

Toy tours: reflections on walking-whilst-talking with young children at home

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Introduction

Mobile research methods seek to observe “directly or in digitally enhanced forms mobile bodies undergoing various performances of travel, work, and play” (Sheller and Urry 2006: 217). In recent years a small, but growing, number of academics have begun to use ‘walking interviews’ as a legitimate mobile method (cf. Ricketts Hein et al. 2008; Lorimer 2003a, b; Lorimer and Lund 2003; Pink 2007) to reflect “the core ... realisation that the mobility of walking within particular environments allows for the creation of meaning. By walking people are able to connect times and places through the grounded experience of their material environment” (Moles 2008: 2). Much of the research focus to date has been on utilising mobile methods such as walking interviews in outside space with young people or adults (cf. Wylie 2005; Lashua et al. 2006; Pink 2007; Moles 2008; Murray 2009; Ross et al. 2009). Participants choose the route that they and the researcher take, which means that the researcher and researched are able to work collaboratively in a flexible format and tease out people’s embedded constructions of their socio-spatial worlds (Anderson 2004). Yet, “mobility is spatially and socially uneven” (Murray 2009). Very young children, in particular, experience restricted spatial practices as they tend to spend a lot of time in the supervised space of the home with adults, and thus are not free to experience mobility independently (cf. Stevenson forthcoming). Therefore ethnographic approaches in naturalistic settings (participant observation, creative exercises and key informant interviews) have dominated the research (cf. Thorne 1993; Pellegrini 1996; Corsaro and Molinari 2000; Plowman and Stephen 2005). This is particularly the case when studying children’s life worlds. One such approach for preschool children, which used a mix of methods, has been developed in the Mosaic Model (Clark and Moss 2001). However, unlike other studies the Mosaic approach included young children giving tours of their preschool setting to researchers. Moss and Clark

(2001) argue that the tours were a less ‘sterile’ way to seek children’s perspectives on their environments than the fixed interview room would offer. Whilst valuable, this model has been employed predominantly in preschool settings rather than the home. This poses a unique set of issues around the use of mobile methods in homes with very young children who have, so far, been overlooked by the mobile research literature.

We address this by focusing on the small-scale mobilities of three- to five-year-old children to better understand children’s everyday life worlds at home. The data were collected for the ESRC-funded research project *Young children learning with toys and technology at home*¹. Over the last 16 months we have visited three- to five-year-old children at home to find out about the role of play in their lives and how this intersects with toys and the domestic, leisure and work technologies that surround them. We visited 14 families between 6 and 9 times each and our visits have drawn on interviews, conversations, observation, mobile phone diaries, video and toy tours to describe children’s play with a range of resources.

We describe here the ‘toy tours’ and the reflective accounts developed through visual methods, observations and the walking-whilst-talking toy tours. It is these toy tours that our paper will focus on as a way to explore the use of this method in generating meaningful understandings of preschool children’s everyday lives.

Toy tours as a walking-whilst-talking mobile method

The toy tours took place during our second visit to the children’s homes. They typically involved researchers walking around the family home with our target child chatting about and documenting the toys that the children had by making lists and taking photographs, although we did not audio record the conversation. At the same time our target child took photographs, using a digital camera,

of their favourite things and/or places. Through walking as a methodological practice with children in their homes, this provided the opportunity for both researchers and children to engage with the environment in non-static ways, enabling encounters with the material and non material worlds that preschool children inhabit, which often go unrecognised.

Toy tours in action

Most accounts of walking-whilst-talking methods refer to one-to-one interactions between the researched and the researcher. When working in people’s homes this is often not possible, especially when involving young children, so the toy tours involved not only the focal child, but usually their siblings and/or parents too. Whilst undoubtedly this will have changed the research dynamic, the toy tours did generate the potential for free-flowing conversation. Not only did the participants draw our attention to certain toys or licensed characters, wider family practices were also highlighted. For example:

During the toy tour with the Henderson’s, we did not recognise the Disney characters on Ruby’s bedroom walls. Ruby told us who they were and Ruby’s mum added that she had not recognised all the characters either and had looked them up on the Internet.

(Henderson family, field notes, July 2008)

By walking-whilst-talking around the house with the Henderson family we were permitted to enter into a particular narrative that we might not have been privy to had the conversation been held in a fixed location. This exchange highlighted how children have cultural knowledge other than that of their parents, which at times encouraged some parents to seek out information that they might otherwise not have.

The spontaneous interactions and play episodes that occurred during the toy

tours added richness to the research encounter that more static methods might not have facilitated. For example:

Upon entering the toy room Jasmine picked up her toy laptop and began to use the mouse as a telephone. Jasmine pushed a button on the laptop to make a noise like a telephone ringing and pretended to have a conversation with her boyfriend. Jasmine's mother laughed and commented that her daughter always did this despite having been told that this is not what the mouse is for.

(Searl family, field notes, July 2008)

This example shows how the methodological practice of walking-whilst-talking enabled the 'moment-ness' (Latham 2003) of participants' interactions with the material objects that form part of their embodied play practice to be explored and experienced both by the participants and the researchers, albeit differently. This opened up space for us, as the researchers, to follow the here and now, rather than rely on participants past memories and constructions of events.

By asking children to walk us around their homes, we were able to build rapport, making the walking-whilst-talking tour less formal yet focused specifically on the familiar environment under investigation. Both the informal and situated nature of the research encounter provided children with the opportunity to ask researchers to help them; for example to take animals out of cages, go into the garage for toys or get arts and crafts things down, even though there were temporal and spatial rules attached to these requests:

Some of Rachel's toys were kept in the garage, which she could not access without her parents' permission. Rachel frequently asked us to go into the garage and fetch toys for her, which through observations and conversations with her parents we knew to be contravening the rules of the house.

(O'Dare family, field notes, July 2008)

Similarly, throughout the walking-whilst-talking toy tours children took the opportunity of another adult's presence to ask parents if they could do certain activities:

Katie pointed out some of her

videos which were kept in the living room. As she did Katie asked her mother if she could put one on, to which her mother replied: "No, you know you don't have the television on when there are visitors".

(Simpson family, field notes, August 2008)

Through the use of the walking-whilst-talking method it is possible to gain insight into the ways that rules operate at both a spatial and temporal level and how the presence of others, such as researchers, disrupts the ways that young children ordinarily experience the home-space. Insights, such as these offered in the toy tours with Rachel or Katie, might not have been gleaned from more structured interviews - as with all the younger participants involved in the study, direct questioning provided scant response.

For some children, whilst they appeared happy to participate in the toy tours they did not offer any commentary about their toys; rather they took the opportunity to involve researchers in their activities.

Kelly willingly took photos of her toys, but rather than providing any commentary about them Kelly instead included us in helping her to carry things for the picnic she was in the process of setting up; looking at us she silently handed us toy picnic objects and pointed out where she wanted them to go.

(Fletcher family, field notes, July 2008)

The lack of direct questioning from the researchers allowed detailed observation of how Kelly enacted imaginary play, yet a fuller explanation around the significance of the tea set or Kelly's other toys that we recorded remained only partially revealed. Although we were able to watch Kelly play in situ we were still unsure about the significance of these objects for Kelly or how they contributed to her everyday place-making practices. What is clear though is the multitude of ways that children view adults and how the researched and researchers positioning in the toy tours is derived through constant forms of negotiation, rather than being fixed.

Finally, there were ethical dilemmas faced by researchers during the use of mobile methods in these family homes.

For example, whose rights should be respected and what role(s) should a researcher take when doing walking tours in people's homes where the power relations are multiple and differential? This came to the fore when visiting the Bain family:

The Bain children took us around their home unaccompanied by their parents. It transpired through conversation that Arden Bain kept various parts of his dressing up clothes in his parents' bedroom. During the toy tours Arden was keen to show us this space and how he used it for play. However, we knew that Mrs Bain did not want us to see inside this room.

(Bain family, field notes, July 2008)

On this occasion the researchers imposed constraints on the route taken around the house and tried to redirect the location of the discussion, thus cutting off the opportunity for Arden to develop this conversation further and show how he occupied this space. However, although one route was closed an alternative was opened as Arden and the researchers experienced how the different voices of the household are negotiated and how some places are open to all, whereas some are closed depending upon perceived positions as 'insiders' or 'outsiders'.

Conclusion

The toy tours situated research encounters in the everyday locales of the participants, in this case their homes, which for preschool children is typically a place where they spend a large proportion of their time. The toy tours allowed a deeper understanding of the ways that homes were organised and the spontaneous use of toys by the children. The sharing of narratives from the mundane to the intimate and significant, as well as the rhythm of the toy tour created a "context through which young people could pace the sharing of narratives" (Ross et al. 2009: 614). Further, the taking of photos, the researcher recording the toys children had, the children's desire to play rather than move on to the next room, door bells and phones ringing, dogs refusing to go outside, children fighting with their siblings - "provided both stimulus for, and interruptions and disruptions to, interactions" (Ross et al. 2009: 615). Therefore the rich data generated, allowed for the

multifaceted connections between people, place, material and non-material worlds that contribute to the geographies that preschool children and their families make every day to be brought to the fore. However, unlike other studies that cite mobile methods as “key to creating a context in which young people could talk freely about their everyday lives” (Ross et al. 2009: 613), the toy tours involved not only the focal child, but usually their siblings and/or parents too. Consequently, the time and space for young children to generate data on their own terms is not as free from constraint as other studies suggest. Not only this, but the existing routes and rules of the house meant on occasion that children were not able to move through their homes as they would like. Thus, the physical arrangement of the home-space and the social practices that take place in this location can either mobilise or restrict children’s place-making, which cannot purely be overcome through the use of mobile methods. In sum, the act of walking with young children around their homes looking at their toys gave space to the multi sensory experience of children’s lives at home. Conversation, taking photos of toys, children (semi)choosing the routes around their homes, displaying how toys could be used and ignored and the places that toys were kept allowed glimpses of family practices set in the wider context of everyday talk about toys. As a result of the toy tours insights were given into how families order homes and children’s practices, the ways that both parents and children exercise power and negotiate social relationships within home spaces and how often within family research this is a spontaneous and unpredictable process.

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