When conducting go-alongs, fieldworkers accompany individual informants on their ‘natural’ outings, and — through asking questions, listening and observing — actively explore their subjects’ stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment. A hybrid between participant observation and interviewing, go-alongs carry certain advantages when it comes to exploring the role of place in everyday lived experience. Go-alongs are a more modest, but also a more systematic and outcome-oriented version of ‘hanging out’ with key informants — an ethnographic practice that is highly recommended in virtually all fieldwork manuals and textbooks. Many reflexive descriptions of what ethnographers do characterize ‘hanging out’ with informants in a variety of social situations as a key strategy. However, because of their extraordinary commitment to a small number of key informants, ethnographers rarely systematically follow a larger number of subjects into a variety of settings. Studies that build ‘hanging out’ with many or all informants into the overall research design — as a number of classic and contemporary ethnographies do (e.g. Becker 1961; Hochschild 1989; Duneier 1999) — usually focus on their subjects’ personal and professional lives at one or two specific locations, thus necessarily downplaying the significance and meaning of less prominent places and of the spatial practices by which different places are linked together.

The goal of the go-along as a research method is at the same time more limited and more focused than the generic ethnographic practice of ‘hanging out’. Go-alongs require that ethnographers take a more active stance towards capturing their informants’ actions and interpretations. Researchers who utilize this method seek to establish a coherent set of data by spending a particular yet comparable slice of ordinary time with all of their subjects — thus winning in breadth and variety of their collected materials what might get lost in density and intensity. What makes the go-along technique unique is that ethnographers are able to observe their informants’ spatial practices in situ while accessing their experiences and interpretations at the same time. While going along with subjects is common in ethnographic
research, I am not aware that ethnographers have used go-alongs or equivalent techniques systematically in previous qualitative studies of everyday life. In any case, sociologists have not yet fully explored the phenomenological potential of this interesting empirical approach.

For the purpose of authenticity, it is crucial to conduct what I have previously referred to as ‘natural’ go-alongs. By this I mean go-alongs that follow informants into their familiar environments and track outings they would go on anyway as closely as possible, for instance with respect to the particular day, the time of the day, and the routes of the regular trip. In contrast, ‘contrived’ or experimental go-alongs – meaning when researchers take informants into unfamiliar territory or engage them in activities that are not part of their own routines – might produce appealing data, but not of the kind that would greatly enhance our understanding of the subjects’ authentic practices and interpretations.

Even though ‘natural’ go-alongs are ideally rooted in informants’ everyday routines, this research technique is obviously not a ‘naturally occurring’ social occasion. It is rather unlikely that informants are accompanied on their routine trips by acquaintances who engage them in discussing their perceptions and interpretations of the physical and social environment. There can be no doubt that go-alongs, like interviews and even participant observation, are always ‘contrived’ social situations that disturb the unfolding of ordinary events. Go-alongs intentionally aim at capturing the stream of perceptions, emotions and interpretations that informants usually keep to themselves. The presence and curiosity of someone else undoubtedly intrudes upon and alters this delicate, private dimension of lived experience.

I found that conducting go-alongs with more than one person at a time, for instance accompanying a couple walking their dog around the neighborhood or running errands together, can be very productive. The presence of a partner or friend can reduce some of the obvious discomfort that a number of informants feel about being followed in, and queried about, their mundane local practices by an ethnographer. This does not, however, mean that go-alongs with couples are therefore more ‘natural’ events. They only produce a different kind of artificiality and cannot solve the much more fundamental dilemma of researcher reactivity. Even so: it is still useful to distinguish between the contributions of more and less contrived versions of go-alongs. While they can never be completely ‘natural’ social situations, and thus always impact the experiences that subjects would have without such company, the less contrived ones stand a much better chance of uncovering
aspects of individual lived experience that frequently remain hidden during participant observations, sit-down interviews and more experimental types of go-alongs.

The most common and practical modes of go-alongs are ‘walk alongs’ (on foot) and ‘ride-alongs’ (on wheels), yet others are certainly possible. Many times, go-alongs will involve a mixture of activities and the use of more than one mode of transportation. Of the 50 go-alongs that I conducted, three-quarters were walk-alongs and the rest ride-alongs or mixed types. My go-alongs lasted anywhere from a few minutes (walking with an informant to the gas station on the corner to buy cigarettes) to many hours (spending almost entire days with informants as they worked, ran errands and socialized). In my experience, a productive time window for a go-along is about an hour to 90 minutes.

I experimented with audio-recording go-alongs, taking jottings and photos, and with not making any records during the actual outing. I found audio-recordings particularly useful in the case of ride-alongs because of the much faster and more urgent pace of events, making it difficult to ask informants for clarifications and to mentally keep track of the sequence of situations. Overall, I found ride-alongs to be less effective than walk-alongs mainly for these reasons. Jotting down key phrases and facts on the spot turned out to be quite helpful, as long as it did not interfere with the original pace or the nature of the outing. In the end, which strategy of recording go-alongs is most useful depends on the variable comfort level of informants as well as on the personal preferences of the researcher (Emerson et al. 1995). What is most important is to expand any records or mental notes into full sets of descriptive fieldnotes as soon as possible after completing a go-along.

What exactly did I emphasize while conducting go-alongs? I tried giving my informants as little direction as possible with regard to what I would like them to talk about. If they insisted on instructions, I asked them to comment on whatever came to mind while looking at and moving through places and also to share with me what they usually experienced during routine trips. On occasion, I pointed to a nearby feature in the environment that was difficult to overlook and asked my subjects what they thought of, or felt about, this particular object in order to demonstrate what kind of information I was looking for. Even though the telling of my informants’ experiences was sporadically invoked by my presence, I avoided participating in the selection or the contents of their narratives. In any case, I could have never anticipated which places and environmental features stood out in their minds and how they perceived and interpreted them.
In sum, the strengths and advantages of participant observation, interviewing and go-alongs accumulate when they are pursued in combination. The argument here is not one of superiority but for becoming more self-conscious about expanding the range of data-gathering techniques in order to exploit the different perspectives and angles each provides. As Becker (1958: 657) points out, social scientists should not only strive to collect many instances of an identified phenomenon but also seek to gather ‘many kinds of evidence’ to enhance the validity of a particular conclusion.4

At the very least, including systematic yet subject-driven go-alongs into the research design of an ethnographic study will provide fieldworkers with the opportunity to schedule multiple returns to subjects who might be hesitant to make themselves available for a formal follow-up interview. Furthermore, go-alongs create excellent opportunities to conduct ‘unobserved’ observations of social settings and situations that happen to be sensitive to unaccompanied outsiders. Ultimately, go-alongs can do more than merely enhance field access and contacts.

Notes

1 Editorial note: The following remarks on the go-along method are an extract from Kusenbach’s essay ‘Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool.’ In *Ethnography* vol. 4, 3, 2003. They provide a methodological background for the following chapter by Loïc Wacquant, who conducts a ‘ride-along’ during his field research.

2 There are always exceptions. In 1959, Lynch and Rivkin claimed to have conducted the first study ‘where respondents have been recorded while actually moving through the city itself’ (Lynch and Rivkin 1970: 631). This is in fact not quite correct. The researchers sent 20 subjects – some of them familiar with the area, others not – on a walk around an urban block in Boston and questioned them afterwards about what they experienced. Lynch and Rivkin are aware that this technique ‘intensifies, and possibly distorts the usual day-by-day perception of the city’ but still assert that it has advantages over other approaches. Katz (1999) employs a variety of ethnographic methods to capture the lived experience of emotions. One chapter discussing road rage is based on student interviews with Los Angeles drivers, quite a number of them conducted while driving. This gave the student interviewers the opportunity to triangulate what they learned from their subjects about vehicular behavior with their own observations. See also Patricia Paperman’s article on the uniform as an interaction device (Paperman 2003), where she notes that it was only when she accompanied a third team of subway police that she could access their work in process.

3 Over the course of the research on two urban neighborhoods (as reported in Kusenbach’s essay “Street Phenomenology”; AS), as I learned many intimate details about the lives of my informants, I had to monitor myself carefully not to use this vast stock of knowledge as a conversational resource in developing bonds with new or difficult informants. Some realized that I knew a lot and were eager
to find out intimate details about their neighbors and I had to consciously resist the tendency to share such information. Because I did not act in accordance with the rules of casual conversations, go-alongs were not quite like chats that could have occurred between neighbors. Yet they were neither very formal nor problematic encounters, even though some informants were obviously less comfortable discussing their experiences and practices with me than others.

Goffman’s famous remarks on how to conduct fieldwork seem to suggest a similar point. He was recorded saying: ‘[Jackie] takes seriously what people say. I don’t give hardly any weight to what people say, but I try to triangulate what they’re saying with events’ (Goffman 1989: 131).

References


