quantify the physical aspects of the guided walk by recording number of steps, kilometers, pace or calories

Next Steps

The outdoor guided walks created a dynamic research environment that encouraged initial and continued participation and open dialogue. Researchers can effectively use guided walks by considering appropriate logistics, participant size, timeline and analysis, and opportunities to use this approach with participants from diverse cultures. The recommendations provided aim to advance this method, which offers unique benefits in understanding the research context, and contributing to participant and researcher wellness.

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