



Methods for Change

Photo go-alongs

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Photo go-alongs



Photo go-alongs involve undertaking a journey with a participant whilst talking and taking photographs. The walk or journey may follow a predetermined route designed by or for the participant, perhaps visiting significant places or a site of interest. Alternatively, the photo go-along may take the form of an unstructured wander around a place, such as a town centre. It could also involve accompanying a participant on an activity, perhaps one they usually undertake like a walk to the shop or walking a dog. Whilst moving, participants are encouraged to photograph and discuss anything of significance to them. This could be anything from litter on the street, to renowned buildings, and everything between. The combination of movement, talking and photography allows participants to think about places and events critically, as they consider which route to take and what to photograph and discuss. Photo go-alongs are particularly useful for researchers who are interested in understanding the complex lives of participants in order to bring lived experiences to light. Like other arts-based and participatory approaches, photo go-alongs allow researchers to understand the world from the perspective of participants, provide rich insight into how participants make sense of the world, and illuminate the dynamics amidst people and place.



How do photo go-alongs create or contribute to change?

Arts-based methods (which include photo go-alongs, video, collaging, mobile and other participatory approaches) recognise how positive change can happen in the process of researching rather than just from research outputs. While the material created using photo go-alongs can have a measurable impact by feeding into the development of policies, change can also be subtle, shifting and emotional, taking place at an individual and group level. Participatory and arts-based methods can provide an opportunity for capacity building for participants which can take the form of new social connections or by simply providing a space for participants to talk about their lives and interests. For example, participants may use their involvement in the research project to introduce themselves to others and discuss the activity, where they visited and what was photographed, allowing new connections to be forged.

While arts-based methods can be used to generate material, they can also assist in creatively communicating and disseminating research findings. The photographs and narratives gathered might be used to create an exhibition or a photo and story collection to share with different audiences. The material generated using photo go-alongs can be used to influence policy and businesses by providing reflections on local policy decisions, or to get at the lived experiences of certain policy areas. For example, photo go-alongs can be used to understand areas and services that need improvement, such as waste and transport infrastructure; to provide insight into the experiences of under-represented groups, such as older people, ethnic minorities and children; and to shed light on those facets of experience that are often obscured in policies in favour of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches. Sharing

the photographs and narratives also creates space for people to talk about themselves and their lives.

What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Photo go-alongs might be understood as a participatory and arts-based method. Like the creative arts, photo go-alongs can be used to facilitate imagination, discovery and exploration. They are concerned with the process of researching and knowledge creation as much as the product of research. They are usually less concerned with the number of participants engaged with than the depth and richness of the material created. Photo go-alongs might also be influenced by participatory approaches in that participants can be invited to interpret and lead on how the method is used. For example, while one participant may prefer to drive, pausing and walking at significant places; another might invite the researcher to go-along to an activity they usually take part in, such as an exercise class or shopping trip. While one participant may have planned a walking route on which several significant places are predetermined, another may prefer to wander around a place, pausing and reflecting when something piques their interest. Part of the participatory and arts-based approach then involves being flexible, responsive and adaptive to both the needs of the participants and the researcher as they arise. This ethos of openness means that it might be useful to use photo go-alongs alongside other approaches, such as object-oriented interviews, group discussions or video, to add depth to the material created. Participants are encouraged to share in the process of conducting research, from deciding where and how research encounters happen, to identifying research questions and problems that need investigating.



Why might I want to use photo go-alongs?

- Photo go-alongs help to see the world from the perspective of participants. They create detailed material which can provide insight into the lives of participants, foregrounding what matters to them.
- They get at the messiness of life. While participants may have selected specific places to visit, it is likely they will vocalise thoughts and feelings as they move through landscapes. A fleeting smell may momentarily connect a participant with their childhood, or a glimpse of litter might encourage a participant to photograph it before reflecting on societal change.
- Photo go-alongs encourage mindfulness. Rather than skimming across the surface of things, they encourage participants to reflect: What is significant? What shall I choose to photograph?
- They allow the researcher to see the decision-making processes of participants as they decide what is significant to them and what to photograph. Sometimes observing this process can reveal more interesting dynamics and provocations than the photographs themselves.
- Photo go-alongs can add depth and richness to policy. While it is often necessary for policies to reduce the complexity of people's lives to simple action points in order to get things done, it is equally as important to understand everyday lived experiences, as a reality check for what policy is doing. Photo go-alongs make it possible to tailor policy to the lives of people that it affects.



The Place, Belonging Manchester photo and story collection at the Festival of Ageing

- Photo go-alongs can be enjoyable. Often, participants really engage with the creative nature of the task, using it as an opportunity to reflect and learn about their lives in relation to different places, generating a wealth of material.
- The photographs and narratives shared can be used to creatively communicate research to different audiences, whether this be through websites, presentations, exhibitions or to accompany more traditional policy briefs and reports.



Step by step guide to using photo go-alongs:

1. Think about why you want to do the photo go-alongs. What are you trying to find out? Try to come up with a broad aim for your research and supplement this with two to three research questions which get at specific dimensions of this aim. Research questions might focus on the population, community, context or place you wish to better understand, for example.

2. Recruit participants and provide information on the project. You could recruit participants by contacting an existing group (such as a community group); by going through an individual or gatekeeper; by spending time in a place and approaching people; or by placing adverts in a local newspaper or online.

3. Approach participants to meet for a walk or journey. If possible, let the participant lead on what form the journey might take and its length. Perhaps they may choose to devise a specific route with points of interest or maybe they prefer to wander around one place of significance.

4. Be flexible to the needs of the participant. Before you set off, show the participants the camera you have and ask whether they would like to use it or if they prefer to use their own. Explain that they can take the photographs themselves or they may prefer you to do this. The aim is to make the participant feel comfortable. If the participant does not wish to use a camera, why not ask if they are able to share some photographs they already have or to point you to online visual materials and resources. Be clear about where the photographs will be stored and for how long. Repeat this process with all participants.

Photo go-alongs can also be used to generate quicker outcomes over shorter timescales without the researcher needing to be present. To do this, participants could be equipped with a camera and asked to follow a predefined instruction. A follow-up meeting could then be arranged to discuss outcomes.

Photo go-alongs may be usefully adapted in relation to different needs. If a participant is unwilling or unable to walk, why not accompany them on a drive, pausing and walking at significant locations. Perhaps you could join them on a bike ride or accompany them on a bus journey. If they cannot leave their home you could undertake a virtual journey online.

5. Record the conversations while walking and talking. If the participant does not want to be audio-recorded then make notes afterwards about the photo go-along and what was discussed. Some participants may be more comfortable using a more discrete recording device such as a mobile phone. If the participant is happy to be audio-recorded, recordings can provide another layer of sensory material to analyse alongside the

Photo go-alongs



photographs. Moreover, do not forget about sounds other than the participant's voice. Can you hear birds, cars, talking? Is the participant commenting on the sound or smell-scapes? You might also take notes on other senses that came into play in addition to aural and visual senses.

Given the immersive nature of photo go-alongs, it is important to remember that the material generated will not be representative of the experiences of all and to consider the diversity of experiences that might fall outside of the individuals engaged with.

Why not arrange to meet participants on more than one occasion to do another go-along in a different way? If the participant had planned a route for the first photo go-along, why not ask to accompany them on an activity next time? Would the photo go-along be very different at another time of day, week, season, or year? This might provide insight into what the participants understand to be significant changes over time and in relation to different contexts.

6. Safely store the photographs and audio material on a computer and transcribe the recordings. Read the transcriptions on several occasions, highlighting recurring topics and points of interest. The photographs should be analysed in conjunction with the photo-walks and on-going conversations rather than independently. Understanding photographs as situated within the go-along can help to tease out nuances between different participants.

7. Use the photographs and accounts collected to creatively disseminate research findings. Think about how to communicate these findings to diverse audiences. The photographs and narratives could be used to tell a story about the community, individuals and places engaged with. Why not create an exhibition or use some of the photographs and narratives to punctuate a report or presentation? Can they be used as a provocation to open further areas of research?

Sharing the material created can be a good way of bringing people together, celebrating the project and thanking participants for their time and participation.



Examples of using photo go-alongs in social science research

More-than older age: making sense of place

Researcher: Dr Amy Barron, The University of Manchester

This research used photo go-alongs whilst researching with thirty-two older people from Prestwich, Greater Manchester. One aim of this research was to foreground the lived dimensions of older age against the policy backdrop of creating what the World Health Organisation call 'age-friendly cities'. Policies targeted at older age have a tendency to focus on common medical and/or mobility needs, overlooking the rich diversity of what it means to be an older person. As such, this research sought to highlight the social and cultural components of being an older person in Prestwich. Photo go-alongs were used alongside a suite of other creative and participatory approaches to understand the city from the perspective of older individuals. This flexible combination of methods shed light on those often-overlooked aspects of life (memories, emotions and practices) which are obscured in policy agendas geared toward older people in favour of a top-down approach. In this project, photo go-alongs:

- i) Demonstrated the importance of creating spaces in the city that are welcoming and a space of respite.
- ii) Foregrounded commonalities amongst a diverse group, such as the importance of specific buildings, monuments or statues as way-finders and memory-joggers.
- iii) Highlighted how individual life histories shape the ways people understand and engage with a place.
- iv) Showed how the experience of the city can vary greatly depending on the other practices and events that are encountered.
- v) Revealed how age, disability and the urban landscape combine to effect feelings of safety and belonging. For example, points where being a wheelchair user might be challenging.

The photographs and narratives created by participants were used to collaboratively assemble a photo and story collection called 'Place, Belonging, Manchester' which was shared at different venues across Greater Manchester for the region's 'Festival of Ageing' which was part of the age-friendly initiative. The focus of the event was not about the number or quality of the photographs, nor on the composition of the collection. Rather, the collection i) offered a way of disrupting reductive representations of older age by showing the diverse ways participants led their lives and ii) provided a place for visitors to discuss and share their own opinions and perspectives. The collection served to open conversation between policy makers, older people and academics about what 'older age' means whilst also sharing it with the communities who had shared their time and thoughts.



Examples of using photo go-alongs in social science research

Age-friendly seating and sense of place

Researcher: Dr Amy Barron, The University of Manchester

This research explored how older people understand and experience a variety of seating in five different city-centre areas in Manchester. The study focused both on the design of seating and the more complex aspects of place, from an age-friendly perspective. The relationship between design, people and place was explored through surveying the number and style of benches available and semi-structured walking interviews in which participants photographed different seating and places used as seating, such as walls. These photographs were then overlaid onto a map to create a picture of feelings associated with the variety of seating

available in the city. The photo go-along highlighted the importance of developing a place-based understanding of seating, based on the perspective of older people going about their everyday lives. A report was then written for Manchester City Council which was shared with the Age-Friendly Manchester Design Group, The Older People's Board, Age-Friendly Bristol and the Intergenerational Design Symposium. This report is available on Manchester City Council's website and is used to inform policy decisions on how to make cities more inclusive and accessible for older people.



The Place, Belonging Manchester photo and story collection at the Prestwich Arts Festival



Where else could photo go-alongs be used?

The diversity of ways photo go-alongs can be used makes them suitable for researching a range of topics. For example:

- Photo go-alongs might be usefully incorporated into urban design or place-making decisions and policies by providing insight into how different people use, interact and relate to a place. The combination of movement and photography can reveal patterns of interaction between different people, shedding light on how communities and places come into being. Photo go-alongs would highlight how depth and meaning emerge through everyday practices, showing what is important to those who live there.
- History groups, museums and other cultural venues could use photo go-alongs to document the living memories and histories of places and communities. The mobile and mindful nature of photo go-alongs means participants reflect on things that are part and parcel of everyday life, foregrounding accounts that might otherwise be forgotten or overlooked.
- They might be used to foster dialogue between different stakeholders, particularly in diverse communities. For example, individuals from different backgrounds could be asked to photograph what is important to them in their neighbourhood in relation to a proposed redevelopment or initiative. The photographs taken could then be used to engender conversation, build understandings of difference and enable a decision to be made that will best serve the community as a whole.

Top tips

1. Be clear about the flexible, open and participant-led nature of this method. Sometimes the freedom provided by this approach can be unfamiliar to participants who might expect a more defined set of instructions.
2. Let participants lead on deciding how the research will unfold by being open and responsive to needs and suggestions as they emerge.
3. Immerse and engage in the process. Too often research is presented as a neat and definitive activity in which a 'researcher' extracts information from a 'participant' to then 'accurately represent' it back to the world in the form of statistics and facts. The reality is that the world is much messier than these categories allow. Trying to confine the messy and evolving world into pre-defined boxes not only undermines how life takes place but can exclude interesting and important aspects of life.



Further reading

- More-than-representational approaches to the life-course.
- Seating and sense of place report.
- Checklists alone cannot create age-friendly places: lived experiences matter.
- Beyond 'older age': a photo and story collection to illuminate the individual.
- Pluralising the walking interview: Researching (im)mobilities with Muslim women.

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