

Narrative Journeys: On the Significance of Motion in Interviewing

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq**Ricardo A. Ayala¹** and **Memory Mphaphuli²**

Abstract

This article introduces *narrative journeys* as a distinct approach to qualitative interviewing that foregrounds movement not as context but as an active feature of meaning-making. Drawing on two case studies—one in Chile and one in South Africa—we explore how interviews conducted while walking allow for different narrative flows, affective rhythms and relational dynamics compared to conventional sit-down formats. Rather than focusing primarily on place, as is often the case in go-along interviews, we argue that it is the motion itself that reshapes the conditions for reflection, disclosure and interaction. Through the use of ethnographic vignettes, we examine how pace, gesture and spatial negotiation structure the unfolding of narrative content. We also address key ethical and methodological considerations, including visibility, consent and the unpredictability of public space. Our analysis suggests that narrative journeys offer not only an alternative technique but a reconfiguration of the interview as a dynamic and co-produced encounter. This approach may be particularly suited to research concerned with lived experience, relationality and the subtle interplay of thought and movement. We conclude by outlining a set of dimensions for analysing interviews in motion and reflecting on the potential of this method within qualitative research more broadly.

Keywords

narrative journeys, walking interviews, mobile methods, qualitative interviewing, embodied research, ethnographic methodology

Introduction

In knowledge, important perspectives come to us in the form of narratives. In narratives, motion has a significance all its own. Take walking, for instance, though often seen as an ordinary and routine activity, it is evolving into a dynamic research practice in which movement and social inquiry entwine with one another. Within the social sciences specifically, it is gaining momentum (Anderson, 2004; Kinney, 2017; Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017; Bell & Bush, 2020; Bilsland & Siebert, 2024) as a compelling method for exploring socio-logical, criminological and other narratives, offering a unique way to experience and interpret the world (O'Neill & Roberts, 2019).

Yet, research environments often default to rigid structures that reinforce hierarchical dynamics, constraining the fluidity of dialogue. Mason (2017) reminds us that “much qualitative interviewing and almost all survey research has traditionally been done by sitting in a room and having a conversation

[...]”. And while one cannot possibly count the studies that lean on conventional interviewing techniques, it is only relatively recently that this aspect began to be problematised in qualitative research handbooks (Denzin et al., 2023; Flick, 2022; Iphofen & Tolich, 2018; Winkler, Reissner Cascón-Pereira, 2023). Sitting down in an office for a face-to-face encounter, though private and quieter than other places (Luhmann, 2021), can replicate sterile, laboratory-like settings, further reinforcing asymmetrical roles between

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researcher and participant (Bilsland & Siebert, 2024; Carpiano, 2009). But richer, more dynamic exchanges are not just desirable; they are essential. Without them, we risk flattening the complexities of lived experience, reducing it to something more easily categorised but less fully understood.

Interviews are co-constructed encounters where researchers do more than just pose questions: they echo key phrases, recalibrate in response and negotiate the pacing of conversation (O'Neill & Roberts, 2019). While various techniques shape interaction differently, the depth and authenticity of an exchange hinge on the researcher's ability to maintain analytical focus while remaining fully present and attuned. Vivid narratives do not emerge solely from well-structured questioning but from methodologies that allow movement, interaction and a heightened sensitivity to context. When researchers engage with a subject's world on a deeper level, they usually uncover more textured accounts (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011). As such, conversations conducted while walking through a space can build together an intricate scaffolding of shared knowledge, developing a more collaborative and immersive understanding.

Over the past few years, qualitative researchers have become more aware of the need for interview methods that incorporate motion, such as the walking interview, allowing narratives to unfold dynamically, where discourse unfolds in tandem with physical movement. Walking interviews do not merely relocate a conversation to a new setting; rather, they transform the interactional rhythm, encouraging spontaneity and a freer, more reflexive exchange between researcher and participant. The focus here is not on place as data but on how movement itself influences the nature of storytelling, allowing narratives to emerge with greater fluency and depth.

Despite a well-established tradition of qualitative interviewing – typically conducted in seated, face-to-face settings – the added value of interviewing while in movement remains underappreciated. While these mobile methods have received considerable scholarly attention over the past decade (Anderson, 2004; Kinney, 2017; Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017; Bell & Bush, 2020; Bilsland & Siebert, 2024), their full potential for generating situated and dynamic quality data is often overlooked in favour of more conventional or stationary approaches. Rather than simply being a different format, walking interviews offer unique methodological and epistemological advantages (Bartlett et al., 2023; Zahavi, 2019) that merit greater recognition – they are, indeed, alternatives to the fixed and immobile. Walking interviews are a unique type of encounter, which, unlike conventional interviews, tend to be more spontaneous and natural. We prefer calling them 'narrative journeys,' as they enable participants to articulate experiences in a fluid and evolving manner, shaped by the rhythm of movement and the unfolding conversation.¹ As such, these interviews furnish the interactants with unique interactional opportunities for exploration.

This article explores how researchers might conduct theoretically and methodologically sound narrative journeys to

produce richer accounts of the realities being studied. Additionally, we define a narrative journey approach to interviewing and argue how important it is that both researchers and reviewers be familiar with the principled considerations that apply, drawing on examples from our own ethnographic research projects (Ayala, 2020; Ayala et al., 2016, Mphaphuli & Griffin, 2020; Mphaphuli & Smuts, 2021). By delineating it as a distinct approach to qualitative interviewing, we provide an account of the notion of a narrative journey, addressing two main areas: first, we explore the fluency and naturalness of the narratives produced discursively while 'in motion' during interviews on the move; and second, we illustrate how the dynamic of trust and the transfer of power shift when discussing complex issues or conducting interviews while in motion.

Over the past two decades, an expanding body of literature has increasingly underscored the importance of place within qualitative research (Anderson, 2004; Casey, 2001; Hillier, 2001). Scholars across fields like geography, anthropology and sociology have shown how specific locations acquire particular meanings and significance for participants, shaping their lived experiences and perspectives. Places, it is highlighted, are not merely physical spaces; they are repositories of memory, emotion and cultural identity. This rich context offers invaluable insights into human behaviour and social interaction.

Human geography, for instance, has long embraced the concept of embedded place – the idea that individuals and communities imbue spaces with meaning (Casey, 2001; Davidson, 2017). Research highlights how walking interviews conducted in these significant locations enable "mapping" meanings as the surroundings are walked through, in ways that it elicits personal as well as collective accounts of places. Moving through these spaces, it turns out, evokes memories, emotions and reflections that might otherwise remain concealed in a static interview setting. This method has proven particularly powerful for themes like migration, vulnerability, belonging and identity, where participants often draw on their spatial context to articulate their experiences (O'Neill, 2008; Davidson, 2017; Bartlett et al., 2023). Moreover, mapping techniques are frequently employed afterwards to analyse spatial data, further enriching the gleaned insights (Martini, 2020; Litman, 2024).

Anthropology and sociology authors have similarly explored how the materiality of space, the physical and symbolic dimensions of particular places, shapes participants' narratives (Aucoin, 2017; Benson & Jackson, 2013). Walking interviews, or "go-along" encounters, in fact provide an opportunity to uncover subtle nuances in how people relate to their environments, whether in urban neighbourhoods, rural landscapes or contentious spaces such as borders and refugee camps. The movement through these spaces creates a dynamic interaction between the participant, the researcher and the physical setting. Such moments allow for richer, more layered insights, where place itself becomes an object of study.

Geographical data can then be juxtaposed with interview transcripts, coded and analysed in much the same way, or alternatively, used to provide a visual representation of the encounters within scholarly output.

Yet, this paper shifts the focus. Rather than focusing solely on place as intricately woven into narrative, we advance a narrative journey approach that emphasises the interplay between movement, conversation and shared meaning-making. It does not foreground place as the central element of the narration; instead, it highlights movement as the key driver of storytelling opportunities and as a catalyst for the relational, emergent qualities of the interview process itself. Our aim, therefore, is to shift the focus away from the locations and explore how movement opens up possibilities for narrative production, with movement being the intersection of person and place.

Key Literature

Research approaches in walking interviews vary widely. They may range from informal methods, where researchers casually explore landscapes while conversing with participants—referred to as “bimbling” (Evans & Jones, 2011)—to carefully structured walks designed to evoke specific responses about predetermined locations. Walking interviews are often argued to produce richer and more nuanced data because participants are naturally influenced by their surroundings. They draw on meanings and associations tied to the environment, reducing the tendency to offer what they perceive as the ‘correct’ answers. Intuitively, it makes sense to engage participants in discussions about places of interest while they are physically present in those spaces. However, this method carries certain requirements: for the research to be meaningful, the questions must align with walkable locations, and the physical act of walking may exclude certain participants or limit the use of some traditional interviewing techniques (Kamarudin et al., 2022; Bartlett et al., 2023).

A more commonly adopted approach is the hybrid method of interviewing and participant observation known as the “go-along” interview, where the researcher accompanies participants as they go about their daily routines, asking questions along the way (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003). This method resembles the “shadowing” technique used in organisational research (McDonald, 2005), though it places greater emphasis on movement between locations. Kusenbach (2003) noted that go-alongs reveal often-overlooked habitual relationships with place, uncovering aspects of environmental perception, spatial practices, social realms and personal biographies. Similarly, Hitchings and Jones (2004) employed a walking method in gardens to explore how participants engaged with and learned about their environment. They found that participants expressed attitudes and feelings more easily when ‘in place,’ leading to richer data compared to interviews conducted indoors, where participants often attempted to provide overly helpful or “correct” answers. Outdoor settings encouraged more informal and meaningful interactions.

Conducting walking interviews, unlike other mobile approaches such as being driven in a car (Laurier & Philo, 2003), immerses both researcher and participant in the multisensory environment of the surrounding space (Adams & Guy, 2007). Rather than being enclosed within a filtered and homogenised “blandscape” (Bijsterveld, 2010; Edensor, 2007), walking enables direct and embodied engagement with the environment, accompanied by a kinaesthetic rhythm that creates a distinct experiential dynamic (Middleton, 2009). This bodily engagement contrasts with methods that remain sedentary from the perspective of both the participant and researcher.

According to this literature, walking interviews have a significant advantage: they uncover attitudes and knowledge about their surroundings. Walking has long been recognised as an intimate way to engage with landscapes, providing deeper insights into both place and self (Solnit, 2001). Ingold & Vergunst (2008) argue that walking alongside interviewees fosters a connection with the environment, enabling researchers to understand how people create places through their movement and routes. From a biographical perspective, Wylie (2005) used a walking holiday along the South West Coast Path in England as a framework for personal reflections on embodiment, affect and landscape engagement.

Despite widespread recognition of their benefits, walking interviews vary considerably in how they are conducted. One key decision is whether the route is determined by the interviewer or the interviewee (Evans & Jones, 2011). Pre-defined routes can help focus the interview on specific locations relevant to the research objectives (Jones, Bunce, Evans, Gibbs, & Ricketts Hein, 2008). For example, researchers exploring reactions to specific buildings or pathways may structure walks around them. Inwood and Martin (2008) used “roving focus groups” during a guided tour to explore students’ perceptions of racial tensions within a US university, while Paulos and Goodman (2004) employed “urban walking tours” to evaluate place perception by guiding participants through four specific locations in Berkeley, California.

Yet, discussions about their limitations also remain scant. Methodological reflections often assume spatially sensitive insights but overlook technical difficulties associated with conducting interviews outdoors, such as interruptions, distractions and ambient noise. Ethics review boards may also be unfamiliar with the approach, complicating approval processes (Kinney, 2018) especially compared to more established approaches such as ethnography, where interviewing while walking tends to occur rather spontaneously.

However, predetermining the route has limitations too. It may disrupt participants’ natural routines, potentially resulting in data that, while appealing, may not provide deeper insights into participants’ authentic practices and interpretations (Kusenbach, 2003). To address this concern, Kusenbach focused her study on “natural” go-alongs, accompanying participants on walks they would take in their everyday lives. She argued that contrived go-alongs might detract from the authenticity of the data and reduce the empowerment participants feel when choosing their own

routes, which could also undermine the informal and conversational nature of the interaction.

Considering both opportunities and limitations, it becomes clear that narrative journeys constitute a distinct qualitative technique. But if so, why? What problems do they solve? Some suggest that interviewing while in motion, though still audio- or video-recorded and transcribed like traditional interviews, feels more natural. Kinney (2017) observed: “In my research I found talking becomes easier when walking. Unnatural pauses that occur in a sedentary face to face interview can be replaced with natural occurrences on the walking interview.” Beyond comfort, this may also enable more spontaneous and embodied responses. Likewise, it is argued that “walking interviews generate richer data, because interviewees are prompted by meanings and connections to the surrounding environment and are less likely to try and give the ‘right’ answer.” (Evans & Jones, 2011).

There may also be a psychological basis for motion’s activation of discourse. Oppezzo and Schwartz (2014), for instance, empirically demonstrated that walking stimulates participants’ idea generation and creative expression. In their influential study, they observed not only that participants talked more—and more creatively—after mild walks, but also argued that outdoor environments specifically offer a type of “cognitive and emotional renewal.” (p.1145) This aligns with Zhou et al.’s (2017) observation that “this could be due to the possibility that walking provides access to metaphorically related knowledge, which in turn might support mentally moving through one’s memories.” (p7) In another empirical study, Fuegen and Breitenbecher (2018) concluded that exercise like walking (as opposed to resting) greatly increases attention and mood, with even greater improvement when the exercise takes place outdoors (as opposed to staying indoors), suggesting that activity and setting interact. This indicates that the interplay of physical activity and setting may jointly prime the mind for imaginative or reflective thought, rather than each operating in isolation. Adding to that, Brossoit et al.’s (2024) research with employees during workplace breaks suggests that this may be driven by *emotional* potential energy that supports positive feelings (e.g., enthusiasm), and *cognitive* potential energy that allows individuals to regulate their thoughts and maintain directed attention. Likewise, Bailenson (2021) has argued that extended videoconferencing is mentally draining precisely because it “tampers down movement,” requiring us to remain “sitting down and staring straight ahead.” (p4) Taken together, diverse yet coherent evidence seems to be pointing to the idea of flows, both cognitive and physical, which reinforce each other during the production of a narrative. As Sheets-Johnstone (2014) so eloquently put it:

To think is first of all to be caught up in a dynamic flow; thinking is itself, by its very nature, kinetic. It moves forward, backward, digressively, quickly, slowly, narrowly, suddenly, hesitantly, blindly, confusedly, penetratingly. What is distinctive about thinking in movement is not that the flow of thought is kinetic, but that the thought itself is. It is motional through and through; at once spatial, temporal, dynamic. (p200)

From this perspective, walking is not merely a context for conversation but a catalyst for cognition. In oral narratives, then, the flow of movement and the flow of thought would be not *parallel* processes, but deeply entangled ones. As Amoroso (2023) suggests, this perspective invites us to view movement not as something external to experience but as constitutive of it. Motion does not merely facilitate knowing; it is itself a mode of knowing. Through movement, knowledge is enacted rather than simply acquired — it is produced in and through the embodied act of moving.

We have explained how narrative journeys constitute a distinct approach to interviewing. Nonetheless, it is worth noting it shares important features with a broader range of creative qualitative methods (i.e., Hunter et al., 2002; Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Porr et al., 2011; Guell & Ogilvie, 2015; Ayala & Koch, 2019; Levell, 2019; Rainford, 2020; McGrath et al., 2021). While traditional in-depth interviews can at times feel like “pouring oneself out to a stranger,” non-traditional methods tend to reduce power asymmetries and offer participants a comfortable atmosphere as well as alternative modes of expression (i.e., Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Ayala & Koch, 2019). Walking alongside an interviewee can reduce the intensity of sustained eye contact, which might otherwise feel awkward or intimidating (Bilsland & Siebert, 2024), unlike sit-in interviews, where continuous eye-to-eye contact may encourage interviewees to seek approval or guidance on topics being explored, or even tailor their responses to please the interviewer, potentially leading to a social desirability bias (Kaminska & Foulsham, 2016).

In oral history and participatory research, similar mobile methods have proven valuable, particularly when working in public spaces or with vulnerable groups. Maggie O’Neill (2008) employed walking interviews with sex workers, refugees and asylum seekers in open public spaces. Sinclair and Reeder (2012) describe such techniques precisely in ways that resemble narrative ‘journeys,’ in which walking becomes a form of searching; where memory is encountered through association, emotion and embodiment (also see Bartlett et al., 2023). Lyon et al. (2017) similarly argue for alternative oral history methods when traditional interview formats constrain participants’ ability to share.

In this paper, we build on this emerging perspective, advancing *narrative journeys* not merely as a variation of the walking interview, but as a distinctive approach, one that centres movement as both a methodological and epistemological foundation for deeper narrative engagement.

Empirical Ground: the Field Journeys

This article draws on two ethnographic studies: one in Chile, the other in South Africa. Both illustrate how walking interviews (what we call “narrative journeys” here) can enrich qualitative inquiry by shifting the dynamics of researcher–participant interaction.

The Chilean study was part of a broader project on the social construction of nursing as a profession. Conducted between 2010 and 2011 in a large university hospital, the

research focused on everyday practices and power relations among healthcare staff. Around 40 participants took part, including nurses, doctors and hospital managers. Alongside observations and sit-down interviews, many of the most revealing exchanges happened while walking between wards, through corridors or during breaks. This was often when participants were leading the way or multitasking. This movement shaped how stories emerged. Interviews were interspersed with gestures, glances, pauses and changes in pace, adding texture to the spoken word.

The South African material, drawn from a study on how heterosexuality is lived and understood within Black families, followed a similar logic. Here too, narrative journeys, often spontaneous walks to the shop or around the village, opened space for moments that would not have arisen in formal settings. These were not simply interviews in motion, but shared experiences in which meaning unfolded gradually, shaped by movement, place and relational shifts.

It is not our concern here to present the findings of that study, as they have been published elsewhere (Author a, 2015, 2020; Author, b, 2019; Author b, 2021). Rather, this article includes two major areas of methodological relevance arising from post hoc reflection, namely the significance of motion in shaping the data and the need to rethink methodological approaches to moving interviewing with a stronger focus on the person-place intersection. Building on the available literature, we explored interview dynamics by drawing on elements such as pace, tone and narrative. These emphasise the layered nature of narratives as not merely given or told, but as shaped by virtue of the moving encounters.

Analysis

We draw on qualitative case *vignettes* as a methodological tool, treating them as “reflexive accounts” (Langer, 2016) that capture ethically delicate moments in our ethnographic studies. Specifically, we reflect on our experiences interviewing professionals in healthcare settings in Chile as well as interviewing men and women in a rural village of KwaZulu Natal (South Africa) on the social construction of heterosexuality within families. In this article, we use vignettes not only as a means of illustrating key moments in the research process but also as a reflexive tool for examining the role of motion in qualitative interviewing. Arguing from a constructivist perspective, we emphasise how the dynamics of motion in researcher-participant interaction shape the unfolding of thought, positioning motion as central to narrative journeys.

In practice, a vignette is a method of interpretative inquiry that presents significant single cases to illustrate complex research findings (Langer, 2016). Unlike its traditional use in psychological and sociological surveys, where vignettes are often hypothetical scenarios designed to elicit reactions (see Finch, 1987), Langer conceptualises research vignettes as a

way of integrating interaction and relationship dynamics into the representation of meaning-making in research, situating them within an interpretive tradition, where they serve as a bridge between empirical findings and reflective, context-sensitive interpretations of research encounters. Adding to that, Aurini and Iafolla (2023) point out that along with their eliciting role (Barter & Renold, 1999; Finch, 1987), vignettes serve as a means to highlight methodological challenges, ethical dilemmas and the practical realities of fieldwork, including researcher-participant interactions, institutional barriers and decision-making processes (Aurini & Iafolla, 2023).

For our analysis, we examine a few distinct narrative journeys. These vignettes capture the interplay between motion—both literal and conversational—and the ways in which pauses, physical contact and rhythm coalesce with the evolving narrative content. We focus on aspects such as motion, rhythm, interactional dynamics and narrative.

Vignette No. 1: A Narrative Journey through the Endless Hallways of a Hospital

The first vignette derives from an interview with a Lead Nurse, the primary informant and contact person in a large hospital ward in Chile. This interview was structured to explore social stratification between medicine and nursing, and to gain insight into the hospital’s cultural hierarchies. Conducted in the middle days of fieldwork, the interaction was shaped by an already well-established rapport. By then, the researcher had extensively observed nurses in their professional environment, frequently engaging in both formal and informal exchanges. Time spent in her office—sometimes in the company of other nurses and doctors—allowed for ongoing, unscripted conversations that blurred the lines between observation and participation.

However, it was often the case that either because of time pressures or to explain her role as a supervisor, interviews were done while walking along the hospital hallways with the nurse, which shaped the data-gathering process differently, as shown below:

Lead Nurse Rodriguez takes me to have a look around in her ward, explaining the dynamics of the work. We walk calmly through the hallway as she hooks her arm through mine.

[Surgeon approaching from the other end] As he approaches, the nurse pulls me discreetly by the arm into the wall side to free the hall. Likewise, María, a Nursing Auxiliary, clears the way pretending she enters a patient room. I notice María’s gaze—half curious, half timid—and her rough-hewn face, which contrast to Dr Schüller’s demeanour—half heroic, half solemn—and his bright eyes and fair skin. Coming somewhere in between, Nurse Rodriguez’s features seem to enact nurses’ personal background in a nutshell.

Vignette No. 2: Boundary Blurring and Meta-Relationship

This vignette involves a scientist who was also a nursing student. Researcher and participant had first met a few weeks earlier in a hospital ward in the context of a round of ethnographic observations. There was a good rapport being built. He was older than the average student, more mature in his outlook and open to the research topic. He was also curious, often asking what was being observed, how sense was being made of it and what nurses could 'improve' in their work. See the excerpt below:

We crossed paths again during a coffee break by the lawn at a medical conference. To my surprise, he asked how my research was going and whether I had observed anything particularly interesting. Since I was interested in the dominance/autonomy dichotomy, I quoted a select passage from my field notes written during the first conference day:

"Well, I am under the impression that doctors [in their presentations] tend to offer 'perspectives' for other doctors to choose among possible therapies, whereas when nurses present it's more like do A, B, C and D, isn't it? Like, what is ought to be done, as in [showing him my notes] 'we have to,' 'we are going to,' 'we'll do this,' 'afterwards we'll do that,' and so forth"

As I shared this fragment, he looked half disappointed, half irritated. I could have sworn I caught a subtle hint of an eye-roll. I sensed that he initially took my observations as judgmental, but then he seemed to realise I was simply describing what I saw. Still, something in his demeanour suggested he was not entirely at ease.

He replies: "Hum... yeah, I think so... maybe. But—uh—that's... like... most nurses, they—uh—tend to think about their job, right? But, let me tell you something," he adds, his pace quickening, "like, younger generations, uh... people like me... we're trying to... expand the role of nursing. I mean—uh—I'm developing an app. For patients... to use, before... and after surgery. So they... have info. 24/7. Even... uh... stuff about when to call their doctor..." [paraphrased]

In the narrative journey of the first vignette, as the nurse grew more reflective, her movements slowed—smoothing into something softer, more fluid, almost *lyrical*. Even the way she asked her interviewer to give way—gently, unhurriedly—seemed to echo the quiet inward turn of her thoughts. It is a very rare and intimate moment of physical contact, which

highlights closeness, connection and mutual trust. Like her, research participants might amble or drift rather than stride with purpose, their gaze falling downward, their pauses stretching as reflection takes hold. In such moments, the rhythm between the interactants often synchronises, movement softening to match a quieter and more measured voice. Here, thought takes the lead, and the body—unhurried—follows.

Within a much longer history of interaction, this dynamic shaped the rhythm of each encounter. Rather than unfolding in a stationary environment, the conversation adapted to the movement itself, revealing subtle shifts in power. As the journey progressed, the physical act of walking dictated pauses, gestures grew more fleeting and changes in pace punctuated moments of emphasis or hesitation. This interplay between motion and dialogue not only influenced the negotiation of authority but also blurred the lines between formality and collaboration. Walking side by side introduced a distinct dynamic: at times fostering a sense of partnership, at others reinforcing hierarchical differences. As an interviewee, she was aware of being part of the dynamics under observation—yet she remained the Head Nurse.

In contrast, in the narrative journey in the second vignette the participant's movements mirrored other emotional and cognitive states. When becoming excited, participants' physicality tends to become more animated and dynamic, as in stepping more quickly, using expansive gestures and shifting their gaze more frequently. This aligns with a *staccato* speech pattern. Movements are sharp, rapid and punctuated. Or even in chunks of speech. As if thought was far ahead. And words lagged behind. Excitement. A sense of urgency or enthusiasm. Quicker footfalls, sudden pauses. Short, distinct bursts.

Sometimes the interviewee in vignette two would also step ahead slightly as if his thoughts were propelling him forward. In a way, this energy can also be categorised as *voice-driven*, meaning the rhythm of the speech—faster pace, rising intonation and bursts of volume—and the bodily motion shaped each other. As these two walked together through the backyard, coffee cups in hand, the conversation shifted. It moved beyond mere curiosity; the student's questions prompted a clearer articulation of the findings. In a way, he became an interpreter, helping to refine the understanding of the interactions being studied. What stood out was how he stepped beyond the stereotypical role of the 'researched person,' shifting into the role of a researcher himself to help interpret the findings. This shift was sparked by a piece of information he objected to.

While relevant to the evolving nature of the narrative, this moment reflected what could be termed as a 'meta-relationship,' a blurring of boundaries where the distinction between observer and observed became less defined, where a relationship *about* the relationship began to form, reflecting on how those involved were being constructed and depicted in the field notes. Here, the pace of the walk quickened when he mentioned belonging to a different generation of nurses and

developing an app to help patients follow up after surgery. In his view, this was a clear example of how nurses' agential power is evolving, which helped him contest the observer's impressions.

However, these two movement patterns are not rigid, yet the interplay between emotional tone and physical rhythm was striking. Staccato movements—quick, choppy, abrupt—tend to accompany moments of emotional intensity or assertion. Lyrical patterns, by contrast, are sustained, flowing, even languid; they move gently, as though stretching time into reflection. This embodied rhythm subtly marks the social dynamic, reflecting how thought and displacement shape this 'journeyal' dimension of narrative delivery. This contrasts with previous sit-down interviews, which at times felt scripted and less dynamic. Both verbal and non-verbal cues enable interviewers to gain deeper insights into how meaning is co-constructed in conversation and how social dynamics unfold in real time. The way interactants' movements and speech rhythms align (or do not) reveals the synchrony of their rapport. This synchrony (or the lack of it) can thus reflect emotional attunement, as bodily movements throughout the journey enter into their own kind of dialogue – a 'travelogue.' For instance, the nurse's unhurried movements suggest a collaborative and reflective intent, while the student's forward-leaning energy may signal urgency or a desire to assert ideas.

These embodied patterns suggest that paying attention to how participants move can enrich narrative analysis. Movement and speech rhythms can reveal what is left unsaid, hinting at tensions, uncertainties or emotional undercurrents that words alone might obscure. The physical dynamics in conversation can also reflect underlying social structures. For example, who moves with ease or assertiveness, and who yields or slows down, may reveal implicit hierarchies or power relations.

As Butler (2006) argues, motion itself can be understood as a core medium of experience and knowing, shifting attention away from space as something fixed. Contrasting a "sedentary metaphysics" of rootedness with a "nomadic metaphysics" that values mobility as fluid and playful, he frames motion as a creative, improvisatory act — much like language — unfolding in the present. Even memory, rather than being anchored to a single point, is mobile and relational, drifting and connecting times, voices and experiences as we move.

From this perspective, bodily rhythms and spatial negotiations during a narrative journey are not mere background details but active sites of meaning-making. They shape how stories are told, how authority is asserted or shared, and how memory itself is evoked and reconfigured through movement — whether in the nurse's unhurried request to give way, signalling deference and care, or in the student's forward-leaning stride, expressing urgency and a desire to control the narrative.

Vignette No. 3: A Narrative Journey through the Unsaid

Vignettes three and four come from fieldwork notes from ethnographic research conducted in South Africa. This project

sought to explore the everyday lived experiences of heterosexuality as reflected on by men and women who make up black families. It examined how heterosexuality, as both an institution and a practice, and the meanings associated with everyday discourse are socially constructed, and how heterosexuality regulates everyday life. In the vignette below, the researcher and the participant had just concluded the second of a three sit down face-to-face in-depth interviews. The researcher had offered to walk with the participant to the supermarket as it was on her way home anyway.

As we were walking towards the supermarket, Mrs. Madonsela moved with purpose, her stride steady—until, without warning, she stopped. Her body tensed as she lifted her index finger, pointing across the road. Her voice, usually warm, hardened as she spoke:

"I do not like the woman who lives in that house," she said, her tone edged with something deeper than mere dislike. "She caused me so much stress during my pregnancy, she is the reason my last-born son, the one you saw playing outside my house, was born disabled. The things she said, the rumours she spread about my eldest son, about my family... She was jealous of me. I hate her."

A beat of silence stretched between us, the weight of her words settling into the space they had just occupied. Then, her gaze turned sharp, assessing.

"I hope you're not working with this family for your research. They are not good people."

I opened my mouth to respond, to process this sudden revelation, but before I could find the right words, she gave a small, firm gesture—a silent command to keep moving. And just like that, we resumed our walk, her question left hanging in the air, unanswered.

As previously discussed, walking creates a fluid, dynamic space for conversation that differs from traditional sit-down interviews. Unlike formal research settings, where discussions may feel structured or rehearsed, walking allows for spontaneous dialogue, shaped by the environment and sensory experiences. In this instance, the act of walking leads to an unprompted and deeply personal revelation from Mrs. Madonsela. The moving body facilitated moving thoughts—past memories, emotions and grievances surface organically as we navigated the landscape together.

Moreover, walking established a shared physicality between the researcher and participant, dissolving some of the hierarchical barriers that may exist in more structured traditional interviews. Here the researcher was not merely an

observer but a co-walker, engaging with the space and stories as they unfold. The interruption of the journey—the sudden stop, the pointing, the change in tone—was a crucial observation as it added another dimension to the ethnographer's understanding of how emotions and spatiality interact. The house across the street was now no longer just a physical structure, but an active symbol of past pain, conflict and lingering resentment. In this way, the vignette highlights how emotional experiences shape and are shaped by movement through space, offering the researcher a deeper understanding of how geography is imbued with social meaning. Furthermore, the exchange between Mrs. Madonsela and the researcher was not just a simple recounting of past experiences; it was also an exercise in power, trust and control within the research relationship. Mrs. Madonsela takes charge of the conversation, deciding when to speak and when to move on, signalling the researcher to follow her lead both physically and discursively. By withholding the opportunity for the researcher to respond, she asserts control over the narrative, ensuring that her story is heard on her terms.

This dynamic illustrates a critical aspect of ethnographic fieldwork, that is, the researcher is often not in control of how and when knowledge is shared. Participants dictate the flow of information, sometimes offering intimate details unexpectedly and at other times withholding crucial insights. The researcher must learn to navigate these shifting power dynamics, understanding that ethnographic knowledge is co-constructed rather than extracted. What emerged unexpectedly through the walks was an opportunity to consider themes of pregnancy and womanhood, and community in a rural setting, which became central points of connection and reflection. Walking thus created a space where personal narratives and broader sociological understandings intertwined, allowing us to engage with pregnancy and womanhood as lived, moving and meaning-making experiences.

Significantly, this interaction provides an entry point into several culturally significant themes that the researcher could further explore as she was examining how heterosexuality is socially constructed within black South African families. For example, Mrs. Madonsela explicitly connects emotional distress during pregnancy to the disability of her last-born son. This belief highlights how local understandings of reproductive health may diverge from biomedical explanations. As we can see, Mrs. Madonsela strongly believes that the woman caused her stress, which then resulted in her son's disability, and this thus resonates with broader beliefs in causality that move beyond Western medical paradigms. In many communities, misfortune, including health conditions, may be attributed to external spiritual or social forces.

In sum, this vignette illustrates that ethnography's narrative journeys can uncover alternative epistemic frameworks. By moving through space with participants, researchers gain access to knowledge that is situational, embodied and deeply tied to lived experience.

Moreover, this moment reveals the ethical complexities of ethnographic research. Mrs. Madonsela warns the researcher

against working with a particular family, positioning them as "bad people". This raises questions about how researchers navigate conflicts within the communities they study. How can one address, on the one hand, the goals of the research, and on the other hand ensure that participants' perspectives are respected and valued? How do researchers ensure they are not drawn into local disputes or reinforcing existing divisions?

Vignette No. 4: Steps in the Sun

The late afternoon sun hung low, casting long shadows on the dusty village road as Baba and I strolled leisurely, our steps unhurried, our conversation meandering like the breeze. After a hearty lunch, we had stepped outside to stretch our legs, letting the warmth of the afternoon settle in our bones.

Barely 2 minutes into our walk, an elderly couple emerged from the path ahead, their hands clasped together, moving in quiet synchrony. Their pace was slow but steady, as though time itself had softened around them. Mid-sentence, Baba fell silent, his attention drawn to the couple. With a warm nod, he greeted them, his voice rich with familiarity.

"Sisabonga impilo," he said with gentle reverence—"We are still grateful for life."

The couple smiled in return, their expressions carrying the weight of years lived and shared. The moment was brief, a simple exchange that held the depth of something unspoken, something known. As they passed by, Baba turned to me, his steps slowing as he lifted a finger and pointed at the old man.

"That man," he said, nodding towards him, "has true love. He is always with his wife. Wherever they go, they are together. I am sure they even go to the toilet together."

I chuckled, and Baba, with his signature humour, joined in. Our laughter rippled through the quiet village path, a shared moment of amusement and understanding. And as our walk continued, the weight of the conversation lingered—woven into the landscape and the rhythm of our steps.

In this vignette based on the same ethnographic research, Baba and Memory are strolling through the village, their interaction fluid and unstructured. The elderly couple they encounter becomes a catalyst for Baba's reflection on love and companionship. This encounter would not have happened in a controlled interview setting—it is an ethnographic moment made possible by the act of walking. The landscape, people

and movement contribute to the emergence of rich, unexpected narratives.

Furthermore, the interactional dynamic between Baba and Memory reflects a relationship of familiarity and warmth. The way Baba interrupts his conversation to greet the elderly couple—“*Sisabonga impilo*” (*we are still grateful for life*)—demonstrates the deep sense of social connection and respect within the community. The researcher, as an observer-participant, is drawn into this web of relationships, experiencing firsthand how everyday social interactions reflect larger cultural values.

Baba’s subsequent commentary about the elderly man—“*That man has true love. He is always with his wife, wherever they go, they are together. I am sure they even go to the toilet together.*”—adds another layer to the interaction. His humour is more than just a joke; it is a performative way of imparting cultural wisdom. By laughing together, Baba and Memory bond, sharing not just a joke, but an understanding of love and companionship in a South African village. Baba’s admiration for the elderly couple suggests that companionship in later life is highly valued in this community. His remark reflects an ideal of enduring love—one that persists through old age and everyday routines. This presents an opportunity to investigate cultural conceptions of love and marriage, particularly how they evolve over time. Baba’s comment about the couple always being together suggests gendered expectations within relationships. Is this a widespread ideal in the community?

Lastly, this vignette also illustrates how different ways of knowing emerge through lived experience. Baba does not deliver his insights on love and companionship in an academic or abstract manner; instead, his knowledge is embodied, expressed through everyday encounters, humour and observation. His commentary on the elderly couple is not a theoretical

discourse—it is a reflection that arises in the moment, shaped by movement, place and interaction.

In many non-Western epistemic traditions, knowledge is not confined to texts or structured argumentation but is transmitted through oral narratives, shared experiences and embodied practices. Walking and talking serve as epistemic activities, allowing knowledge to unfold in a relational and situated manner. This interaction provides a powerful example of how ethnographers ought to remain attuned to the diverse ways people understand and articulate their worlds. Moreover, as Yi’En (2014) has previously argued, revealing these otherwise hidden accounts provides a more complete picture of the poetics and politics inherent in conducting fieldwork.

Across the vignettes, interruptions emerged as meaningful moments that punctuated the flow of motion, often intensifying the affective charge of the scene and shaping how the experience was narrated. Indeed, it was interruptions that first drew our attention to the phenomenon of motion, highlighting its presence by momentarily disrupting it.

These two studies, though grounded in different settings, point to a broader claim. Narrative journeys do not need to be confined to research concerned only with place-based experience, as is often the case in studies employing the go-along approach. Their value lies not simply in accessing spatial meaning but in shifting the rhythm and tone of the conversation itself (see Table 1). Yet, we are not proposing them as a replacement for more traditional seated interviews but as a complement. Used alongside one another, these modes of engagement can open different narrative pathways—some more reflective, others more direct—allowing researchers to access layers of meaning that might otherwise remain dormant. Movement in this sense is not simply logistical; it is epistemological.

Table 1. Analytical Dimensions of Narrative Journeys

Vignette	Movement pattern	Narrative effect	Power dynamic	Embodied cues
1. Hospital hallways (Nurse Rodriguez)	Lyrical, slow, fluid; occasional yielding	Reflection deepens; narrative becomes introspective	Subtle assertion of authority with gestures; shifting between collaboration and hierarchy	Slowing pace, arm-hooking, gentle guidance, gaze shifts, yielding gesture to surgeon
2. Meta-Relationship (Nursing student)	Staccato, fast, forward-leaning, animated	Shift from interviewee to co-analyst; reclaims narrative control	Temporary imbalance as participant challenges interpretation, asserting intellectual agency	Quick footfalls, speech in bursts, excited tone, body leading walk, expressive gestures
3. Supermarket walk (Mrs. Madonsela)	Intermittent; sudden stop followed by a resumed steady pace	Unprompted emotional disclosure linked to place; narrative tied to spatial memory	Participant asserts narrative and physical control; interviewer is repositioned as silent witness	Pointing, sudden stop, shift in vocal tone, commanding gesture to continue walking
4. Village stroll (Baba)	Meandering, unhurried, conversational	Elicits reflective cultural insight; humour and storytelling as knowledge-sharing	Balanced, relational; participant guides tone, but dynamic is warm and reciprocal	Pause to greet, hand gesture, soft voice, laughter, shared rhythm with the researcher

We see the motional aspects of the interview –pace, pauses, detours and interruptions– as elements that need to be made visible in the analysis rather than left implicit. One way this can be achieved is by noting such shifts in brackets within the transcript so that movement can be read alongside content, tone and other non-verbal cues. Not everything can be captured in real time, of course, and researchers often rely on recordings, fieldnotes and memory. When we realise that the memory of an event carries analytic potential, we may return to it deliberately, gathering material, revisiting notes and recordings, and sometimes even meeting again with the interviewer to elicit reflections. This recursive process allows us to look more closely at both the events themselves and the narratives through which they were remembered, bringing motion more explicitly into the analytic frame. While not all qualitative researchers give this the same weight, we see it as vital for capturing the narrative journey of the interview in motion.

Additional Considerations

While narrative journeys offer a textured in-motion approach to qualitative interviewing, they also bring with them a constellation of ethical and methodological complexities that demand careful consideration.

Firstly, narrating personal accounts in public or semi-public spaces introduces a range of risks not typically encountered in more controlled environments. These include, for instance, physical or environmental hazards, the unpredictability of bystander interruptions and the possibility of inadvertently exposing participants, particularly when the conversation turns to sensitive or stigmatised topics. In tightly knit communities, simply being seen in dialogue with a researcher might compromise anonymity (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Emmel & Clark, 2009; Moles, 2019) or, otherwise, lead to wrong assumptions about who has said what. This visibility, in turn, raises questions around participant safety and reputational risk, especially in contexts marked by political tension or stigma. Participants may feel constrained in what they are willing to say or later regret disclosures made in spaces that feel less private than they initially appeared (see Hatuka & Toch, 2017).

To mitigate these concerns, researchers might begin by co-designing the journey with participants, allowing for greater control over visibility, familiarity and perceived safety. Prior to the interview, it can also be helpful to engage in a detailed conversation about potential risks, clarifying not just the logistics but the emotional and reputational stakes that might arise in particular locations. Informed consent should be specially treated as an iterative process rather than a one-time agreement. This means checking in before, during and even after the interview, creating space for participants to re-negotiate the terms of disclosure or request redactions. Flexibility is also key. Researchers need to be prepared to pause, shift direction or temporarily move to a more private

setting if the context changes unexpectedly, whether due to ambient noise, the presence of others or a sudden shift in the participant's comfort. Likewise, researchers might consider how their own presence, embodiment and perceived affiliations shape the interview dynamic. Reflection on power, visibility and spatial politics does not need to be reserved for post-fieldwork analysis, but integrated into the encounter itself, informing both the ethical posture and methodological choices of the researcher in real time.

Secondly, Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) or ethics committees, meanwhile, may be unfamiliar with the embodied and mobile nature of these methods. Often oriented toward more static or conventional designs, they may require additional justification (principled considerations, that is), leading to delays, misunderstandings or the need to reframe narrative journeys as both valid and ethically sound. Nevertheless, such principled considerations should also ponder whether the technique may potentially involve a breach of the privacy of others, as in recording audios or taking pictures (see Nebeker et al., 2016), and how the researcher would minimise the risk and mitigate any potential breach. Highlighting the co-constructive nature of the journey could help IRBs to shift from risk-averse ethics to an opportunity-led attitude (Stouten et al., 2025).

To address this, researchers might consider engaging with ethics committees early in the design process, providing anticipatory rationales for the use of mobile methods. This could involve offering precedents from existing literature, articulating how embodied approaches offer insights not possible in static settings, and explaining the specific steps taken to ensure participant well-being in dynamic environments. In some cases, it may be useful to include visual or narrative examples (e.g., maps, photographs or hypothetical scenarios) that render the methodology more tangible to reviewers unfamiliar with spatial or sensory-based inquiry. Likewise, anticipating concerns and framing mobility not as a methodological liability but as a deliberate, ethically attentive choice can help shift the conversation from justification to collaboration. Researchers might also benefit from advocating, where possible, for broader methodological literacy within ethics review structures, highlighting the growing legitimacy of narrative, mobile and place-based methods across disciplines.

And thirdly, the open-ended and mobile nature of these interviews makes them particularly vulnerable to disruptions in flow. Ambient noise, inclement weather and logistical detours can compromise audio quality and derail conversational rhythm (Bell & Bush, 2020; Vyas, 2024). Here, infrastructural foresight becomes essential. Researchers might scout routes in advance to identify quieter paths, schedule interviews during times of minimal environmental noise and develop contingency plans for adverse weather or other interruptions. Using lightweight, wind-resistant recording equipment or lapel microphones with noise-cancelling features can help preserve audio clarity without constraining the natural movement of conversation. In some cases, pausing the

recording or transitioning to a stationary location can allow participants to regain their narrative thread before continuing. More broadly, embracing a degree of improvisation, treating interruptions not as ‘obstacles’ but as part of the method’s embodied texture, can recast them as data in their own right, offering insight into how context dynamically shapes meaning.

Altogether, these considerations underscore the necessity of methodological flexibility when conducting narrative journeys. Rather than viewing mobility as an anomaly, researchers and IRBs are encouraged to engage with its challenges as central to the research process. By attending closely to ethics, environment and embodiment, narrative journeys become not only viable but also deeply generative spaces of inquiry, where movement through place entwines with the unfolding of story, insight and relational depth.

Conclusions

In this article, we have proposed *narrative journeys* as a distinct approach to qualitative interviewing, one that foregrounds the interplay of movement, interaction and meaning-making. Drawing on our empirical cases, we have attempted to answer an important question, How can movement, particularly through narrative journeys, serve not merely as a context for data collection but as a constitutive element in the production of narrative, trust and meaning within qualitative research?

Narrative journeys allow for a particular kind of co-presence, where researcher and participant move together, both literally and figuratively. We have argued that these are not interviews that just happen to occur while walking, nor are they focused on place as data. The way we have defined them, these are interactions in which *movement* becomes a generative feature of the dialogue itself. As participants walk, they often narrate in ways that are less rehearsed, more layered and embedded in the present moment. In this sense, walking becomes a medium that supports the unfolding of thought, be it because of increased attention, reflective thinking, enthusiasm, cognitive energy or otherwise.

We have also argued that narrative journeys bring into view aspects of embodiment and spatiality often underplayed in conventional qualitative interviewing: the body, the setting and the relational field, which are too part of the data. As our vignettes have illustrated, movement can signal shifts in mood, mark moments of discomfort or underscore the emotional weight of particular memories. These embodied cues may remain inaccessible in conventional sit-down formats, where the natural rhythm of conversation is often muted by the constrained atmosphere of laboratory-like settings.

At the same time, narrative journeys require researchers to engage with a set of ethical and methodological complexities. They call for flexibility, attentiveness and a willingness to be shaped by the encounter. Issues of visibility, consent and context do not disappear. Rather, they take on new forms. We have highlighted the importance of viewing informed consent

as iterative, of attending to shifts in power and of treating disruptions not as ‘noise’ but as meaningful features of the conversational flow. This requires focused attention not only to the interview as an outcome but as a process, one that is journeyal in nature, where narrative unfolds in relation to motion, rhythm and interactional dynamics.

In sum, *narrative journeys* offer a way to think differently about what it means to interview. They shift the frame from information extraction to co-navigation. However, rather than replacing traditional interviewing, we believe they complement it by providing alternative pathways, especially where the physical and emotional engagement of narrative delivery matters. That said, for subjects requiring additional privacy, a closed environment may still offer a safe choice.

As the social sciences continue to explore more relational and situated ways of knowing, narrative journeys may offer a timely and valuable contribution to the evolving toolbox of qualitative researchers.

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Note

1. On critiques from critical walking studies and feminist perspectives, we use the term “narrative journey” rather than “walking interview” to acknowledge that movement need not be limited to walking (e.g. “drive-along”), even if our fieldwork happened to involve only journeys on foot.

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