GOING ALONG

WHAT CAN MOBILE METHODS CONTRIBUTE TO QUALITATIVE AND INTERPRETIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS?

Maggie Kusenbach, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

University of South Florida

Fulbright Visiting Professor

University of Vienna (Summer 2021)

Background

theoretical approach

- interpretive theory, sociology of knowledge
- symbolic interactionism, social constructionism
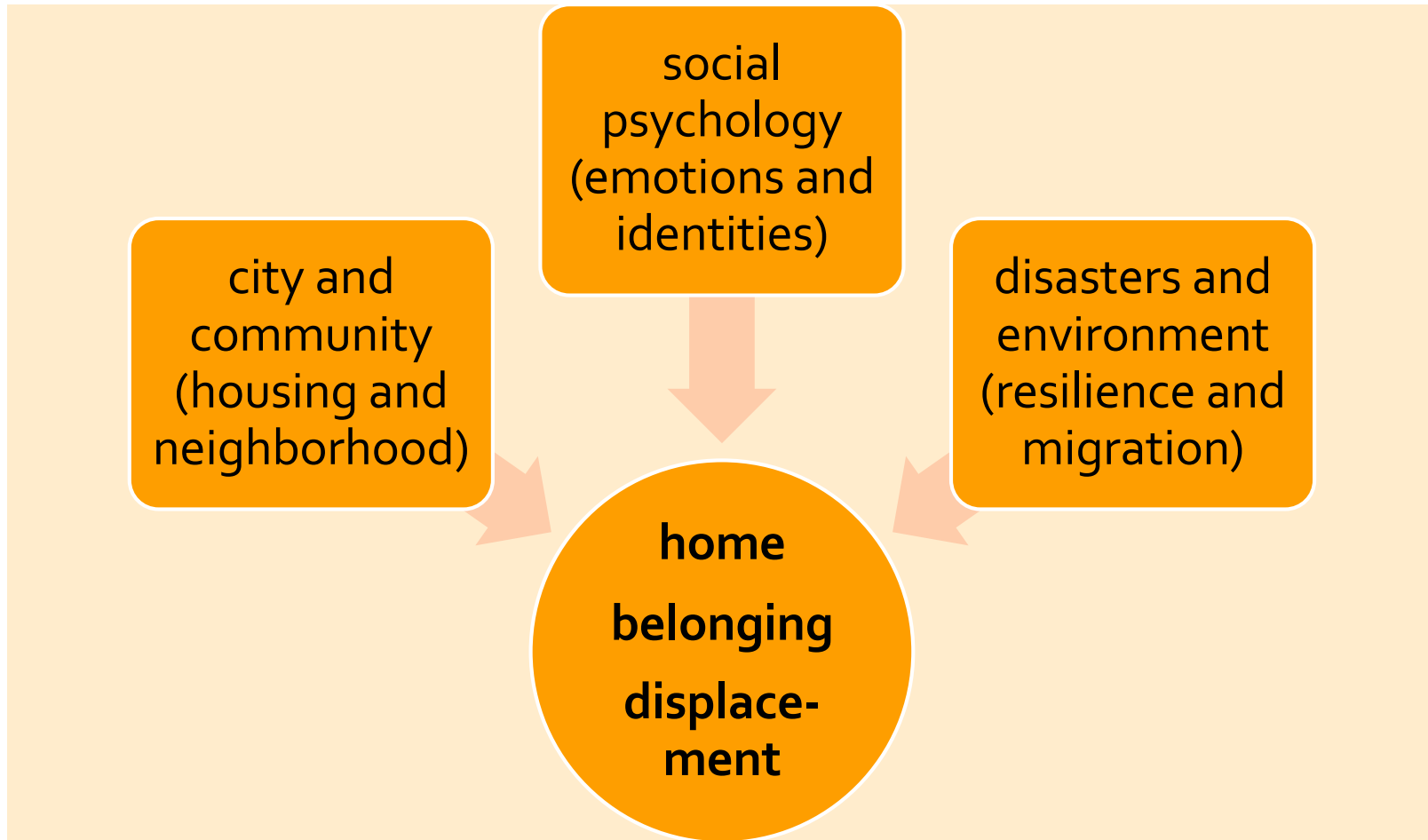- phenomenology, ethnomethodology

dissertation 2003

- *Neighboring: An Ethnographic Study of Community in Urban Hollywood*
- go-along method developed as a tool

methodology

- ethnography (observations and interviewing)
- visual and mobile methods
- narrative and "alternative" methods

Background

Background

New Research (since 2019):

graffiti/street art and urban development

Overview

- origins of mobile methods & go-alongs

- definition & uses

- characteristics & types

- examples

- strengths & limitations

- final comments

Origins

Mobilities Paradigm

(John Urry and colleagues, UK)

- NEW TOPIC: response to global increase in movements of people, objects, images, ideas, and communication

- NEW THEORY: aimed at overcoming "sedentary" biases & limitations in previous thinking & concepts

- NEW METHODS: searching for new catalog of methods to study mobilities in new ways
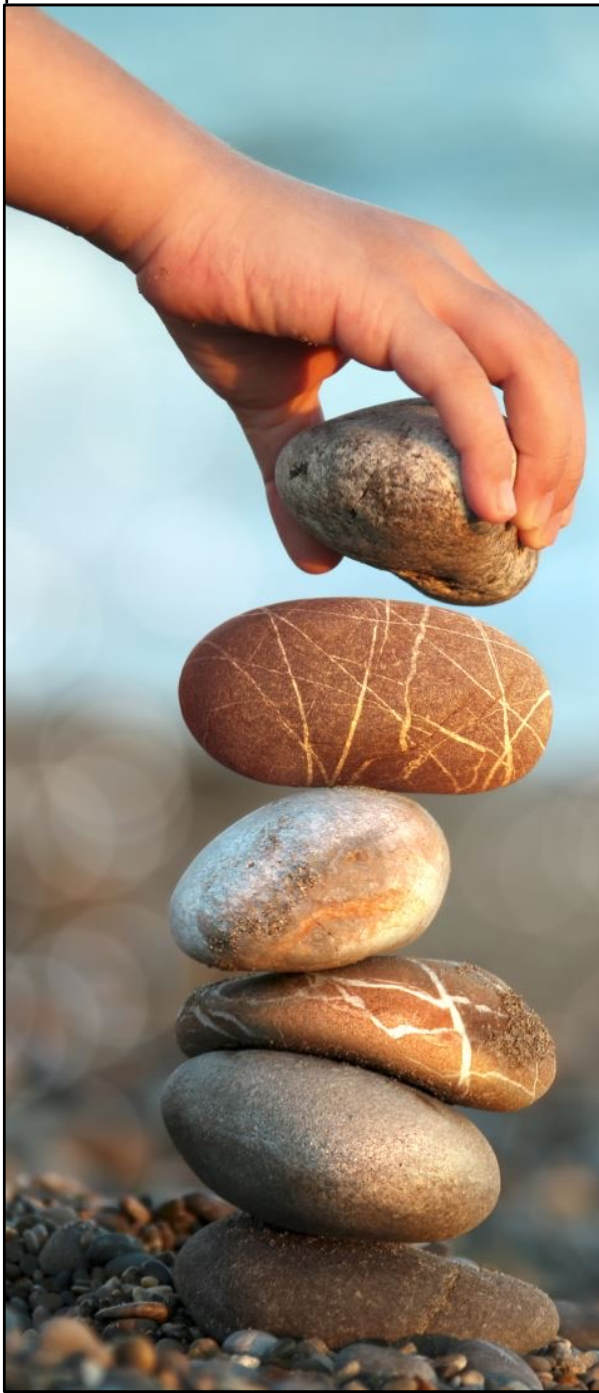
Origins

Methodological Critiques

- improving the "toolkit" of qualitative methods

- inspirations found in philosophy, phenomenology, social geography, urban & regional studies, etc. emphasizing human experience

other impulses:

- embodiment research

- social network

- science and technology studies

- visual studies

- cultural studies

- literature, art, film…

Origins

Critiques of traditional participant observation ("hanging out")

- too static
- too local
- too self-referential

Critiques of traditional interviewing

- too static & structured
- too unequal
- too verbal

- both miss taken for granted views and practices

Definition and Uses

Broad conception of mobile methods:
- the various ways of studying mobility
- perhaps better: "mobility methods"

**Narrow conception** of mobile methods (including go-alongs):
- qualitative,
- hybrid interview/observation
- "methods of participating in patterns of movement while conducting research" (Buescher, Urry, Witchger 2011:8)
- when "research subject and researcher are in motion in the 'field'" (Hein, Evans & Jones 2008:1276)
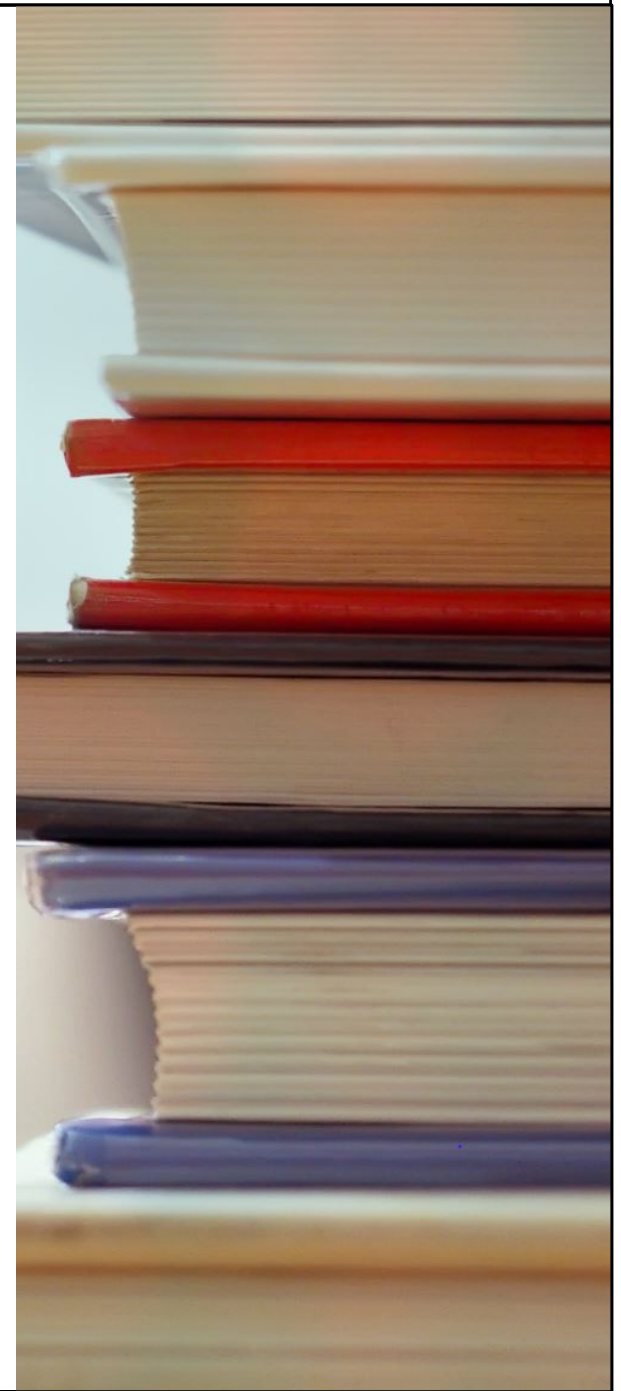
Definitions and Uses

go-alongs also known as:

- shadowing
- talking while walking
- bimbling
- guided walks
- participation while interviewing
- walking interviews & probes
- mobile narratives
- mobile or alongside interviewing
- parcours commentés, etc.
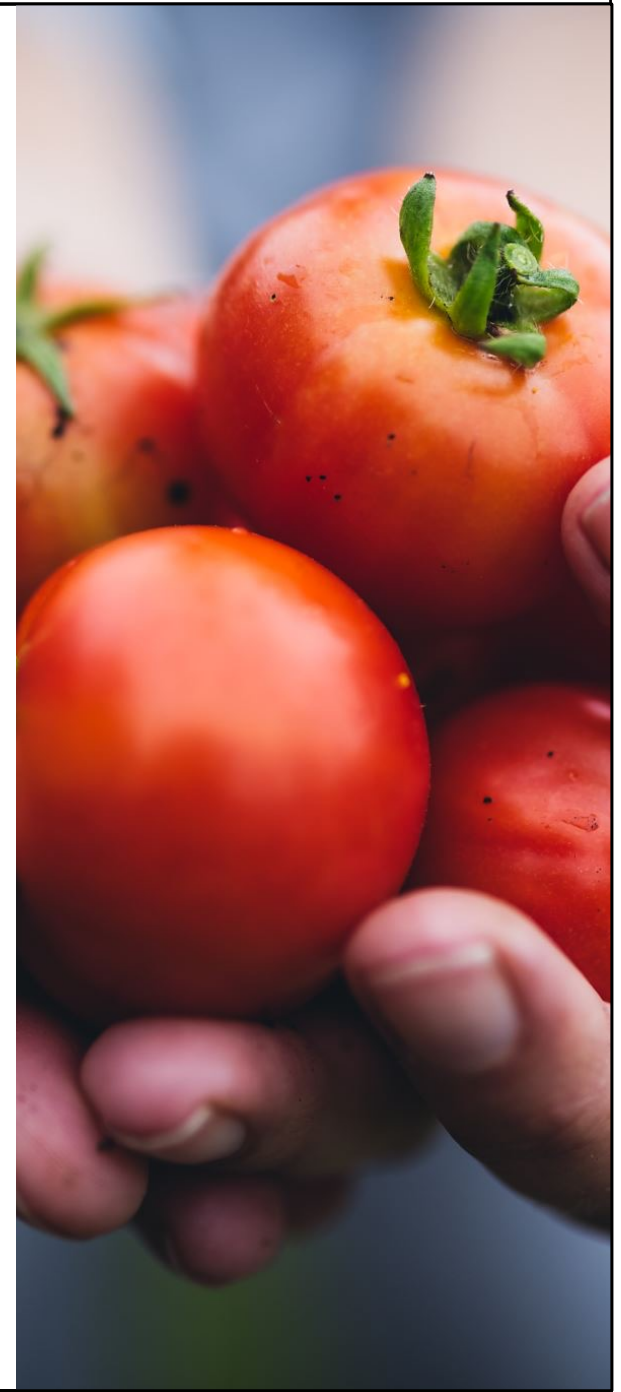
Definition and Uses

Research Areas & Topics

- regions, cities & neighborhoods

- migration and refugee studies

- mobility, travel & leisure

- health & wellbeing

- culture & consumption

- children, youth, family

- work and workers

- social movements

- gender, sexuality, bodies, etc.

Characteristics and Types

Place-Based
- place as agentic ingredient, "three-way conversations" (Hall 2009)

Symbolic
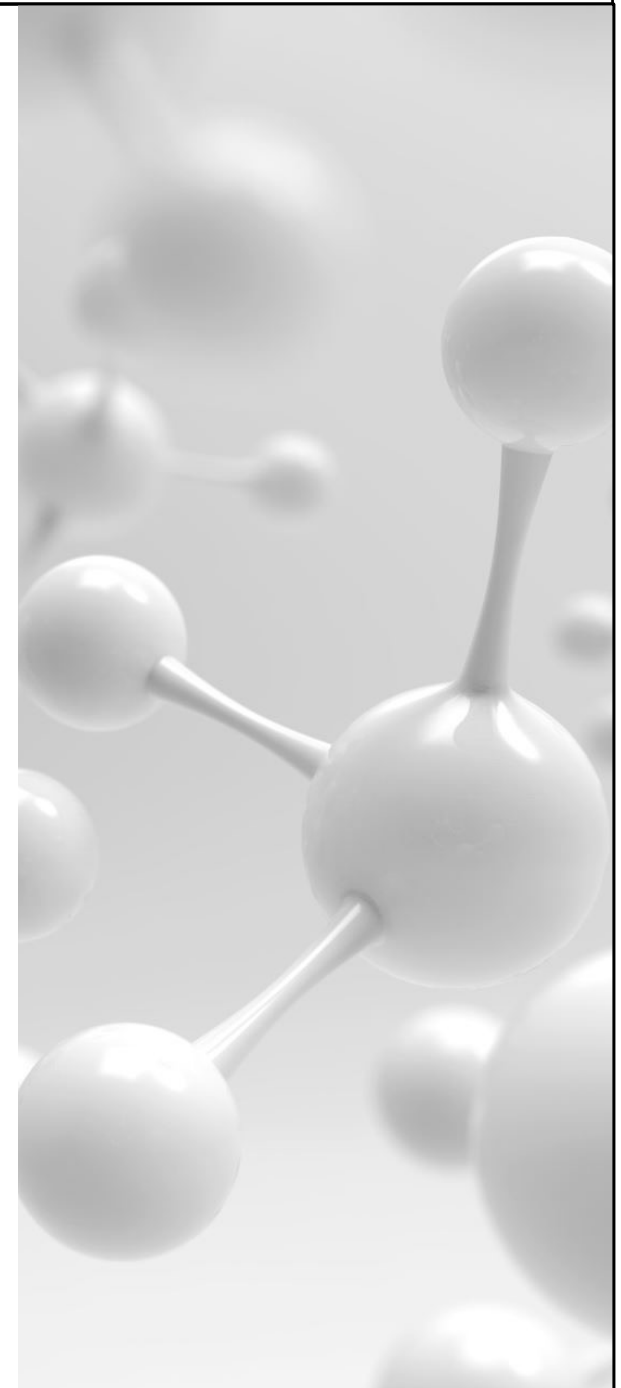- considers symbols, identities

Person-Centered
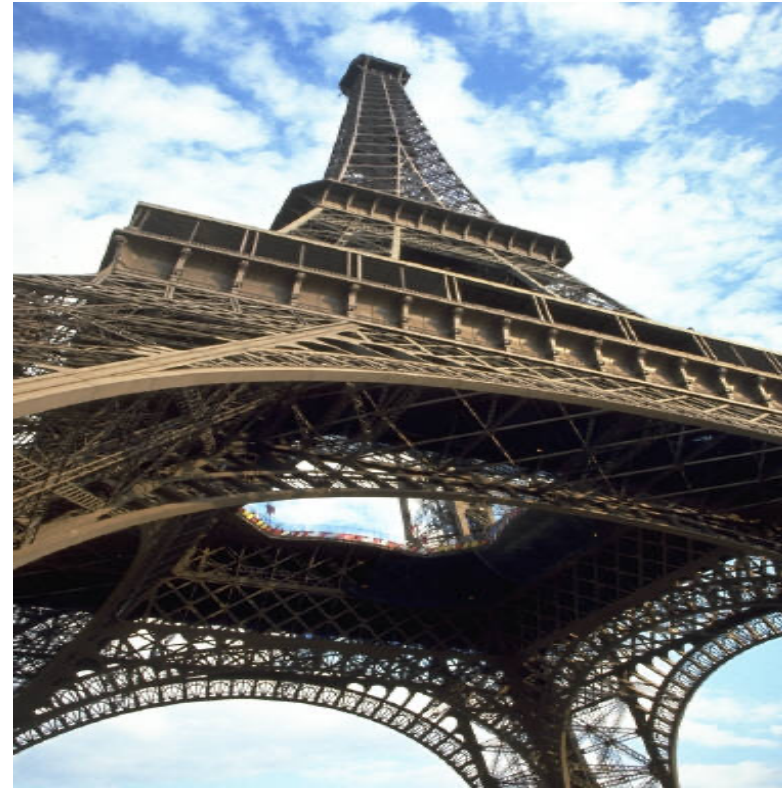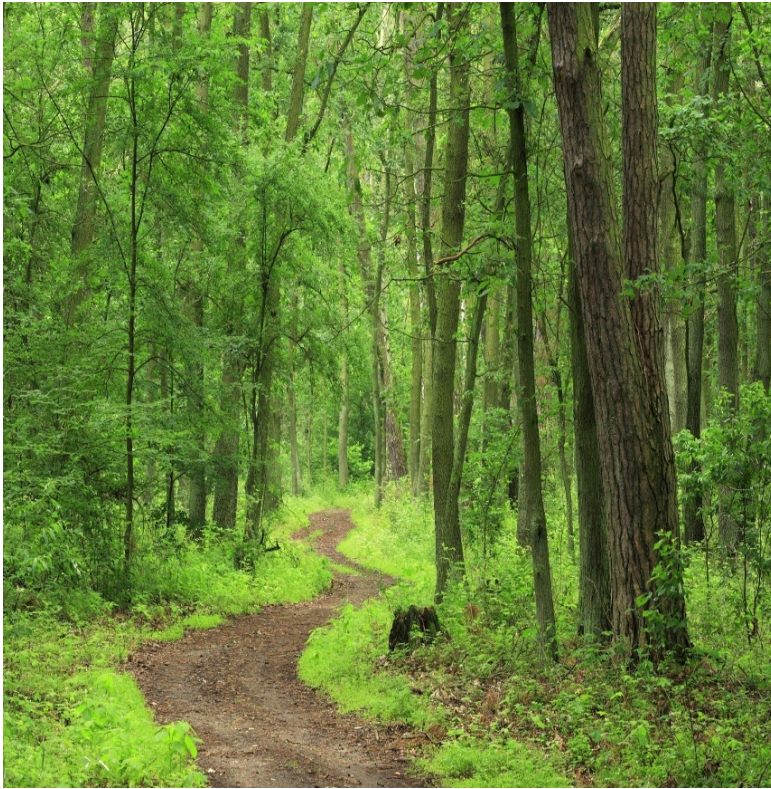- focused on human constructions of meaning

Interactive
- requires trust, collaboration, reflexivity

Systematic
- organized as data sets, similar to interviews, importance of sampling

Characteristics and Types

Characteristics and Types

Trails

- "natural" outings, based on daily routines or work

- routes, time, length entirely determined by participant

- practical contexts & purposes

- conversation when possible

- more authentic?

Example: grocery shopping

"natural" tours

Tours

- arranged outings in "natural" settings, not experiments

- routes, time, length determined collaboratively

- research purpose, showing things

- emphasis is on conversation

- more enjoyable, productive?

Example: neighborhood tour

Characteristics & Types

Mode of Mobility
- distinct sociability of walking

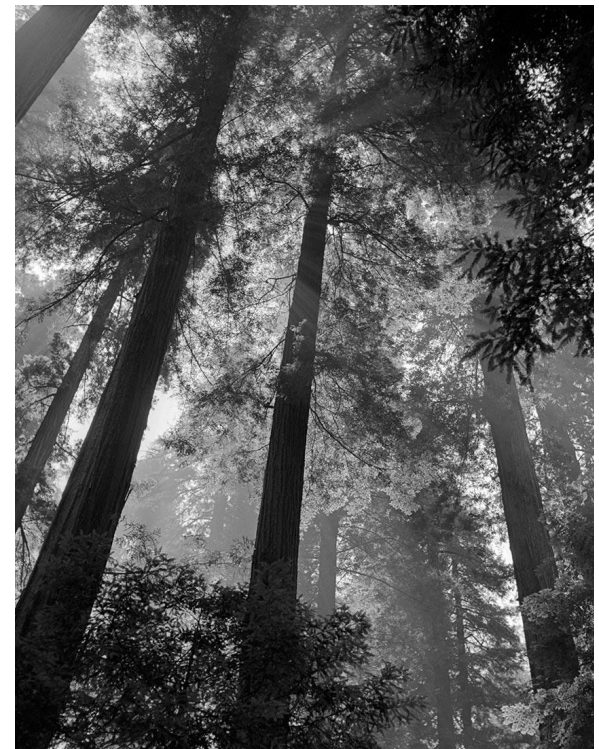**Participant-Researcher Engagement**
- talking vs. doing, semi-structured vs. open

Documentation
- fieldnotes, audio, video, photography, maps, geocoding (GPS)

Triangulation
- integration with other methods & data (qualitative and quantitative)

Example 1: Hollywood, CA (M. Kusenbach 2003)

Fieldnotes on a morning walk-along

Rob (white, 50s) tells me that in the early morning, there are usually many neighbors out on the streets; "you can see them jogging or walking their dogs." Soon afterwards, we pass a young white woman with a dog. Rob says "hi" to her in a friendly tone of voice. She smiles and says "hi" in return. Unlike before, Rob does not comment on the woman when we are out of earshot am almost certain that they do not know each other. … (Later, when we turn onto Sunset Blvd, Rob stops greeting people.)

Analysis

- insight into perceptions & constructions of neighborhood vs. public space, boundaries

- witnessing interactions up close, self-fulfilling prophecy: greeting "neighbors" vs. not greeting "strangers"

- pattern of "stranger inclusion": even (certain) strangers are treated with friendliness in parochial spaces

- shows power of place in local practices and interactions

- **OTHER INSIGHTS**: biographical layers, local social structures, etc.

Example 2: Vienna
(M. Parzer, I. Rieder, E. Wimmer 2017)

fieldnotes & excerpt from a "shop-along"

Analysis

"(Mr. Steiner) says that he always enjoys shopping here because he likes trying new products. When he finds an interesting product, he bursts out: 'Oh, this sounds great, I've got to taste this!', and puts the product in his shopping basket."

Often, the whole atmosphere is commented on by referring to emotions, for example when the shopping experience is compared to holidays in foreign countries. (…)

(for instance, informant Mr. Reiter refers to a recent trip to China when he finds familiar Japanese beer in an Asian food store)

- purposeful cultural consumption, constructions of "authenticity"

- observation of heightened emotionality not revealed in interviews: pleasure, enjoyment, euphoria, fascination but also some uncertainty, ambivalence, fear

- insights into display and performance of "cosmopolitan" identity, cultural capital

Strengths & Limitations

- **better interviews**: time for reflection, open questions, random associations and memories

- **better observations**: opportunity to observe "natural" engagement with environment, and interactions with others, performances

- **new information** on emotions, embodiment, some nonlocal contexts (other places, times, people), place-based structures and hierarchies,

- **power shift:** participants as experts with increased control, less intimidation, more researcher reflection, participatory approach, can help recruitment

- **better connection:** with participants, doing s.th. together, side-by-side vs. face-to-face mode

- **technology**: integration of new technologies (GIS, GPS), other methods

Strength & Limitations

- mobile activity must engage environment AND allow for researcher-participant interaction, action bias

- practical limitations: ability & health, safety, weather, light

- depends on trust, special ethical issues

- practical pressures, limited in time and space: best combined with other methods that transcend here and now?

- current focus on individuals may limit understanding of group processes, cultural discourses, social structures

- depths versus breadth: typically small numbers, importance of "theoretical" sampling

Final Comments

- rooted in phenomenology, symbolic interactionism , ethnography: focus on "members'" meanings & experiences, particular researcher positionality

- overcoming weaknesses and limitations of traditional qualitative methods

- examining under-explored issues: emplacement, embodiment, everyday mobility, etc.

- help access and recruitment, more equality, participation

- overcoming "traditional" boundaries: disciplinary, geographical, qualitative-quantitative, perhaps even theoretical

- invitation toward methodological reflexivity & creativity, a worthy effort

- reminder of importance of data quality, connection to "real" life, grounding theories
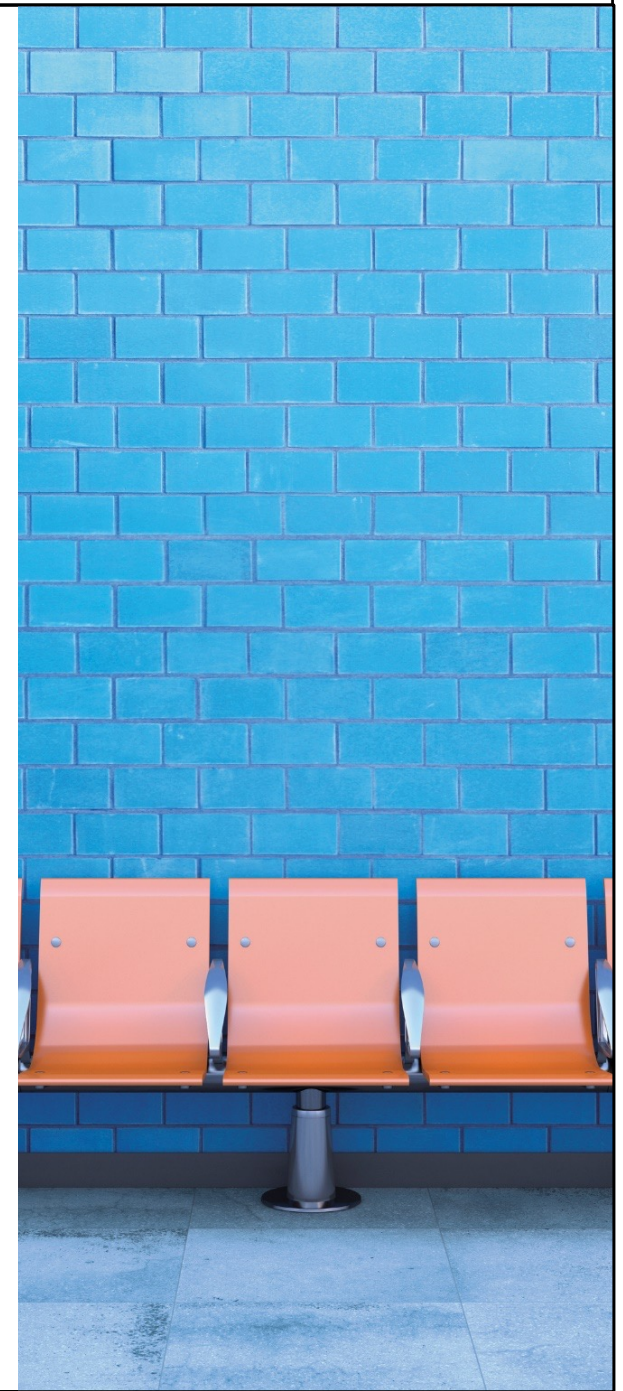
Final Comments

It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly, one begins to twist the facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.

Sherlock Holmes
(Arthur Conan Doyle)

Thank You

Contact:

mkusenba@usf.edu

Example 3: Milwaukee, WI (R. Carpiano 2009)

article excerpt on "drug houses"

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 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.

Analysis

- presence and **location** of "drug houses" not noticed as outside observer

- Insights into variety and nuances of perception not displayed at meetings, special interpretations

- observing interactions with environment

- **OTHER BENEFITS**: overcoming access & trust issues as a white, male academic studying a low-income African American neighborhood