

THE TRANSGENERATIONAL WALKING INTERVIEW METHOD: INSIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS FOR COMMUNITY RESEARCH IN PLACE AND MEMORY

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INTRODUCTION

Our relation with space and the meaning we give to places is affected by our individual perspectives as well as our social and cultural environment. The notion of 'place' generally contrasts with that of 'space'. While space refers to a geographical location, place embodies an emotional component connected to a particular setting¹. From a socio-cultural perspective, while in Aboriginal tradition people's relationships with the land tend to be more spiritual, in Western tradition, land is often viewed as property, with its value as a commodity being more prominent². Thus, "different peoples might "see" different places in the same "place""³. This observation is not only applicable at the socio-cultural level but also at an individual level. For example, a park where one person recalls childhood play and familial bonds might, for another, be associated with solitude or loss. Thus, the same location can evoke vastly different meanings and emotions depending on personal experiences. Through these meanings, individuals and communities develop emotional connection towards their physical environments⁴, and this phenomenon manifests itself as place attachment⁵. Throughout one's lifetime, new bonds are continually formed. The significance attributed to a particular location is subject to change and transformation over time and also across generations.

In Belgium, and more specifically in the region of Wallonia, where our study was conducted, the significance of place has undergone a substantial transformation across generations, particularly perceptible in post-industrial landscapes. This shift is closely linked to the transition from an industrial economy and the subsequent economic crises. Locations that were once sites of industrial work, factories, and symbols of national pride have, in many cases, become ruins or landmarks, sometimes repurposed for new uses⁶. While some places have retained their original function, they have often been subject to significant renovations. Over time, the physical characteristics of these places have evolved, their societal roles have been redefined, and the demographics of the surrounding communities have shifted⁷. Consequently, different generations may perceive these places differently, depending on their personal connections or lack thereof to the site's historical or contemporary significance.

For communities, the new generation's understanding of a place can play a crucial role in its reintegration, revitalization, and reuse. Beyond being a sustainable approach to resource management, repurposing space and preserving its inherent value can also serve as a means for younger community members to learn about and connect with the past⁸.

In this context, we explore how engaging in memory work within a transgenerational setting can alter the relationships between participants and the place.

To address this inquiry, we propose a specific methodology: the transgenerational walking interview (TWI). This exploratory paper seeks to establish an appropriate protocol while identifying the potential and limitations of this method, as well as the types of data it can yield. Our focus is not on analyzing the content of the interviews themselves, but on critically evaluating the methodology itself, with the goal of developing a robust approach that can effectively be used in community research and by community researchers.

THE TWI METHOD

Walking interviews, also referred to as "go-along interviews" or "commentated walks," involve the interviewer and interviewee walking together in a location relevant to the research question. This method effectively situates narratives within their spatial context, using the environment to trigger discussions through various stimuli⁹. The approach is sensory, spontaneous, informal, and less structured, allowing participants to have greater influence and take a more active role in the conversation. Walking interviews offer several advantages: they enable a deeper understanding of individuals, challenge assumptions, improve communication skills, and build connections between participants¹⁰.

Transgenerational interviews involve two individuals from different generations, with the younger participant typically taking on the role of the interviewer. These interviews are particularly valuable as they recognize and respect the distinctiveness of each individual's life experiences¹¹.

In the context of intergenerational research, we use peer interviewing, a method where researchers do not ask questions but instead observe as participants take the lead in the conversation¹². Unlike traditional interviews where the interviewee passively responds to the researcher's predetermined questions, this approach enables both the interviewer and the interviewee to collaboratively construct meaning. In our context we consider both participants as "peers" as they are part of the same family, and consequently belong to the same community, social group and therefore share social codes. This method promotes greater flexibility and creativity in the dialogue, allowing for a richer exchange of ideas and experiences.

The method that we define here as "Transgenerational Walking Interview" thus refers to an interview in which two people from different generations come together; the younger person taking on the role of main interviewer to conduct a walking interview in a place significant to the older participant. To conduct these interviews, researchers explain the research protocol to participants, who are then asked to guide the visit. The younger participant has question cards to inspire them, prepared and provided by the researchers. We, as researchers, document the experiments and try to remain very passive to also assess the ease of use of the method, only intervening with questions if there is a blockage.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Throughout the study, we conducted our research with two pairs of relatives at two distinct sites in Wallonia, Belgium.

In the first interview, Nathan and his grandmother Marie-Anny visited a high-school in Fontaine-L'Eveque (Figure 1), a school where Marie-Anny had taught for many years. The school, still operational today, had undergone significant renovations but retained some of its original structures. This setting provided Marie-Anny with an opportunity to share her experiences in a familiar environment, though it was Nathan's first visit to this place. Given its rural context, the site was primarily known only to those who used it.



Figure 1. Nathan and his grandmother Marie-Anny in the classroom where Marie-Anny used to teach

In the second interview, Gérôme and his grandfather Charles explored Haut-Fourneau B in Liège, an industrial site where Charles had worked (Figure 2). Despite partial dereliction and ongoing construction, the site still permitted engagement with its historical significance. Located in an urban area and adjacent to a frequently traveled road, this site was more widely recognized.



Figure 2. Gérôme and his grandfather Charles walking to the old factory site for a closer view.

During the interviews, participants discussed a range of themes, including their typical workday and the main activities they were involved in. They also reflected on the people they encountered regularly at the location, whether colleagues, students, or other individuals connected to the site. Additionally, participants recalled special events that stood out in their memories, such as a particularly significant incident that occurred on-site or a unique anecdote that happened with students.

“One year, a student in the fourth grade... I taught geography. And there were 15 atlases in the bookcase. And so, at the end of the lesson, the students put their atlases back in the cupboard, themselves, not me. And then, I saw that an atlas was missing. So I wondered what I was going to do, but I knew that it was a student

from 4e technique who had taken over the atlas [...] And so the following week, I came into the classroom, waited for absolute silence and [...] explained that an atlas was missing and that if it was a student who was passionate about geography and didn't have enough money to buy an atlas, well, he could come and tell me and he could keep the atlas. [...] And so, the next day, the atlas was left in the boys' bathroom downstairs. The student returned the atlas. So, the next time, I said we'd found the atlas, but no one ever came to ask for an atlas. Otherwise, we would have given it away.”(Marie-Anny during the TWI)

Post-evaluation interviews were conducted later on by the researchers to capture participants' perspectives on the transgenerational interview method. These more conventional semi-structured interviews took place immediately after returning from the sites, with each participant individually reflecting on their personal experiences of the place, impressions of the walking interview, and perceptions of the methodology. The interviews were recorded using audio and video and later transcribed for thematic analysis¹³.

RESULTS

Experience of the place-related insights

Both younger participants noted that being physically present at the sites made the stories more immersive, allowing them to better appreciate their grandparents' experiences, and helping them visualize the scenes described, which enhanced their understanding and connection to the shared stories. This aspect was especially highlighted by one of the younger participants, who found it more vibrant compared to a museum experience:

“It was more vibrant than a museum visit for example” (Nathan in his post-evaluation interview)

Both older participants expressed positive emotions about revisiting significant places from their past. During the post-evaluation interviews, they mentioned that they didn't find the on-site experience essential to their storytelling. However, they also acknowledged that being on-site was naturally beneficial, and both had at least one memory elicited by being in the place. On the same subject, younger participants observed a change in the attitude of older participants during the walks, noting that they became more engaged with the place.

“It's nice, it shows that... Michel, he would be... He's passed on. He died a long time ago. He'd be happy to see us here. And your mom, she had class here. She was sitting over there.” (Marie-Anny during her TWI)

Learning about the site and changing perspectives on heritage value

Learning more about the site and connecting it to personal stories also changed the perception and value of the place for the younger participants. One of them, who already knew the industrial site where his grandfather worked as a site of urban heritage, shared that re-exploring it with his grandfather enabled him to gain a deeper understanding of the place and its significance. He shared that the TWI has changed his perspective on the site.

“For example, one idea that changed was that I thought it was going to disappear completely. [...] As the interview progressed, when we were on the site, we heard the [construction] worker say that they were going to preserve part of it for heritage purposes, and I thought that was really interesting. Basically, I'd never have given it much thought. I didn't grow up with it, so it didn't have much of an impact

on me. I'm not particularly attached to the industrial landscape, etc. to go through history, to understand how the Liège basin developed. I don't think it's essential, and I don't think you have to force it on everyone, but I do think it's nice to preserve.” (Gerome during his post-evaluation interview)

While asking questions, the younger participants also shared their own vision of the place as well as their own experiences in contexts similar to the ones shared by the elder.

“It's funny because last year, when I had to come back to high school [after my graduation], it was already very strange for me to come back when I'd only been away for one year.” (Nathan during the TWI)

Participants' perceived participation

While both grandparents shared that their engagement would be similar without their grandchildren present, both grandchildren perceived their grandparents to be more engaged when sharing stories with them rather than with researchers they didn't know.

Additionally, although the grandparents mentioned that they were not particularly emotional about returning to the sites of their careers, the grandchildren believed their grandparents were emotionally affected by the visit and thought that it was a deeply personal experience for them.

Both grandparents and grandchildren expressed that they would have preferred if the researchers had taken a more active role in the interview by asking questions and participating more in the discussion.

“Your presence isn't at all distracting, absolutely not, but what you can perhaps do is ask questions during the visit, ask the person you're interviewing, ask what they're thinking at the time. But otherwise, no, your presence is not at all awkward. In fact, it was nice to be able to show you a place we've known and loved for a long time.” (Marie-Anny in her post-evaluation interview)

Participants' preparation before the TWI

None of the participants had prior experience with interview methods. In that case, the quality of questions posed by participants can vary depending on their personality and lack of experience. The younger participants, in particular, who were expected to ask more questions, initially felt unprepared but grew more comfortable as the interviews progressed. They found the prepared question cards helpful for initiating the conversation or when they encountered difficulties.

Driving around the neighborhood

Conversations in cars were also found important, as they provided a comfortable setting for the older participants to share their memories while driving around familiar neighborhoods and discussing the evolution of their former workplaces' surroundings. This mobile aspect of the interviews allowed for dynamic interaction with the environment, which sparked additional reflections and stories.

For instance, Marie-Anny shared her nostalgia upon seeing the closure of shops in the village center, a consequence of the economic shifts following the deindustrialization process in the Walloon region. This context added depth to her narrative, illustrating how the broader socio-economic changes had impacted her local community.

Similarly, Charles noted the dramatic transformation of the industrial landscape in Liège, contrasting the vibrant activity of his working days with the current state of dereliction and ongoing redevelopment. These in-car discussions not only enriched the storytelling experience but also highlighted the interconnectedness of personal and communal histories, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' pasts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our method proved particularly beneficial for younger participants who assumed the role of interviewer, deepening their understanding of the place through firsthand narratives. These experiences, centered on the sharing of personal stories, were found to be more engaging than traditional methods, such as guided tours in heritage institutions.

Some researchers suggest that peer-interviewers can enhance the quality of data, as participants may respond more authentically to someone who understands their life circumstances. Such interviews also empower participants by giving them the lead and opening up a space for expression. Therefore, their use is highly recommended for community research settings. Yet, a key limitation is that peer-interviewers may lack the formal training needed to conduct interviews effectively, which could impact the depth and consistency of the data collected.

Furthermore, the method encouraged younger participants to critically evaluate the heritage value of the site, making it a valuable tool for involving younger generations in memory work. By connecting generational memories, this approach fosters a transgenerational understanding of such places, effectively contributing to heritage sensitization.

While older participants may not always recognize the significance of sharing their memories specifically with their grandchildren, the younger participants valued these moments as opportunities to learn new aspects of their grandparents' lives. However, the younger participants' perceptions of the older participants' experiences were sometimes contradictory. Investigating the reasons behind these differences would be valuable for gaining a deeper understanding, and future studies could include focus group interviews to compare and contrast these perceptions.

Despite the method's minimal guidance, participants were able to apply it successfully. Our experiments with TWI suggest that this methodology is easily applicable in community research settings. However, adjustments are necessary to enhance its adaptability. Our conclusions on these adjustments are summarized below in our improved methodological guide.

IMPROVED METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE

Before the TWI – preparation of the participants

With no prior interview experience, participants—especially the younger ones—initially struggled but became more comfortable as the interviews progressed, finding prepared question cards helpful for guiding the conversation. Therefore, we recommend allocating time for a brief training session before going on-site. Additionally, we suggest preparing basic, inspirational questions to serve as ice-breakers.

During the TWI

The use of a clip-on microphone was found to be beneficial for recording clear audio, especially in environments with difficult weather conditions. It also allowed the younger participant to focus more on the conversation, eliminating the need to hold a phone or device for recording.

After the TWI

Because we found conversations in the car before arriving on-site valuable for gathering general information about past events and the neighborhood's history, we recommend starting the recording as early as possible and continuing it for as long as possible. Meaningful discussions can emerge at any moment. Additionally, we observed that upon returning to the location, participants introduced more themes, eager to connect their experiences with other places in the neighborhood.

NOTES

- ¹ Maria Vittoria Giuliani, 'Theory of Attachment and Place Attachment. In M. Bonnes, T. Lee, and M. Bonaiuto (Eds.), *Psychological Theories for Environmental Issues*.' 2003, 137–70.
- ² Fred R. Myers, 'Ways of Place-Making', *La Ricerca Folklorica*, no. 45 (2002): 101–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1480159>.
- ³ Myers, 103.
- ⁴ Maria Lewicka, 'Place Attachment: How Far Have We Come in the Last 40 Years?', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 31, no. 3 (1 September 2011): 207–30, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.10.001>.
- ⁵ Lynne C. Manzo and Patrick Devine-Wright, *Place Attachment: Advances in Theory, Methods and Applications* (Routledge, 2013).
- ⁶ Jeremy Cenci, 'From Factory to Symbol: Identity and Resilience in the Reuse of Abandoned Industrial Sites of Belgium', *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 9, no. 2 (3 April 2018): 158–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17567505.2018.1506017>.
- ⁷ Marion Fontaine and Xavier Vigna, 'La désindustrialisation, une histoire en cours', 20 & 21. *Revue d'histoire* 144, no. 4 (2019): 2–17, <https://doi.org/10.3917/vin.144.0002>.
- ⁸ Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Temple University Press, 2010).
- ⁹ James Evans and Phil Jones, 'The Walking Interview: Methodology, Mobility and Place', *Applied Geography* 31, no. 2 (1 April 2011): 849–58, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2010.09.005>.
- ¹⁰ Phil Jones et al., 'Exploring Space and Place with Walking Interviews', *Journal of Research Practice* 4, no. 2 (2008), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ827010>.
- ¹¹ S. Donaghey, "Repositioning the Oral History Interview: Reciprocal Peer Interviewing within a Transgenerational Frame," in *Communication Issues in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Collection of Research Essays*, ed. G. Dodson and E. Papoutsaki (Auckland, New Zealand: Epress Unitec, 2014), 95–105.
- ¹² Emma Tsui and Emily Franzosa, 'Elicitation as a Multilayered Process: An Experiment in Reciprocal Peer Interviewing', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17 (1 October 2018): 160940691879701, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918797012>.
- ¹³ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon, 'Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis', *Qualitative Health Research* 15 (1 December 2005): 1277–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.

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