THE GO-ALONG AS ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH TOOL

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While conducting a three-year collaborative qualitative study of the ways that residents' daily activities and social interactions in five urban neighborhoods in Los Angeles affect their perceptions of local problems, Margarethe Kusenbach became dissatisfied with the traditional methods of participant observation and interviewing. To accomplish her goals of exploring the roles of the environment and the meaning of place in everyday lived experience, she constructed an innovative method for gathering information. In this chapter, she describes the process of what she calls "the go-along" method, a mobile interviewing technique that allows the interviewer to get feedback, in situ, about the emotional and symbolic meanings places hold for urban dwellers. Kusenbach outlines how one employs the method and then proposes five urban themes the method is particularly well suited to explore: environmental perception, spatial practices, biographies, social architecture and social realms.

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.

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,

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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; Duneier, 1999; Hochschild, 1989)—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 toward 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.[1] 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

[1] 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 & Rivkin, 1970, p. 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 afterward 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.

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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.[2]

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

[2] 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.

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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 ago-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, p. 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.[3] 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 prereflective 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.

[3] 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, p. 131).

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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 following, I briefly illustrate how go-alongs render visible two such perceptual filters: practical knowledge and tastes/values.

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 U.S.

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

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

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's 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. 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.

Spatial Practices

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. For instance, one interesting aspect of environmental engagement is the fact that

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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.

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. 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

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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. 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.

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. 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.

Other personal landmarks directed my informants’ awareness into the future, for instance by reminding them of their future projects and ambitions. 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.

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.

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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 toward them are based on their "interactional past" and "interactional potential," as Milligan (1998) investigated. 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. 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.

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Social Realms

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.

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 toward strangers. The observed phenomenon of "stranger inclusion" 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.

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