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# Talking on the move: placebased interviewing with undergraduate students.

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## **Talking on the move: Place-based interviewing with undergraduate students**

### **Abstract:**

Across the social sciences there is recognition that place is becoming increasingly important in the research encounter. This paper contributes towards research in this area through an investigation into the lived experiences of higher education students. Whilst there is growing academic attention paid towards what have been termed 'student geographies', there has been relatively little attention towards the methods that we might utilise in investigating students' experiences and understanding of University towns and cities and here we employ 'Walking interviews' to explore these. Accompanying them 'in the field' allowed us to explore students' narratives 'in place' while seeing firsthand how some of the multi-sensual and multi-layered experiences of place might be captured and interpreted. We argue that such place-based interviews may allow us to 'get into the gaps' of student experiences and understand how students' dynamic relationships with place shape their conceptions and narrations of their term-time location.

**Keywords:** Walking interviews; Higher education; Sense of place; Student Geographies; Studentification; Student mobility

## **Introduction:**

Emanating from the recent critical [re]consideration of qualitative methods and the research encounter has been the emergence of the question: “what is the relationship between what people say and where they say it?” (Evans and Jones 2011, 851). As Anderson (2004) has noted within the pages of this journal, qualitative researchers often hint at the spatial contexts of the research encounter, through references to “researchers go[ing] out into the field to meet with groups under study” (2004, 225), but how such spatialities serve to shape the research encounter often remain un[der]explored or, at best, implicit. More recently, several qualitative researchers have played a key role in redressing this issue and have begun to more critically engage with the importance of socio-spatial constructions of knowledge within the conduct of their research. As Casey has argued: “The relationship between self and place is not just one of reciprocal influence [...] but also, more radically, of constitutive co-ingredient: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect, there is no place without self and no self without place” (2001, 684), and research has accordingly begun to explore how particular spatial contexts may be important in giving access to “some of the transcendent and reflexive aspects of lived experience” (Kusenbach 2003, 455). This has also taught us how place may be used to allow research participants to narrate their lived experiences of everyday (Porter *et al.* 2010) and more occasional (Reed 2002) spaces, as well as how particular knowledges may be embodied within, and cosubstantive with, particular contexts (Anderson 2004; Riley 2010). Informed by what has been referred to as a the ‘mobilities turn’ (Sheller and Urry 2006) much of this research has also explored the potential of what more mobile research may offer in terms of more active knowledge (co)production (see DeLyser and Sui 2013 for a review), and how this may allow us to “observe spatial practices *in situ*” (Kusenbach 2003, 463).

To date this research exploring the spatial contexts of the research encounter can be broadly categorised on the one hand into that which considers the more everyday, familiar places such as homes and immediate living environments (e.g. Porter *et al.* 2010; Jones *et al.* 2011) and on the other hand, less familiar environments, such as sites of protest (Anderson 2004). The following paper joins this discussion through a consideration of lived experiences of higher education (HE) students. This group arguably straddle this familiar/unfamiliar dichotomy as whilst they may permanently reside in a city, this residence is often temporary in the sense that it is commonly for the duration of their course (most often, three years for undergraduates in the UK) and usually just during the term time of this.<sup>1</sup> Taking HE students as a subject of study is a relatively recent, but rapidly developing, area of interest in social science research (see: Smith's (2009) editorial on 'student geographies'), with attention focused upon institutional (Reay 2003) or residential preferences (Holdsworth 2006; Andersson *et al.* 2012), as well as themes of mobility (both pre and post University (Holdsworth 2009; Sage *et al.* 2013)). Despite the research which focuses on students' [multiple] identities, there has been less attention to the ways in which students develop their 'sense of place' whilst at University or to consider their lived experiences of their term-time location. Such a research gap is somewhat surprising given the growing attention which has been given to the impact of students on University towns and cities, specifically with regard to the complex 'town' and 'gown' issues raised by processes such as studentification (Hubbard, 2008; Munro *et al.* 2009; Munro and Livingston, 2011) as well as the investments by governments, universities and private investors into [re]shaping and commodifying the 'student experience' (Chatterton 2010). Indeed, Holloway *et al.* (2010) have recently cautioned that an over-emphasis on the political economy of HE (and its restructuring) risks ignoring the geographies of students themselves and in particular the "complex social

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<sup>1</sup> We focus here primarily on those students who move away from their hometown to study, and it should be noted that this tendency is perhaps more peculiar to the UK context (Chatterton 2010).

relations that occur in specific cultural contexts” (592). The following paper considers the potential of a mobile interviewing approach for exploring HE students’ experiences of their term-time location, and explores how it may be used to tease out their interpretations of space and place. Following a review of the recent methodological discussions of place-based interviews and an outline of the approach employed in the current research, the paper draws illustratively on experiences from interviews with undergraduate students to explore the potential of place-based interviews for helping understand students’ experience of their term-time location.

### **Place and the research encounter:**

There is a steadily growing literature pertaining to the value of place-based field research and the important role place has within the research encounter (Dwyer and Davies 2010). One particularly fruitful area of development is that relating to ‘place-based’ or ‘walking’ interviews. Various appellations have been given to these more mobile approaches including: touring (Reed 2002), ‘bimbling’ (Anderson 2004) and ‘go-alongs’ (Kusenbach 2003). Whilst each of these expressions show slight variations in terms of scale, route determination and familiarity of research location (see Evans and Jones 2011, 850 for a useful typology), they share the common characteristic of participants being accompanied on (un)specified walks around a research location (see also Riley 2010; Evans and Jones 2011). Importantly, Anderson (2004) and Elwood and Martin (2000) suggest, this type of approach to interviews may go a long way in revealing the spatial relations and meanings which constitute the ‘micro-geographies’ of place. As Reed concurs:

“[place-based interviews embody] a ‘sensing of place’, [revealing] the manner in which a set of persons animate a city and imagine that the city animates them” (2002, 129).

As the place in which interviews take place may serve as a prompt or cue for respondents' narratives, place-based interviews have the potential to move beyond simply gaining responses to questions and instead offer the potential to unpick more experiential understandings of these places (Housley and Smith 2010). Such an approach may allow a more spontaneous set of interactions (Benwell 2009), with others suggesting that they may: "help reveal some of the place and practice-based insights of participant observation without the intensity and time commitment ethnography demands" (DeLyser and Sui 2013, 5). In a review of place-based interview techniques, Jones *et al.* (2008) suggest such experiences can be elicited in two ways - either by using fixed routes to record a participant's first impression of a place or allowing the participant to roam freely around a location. Kusenbach (2003) suggests that these encounters should reflect, as much as possible, 'natural', everyday journeys which are familiar to the individual and that interviewers should avoid overly directing the direction of the interview. There is, however, caution offered over the extent to which such approaches may ever offer 'natural' experiences and that, as with more conventional sedentary interviews, the interviewer must be aware of their own positionality within the encounter (see Kusenbach 2003).

In a study of a group of 'enthusiasts for London', Reed (2002) suggests, walking interviews allow participants to pause to 'sense' and grasp the essence of place through imagination. This technique allowed Reed to excavate knowledge and capture encounters 'in the moment' as well as developing richer understanding of identities, emotions and social relations which shape the nature of responses. Others have extended this point by suggesting that place-based interviews may allow a more democratic (co)construction of knowledge with respondents, for example, playing a role in shaping the direction (both literally and metaphorically) of the interview (see Riley 2010). Place-based interviews may also make the general more specific and may prompt the discussant to talk about places more than people. They prompt

spontaneous discussions and act as 'walking probes' which stimulate responses. Riley (2010) suggests that conducting interviews 'in place' can allow the focus of the interview to drift away from the person-to-person encounter to being *in* and *of* the place itself, going some way in eliminating some of the awkwardness of explaining place in conventional face to face interviews. Others have taken this further to combine participant's responses in building a picture of the micro-geographies of an individual or community to begin to emerge meaning commonalities between participants may become clearer (Jones *et al.* 2011; Elwood and Martin 2000). An important caution within this research is that place is not simply a blank canvas within the research encounter. Different places have meanings and power relations associated with them (Elwood and Martin 2000) and thus the interviewer needs to take a more proactive role in developing and interpreting the actions of the participant and their surroundings (Anderson 2004).

### **Methods:**

The data for this paper were collected as part of a wider research project exploring how HE students establish their 'sense of place' within their term-time University location. Thirty one 'walking' interviews, with full-time University of Portsmouth undergraduate students, were conducted between January and May 2012. Respondents from an earlier web-based survey were invited to participate in the interviews. A quota sampling technique was implemented to ensure the sample was as balanced as evenly as possible. The final few candidates were recruited via an advert posted on LookUP, the University's online student news homepage. Excursions lasted up to an hour-and-a-half and participants were asked to prearrange two to three locations within the city which they visited regularly (this included places where they socialised at night, shopped, ate out, studied with friends, as well as tourist spots or

communal spaces, such as the seafront, Southsea Common<sup>2</sup> or one of the local parks). This concurs with Elwood and Martin's (2000) suggestion that interview sites should be more than just convenient research locations and should be representative of an aspect of the participant's identity. The routes were kept fluid between locations in order to replicate as much as possible the 'natural', every day journey recommended by Kusenbach (2003). The interviews were recorded using a handheld voice-recorder which was controlled by the participant and the recordings were subsequently transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory technique to tease out theories through an iterative process of careful coding and sorting. Extracts have also been included from a research diary completed during the interview process which was used to record information about the interview itself and observations about respondents' engagement with the places visited.

### **Layered narratives:**

A recurring theme across the interviews conducted was the considerable deliberation by respondents in choosing the routes taken and places visited during the interviews. The time taken in selecting the route, and common changes and detours added in during interview, hinted at the diversity and fluidity of students' experiences of this city. An extract from an interview with Tim<sup>3</sup>, a second year student living in a rented student house, foregrounds the discussion of this dynamicity:

*“This [the Students' Union] was somewhere I would spend most weekends in the first year. It's not somewhere I would go to much now but it is sort of seen as a first year kind of bar really in that sense, so it's definitely changed the way in which I use the Uni [sic] as such. I go there to go upstairs and*

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<sup>2</sup> A popular grassed area adjacent to the seafront promenade which is used for various recreational purposes by the general public.

<sup>3</sup> All names have been anonymised.



*work rather than go downstairs and drink which is a bit different, still have the odd night out there but it's not the same as it was in the first year, you don't get the same sort of atmosphere in there" (Tim).*

Tim's decision to visit the 'Union' is perhaps unsurprising, but the way in which he talked about this place is interesting for both how we might think about students' interpretations of University spaces and also how place-based interviews may help in unpicking these understandings. Methodologically, being *at* the Union drew Tim to give interpretation to it and reflect on its significance. Previous place-based research has highlighted the way in which material space and features may act as a 'cue' or 'prompt' to respondents' narratives, and within our research we saw the role they might play in disrupting and (re)constructing these narratives. Disrupting, in the sense that his response was not limited to his current use (predominantly just of the upstairs space of the Union), as may have been the case if interviewed outside this context, but also, as we traversed through them, drawn to reflect on the parts of the Union that he previously engaged with more. Here the material spaces, in addition to eliciting memories, brought the construction of a narrative in the moment – not only describing the place and recalling his previous experiences, but also moving on to reflect more broadly on his evolving use of the University space. Interlaced with this is the importance of his references to the 'atmosphere' and it 'being a first year thing'. For Tim, and the majority of students spoken to, there was a clear sense in which their use of the city was strongly influenced by their peers and social expectations. Another quote from Liam, relating to another nightspot picked up on a similar theme:

*"That's Liquid [nightclub]. We don't go there anymore because that's more of a first year club. We went there a couple of times in the second year but*

*[...] we overdid it in first year and you just want to give that one a rest and leave it to first year memories” (Liam).*

At one level these narratives arguably play towards a discourse of students as focussed on “hedonistic pleasure-seeking, drinking and sex/coupling” (Hubbard 2011, 3) – which predominate many popular (and some academic) depictions of students and foreground the homogeneity of student actions and the associated uniformity of ‘studentland’ (Chatterton and Hollands 2003) which are replicated across many cities. However, they also reveal a level of reflectivity in the decision of which spaces were used. Spaces for socialising, in particular, were set within very intricate hierarchies of what was ‘in’ and ‘out’. Commonly these mirrored Chatterton and Hollands’ (2003) observation that these micro-cultures may be year-cohort related, with freshers most often frequenting the bars adjacent to halls of residence, but on another level related to very specific friendship groups and were restricted to very particular time periods. An extract from the interview whilst walking with Ruth, a third year student, took this further:

*“When I left halls and went into the house I was taken out of this immediate environment and I was shoved down towards Albert Road and Elm Grove. You go out drinking and you’re like ‘Everyone’s dressed normally, there’s no Barbie dolls’. ‘This is pretty cool, there’s a live band in this pub, we can just go in without getting charged’. It was like a whole new nice side instead of getting launched into it, ‘come here, free pint, free pint’, it was lovely. You had the Wedgewood Rooms, you got your bands in there, the local pubs are full of cool people and you get to know them. I worked in a couple of the pubs down there. [...] Just by leaving the halls triangle you were put into a*

*world where you had much more of a mature way of drinking and socialising, it was much better” (Ruth).*

Ruth’s reference to the ‘halls triangle’ hints at a physical space but also, metaphorically, at the social space or ‘bubble’ associated with being a first year. What these narratives begin to highlight is the way in which understandings and experiences of the city can be rapidly written afresh as a student’s status changes (in this case in moving from being a ‘fresher’ to a second year). Not only did moving out of this in the second year broaden the boundaries of the city experience, the halls triangle provided a comparative lens through which they interpreted the rest of the city. Moving between spaces during interview revealed how they were commonly given meaning relationally to one another. In relation to Anderson’s (2004) point that walking interviews may allow us to tap into the episodes buried in the ‘archaeology of knowledge’, we would extend this to suggest they have the potential not just to unlayer more cumulative, sedimented and static understandings that may exist for those who have many years repeated use of the same space, but also the more fluid and transitory experiences and how they are given meaning in relation to one another. In moving through these spaces with students we get a sense of how the importance of a place shifts over time: for Tim, his use of the Union is shaped by its social construction (amongst his student peers) of this as a first year space and how his engagement with it must change now he is a second year; for Liam the same logic applies for his use of a nightclub, but this is also layered with his desire not to disturb the memories which such places hold for him; whilst for Ruth her lack of engagement with the halls triangle is framed by her desire to move towards a less conspicuous set of consumption experiences.

### **Interpreting ‘[non]student’ spaces:**

Whilst there was an obvious tendency in the interviews towards overtly ‘student’ spaces, such as the campus and particular night spots, moving through the city with respondents allowed non-student spaces to be encountered – both as a purposeful part of the route as well as in traversing between other localities. Clarence Pier, on the seafront in the Southsea area of Portsmouth, was a place commonly encountered *en route* to other locations. Lisa used this space and recognised it as a way of involving herself with non-student processes in the city:

*“There’s the arcades and stuff. I come here sometimes with friends and with my boyfriend particularly and it’s just nice because it has that kind of seaside town feel that you get from the fish and chips places and the arcades and stuff like that. It’s quite fun, like the two pence games over there. I’m quite poor so it’s quite nice to come and play something I can afford” (Lisa).*

Although Lisa had taken quite a conventional route in terms of her residential preferences through her time at University – moving from halls of residence to shared student houses in student-dominated residential areas – this more non-student space was, the interview revealed, an important part of her experience as a student in this city. Whilst her financial status as a student played a part in spending leisure time in this place she could afford, it was the place’s inherent characteristics – as a seaside experience – that she appreciated it for. Indeed Lisa’s interview revealed that, for her, this place acted as a temporary escape from ‘studentland’. Visiting the place with Lisa, and hearing reference to the very specific, multi-sensual, details – the smell of the sea air and fish and chips, the arcades and seaside memorabilia – not only gave insights into her own very specific experiences, but also had wider relevance for how we might think about ‘student geographies’. Whilst there is ample visual evidence in this city, like many others, of the student as ‘consumer’ and ‘gentrifier’ (see Smith and Holt 2007), when we dig deep into the totality of their experience we see

many examples of where students wish to consume non-student spaces and how they might do this without significantly altering these places. The walking interviews allowed us to ‘get into the gaps’ of students’ experiences, both literally and metaphorically. Interview responses, it is suggested, may leave gaps as the more ‘tellable stories’ take priority over those associated with the more mundane, everyday and unspectacular (Riley 2010). Indeed the routes chosen by students also demonstrated this tendency, with places associated with big events, such as student nights, being the ones most often visited in the first instance. The gaps in this case – that is the spaces *en route* between these – could, however, be explored within the interview as they were passed by, with respondents asked what, if anything, spaces meant to them and why (or not), as well as how, they used and experienced these spaces. What became abundantly clear is that even though those spaces associated with processes of studentification may be the one most readily visited, they only make up part of students’ experiences of the city. Whilst our observations certainly do not refute the role of students in changing the face of cities, they do reveal ample evidence of students engaging with non student spaces, events and activities and add to the view that we might usefully move beyond meta-narratives of student geographies to understanding the more micro-scale, lived experiences (Holloway *et al.* 2010). Thinking critically about the routes taken by students also offered another methodological insight relating to ideas of how spaces may be used to perform particular identities (Hetherington 1998). It was clear in looking across the various routes chosen, and the discussion in particular places, that the places selected by respondents are not just a direct recounting of places the respondents do and do not experience, but may also be a reflection of where they do and do not want to be seen. The following extracts are illustrative:

*“[around the Pier is] a bit dire. It’s not like my town at all, I’ve no real attachment, we’ve walked through it a few times in the summer but it’s a bit*

*childish [...] I don't think that I'd want to spend time here it's tacky"*

*(Liam).*

*"Once we had arrived at Palmerston Road [the main shopping district in Southsea] a different, more 'adult' version of Kay emerged – this place was described as being somewhere less 'studenty' and more grown up. She was more confident and her answers became more forthcoming" (Research Diary).*

As Kusenbach (2003) has rightly cautioned, interviewers must be aware of their role as insider/outsider as researchers do not get automatic access to participants 'real' thoughts or experiences meaning underlying tensions or motives may be obscured. Here, we approach this caution from a different perspective – accepting that students may direct interviews to places which they associate with friends or preferred activities, but recognising that routes taken can give a useful insight into where students do and do not want to be seen and how the interview route itself becomes a reflection of their interpretation of their *ideological* selves. That is, the interview material and routes can be viewed not just as giving factual detail, but can be viewed as active knowledge construction in themselves, offering insights into how particular places are enmeshed with a student's multiple identities. Within Liam's response we can see what might be termed the discursive closing off of spaces. Attaching the labels of 'dire' and 'childish' to this place allowed him to justify his lack of engagement with it. His lack of attachment to place was not born out of experience – in fact he had never been on to the pier itself – but through passing observation and a positioning of the place as something that did not fit with his identity. Similarly, Kay's diary extract shows how the route taken can be read, in part, as being about how respondents wish to narrate and present themselves. Importantly, this may impact on how being *in* and moving *between* these places may lead to very different

interview dynamics (and hence different types of responses) even within the same research encounter.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper has contributed to the recent attention given to more emplaced and mobile research encounters, by exploring how placed-based interviewing may enlighten and enliven research into the lived experience of place amongst University undergraduate students. The material presented here has shown that place-based interviews are not simply a case of “if you conduct a method-in-this-place you will secure this type of knowledge” (Anderson and Jones 2009, 300), but instead has highlighted the multifarious ways in which being in, and moving through, these places influences the research encounter. Walking through the city, we have argued, allows us to ‘get into the gaps’, not only by encouraging respondents to reflect on places in the moment, and thus move away from superficial or rehearsed narratives of the place, but also in giving an understanding of the more everyday, mundane and less easily storied spaces, which might be overlooked within a more conventional sedentary interview. Empirically, utilising the city as a methodological tool allows us to uncover young peoples’ dynamic (and changing) relationships with place. Moreover, this makes a significant contribution to the studentification debate by identifying how students may view their term-time location. As this paper demonstrates, this is important as young people’s interactions with places are not linear but intricately layered and, most importantly, re-layered as they navigate through their term-time location.

The routes taken within in interview, we have argued, can be read not just as a direct account of places that are known or unknown to the respondents, but also as a conscious writing of the story of themselves. This has practical implications in structuring where students lead (or will be led) in interviews and shaping how they may act and ‘perform’ within these spaces.

This research methodology may also open up potential for future research into other under-explored student-centric sites including the home and the University campus. This could also be examined at different scales, perhaps exploring adaptations to the 'sense of place' longitudinally throughout the degree period or alternatively, contrast their sense of place between the term-time location and the home environment.

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