

Walk-alongs

Accompanying, observing, and discussing experiences of space



Figure 1: "Walking with Neo-Futurist Walks", during WARP Conference in Amsterdam. Source: Cardoso et al. (2022)

The walking or go-along method was first developed as a qualitative research technique by ethnographers and human geographers around 20 years ago (Bartlett et al., 2023) to understand socio-spatial relations. Originating in the social sciences, the method has since expanded into the humanities, art, design, and related fields. It involves a researcher walking or travelling alongside a participant in their local neighbourhood while asking questions along the way. This enables researchers to generate data about a person's relationship with themselves, with others, and with the places in which they live.

Bartlett et al. (2023) note that related terms for this method include *walking interview*, *narrative walk in real time*, *go-alongs*, *go-along interview*, *walking fieldwork approach*, *qualitative mobile research methodology*, *mobile methods*, *wheeling interview*, *ride-alongs*, *bimbling* (when neither the participant nor the researcher knows the route in advance), and the *docent method* (a three-stage guided walk led by a docent).

According to Warren (2017), the key distinction between guided walking interviews and natural go-alongs is that the former follow a route selected by the researcher because it is empirically relevant to a predefined research question. In contrast, natural go-alongs resemble shadowing: the researcher accompanies the participant during their everyday routine, capturing habitual and often overlooked relations with place and environment (Evans & Jones, 2011).

As opposed to traditional sit-down methods such as interviews or focus groups, the walking or go-along method exposes participants to risks concerning security, anonymity, and privacy—particularly when conducted outdoors (Bartlett et al., 2023). Researchers employing this method therefore need to account for unknowns and unpredictable factors inherent to public space.

Why Use Walking / Go-along Methods in Feminist Research?

Walking or go-along interviews are innovative methods that prioritise experience, participation, and place-based approaches. Walking centres bodily experience and provides participants with greater control during data generation (Bartlett et al., 2023).

The *Walking as Research Practice* (WARP) Conference (Cardoso et al., 2022) raised several reflective questions about the impact and nature of walking as a research method:

- What counts as the research output of a walking practice?
- Where and when does research occur in relation to the walk, the walking, and the walkers?
- Does the walk activate our senses, or do our senses demand that we walk?

- What and where are the objects and subjects of a walk?
- How might walking strengthen our connection to the more-than-human world?
- What are the entry points to a city through walking?
- How might walking foster more socially just urban spaces and commons?

Investigating Urban Hierarchies

Walking as a spatial practice can shed light on urban hierarchies and inequalities. According to Maria Persu, “what a body can do in order to face urban obstacles is bound to the norms surrounding how certain bodies should move” (Cardoso et al., 2022). Uneven sidewalks, inaccessible signage, and the absence of elevators in subway stations shape how a person with reduced mobility—or a parent with a stroller—moves through the city, where they pause, and when they must ask for help.

Embodied and Situated Knowledge

Walking or go-along research is an embodied method that immerses researchers in the research process, heightening their attunement to diverse sensorial and experiential rhythms (Cardoso et al., 2022). For feminist research, walking supports deeper exploration of the relationship between individuals and their environments, revealing sensorial rhythms that are often obscured by routine.

Because embodied and situated knowledge is rooted in context, perception, and lived experience, walking allows researchers to unearth diverse intersectional perspectives. Bartlett et al. (2023) emphasise that movement allows participants to *show* person–environment interactions more easily than describing them verbally, particularly where language barriers exist.



Figure 2: “Graphical Response to Walk” “Being A Pilgrim”, a curated walking experience of the 500-mile Camino de Santiago in Spain where participants share formative moments shaped by discourse and serendipity. Source: Cardoso et al. (2022)

Shifts in Power Dynamics

Walking or go-along methods can be subversive, as they break away from controlled indoor environments and challenge traditional researcher–participant power dynamics. In their review of 23 studies using this method, Bartlett et al. (2023) note that 11 explicitly described a shift in power relations when compared to sit-down interviews.

Natalie Bamford’s “Direct Me” method is a participatory technique designed to access embodied knowledge of place. She invited citizens of Newcastle to anonymously provide written directions, making the researcher the recipient of instructions rather than the participants. These directions were later used to guide a collaborative walk. Bamford (2024) argues that this approach can be scaled while minimising participant burden—an important consideration in participatory research.

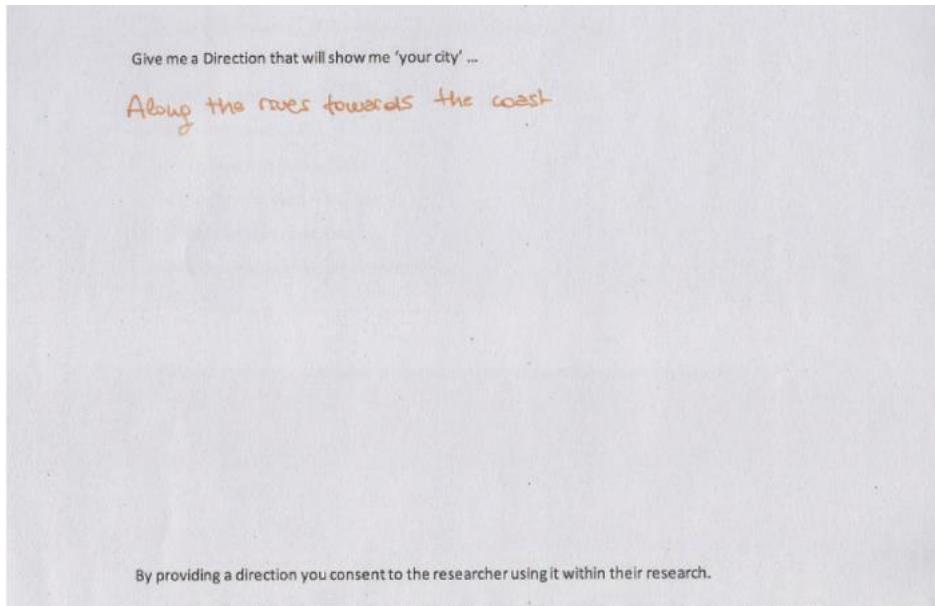


Figure 3: "Directions from participants". Source: Bamford (2024)

Reading and writing a palimpsest of space together.



Figure 4: "Graphical Response to Walk" shows a palimpsest of a collaborative walk conducted by Bamford (2024) based on the "directions" from participants. Source: Cardoso et al. (2022)

Why Use Walk-alongs to Study Climate-related Health Vulnerabilities with Migrants?

“[T]he emancipatory potential and democratic possibilities of urban walking are far from straightforward and unproblematic, as much of the literature on walking in the city is imbued with a degree of romanticism whereby walking is often considered, without question, as a positive urban practice.”

(Middleton, 2010, p. 579)

In IMBRACE, the walking or go-along method will be used to understand how migrants' embodied knowledge and situated practices in European cities can inform climate-related health adaptation, particularly to identify pitfalls in current adaptation efforts. This includes walking with participants in each city to assess how heat- and flood-related infrastructures (or the absence of such infrastructures) address climate-related health challenges.

Migrants' Use of Heat and Flood Relief Spaces

This method can illuminate barriers related to migrants' use of public spaces, parks, plazas, health centres, and other forms of climate-adaptation infrastructure. It allows researchers to assess:

- accessibility to heat and flood relief spaces
- whether infrastructures reflect migrants' needs and desires
- whether adaptation measures have produced negative impacts such as gentrification or displacement
- how migrants navigate their neighbourhoods and cities more broadly

Informing Climate Adaptation at Larger Scales

Insights from walk-alongs can highlight intersectional positionalities and socio-cultural dynamics that shape adaptation practices at both individual and collective levels. This knowledge can inform planning and policy on climate, health, and migration not only in the six case-study cities but across Europe, supporting broader cross-sector collaboration.

Implementing Walk-alongs in IMBRACE

Walking or go-along methods help make visible how participants move through cities and how they engage with climate adaptation infrastructures (Bartlett et al., 2023). Given the risks faced by vulnerable migrants, implementation must be co-designed with participants. Time must remain flexible based on comfort and enthusiasm, with an upper recommended limit of one hour. Walks will be followed by a reflective session where participants can share their feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

Sample prompts during the walk:

- What are the limitations or negative impacts of these infrastructures?
- Are they accessible and welcoming?
- Are their benefits equally distributed, and does this vary within communities?
- Do they reflect the needs, desires, and everyday cultures of immigrant groups?
- Were migrant communities consulted during their development?
- Have they caused negative impacts such as displacement, job loss, or increased exposure to health risks?

Key Parameters for Implementation

Flexibility

Drawing on Warren's (2017) work with Muslim immigrant women in Birmingham, walking interviews should accommodate participants' preferences regarding walking alone, accompanied, or in small groups, and whether to bring children or partners.

Route and Area Selection

Within diverse neighbourhoods, walks should ideally include infrastructures designed to address heat and/or flood-related health challenges. If such infrastructures are missing, the method can be implemented to understand where such efforts are needed. Routes should be co-selected with participants and begin and end at a familiar, trusted location.

Participants

Five participants per city will take part in walk-alongs—each already engaged in previous in-depth interviews, ensuring established rapport. Interpreters may join if needed. Warren (2017) suggests avoiding social gender-mixing if possible or having at least one female facilitator if female participants are included.

Resistance or Hesitation

Hesitation may arise due to concerns around legal status, insecurity, fear of the unknown, or time constraints related to care work.

Privilege and Power Dynamics

Walking interviews are often pivoted on Eurocentric secular assumptions as “Publicly walking along the street may feel less of a liberatory experience for a Muslim woman in a hijab or a young Black man wearing a hoodie, than it does for a white person in a business suit” (Bartlett et al., 2023, p. 3)

Physical and Emotional Health Concerns

Risks include dehydration, fatigue, or emotional distress. Revisiting meaningful or traumatic sites can trigger strong emotional responses like exclusion, anger or mistrust in authorities, or experiences with authoritative violence such as police arrests, a common occurrence in immigrant neighbourhoods. “Walking/ go-along interviews can be an emotional experience, for both the participant and researcher. Travelling to and through a place that is meaningful to the participant might be upsetting for the participant and distracting for the researcher. For example, in one walking interview study involving survivors of an earthquake in Italy, participants revisited the ruins of the place where they were when the earthquake struck and understandably became very distressed during the interview.” (Bartlett et al., 2023, p. 3)

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