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Street phenomenology
The go-along as ethnographic research tool

■ Margarethe Kusenbach
Department of Sociology, University of South Florida, Tampa

ABSTRACT ■ This article introduces and evaluates the go-along as a qualitative research tool. What sets this technique apart from traditional ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviewing is its potential to access some of the transcendent and reflexive aspects of lived experience *in situ*. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two urban neighborhoods, I examine five themes which go-alongs are particularly suited to explore: environmental perception, spatial practices, biographies, social architecture and social realms. I argue that by exposing the complex and subtle meanings of place in everyday experience and practices, the go-along method brings greater phenomenological sensibility to ethnography.

KEY WORDS ■ ethnography, everyday life, interaction, neighborhoods, phenomenology, qualitative methods, Schutz

Previous phenomenological investigations in other disciplines have established that our experience of the environment is fundamentally based on the coordinates of our living body, giving 'place' primacy over 'space'. Informed by Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher Casey (1993: 43ff.) describes how living bodies' movements constitute our primordial sense of the environment as a diversity of places. This perspective resembles the concept of 'perceptual

space' as developed by the humanist geographer Relph. Relph (1976: 11) asserts that perceptual space is 'richly differentiated into places, or centres of special personal significance', including not only actual places but also imagined and remembered ones.

Alfred Schutz, one of the founding fathers of interpretive sociology, acknowledged the importance of the subjective coordinates of the body in describing the structures of the life-world (Schutz and Luckmann, 1989), yet he did not fully recognize the primacy of place in our environmental experience and practices.[1] The role of the environment and the meaning of place in everyday lived experience is an area of inquiry that phenomenologically minded sociologists have begun to explore only recently (e.g. Milligan, 1998). The broader goal of this article is to contribute to a better phenomenological understanding of how individuals comprehend and engage their physical and social environments in everyday life. More specifically, it introduces and evaluates the 'go-along' as an ethnographic research tool that brings to the foreground some of the transcendent and reflexive aspects of lived experience as grounded in place.

I begin by briefly commenting on the complex relationship between phenomenology and sociological research. Next, I take a critical look at classic ethnographic methods and then specify what is new about the method of the go-along and how this technique for gathering data manages to overcome certain shortcomings of participant observation and interviewing. The main part of the article is devoted to illuminating the substantive potential of the go-along technique by noting five themes that it is particularly suited to explore: (1) environmental perception, (2) spatial practices, (3) biographies, (4) social architecture and (5) social realms. Finally, I address some limitations and implications of go-alongs.

The article is based upon my participation in a three-year collaborative ethnographic study of how residents in five urban neighborhoods in Hollywood (Los Angeles) perceive local problems, and how their daily activities and social interactions relate to those understandings.[2] I studied two of the five neighborhoods, all of which were distinct in terms of the racial, ethnic, class and lifestyle composition of their residents. One of the two areas, here called 'Melrose', is a lower-middle-class neighborhood with a culturally heterogeneous population that includes Orthodox Jewish families, aspiring actors and immigrant Russians. The other, 'Gilmore Junction', is an upper-middle-class and more homogeneous neighborhood located about a mile away from the first one. Many of its overwhelmingly Caucasian residents are homeowners and have established successful careers in the Hollywood entertainment industry. In 61 interviews lasting one to three hours, I gathered ethnographic data on residents' biographies and daily experiences in these areas. I also observed the neighborhoods' local events and street life over about 18 months and recorded my observations in fieldnotes. In this

article, I predominantly draw on a third set of data: my records of 50 'go-alongs', covering 30 residents, during which I accompanied my informants on their 'natural' everyday trips.

Building on phenomenology

By further developing Husserl's groundbreaking ideas into a systematic description of the structures of the life-world (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, 1989), Alfred Schutz gave the social sciences a phenomenological foundation. While Schutz's work has been actively engaged in European sociology (e.g. Sprondel and Grathoff, 1979; Eberle, 1984; Srubar, 1989), his influence on sociology in the American context has been much less direct (Wagner, 1988). In the United States, Harold Garfinkel counts as the principal interpreter of Schutz's thought (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). Garfinkel's ethnomethodology is seen as an attempt to turn Schutz's foundation of the social sciences into a radical research program while preserving its 'phenomenological sensibility' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 40; see also Psathas, 1977).[3]

The complex relationship between phenomenology and sociology has been widely discussed in the past (e.g. Luckmann 1973; Natanson, 1973; Psathas, 1977). Luckmann claims that phenomenology serves an important methodological purpose but warns that it should not 'be taken as a substitute empirical method' (Luckmann, 1973: 179). Meant to reveal the universal, invariant structures of the life-world, phenomenology provides a 'matrix' for research but cannot itself be based on data because 'all data of the social sciences are historical' (Luckmann, 1973: 180). In this view, the structures of everyday experience, and basically any phenomenological inquiry, cannot and should not be subjected to empirical investigation, including ethnographic research.

In a recent article linking phenomenology and ethnography, Maso (2001) points out considerable shortcomings in this traditional view of the nature of phenomenological inquiry, a view that is favored by scholars such as Psathas and Luckmann who closely follow Schutz.

> Nowadays, [the] strict bracketing of all presuppositions and prejudices about phenomena must be considered a myth. Since Hanson we know that perception and interpretation are inseparable, which means that theories and interpretations are 'there' in the observing, from the outset. . . . To bracket them, if at all possible, would make perception, and therefore experience, impossible. This is why bracketing can at best refer to an attempt to refrain from those presuppositions and prejudices about phenomena that are sensed by phenomenologists as contaminating (from the outside) their pure

> experiences of those phenomena. What will be bracketed and what subsequently appears to consciousness will be dependent on who is bracketing. (Maso, 2001: 138)

Maso points out that the method of phenomenological reduction is an ideal that cannot be reached without eliminating the very phenomena sociologists are interested in. He argues that the bracketing procedure underlies the same socially contingent prejudices and presuppositions that it attempts to dismantle. Maso puts phenomenology where it belongs, back into the canon of scientific perspectives situated in history and culture, and he reminds us to be cautious not to frame phenomenological goals, methods and findings in absolute terms.

In ethnography, a rising awareness of the researchers' own positionality, sometimes characterized as the 'reflexive turn' (see Emerson, 2001), has not prevented scholars from practicing their craft. Rather, it facilitated a fundamental shift in the ways ethnographers locate themselves within the context of their research and writing (Coffey, 1999). Similarly, acknowledging the reflexivity of the phenomenological method need not put an end to phenomenological practice; it can instead contribute to its sophistication and progress. With Maso, I believe that the phenomenological structures of lived experience are legitimate objects of empirical, particularly ethnographic, inquiry. Indeed, if phenomenological inquiry is not subject to empirical testing, on what basis can phenomenologists distinguish between valid and invalid phenomenological propositions? Thus the effort to develop a phenomenological ethnography offers the promise of saving phenomenology from the inadequacies of a solely 'philosophical' foundation.

How, then, should phenomenological structures of lived experience be studied? What contribution can ethnographic methods make toward the goals of a more phenomenological sociology and a more sociological phenomenology? Here, I argue that the innovative method of the go-along, through combining some of the strengths of ethnographic observation and interviewing, is a tool particularly suited to explore two key aspects of everyday lived experience: the constitutive role and the transcendent meaning of the physical environment, or place.

Some limits of participant observation and interviewing

Ethnographic methods can roughly be divided into interviewing informants and observing 'naturally' occurring social settings, conduct and events. Both methods of inquiry can be conducted from close-up or from a relatively distant vantage point. Both have advantages and disadvantages when it

comes to exploring the role of place in everyday experience. Because people usually do not comment on 'what is going on' while acting in 'natural' environments, it is difficult to access their concurrent experiences and interpretations through a purely observational approach. On the other hand, conducting sit-down interviews usually keeps informants from engaging in 'natural' activities, typically taking them out of the environments where those activities take place. This makes it difficult to grasp what exactly the subjects are talking about – if they are able and willing to discuss at all what researchers are interested in. In both cases, important aspects of lived experience may either remain invisible, or, if they are noticed, unintelligible. This is especially true for the spatial footing of experience and practices in everyday life.

Some limits of participant observation

The following pair of fieldnote excerpts clearly illustrates shortcomings of the ethnographic method of participant observation. I recorded the first one after walking around Gilmore Junction at the very beginning of my fieldwork in this neighborhood.

> 8-29-97. It is trash pick up time. I notice one of these huge green garbage trucks that have an automatic arm on the side which grabs, lifts and empties the cans without any help by the driver. We have the same system in our neighborhood: it is fast and clean but it requires that the trash cans stand properly spaced on the street in front of the curb, and that they are not blocked by parking cars. This seems to be no problem in the entire Gilmore Junction area, whereas the same system causes considerable conflict around where I live. Here, there is ample parking space available on every street and there is very little traffic. . . .
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> I think I will make the entire Gilmore Junction neighborhood my study area. The number of housing units to draw informants from is low (I estimate that the number of people living here on eight blocks equals the number of people living on two blocks in my other neighborhood). The houses all look very similar: there are no multiple-unit or courtyard buildings, no abandoned or empty buildings, and no converted garages. I see a number of 'for sale' signs by real estate companies but I don't notice any signs advertising places for rent.

The above excerpt is taken from the first set of fieldnotes that I took after scouting out Gilmore Junction as a research site. It is obviously the description of an outsider who knows next to nothing about the area. My efforts to make sense of my observations are focused on comparing this area with the other neighborhood I had already been living in and studying for several months. The absence of traffic, the availability of parking space, the orderly

process of the trash pick-up, and the lower concentration and homogeneity of buildings are all features that become noticeable and meaningful in contrast to features of an area I was much more familiar with. However, these observations and comparisons reveal little if anything about how the area's residents perceive and interpret their local environment. Any outsider's view of a setting that lacks a local vantage point necessarily remains superficial, revealing more about the observer's own standpoint than anything else.

Yet even when informed by intimate local knowledge, observations of natural settings can be problematic. Our research team learned through trial and error that independent, solitary observations – even when done as insiders – are not well-suited to access local culture as it unfolds through other members' experiences and practices. Echoing the dilemma that distant or novice observers run into, we also found that the detailed observations of well-immersed researchers similarly *emphasize*, instead of overcome, their independent reference points. Consider this second excerpt taken from fieldnotes recorded five months into my research in Gilmore Junction.

> 1-31-98. On my way to the copy shop I pass the two-storied white house on Gilmore that sits directly behind Cam's. He had told me earlier that the house had been owned by two elderly sisters who were badly tricked into selling their valuable home under price. It now seems to be on sale again after undergoing remodeling. . . . On one side of the front lawn, I have previously noticed a sign of the real estate company that Nick Russell works for ('Tuft and Associates'). A plate with his full name used to be displayed on top of the sign. I saw it several times; it was the only sign in front of this building.
>
> Now I discover something very interesting: on the other side of the front lawn, another sign has been put up by a company called 'B&H Realtors'. Under the big sign stands a smaller one that reads: Tom and Jean Stark. The 'Tuft and Associates'-sign is still there, not even six yards next to the new one, but Nick Russell's personal name plate has been removed. I take these observations as a sign of the ongoing turf war between Tom and Nick that Tom had told me about. Both are rivals in their attempt to control the real estate market in the neighborhood. And it is out there for everyone to see.

Five months into the fieldwork, I had interviewed many Gilmore Junction residents and was now quite familiar with the area. I had learned about and spoken to two local realtors, both residents and active members of the neighborhood association. I also knew that there existed a professional rivalry between the two which made it impossible for them to, for instance, serve on the same neighborhood committees, as one of the men admitted. What in my early observations seemed to be a bunch of real estate signs – originally I had only noticed the absence of 'for rent' signs as significant –

has now turned into a good indicator of the ongoing conflict between two local realtors. I knew about the existence of this conflict but was surprised to find signs of it in the open, 'out there for everyone to see'.

Although the second excerpt testifies to my familiarity with locals and local social life, it does not reveal whether my savvy observations were shared by, or meant anything to, any of the residents. Again, my perceptions and interpretations of environmental features are primarily informed by my personal knowledge and interests. I identify the exchange of the signs to be a 'juicy' indicator of the ongoing conflict between the local realtors, even though I cannot be certain that it actually means to residents what it appears to mean to me. After all, it is possible that the exchange of the signs does not point to an active turf war but to a compromise, an act of cooperation between the rivals.

All in all, the two examples illustrate how solitary observations of a field setting, whether conducted from a distant or a close vantage point, fail to access the environmental perception and experience of (other) members. This considerable weakness does not disappear when observers focus directly on other persons or their encounters instead of environmental artifacts. What exactly these others are doing, and what their local experiences and practices actually mean, often remains a mystery – even when examined by researchers who have become full members of their settings.

Being the primary and sometimes only informant can indeed provide extraordinary depth, for instance in the study of emotions and personal relationships (as recent works in auto-ethnography have shown, e.g. Ellis, 1995), or when examining the acquisition of practical skills (Sudnow, 1978). Furthermore, there is no doubt that being an accepted member of the setting provides unique access to fellow locals and should be the preferred position of anyone conducting field research.[4] My point is that becoming and being a privileged insider does not provide *automatic* clues to other locals' lived experiences. Garfinkel's radical insistence on becoming a practitioner as the key strategy of ethnomethodological inquiry (Garfinkel, 2002: 169) discourages any research activity that, by definition, transcends the member role. In my view, such a position negates itself instead of furthering a phenomenological understanding of everyday lived experience. If I had solely remained a competent and fully accepted neighbor, and written fieldnotes from this insider point of view without taking a more proactive approach towards understanding *others*, I would not have learned as much about the elusive aspects of environmental experience in everyday life as I report below.

In short, participant observation, especially when done unobserved, is often characterized as the most authentic and reliable ethnographic method because it provides access to 'naturally' unfolding events and delivers 'volunteered' member interpretations (Becker, 1958). But despite its many

strengths, this method is neither the only nor the first choice for all areas of sociological and phenomenological inquiry.

Some limits of interviewing

Because of its ability to go beyond what is visible and thus observable, sit-down interviewing is an excellent phenomenological tool. Ethnographic interviews can provide unique access to informants' biographies and future plans, to their subjective interpretations of others and social interaction (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Seidman, 1998). Yet there are at least two shortcomings of the interviewing method with respect to its ability to reconstruct the informants' lived experience of place. The first is posed by the limits of narrativity; the second by the limits of the interview situation.

De facto, it is not possible to access *all* aspects of lived experience in interviews because informants refuse to talk about certain topics or cannot talk about them because, no matter how much they may wish to collaborate, they overlook issues that do not figure prominently in their awareness. Ethnographic interviews can miss out on those themes that do not lend themselves to narrative accounting, such as the pre-reflective knowledge and practices of the body, or the most trivial details of day-to-day environmental experience. Aware of this problem, interviewers often move away from a strict question-and-answer format, using props such as letters, books, maps and photographs (see Harper, 2002), in order to stimulate the less easily accessible, non-verbalized regions of their informants' minds. Although association props are helpful in broadening the narrative focus of ethnographic interviews, they still cannot overcome some of the limitations posed by the interview situation itself.

Sit-down interviews are primarily static encounters in which talking becomes the center of attention. Any other activity is usually perceived as a distraction and pushed into the background. The structuring and emphasis of the interview situation not only discourage 'natural', that is, context-sensitive reactions of the interviewer and interviewee, they also magnify the dialectical relationship between the participants instead of promoting a shared perspective and a more egalitarian connection. In short, the particular interactional dynamics and the physical constraints of most ethnographic interview encounters separate informants from their routine experiences and practices in 'natural' environments. These are serious disadvantages, especially if they obstruct themes that are the foci of the investigation.

The go-along method

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.[5] 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.[6]

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.[7]

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.

The thematic potential of go-alongs

I see five substantive topics to which go-alongs provide privileged if not unique access when compared to other ethnographic methods. Because these themes tend to be pre-reflective and visually elusive, they are particularly difficult to discover through participant observation or interviewing, even though these techniques can be essential for collecting additional evidence once the themes have been established.

First, go-alongs unveil the complex layering and filtering of *perception:* they can help ethnographers reconstruct how personal sets of relevances guide their informants' experiences of the social and physical environment in everyday life. Second, go-alongs offer insights into the texture of *spatial practices* by revealing the subjects' various degrees and types of engagement in and with the environment. Third, go-alongs provide unique access to personal *biographies*. They highlight the many links between places and life histories, thus uncovering some of the ways in which individuals lend depth and meaning to their mundane routines. Fourth, go-alongs can illuminate the *social architecture* of natural settings such as neighborhoods. They make visible the complex web of connections between people, that is, their various relationships, groupings and hierarchies; and they reveal how informants situate themselves in the local social landscape. Fifth, go-alongs facilitate explorations of *social realms*, that is, the distinct spheres of reality that are shaped by varying patterns of interaction (Lofland, 1998). The position of the solitary and transient observer well suits studies of public space because here anonymity reigns and the dominant code of conduct is based on categoric as opposed to personal knowing. Yet, because they establish a more grounded, intimate vantage point for reconstructing the dynamics of interaction in communal and private realms, walk-alongs have a significant edge over other ethnographic methods.

1. Perception. One could say that our perception of the environment is filtered through a series of veils. Some of these veils, such as the capacities or the actual performance of our sensual apparatus, are determined by physiological and developmental factors that usually remain invisible until we notice a sudden change or problem (Leder, 1990). Other filters of perception – our emotions, tastes, values and previous experiences, for instance – are shaped by, and sensitive to, social contexts. They vary greatly throughout our life course and from one moment to the other. In the practical course of everyday life, we are not aware of the fact that what we notice in the environment is determined by a complex and selective process. We usually take for granted and do not reflect upon the structures, conditions and processes of our perception. In the following, I briefly illustrate how go-alongs render visible two such perceptual filters: practical knowledge and tastes/values.

Practical knowledge constitutes an indispensable yet often invisible filter of our perception.[8] It is closely intertwined with one's personal interests, talents, dispositions and sensibilities. I call the combination of such elements 'relevance', adopting the approximate meaning that Alfred Schutz (1970) gave this term in one of his early books. The experiential relevance of 'relevance' is illustrated in the following examples.

I noticed that those of my Gilmore Junction informants who were real estate agents frequently perceived and pointed out largely invisible features of the urban environment, such as the historic architectural references of homes; past, current and future property values; rising or falling reputations of neighborhoods; or safety issues such as potential water or earthquake damage. During our walk-along Tom, for instance, explained that the Hollywood foothills in front of us were 'geologically safe' while he called living on the beach 'geologically speaking a disaster'. Almost magically, Tom can view beneath surfaces and make out geological structures that typically remain invisible to others. An assessment of safety, geologically speaking, is one of the relevances that guides Tom's perception of probably any environment. He acquired this particular sensibility through working in the real estate field in California for many years where it is an important professional skill.

A second excerpt illustrating a similar point comes from my morning walk-along with Gilmore Junction resident Ross, a retiree in his 70s. It, too, illustrates how work-related knowledge has created an appreciation of an environmental detail that almost certainly escapes the rest of us, at least during the day.

> Ross points out something to me that I have never noticed before: the fact that the street lights in Gilmore Junction are installed on only one side of the street, and that there are only three of them on each block. He tells me what this particular type of lamp is called, 'Cobra', and continues by saying that the lamps are much too high. This makes a lot of sense. Ross explains that in most cases, the lamps are so high that light they give off will illuminate only the upper side of the trees but rarely reach the sidewalks and streets. They are thus not very functional or safe. . . .
>
> Ross also says: 'I always take notice of the lights!' He tells me that when he traveled to Venice [Italy], which is the hometown of his wife, he realized that the street lights were 'very yellow', unlike in the US.

Why does Ross 'always' take notice of a background environmental feature such as street lights, even during the day? Before retiring, Ross used to work in the City's Department of Street Lighting for many years. Because of his professional experience, Ross routinely notices and evaluates street lighting conditions as a prominent feature of the urban landscape. He was the only informant who mentioned the issue of street lighting to me without being

asked about it, even though this is an environmental detail that, unlike geological risk, can easily be detected by everyone.

Whether a place is evaluated in terms of its geological risk or adequate lighting depends on the personal relevances that shape environmental perception. During go-alongs, ethnographers can detect and directly observe the workings of such perceptual filters which not only create the 'visibility' of objects but also determine *how* they are interpreted. Eventually, through comparisons, researchers can begin identifying the patterns and principles that underlie practical, lived perception.

Another pair of data excerpts illustrates the constitutive role of tastes and values in the complex process of perception. During our walk-along, Ross likened the property on the corner of his block to a 'jungle'. I recorded the episode in my fieldnotes as follows:

> The house on the south-east corner of his block is partially hidden behind a dark green fence and a number of tall trees and bushes. Ross comments: 'This used to be a nice house!' He continues by saying that this was back when the fence was painted white and the garden 'didn't look like a jungle!' 'It was really pretty. Well, no more!' I can't find anything wrong with the landscaping of this property, it looks lush and interesting; thus I don't react to his comment.

Clearly, Ross uses the word 'jungle' to express his negative aesthetic impression of the house, drawing on connotations such as 'wild' and 'uncivilized'. Ross does not enjoy seeing a 'jungle' instead of a house that was once 'nice' and 'pretty'. His description of the former looks of the house implies Ross' aesthetic preferences for homes in his neighborhood: white fences, controlled vegetation.

A few weeks later, a neighborhood walk-along with another informant named Jill, a musician in her late 40s, takes us by the same house.

> We pass the house about which Ross had said that he doesn't like it because it looks like a 'jungle'. Jill now uses the exact same word to describe how much she likes this house: 'It's just like a jungle! Look at all these different plants in the backyard, and the trees and everything in the front!' Jill thinks that the owners take 'very good care' of the garden, she 'just loves' how it looks.

Unlike Ross, Jill here uses 'jungle' in a positive meaning, probably thinking of a jungle's exotic character and hidden secrets. Even though both informants agree on the looks of the property, Ross and Jill's opposite tastes render the jungle-house a dramatically different feature in their everyday environment: an eyesore versus an exotic treasure.

Ross and Jill's aesthetic preferences are linked with their ideas of what good maintenance means, thus also including a moral judgment of the

owner's care-taking abilities and taste. Jill sees the many plants as an adorable effort by the owner to create an interesting environment, a sign that they take 'very good care' of it, as opposed to a sign of neglect, which is how Ross reads the excessive vegetation surrounding the home. Ultimately, these judgments reveal the two informants' distinct ideologies of what good neighbors are like. Note that Ross and Jill did not form their aesthetic and moral judgments of this site as a reaction to seeing it. These values have been in place long before, yet they become explicit in their differing depiction of this site.

In sum, go-alongs can sensitize ethnographers to the idiosyncratic sets of relevances that govern their informants' environmental experiences. Being able to witness *in situ* the filtering and shaping of their subjects' perceptions de-emphasizes the researchers' own perceptual presuppositions and biases, which are in the end irrelevant, and of which they might not be completely aware. While lonely observers depend on their imagination if they want to reconstruct how others perceive a particular place, interviewers run into difficulties because of the fragile, pre-reflective nature of environmental experience. Remedying these shortcomings, go-alongs provide independent, empirical evidence of a phenomenon which is difficult to access and substantiate by other means.

2. Spatial Practices. The geographer Seamon (1979: 99f.) suggests that our manifold engagements with the environment can be located on an 'awareness continuum' spanning between complete 'person–environment separateness' at the one end and complete 'person–environment mergence' at the other. He distinguishes between various kinds of encounters of humans with the environment[9] – such as 'obliviousness', 'watching', 'noticing', 'heightened contact', 'basic contact' and 'at-homeness' – which distribute over the entire spectrum of the 'awareness continuum'. Seamon's somewhat static model nevertheless conceptualizes a phenomenological quality of environmental experience that has routinely been overlooked. It analytically captures the fact that our immersion in the environment can vary in its strength. In other words, Seamon's model takes into account that we can be more or less aware of, and engage with, the places and objects around us throughout the course of our everyday lives. At times, being in and moving through the world requires a high degree of commitment and concentration, for instance while changing several lanes on a busy freeway. At other times, we are able to (almost) completely withdraw from our environments and movements. Go-alongs allow ethnographers to learn more about the various *degrees* of our informants' environmental engagement, especially during moving practices, and also about the various *qualities* of this engagement, about which we learn relatively little from Seamon.

For instance, one interesting aspect of environmental engagement is the fact that we are able to reframe our spatial practices to enhance their

primary meanings and functions. What may appear to an independent observer as a straightforward and relatively uneventful commute to work can actually be saturated with layers and contexts of meaning that subjectively transform a mundane routine into something entirely different. I believe individuals conceive of such transformations in order to amplify the experiential depth of their routines. In other words, one can 'thicken' the texture of one's habitual practices by making them more rewarding or exciting; in short, a more effective use of one's personal resources. One especially interesting motive in my informants' efforts to enhance the depth of their mundane practices was to frame them as fun or play (see Goffman, 1974).

Consider, for instance, the case of Tony, a retired widower in his 80s who, for decades, has regularly walked around and beyond his neighborhood. Tony refers to his walks as 'exercise' and appropriately dresses for these occasions in a jogging suit and sneakers. Yet Tony, who used to be very athletic and is still in fine shape, does not regard his walks as only health-related or recreational but also as a somewhat competitive endeavor, explaining that 'it's more fun this way'. Tony has measured his two regular and slightly different walking routes with the odometer of his car – they are exactly 2.1 and 2.25 miles long respectively – and he carefully times himself on his walks. He finds it 'not bad' when I tell him upon his request that our walk over the 2.25 miles distance took exactly 50 minutes. Tony frequently adds even more 'fun' to his exercise routine by purchasing a lottery ticket at a convenient store located along the way back to his house, even though this stop adds a couple of minutes to his carefully timed walks. Being a frugal person, Tony justifies the lottery tickets by explaining that 'this is the only spoof I have'. I learn that when he walks by himself, Tony often fantasizes about what he would do with the money if he were so lucky to win the jackpot. The extra fun he gets out of playing the lottery is well worth the cost in terms of money and time added to his walks.

These subtle, peripheral layers of meaning which subjects often infuse into primarily functional activities are not likely to surface when researchers rely on traditional ethnographic methods. For one, they are impossible to observe. And examining the many meanings of a mundane and seemingly one-dimensional practice such as walking did not cross my mind while interviewing Tony in some detail about his personal map and his daily routines. However, the careful orchestration and complex framing of these walks became very obvious during my repeated walk-alongs with Tony, as he freely elaborated on their various aspects and implications. This example illustrates how go-alongs can unearth mundane details too trivial to think and talk about during more formal research occasions.

A recreational stroll around the neighborhood can also be reframed as 'work'. I became aware of this possibility while following Tom, one of the

Gilmore Junction realtors, who during these occasions makes and strengthens informal contacts with other locals that at some point 'might lead to business', as he volunteers. By wrapping their activities into multiple contexts of meaning, my informants pushed their encounters with the environment towards the end of the continuum that Seamon (1979) described as 'mergence'. The more aspects or nuances of their selves my informants were able to tie into a particular activity, the better it expressed who they are, and the more they were able to identify with and enjoy it.[10] It even happens that mundane spatial practices become so saturated with meaning and experiential depth that they turn into *symbols* of someone's personal identity.

Consider the following example, which illustrates the emblematic meaning of walking to one of my Melrose informants. Andrea, a married woman and mother in her 50s, regularly walks around her neighborhood for recreation and to take care of small errands. However, what captures the meaning of her walks better than functional goals are the political and almost subversive implications of this practice. Ultimately, Andrea walks because she considers walking to be a fundamental right in need of being demonstrated and reclaimed. She explains:

> I pay my property tax here. We are very established here. This is our neighborhood. And I think we SHOULD be able to do this! And I think when you are always scared . . . I can't understand that, you know? It gets to you. And then you are too scared to go to the market. And now, think about it, Maggie, if everybody here would think that way! We all walk to the movie [theater]; it is close by, right, the one right here. Or to get a video . . . everything is in our vicinity. And I think if everyone, every house, would have that attitude! If you like to walk, go out and walk! And suddenly we would have so many people out here at night, and everyone walks a little bit, goes for a little walk, with a dog, without a dog . . . it would be safer. And this is what I think about how you take back your neighborhood.

It troubles Andrea that her neighbors seem be too scared to walk around the area. She knows about these fears because family members constantly caution her not to walk around the area, at least not in the dark or by herself. Walking is thus a potentially dangerous practice but for Andrea its benefits outweigh its risks. It is her personal crusade against the forces out there that attempt to limit her freedom. She also walks with the hope of setting an example for others, encouraging them to join her in a collective act of resistance.

I could speculate about the sources of Andrea's 'because-motive' for walking, to use another one of Schutz's terms. Andrea grew up and lived part of her adult life in a small town in Germany, in a place and at a time where walking was a universal, taken for granted practice in everyone's

daily life. Throughout her life, Andrea has made a number of decisions that people around her did not support and even opposed: such as leaving post-war, small-town life in Germany behind, moving to Los Angeles, marrying a Spaniard and, lately, opening her own home business. Being too scared to walk around would mean giving up control over her personal freedom and space. Andrea's biography shows how she has managed to maintain a sense of control over her life, and that she is willing to stand up for her beliefs.[11] In short, spatial practices can become powerful tools in expressing and shaping our personal identities, and go-alongs provide privileged access to this phenomenon.

3. Biographies. Ideally, go-alongs bring to the foreground the stream of associations that occupy informants while moving through physical and social space, including their memories and anticipations. Whether we appreciate it or not, the environment we dwell in on a daily basis becomes a sort of personal biographer as it preserves parts of our life history. Navigating familiar environments full of personal landmarks in many ways resembles going through the pages of a personal photo album or diary. The following passage from Michel de Certeau's essay 'Practices of Space' expresses this idea more poetically.

> Memory is only a traveling Prince Charming who happens to awaken the Sleeping Beauty – stories without words. '*Here, there was* a bakery'; '*That* is where old Mrs. Dupuis *lived*'. We are struck by the fact that sites that have been lived in are filled with the presence of absences. What appears designates what is no more: '*Look*: here there *was* . . .', but can no longer be seen. . . . Every site is haunted by countless ghosts that lurk there in silence, to be 'evoked' or not. One *inhabits* only haunted sites – the opposite of what is set forth in the *Panopticum*. (De Certeau, 1984: 143–4, all italics and quotation marks in original)

As silent witnesses, 'haunted' sites bring back to life the ghosts of the people, places and events that together form our biographies. Go-alongs can unearth the personal, biographic experiences that underlie our subjects' present engagements with their environments. They can also give clues as to how informants integrate memories of past events, and anticipations of the future, into the ongoing stream of their spatial experiences and activities. In comparison, these themes are very difficult to retrieve through interviews and almost impossible to observe.

Encountering personal landmarks during their daily routines frequently evoked feelings of identification and at-homeness in my informants.[12] Often, an aura of nostalgia envelopes their past homes, as the following excerpt from one of my walk-alongs with Tony conveys.

As we come up to another street corner, Tony says: 'I want to show you something that has a little history to it. Do you see this place there, the bungalow with the sign NUDE GIRLS?' I say that I see it; I noticed it many times before. 'That is where I lived once!' says Tony. I am stunned: How did that happen? Tony tells me that when he came home after the war [Second World War], he and his wife did not have a place to live. Luckily, they were able to stay at this place that was then owned by one of his wife's twin sisters. 'Do you see the bungalow behind it?' he asks me as we peek through the fence right next to the strip joint. I do; I can see a small wooden house right behind the club. It looks empty and quite run down from the outside. It turns out that this is the building where Tony and his wife lived together with their relatives.

I ask: 'What was in the front at that time?' 'Nothing', says Tony, 'there was just the house.' Much later, his wife's sister sold it and the strip club was put up in front of it. 'Every time I walk by here, I have to think about that I once lived here', says Tony. Soon, he remembers something else: one year his sister in law's children got a duckling for Easter which they decided to raise. It grew up to be a huge duck, almost the size of a goose. The duck followed the children around like a dog when they played in the driveway. It was aggressive towards others and protected the children just like a dog would have done. Tony often remembers this too when he walks by this place.

Tony refers to his former home behind one of the area's strip joints as a place with 'a little history', glossing over the fact that the places surrounding it have histories as well. Only the fact that it plays a significant role in *his* biography makes the unnoticeable building special, giving it 'a little history' that outside observers could hardly see or imagine. Interestingly, Tony says he has to think about the fact that he once lived here 'every time' he passes the house. In fact, he did point it out again during a similar walk-along about one month later. In Tony's memories of his former home, the strip club with its aggressive signage does not exist, even though it is difficult to overlook. He even recalls his nieces and nephews playing with their duck in the no longer existent driveway.

It could be that the place symbolizes the generosity of his sister in law who offered Tony and his (recently deceased) wife a place to live while he was looking for work. It was Tony's first residence in the neighborhood where he has ended up living and raising his own family for over 50 years. The little house is an important symbolic landmark in Tony's biography, even though it is no longer intact in the way that it keeps living on in his memories. Remembering its significance and being reminded of scenes of daily life that happened here clearly transcends the here and now of Tony's regular walks. As he encounters this and other personal landmarks, Tony's current experiences become anchored in his biography in ways that remain invisible to outsiders.

Other personal landmarks directed my informants' awareness into the future, for instance by reminding them of their future projects and ambitions.[13] Our experiences of, and practices in, the urban environment span the entire arch of our life history – past, present and future. While we all know this from personal experience, go-alongs allow ethnographers to call systematic attention to and explore in detail the transcendent aspects of environmental experience which easily escape observations and off-location interviews.

4. Social Architecture. Go-alongs are helpful in lifting to the surface the implicit web of social relationships between individuals who live in, or use, a certain area. While sit-down interviews are well suited to investigate strong social ties, they are much less effective in examining the less significant or purely functional relationships which all people have but rarely tend to think about. By visualizing social networks in real space and time, in situ, go-alongs chronicle local relationships, especially those that are not considered worth mentioning under different circumstances. Moving around their natural environments encourages informants to talk about the people who live right here or over there; and about the particular person they just passed. With many of such details in hand, ethnographers can over time piece together a mosaic of the invisible social architecture of their setting.

Even without encountering others, routine spatial practices are social in nature because we tend to view the physical features of places, especially in the urban environment, as animated. Places represent others, and our feelings towards them are based on their 'interactional past' and 'interactional potential', as Milligan (1998) investigated.[14] The following excerpt from my notes following a go-along illustrates this interesting phenomenon.

> As we pass a rented house – Jill calls it a 'rental' – she says disapprovingly: 'You can see the difference!' and points to the relatively messy front yard. There is yard waste piling up in front of the house on the yellowish lawn; no flowers beds or other landscaping features beautify the front yard. 'Compare it with this!' Jill demands and points to the next house down the block. She knows that this house is owned by Kimberly – 'a top model, really successful, and very nice' – and tells me that her house is 'always wonderful'. 'Look at the flowers here, and the grass!' It is true: there is a stunning difference between the two houses which I have never noticed before. (. . .)
>
> The next one is another 'perfect' house, according to Jill. It is painted dark green with ivory-colored trims and frames; the interesting landscaping looks thoroughly planned and very well maintained. Jill stops walking and declares: 'This is the prettiest house in the area!' I say that it really does look very nice. Jill continues to tell me, proudly, that when the owners began to remodel this house, their contractor came over to look at her (Jill's) house

on the next block for inspiration. Afterwards, he initially wanted to copy some of her design ideas for this front yard. Even though the contractor ended up doing things differently, he still complimented Jill on her house a lot.

It is no coincidence that Jill points out the contrast between the messiness of the renters' house and the 'wonderful' house owned by Kimberly. To Jill, the appearance of homes represents the social hierarchy of people in her neighborhood. Renters are the underdogs in this area dominated by homeowners. The apparent neglect of the rented home is congruent with their inhabitants' inferior social position. According to the same logic, it is just natural that a home owned by a beautiful and successful top model looks 'always wonderful'.

A thorough reading of other places suggests where one stands in the hierarchy oneself. It is clearly a source of personal satisfaction for Jill that the contractor who designed the 'prettiest house in the area' looked to her for inspiration. She can pride herself on providing the prototype. To an outsider, it might look like her place was an attempt to copy the 'prettiest' house, obscuring the fact that it was actually the other way around. By walking around the neighborhood and by seeing the 'prettiest' house, Jill reassures herself of the position of her own home in the neighborhood's aesthetic and social hierarchy. Her own home's top placement allows Jill to be critical of others whose homes score lower on the beauty scale. Go-alongs with Jill and other locals suggest that two important functions of environmental experience are *comparing* and *positioning*, operations through which locals produce an assessment of their own social status relative to the overall local order.

In sum, social relationships and local orders are important aspects of everyday spatial experiences. Because informants will spontaneously and continuously comment on their personal connections to places and people in the environment, go-alongs are helpful in mapping the social architecture of an area, especially when it comes to weak social ties. This particular point, as well as the next, indicate how go-alongs are particularly useful in ethnographic research on communities and neighborhoods.

5. Social Realms. Thus far, I have discussed how researchers using the go-along method can expect to uncover hitherto hidden dimensions of perception, spatial practices, biographies and the local social architecture. In addition, go-alongs are instrumental when it comes to exploring the interaction patterns that shape the social realm of neighborhoods and other 'parochial' territories (Lofland, 1998). The discovery of such patterns hinges on the researchers' observations of actual social encounters from the perspectives of locals. 'Hanging out' and moving along with a range of informants permits ethnographers to examine the naturally occurring

patterns and variations of social encounters which they could not fully access as outside observers, nor as practitioners. And because of their subtlety, these patterns are quite difficult, if not impossible, to capture through off-location interviewing.

Take, for instance, the basic principle of 'friendly recognition' (Kusenbach, 2003), which is the parochial equivalent of 'civil inattention' (Goffman, 1963; Lofland, 1998) in the public realm. Here is a typical example of this kind of exchange, observed just before our walk-along while Tony gave me a tour of his front yard.

> We turn around and see Roger, the neighbors' adult son, on the front porch of the house next door. Roger is barefoot and dressed in shorts only. Tony and Roger take turns greeting each other with a smile. They say 'Hi' and mention each other's name: 'Hi Roger!' 'Oh, hi Tony!'

Friendly recognition, the neighborly way of greeting, demonstrates personal recollection and kindness towards other locals. It pays tribute to the special bond that exists between many neighbors as a result of sharing home territory. Other instances suggest that meeting a neighbor – that is, facing the obligation to initiate or return a neighborly greeting – can temporarily interrupt primary activities, such as a casual street conversation or outdoor interviews. I also found that the unaccounted withholding of friendly recognition among neighbors is a noticeable event that evokes disapproval and, if it happens repeatedly, leads to permanent exclusion from neighborly interaction.

Even though neighborly greetings seem almost too trivial to be noticed, they can carry great significance, much in the way that 'weak ties' can support powerful stratification effects (see Granovetter, 1973). Any more intimate form of communal sociability begins with friendly recognition. It is a vehemently enforced, normative interactive principle that paves the way for the construction of local networks and communities. Friendly recognition, as well as other forms of neighborly interaction, is generously extended to anyone who carries an association with a neighbor, as I often experienced myself. In general, my impression was that neighborly encounters were not severely changed by the presence of an 'associate' such as myself, yet I noticed that I could not rely on neighborly treatment on my own in an area where I was not one of the locals.

Observations of social encounters during go-alongs with informants emphasize an additional aspect of social realms that has not yet been fully investigated: the autonomy of place in shaping social interaction. In compliance with the principles of public interaction (Lofland, 1998), we would expect that strangers will be treated as strangers even if they enter parochial territories. My observations indicate that this is not always the case. Informants who strongly identify with their neighborhoods often treat certain

strangers *as if* they were locals. The locals afford some strangers a version of the friendly and personal treatment that they usually reserve for neighbors; a treatment that is, strictly speaking, inappropriate considering their mutual unfamiliarity. Consider the following example, taken from my late-morning go-along with Gilmore Junction resident Cam.

> Cam tells me that in the early morning there are usually many neighbors out on the streets; you can see them jogging or walking their dogs. Very soon afterwards, we pass a young woman with a dog. Cam says 'Hi' to her with a friendly tone of voice. She smiles and says 'Hi' in return. Cam does not comment on the woman when we are out of earshot and I am almost certain that they did not know each other.

Here, Cam informs me that people on local streets who are jogging or walking dogs are usually neighbors. This piece of information turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy when Cam affords a woman who he does not seem to know a neighborly greeting, presumably because she could be a neighbor. Other observations corroborate this interesting pattern. Even some obvious strangers can expect to be treated with select friendliness, as if locals welcomed them as guests in their home territory. In contrast, on streets that were not part of their parochial territory, the same informants refrained from showing neighborly kindness towards strangers.

The observed phenomenon of 'stranger inclusion'[15] clearly demonstrates the transformative power of place. Conducting go-alongs in neighborhoods and other parochial spaces provides ethnographers with the opportunity to observe first-hand and without seriously distorting the principles of communal interaction. The analysis of all the social realms that together make up the 'interaction order' (Goffman, 1983) is a project of primary importance to symbolic interactionists. The go-along method contributes to this goal by sensitizing researchers to the substantial role of place in everyday social reality.

Conclusion

I do not wish to imply that go-alongs can or should displace traditional ethnographic tools. Go-alongs are clearly unfit to explore the many sites and activities that do not accommodate conversation, such as physically exhausting activities or rituals that require silence. Further, the unique potential of the go-along method cannot be fully developed when applied to settings in which informants pursue stationary, internal activities that do not require engaging the environment. In these cases, the more general practice of 'hanging out' with informants while they engage in natural activities would still provide advantages over off-location interviews or

unattached observations. At the minimum, subject-centered research can stimulate and focus future field trips and interviews. Settings that ethnographers cannot or should not physically access, for example very dangerous or private activities, also limit the applicability and practicability of go-alongs.

Above, I discussed a variety of themes that go-alongs are particularly suited to explore, such as parochial realms as opposed to public realms, and informal networks as opposed to strong social ties. Moreover, go-alongs provide unique access to biographies by taking a spatial versus a chronological approach; they emphasize the many contexts and symbolic qualities of everyday spatial practices; and they render visible some of the filters that shape individual environmental perception. All of these topics are firmly grounded in the three-dimensionality of the life-world. By illuminating how people get into and frame settings, and how settings for conduct become routine parts of the self, we clarify the importance of place as a fundamental category of everyday experience and practice.

Go-alongs develop phenomenological themes by placing researchers in the mobile habitats of their informants, thus facilitating access to their experiences and practices as they unfold in real time and space. This unique positioning counterbalances some of the narrative and interactional dynamics that restrict interview situations, and it anchors observations. By tracking the natural sequence of places in practical everyday life, go-alongs enhance our understandings of how individuals connect and integrate the various regions of their daily lives and identities, which sociologists, including symbolic interactionists, too often treat as separate, autonomous entities (for a rare exception see Nippert-Eng, 1995).

The go-along method also brings greater phenomenological sensibility to ethnography by allowing researchers to focus on aspects of human experience that tend to remain hidden to observers and participants alike. They make visible and intelligible how everyday experience *transcends* the here and now, as people weave previous knowledge and biography into immediate situated action. Because they can help blur the seemingly static boundaries between individuals and environments, and between subjects and objects of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), go-alongs ultimately point to the fundamental *reflexivity* of human engagement with the world.

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Notes

1 Schutz surrounds the subjective position of the self with a set of roughly concentric zones. While there is no doubt that everyone's environment is, to some extent, structured in terms of its varying accessibility (constituting distinct zones), the Schutzian model overlooks important aspects of lived experience, for instance that we orient towards the surrounding world in terms of specific places, not primarily zones. Environmental experience transcends the geographic dimensions of space and it also overcomes the zones of accessibility as described by Schutz. Subjectively, we can feel far away from nearby places (such as when walking towards our home in heavy rain) and simultaneously hold very close faraway places that no longer exist.

2 The research project 'Everyday Perceptions of Disorder, Self-protection against Crime, and Community Policing' was funded by a grant received from the National Institute of Justice in 1996. Jack Katz was the Principal Investigator and Peter Ibarra was the third member of our research team.

3 Holstein and Gubrium (1994: 269) conclude that: '[A]ll told, the range of qualitative research approaches manifesting phenomenological sensibility has grown considerably.' The authors suggest that 'phenomenological sensibility' was brought to sociology by Garfinkel via his interpretations and empirical turn of Schutz's work. While this is a popular view, it glosses over the European lineage of Schutz's interpretations, and it neglects crediting other phenomenologists who continue to influence sociological theory and research. An updated overview of studies and approaches displaying such phenomenological sensibility is overdue, especially since sociologists today (symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists included) rarely situate their work with respect to its phenomenological implications.

   There are few exceptions from this rule. James Ostrow's *Social Sensitivity* (1990), for instance, is an attempt to move 'beyond Schutz' as he states in the conclusion of his book. Ostrow develops his phenomenological analysis of intersubjectivity by mainly drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Jack Katz's book *How Emotions Work* (1999) integrates symbolic interactionism and pragmatism with a phenomenological approach to the embodied experience of emotions in everyday life. Like Ostrow's work, Katz's concepts and ideas go 'beyond Schutz' in their appreciation of the aesthetic and transformative elements of feelings.

4 Being a resident in Melrose opened unique access to situations that helped me to understand the locals and local life to a greater degree than I was able to do in Gilmore Junction. Just like some Melrose neighbors, I got wet feet after torrential rainfalls caused a flash flood over a foot deep on our street. Like others, I was alarmed when a police helicopters circled low over the neighborhood for several hours, officers shouting down commands to

an armed kidnapper – an event that remained vivid in the memories of locals for weeks. These and other shared experiences provided opportunities to get to know people, to initiate discussions, and to pass as a local. Yet they did not save me the work of documenting the meaning of these events for other residents in their own practical lives.

5 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 in this issue, where she notes that it was only when she accompanied a third team of subway police that she could access their work in process.

6 Over the course of the research, 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.

7 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).

8 Uexkuell (1957) examined how our perception of objects in the environment is intimately connected with their practical use. Objects carry a certain 'tone' that corresponds to their culturally specific, habitual use. To us, chairs carry a 'sitting tone' and ladders a 'climbing tone' because we automatically associate the act of sitting with chairs and the act of climbing with ladders. Individuals and cultures that do not share our use of these artifacts

might perceive them in completely different ways. Heidegger's concept of 'handedness' points in the same direction.

9 Seamon (1979: 99) defines such encounters as 'any situation of attentive contact between a person and the world at hand'.

10 Other ways of amplifying the experiential depth of spatial practices are presented by the many planned and unplanned interactions with others, what Lofland (1998) refers to as 'interactional pleasures'.

11 A paper by Michael Angrosino entitled 'On the Bus with Vonnie Lee' illustrates a similar point. Angrosino carefully uncovers the symbolic meaning of riding the bus for an ex-mental patient named Vonnie Lee. He concludes:

> The bus – to the 'nice' people the symbol of poverty, the despised underside of the glittery urban lifestyle touted by the city's boosters – was for Vonnie Lee a potent symbol of empowerment. Coming from a family that was *too poor even to take the bus* was a humiliation that had scarred his young life. He spent his years grimly walking, learning the details of the streets and yet yearning for the time when he could be chauffeured high above those streets in the style to which he felt himself entitled. For Vonnie Lee, the payoff for all his hard work in overcoming both his background and his numerous 'break up' reversals was neither the apartment nor the job but the fact that he was finally deemed worthy to learn how to ride the bus between the two. (Angrosino, 1994: 22, emphasis in original)

12 Seamon (1979: 78ff.) discusses the phenomenological quality of 'at-homeness' and describes its various components: 'rootedness', 'appropriation', 'regeneration', 'at-easeness' and 'warmth'. This description is similar to what Tuan (1974) calls 'topophilia' and Relph (1976: 44ff.) describes as the 'insideness of place'.

13 During our walks, the local activists among my informants not only pointed to past achievements of their neighborhood association, they also noticed unsolved or new problems that they would like to see addressed in the future. A speeding car, for instance, reminded Cam that the neighborhood organization should push for the installation of four-way stop signs at this particular intersection. Other places around the city reminded my subjects of their professional ambitions and goals. Jenny, a struggling Melrose actress, mentions the Mark Taper Forum in downtown Los Angeles with much admiration and respect. She tells me that whenever she sees it, she dreams of standing on its stage one day. For Eric and Zoe, a young Gilmore Junction couple, seeing the Hollywood Hills from their front yard is a constant reminder that, one day, they want to be successful and affluent enough to own a house and live there as well.

14 Numerous studies of place attachment have shown that sites can even become social beings themselves (e.g. Altman and Low, 1992). This by itself

is an interesting phenomenological finding. Consider the following example, taken from a casual conversation with an informant on her front porch. Margaret, a teacher in her late 50s, is one of the most prolific neighborhood activists in Gilmore Junction. While commenting on having to retreat from her active involvement in local issues, she conveys the extraordinary meaning that the neighborhood has taken on for her in the following fieldnote.

> You know, I am the first one to say that nobody is indispensable. And I think that's true. I just know if I am going to retreat from this [the neighborhood newsletter], it is going to be difficult! It is like having a baby. You know, this neighborhood, all eight blocks, have been something like a baby for me in the last years.
>
> Margaret knows that 'it will change' when she gives up some of her activities and allows other people to take over. She admits being a little concerned, yet she also knows that she did it long enough; that she did 'her part'. 'But it is going to be difficult for me!' Margaret repeats with a smile.

For Margaret, who does not have children, the entire neighborhood has become an extension of her home and even a part of herself. Margaret cares for the neighborhood just like a mother would care for a child. And just as a parent struggles to let go of a child once it has grown up, Margaret anticipates how painful it will be to withdraw from her active role in the neighborhood organization after nurturing her 'baby' for such a long time.

15 'Suspicious' strangers who do not look like potential neighbors or guests can expect to run into open hostility that often goes well beyond the negative treatment of strangers typically occurring in public. This pattern of parochial 'stranger exclusion' proves the same point about the power of place in shaping interactions.

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Sociology', in L. Embree (ed.) *Worldly Phenomenology: The Continuing Influence of Alfred Schutz on North American Human Science*. Washington, DC: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America.

■ **MARGARETHE KUSENBACH** is Assistant Professor in Sociology at the University of South Florida, Tampa. She recently completed her PhD dissertation entitled 'Neighboring: An Ethnographic Study of Community in Urban Hollywood' at the University of California, Los Angeles, which led to a number of presentations and publications. Her present research interests center around the multiple uses and meanings of urban public spaces such as parks and museums, and their impact on social relationships. She is currently preparing a new research project in this area that will further explore the applicability and advantages of go-alongs as an ethnographic research tool. *Address*: University of South Florida, Department of Sociology, 4202 East Fowler Ave., CPR 107, Tampa, FL 33620–55550, USA. [email: mkusenba@cas.usf.edu] ■