

The struggle to belong

Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

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Mobile Ethnographic Methods: Researching Cities, Communities and Places While Going Along

In recent years, one of the most interesting innovations in qualitative research methodology is the development of so-called “mobile methods.” Within the last decade, uses and reflections of mobile methods emerged from several scholarly contexts, including the “Mobilities Paradigm” as proposed in the UK, and phenomenological critiques of traditional qualitative research methods which predominantly developed in the US. Mobile methods, also formerly called “go alongs” (Kusenbach 2003), include elements of ethnographic observations and in-depth interviewing, thereby combining the strengths of these techniques while allowing researchers to explore new topics, experiment with new technologies, and obtain new insights and conclusions. After describing the origins and the current state of the field of mobile method research, I offer a detailed definition. Mobile methods are understood as qualitative techniques of data collection during which researchers move alongside participants in their familiar spatial contexts and who exhibit the following five characteristics: they are (a) person centered, (b) interactive, (c) data set driven, (d) place based, and (e) metaphoric. I then discuss two basic types of mobile methods, here called “trails” and “tours,” and present some examples from the literature as well as from my own use of mobile methods during two studies, one of neighborhood life in urban Los Angeles, and the other of suburban mobile home communities in Florida. Throughout my presentation, I argue that mobile methods are particularly suited for investigations of neighborhoods, places, public spaces and, generally, all inquiries of social and spatial environments. They are therefore of key interest to qualitative urban sociologists, and especially to urban and community ethnographers. My paper continues with a consideration of important choices researchers must undertake when using mobile methods. In closing, I discuss the limitations as well as the advantages and future opportunities of the use of mobile methods in urban sociology and ethnography research in general.