

## Resource 10: Using mobile methods

When researching mobilities, geographers might embrace the following techniques:

- 1) **Observational research:** researchers can ‘look at’ people’s movements closely, ‘their strolling, driving, leaning, running, climbing bodies, bodies lying on the ground... and so on’ through direct approaches such as ‘shadowing’;
- 2) **Active participation:** researchers can involve themselves in the movement they are examining, resulting in a ‘co-present immersion’ in the mobile landscape under exploration. This might be thought of as a mobile ethnography. Such participation can often be captured using technology such as video cameras.
- 3) **Time-space diaries:** researchers and participants can keep a detailed record of ‘what they are doing and where, how they move during those periods and the modes of movement’ allowing the researcher to ‘plot’ movement and its drivers. Diaries can be in written form, or may be photographed or videoed;
- 4) **Virtual research:** researchers can investigate the virtual movements of people through ‘analysing texting, websites, multi-user discussion boards. Blogs, emails and listserves’. Such research presents ethical challenges (see the next section) and the extent and direction of movement is not always transparent or easy to follow;
- 5) **Imaginative research:** researchers can use art and design interventions (for example, drawing and painting) to try and capture some of the imagined mobilities of participants, or use gaming technologies to make sense of imagined futures (for example, mapping out ideal city designs);
- 6) **Following:** researchers can follow the journeys of people and things exploring how travel impacts subjects and objects and the decision-making processes that determine

movement. Technologies such as GPS (Global Positioning Systems) can be embraced to enhance such approaches. (Taken from Buscher and Urry, 2009: 104–8)

In order to embrace these methods, 2 techniques are common – the use of **autobiography** and the use of **video methods**. These are each described below:

- *Using autobiography to capture embodied motion:*

For geographers, the body is both a subject of research enquiry, and a tool for conducting research. In respect of the latter, the body is not just a means of employing methods (of engaging in ethnographic practice, or pushing the record button on the Dictaphone during an interview). Rather, we can reflect upon our own embodied lives, experiences, and encounters, using **autobiographical** data to make sense of the social worlds under investigation. Autobiography enables us to make sense of geographical worlds by considering our own geographies, our own worlds (Moss 2001). As Pamela Moss notes in the introduction of her excellent edited book *Placing Autobiography in Geography*, during a period of research concerning the spatial experiences of chronically ill women and their relationships with work and home environments, Moss found a value in reflecting on her own experiences of someone who was likewise unwell (2001: 2–3). As she notes:

I decided to use myself as a source of information. It was not so much to compare my life with theirs (the research participants), rather it was to juxtapose mine with theirs ... I wanted to use my experiences the way I used theirs – to elaborate empirical links, to contribute to critically informed uses of the individual in political-economy studies, and to shed light on the dearth of feminist analysis of materiality ... in geography (Moss, 2001: 3).

In other words, for Moss autobiography becomes another form of data from which we can hope to make sense of particular geographical phenomenon. Just because it is our life, doesn't mean it isn't valid for making sense of space, place and experience. Moss notes that autobiography can be used in multiple ways, through **life histories**, **ethnographies**, and in making sense of our research via processes of **reflexivity** (Moss, 2001: 9 and Chapter 6).

Indeed, if we are to engage with autobiography seriously and critically, it is not enough to 'muse' over past experiences. We have to approach this method of research with the same level of thought and consideration that we give to other forms of data gathering. Banks (who has used autobiography to reflect upon the economic experiences of single mothers in New Zealand, see 2003), notes that autobiographical research can be employed using a **research journal** to record 'thoughts, feelings or reactions'. Latham notes (2010: 192-4) that it is also possible to use other forms of diary – photographic or video. Diaries can (and should) be **expressive** in style, reflecting your own way of communicating. Reading examples of autobiographical writings by geographers such as Wylie (2005) and Cook (2001) provide good examples of the variety of ways of animating geographical knowledge autobiographically.

### **Useful references**

- Banks, A. (2003) 'Autobiography and cultural geography', in a. Blunt and P. Gruffudd, J. May, M. Ogborn and D. Pinder (eds) *Cultural Geography in Practice*. London: Arnold, pp. 88–102.
- Büscher, M. and Urry, J. (2009) 'Mobile methods and the empirical', *European Journal of*

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Cook, I. (2001) 'You want to be careful you don't end up like Ian. He's all over the place: Autobiography in/of an expanded field', in P. Moss (ed.) *Placing Autobiography in Geography*. New York: Syracuse University Press, pp. 99–120.

Latham, A. (2003) 'Research, performance, and doing human geography: some reflections on the diary-photograph, diary-interview method', *Environment and Planning A*, 35 (11): 1993–2017.

Moss, P. (2001) *Placing Autobiography in Geography*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Wylie, J. (2005) 'A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30 (2): 234–47.

- *Using videos to capture a world on the move:*

In the past, the use of video as a research gathering tool was limited for most researchers on account of cost, access, and the expert skills required to wield the camera (Garrett, 2011: 525). Today, however, digital video has revolutionised how researchers may engage with the medium for data collection (Pink, 2012). Hand-held video cameras are now much cheaper to purchase, without compromising quality, and the capacity of phones and other devices to capture moving images has made video footage easier to produce than ever before. The ability for even a novice to record and edit videos has increased the capacity for use in research. But when might you use video in your own research? First, you need to ask if video is a suitable method in respect of your research enquiry. Like any method, video will not be suitable for all projects. However, video is especially helpful if you hope to understand moments 'as they happened'. Video can capture 'a particular time place, preserving (it) visually, aurally and sensually' (Garrett, 2011: 526). This makes video especially useful in

mobilities research, where we wish to reflect upon events ‘in-situ’. Yet what considerations should researchers make when engaging with video, whilst videoing, and afterwards when they seek to make sense of the footage?

### ***Making videos***

Justin Spinney has demonstrated the usefulness of video methods in his work on urban cycling (see Spinney, 2011). For Spinney, the movement of cycling was difficult to intimately comprehend with ‘regular’ methods. The camera allowed him to capture and then reflect back upon ‘fleeting’ and ‘ephemeral’ moments. Spinney conducted a mobile ethnography, ‘riding along’ with urban cyclists, capturing their mobility on film. Yet for Spinney, it was vital to think seriously about where to *place* the camera. Different camera positions construct different knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation. In order to make sense of the embodied experiences of cycling, Spinney conducted various rides with the camera placed differently each time, adding varying layers of perspective on the embodied sensation of cycling. To begin, the camera was mounted on the cycle helmet of participants (to record *their* view of the journey looking outwards). For the second recording, Spinney followed the participants (to record their journeys from behind, allowing full view of the body and its movements – the weavings, stops and starts – to be recorded). For the third recording, the camera was mounted on the participant’s handlebars but positioned to look back at the cyclist (to record their reaction to the journey looking inwards). Each allowed Spinney ‘to access aspects of the journey that were previously beyond reach’ (2011: 167). Researchers using film must therefore be both considered and rigorous in their approach in order to best collect data using this medium.

### *Analysing videos*

Video also provides novel opportunities for analysis and interpretation. Video, as Garrett notes, ‘captures’ moments (2011: 526). Crucially, this allows the researcher to look back and interrogate moments as they unfolded. But there are various ways that video can be reflected-upon. The first is that the researcher may carefully watch the footage themselves to make sense of events or instances that were fleeting, or momentary. Garrett notes (2011: 526) that the ability to stop, pause, rewind and re-watch video allows the researcher the opportunity to deeply engage with the transitory topics under consideration. However, whilst video can be ‘stilled’, its presentation of moving image is also important in allowing the researcher the opportunity to analyse the ‘flow’ of particular events or occurrences and to observe how moments might ‘link together’ (Spinney, 2011: 168). Video can also be analysed not only by the researcher, but by the participant. In Spinney’s work, he conducted interviews with participants following the video recordings, asking cyclists to reflect upon moments of mobility. Such analysis enables participants to not merely describe their movement (as they might in a traditional interview) but to regain a closeness to that movement by critically considering what happened, why and when, in respect of the video footage. As Spinney notes (2011: 168), video allowed a ‘nuanced account of place and the body to emerge’ as he was able to ask his participants about their mobility ‘in a way that was impossible whilst ... (the movement was) actually being performed’.

### *Critiquing videos*

That said, we must be cautious of celebrating the potential of video to (1) do research work for us with little consideration, and (2) to capture the world ‘as it is’. With regard to the former, it is often argued that far from enabling researchers to ‘get

closer' to particular sensory, embodied engagement, video actually creates a distancing effect by positioning the camera between the researcher and the researched. Accordingly, Spinney (2011: 172) notes that careful use of video is necessary in bringing researchers closer to that which they hope to understand. The researcher has to be proactive in using video as a 'bridge' to allow participants to better articulate their experiences to researchers (Spinney, 2011: 172). Moreover, video, like the still image, or textual account, **remains a representation**, constructed by the researcher and dependent on the camera angle (see above), the editing of any footage, the quality of the equipment used, and so on. As such, researchers must think seriously about how their video (re)presents the topic under consideration.

### **Useful references**

- Garrett, B. L. (2011) 'Videographic geographies: Using digital video for geographic Research', *Progress in Human Geography*, 35 (4): 521–41.
- Pink, S. (2012) *Advances in Visual Methodologies*. London: Sage.
- Spinney, J. (2011) 'A chance to catch a breath: Using mobile video ethnography in cycling research', *Mobilities*, 6 (2): 161–82.