Evaluating a Qualitative Research Method: 'Pedestrian Activist Exploration'

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I. Introduction

For this assignment I am required to critically evaluate a qualitative research method. The method I will discuss is *walking*, specifically as used in the tradition of *psychogeography*.

After explaining my own epistemological and (epistemo-)ethical frameworks, I will clarify three features that in my view distinguish this method from other sorts of social-scientific 'walk-along.' I will then compare it with another very different tradition of cartographically-inclined walking: neo-pentecostal prayer-walking. This comparison will generate a mutual critique, helping me evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the method within my own particular context. I will also suggest some research questions for which the method would be suitable, and consider the logistical issues the method raises.

This is clearly a personal exercise – Western academic tradition and the University's Code of Practice insist that a student's submitted work be "the product of his or her individual efforts" (University of Liverpool, 2019, p. 2). As such, I will write "in the first person" (Webb, 1992, p. 752), rather than "the apparently neutral and objective third-person form."

With those last two sentences we have now already dived headfirst into the subjects of ethics and epistemology. So I will now introduce two key concepts to explain my position on these matters.

II. My Research Epistemology: Critical Realism

The first is *critical realism*. As Wright (1992) develops it, this epistemological framework "sees knowledge of particulars as taking place within the larger framework of the story or worldview which forms the basis of the observer's way of being in relation to the world" (p.37). "There is no such thing as 'neutral' or 'objective' proof: only the claim that the story we are now telling about the world as a whole makes more sense, in its outline and detail, than other potential or actual stories… Simplicity of outline, elegance in handling the details within it, the inclusion of all parts

of the story, and the ability of the story to make sense beyond its immediate subject-matter… are what count" (p.42).

For Wright this account coheres with "a Christian worldview… [in which] knowledge has to do with the interrelation of humans and the created world… [and where] humans are made in the image of the creator, and… are entrusted with the task of exercising wise responsibility" (p.45). This Christian worldview is one that I also share. But while England may still have an established Church (the contours of which are described by Cranmer et al., 2006), "almost everyone would agree" that "we live in a secular age" (Taylor, 2007). This means that the ethical assumptions I encounter at church on Sunday and then at university on Monday can seem not just incompatible but mutually unintelligible.

Wright's account of critical realism gives me an epistemology simultaneously compatible with Christian conviction and accessible to those with other convictions. But in itself it fails to give adequate support for patient engagement with those of different views. According to Wright, "when stories which one group tells about the world come into contact with stories that other groups tell" there will be either confirmation or "direct confrontation: if I were to make sense of the stories I see enacted in front of me, I would have to abandon my controlling story" (p.42). But this binary of verification or falsification is too stark; we must not forget the primary role of critical *adaptation*. Further the sad reality is that it is more commonly the case that groups with divergent worldviews will separate themselves into segregated echo chambers in which their controlling story is able to go unchallenged – and this is all the more true with "the rise of digital media and other online discourse platforms"(Gillani et al., 2018).

So as well as a critical epistemology, I need an a critical epistemological ethics to empower the emotional effort of sustained engagement with the ethical positions I encounter as a Christian doing social science. I have found this in Andrew Shanks' account of *radical honesty*.

III. My Research Ethics: Radical Honesty

Shanks (2005) develops this in conversation with Nietzsche (Nietzsche (2013); Nietzsche (2018); Nietzsche (1974)). He draws out three dimensions of intellectual dishonesty: 'banality,' 'manipulation,' and 'disowning' (p.9). This happens to be "a threefoldness directly corresponding to the Christian self-revelation of God as Trinity" (p.10), but its appeal lies not in "merely historiographical or metaphysical disputes, about the supposed truth-as-correctness of the gospel, with which ecclesiastical conceit is preoccupied" (p.165), but "with the infinite demands of Truth" (p.17).

Shanks explains that Nietzsche's "critique of Christianity very largely builds on Epicurus' critique of Platonism[, in that] Christianity, [Nietzsche] argues, is essentially manipulative" (p.23). Epicurus is contrasted with Plato, who in *The Republic* (Plato, 2003) "identifies the political cause of Truth with the self-assertion of a particular educational elite," "openly advocating a strategic use of religion in order to promote public order" (p.20). On the other hand, Epicurus "completely rejects the notion of post-mortem rewards and punishments [of] Platonic propaganda," denouncing

them "as a merely manipulative device to make the oppressed acquiesce in their oppression" (p.21).

But then Nietzsche goes "decisively beyond Epicurus," who "is exclusively concerned with the problematics of release from manipulation, and completely blind to the no less serious problematics of overcoming banality." "[B]ecause of the missionary impulse which both movements [ie. Epicureanism and Christianity] share… their consequent inclination [is] always to try to appeal, as far as possible, to the lowest common denominator of human desire" (p.23). But for Nietzsche "the highest form of human fulfilment is… whatever involves the most thorough, all-inclusive *self-questioning*"; "the very opposite to the banality of the human herd" (pp.23-25).

So Nietzsche has "mixed feelings" about both Epicureanism (liberating but not sufficiently rigorous) and Platonism (while "Platonism may.. be deplorably manipulative, … Plato is also a singularly radical critic of the banal"). Christianity however, Nietzsche attacks: as "essentially, a sacralization of 'slave morality'… that is, quite precisely, a militant combination of manipulativeness and banality" (p.24). In this Nietzsche is "an outrageous caricaturist," whose "many very sweeping exaggerations" could be negated; but for Shanks this "commitment to caricature… expresses [Nietzsche's] absolute repudiation of any compromise whatsoever with manipulatedness or banality" (p.25). Rather than "quarrel," "[t]he only real question… is whether Nietzsche is right about the proper nature of intellectual honesty." Can we "justify community-integrative compromise, not as a qualified retreat from the most demanding form of Honesty, but, on the contrary, as being somehow positively required by it?"

Shanks answers that we can, "because intellectual Honesty … does not only stand opposed to manipulation and banlity… [but is] equally opposed to… dishonesty-as-disowning." "Nietzsche himself is dishonest" in this third respect, as made clear "in his quite undisquised craving for a sort of *historic innocence*," exemplified by "[t]he sheer virulence with which he repudiates his ancestral Lutheranism" (p.25). Rather, radical honesty "surely also includes an infinite patience," "compelling one sympathetically to consider, and respond to, the experience and views of others from quite different backgrounds, as fellow community-members."

In the background of this criticism, is the appropriation of Nietzsche "as one of the prophets of what was later to become Nazism" (p.25), and a consideration of the way "totalitarian regimes in general are systematically designed to reward banality; just as they also facilitate manipulation[, a]nd then third, they involve a wholesale disowning of the real past" (p.30).

And so we have Shanks' answer to Nietzsche's *joyous science*. I have spent some time explaining this because on the one hand, I am aware of the evangelical inclination to fundamentalist withdrawal from the scientific task, and for me it is important that this temptation can be resisted on evangelical terms. (Though perhaps I should note that Shanks does not uphold the necessary *shibboleths* – cf. Judges 12:6 – to be considered an 'evangelical Christian'; nevertheless, he grounds his imperative to 'third-person' honesty in a corporate application of the definitively evangelical gospel parable of "a Pharisee and a sinful tax collector" p.138).

But also, I believe that this epistemological ethic coheres with the inclusive activist instincts that we find in the contemporary British psychogeographers, to whom we now turn our attention.

IV. Psychogeographical Practitioners

My point of introduction to the idea of *psychogeography* was Morag Rose, lecturer and course coordinator for this Qualitative Research Methods module. I came across the website for her *Loiterers Resistance Movement* (LRM, 2019) in the semester's first week. Having myself worked with various charities (primarily with the Christian youth movement YWAM) between graduating from university and now returning to academia, I was inspired by her combination of experience "running an autonomous, activist social centre" and engagement in academic geography; and familiar with feeling "disillusioned and burned out… and frustrated by… limited impact" (Rose, 2015). Rose's research (Rose, 2017b) uses "walking as a tool to investigate the atmosphere and hidden power structures in the urban environment" and she leads a monthly psychogeographical exploration of Manchester.

I then encountered Phil Smith during his presentation (Smith, 2019) to the *Power, Space, and Cultural Change* research group, in the *Geographic Information Centre* on the sixth floor of the Roxby building. Smith was involved with theatrical performance of various sorts, when "the invitation of heritage institutions… to make 'mis-guided tours' alerted him to the potential for impact within the tourism and heritage industry (Smith, 2013, p. 12). This led to doctoral research on the question of how to provoke"ways of seeing and using sites as places of multiple meanings rather than …bounded by normative heritage narratives" (p.3). Smith describes his methodology with "the word *mytho-geographical*… which was almost certainly [originally] a mis-remembering of 'psychogeographical'… [but] became useful as we sought to distinguish ourselves from [psychogeography's] hegemonic aspects" (Smith, 2015).

The location of his seminar was of psycho-/mytho-geographical significance for me, because up until then my experience of the room had been hegemonically defined by its hosting the weekly meeting for the *Geographic Data Science Lab*, of which I am part. My undergraduate degree was a combination of Mathematics and Theology, and it is important to me that we engage the full spectrum of approaches to understanding the world around us: combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to Geography seems vital. But casual comments from several people within the Data Science Lab have demonstrated that 'the Quantitative/Qualitative Divide' (McLaughlin, 1991), however unhelpful and indeed *dishonest* a dichotomy it may be, is a real social phenomenon. Smith's psychogeographic seminar was therefore disruptive of my mythic experience, or narrative associations, of the Roxby Building.

A few weeks after that seminar I again walked out the door of the Roxby Building, round the new School of Law and Justice, no longer barricaded by builders' paraphernalia, past the bicycle racks and past the dispersed crowd of techno-smokers vaping their e-cigarettes, and through the door of the Sydney Jones library and up the stairs to its Grove Wing, where I found a copy of Tina Richardson's edited anthology of *Contemporary British Psychogeography* (Richardson, 2015). Richardson discovered "walking as a form of urban critique" (Richardson, 2014) as a Masters student, and she then developed her own "walking practice and methodology for examining urban

space: *schizocartography*," in a doctoral thesis critiquing the rhetoric of 'excellence' in contemporary British higher education. Her experience of "think[ing] through [her] own type of critical walking as a more formulated methodology that could stand up to critique" (Richardson, 2014, p. 181). Having finished her thesis, and still desiring to "raise the profile of psychogeography within academia" (p.250), she mobilised thirteen others who "practice or study urban walking as a way of responding to the environment" (p.4) to contribute to what she (ambivalently) suggests might be "a 'text book' on psychogeography" (p.250).

And all but three of them make explicit reference to *Guy Debord*, a mid-20th Century Parisian intellectual and experimental film-maker (eg. Debord, 1959).

V. Debord's Definitions

Debord was cofounder and leader of the Situationist International (Merrifield, 2005). But Debord's legacy to post-modern geography is primarily found in two articles he wrote before that, for the *Lettriste* magazine *Les Lèvres Nues*: the *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography* , and the *Theory of the Dérive*.

In the first he suggests that psychogeography study the "specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (Debord, 1955). "The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance which … has no relation to the physical contour of the ground)," "can be uncovered by careful analysis."

His *Theory of the Dérive* (Debord, 1956) then builds on the conviction that "cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes." The *dérive* is an intentional letting-go of all "usual motives for movement and action, [so as to] be drawn by the attractions of the terrain" and discover " the psychogeographical articulations of a modern city… their main components and their spatial localization, …their principal axes of passage, their exits and their defenses".

Translated, *dérive* means 'drift.' But Collier (2015) explains how direct usage of the French word in English "transforms its context": "*[d]rift* is passive, to be carried along, whereas *dérive* suggests drive," implying "a certain insurgent agency" (p.136). Meanwhile Richardson (2018) plays with the (half-)rhyme of *arrive* and *dérive*.

One could delve deeper into history in search of the roots of Debord's walking method. He himself mentions "the famous aimless wandering attempted in 1923 by four surrealists" (cf. Morris, 2020, p. 36). Solnit (2014) (p.212) considers him another "observant and solitary man strolling about Paris" (p.198) in the lineage of Walter Benjamin. Coverley (2010) finds the roots of psychogeography in literary London.

Certainly Debord's *dérive* was not created *ex nihilo*, but *as a qualitative social research method* it was original. Let me now specify what I see as its defining qualities, in Debord and his recent

revivalists.

VI. The Critical Elements of (this) Critical Walking

i. Embodied Pedestrian Mobility

First, we have walking as *walking*.

Debord (1956) (and likewise Richardson (2015) p.4, p.251) eagerly distinguishes his method "from the classic notions of journey or stroll," but his vehemence is precisely because in its physical mechanics they are identical. This is its genius, because of its accessibility ("anyone can do it" Richardson (2015) p.251), and because of its universal relevance ("[t]he bodily history of walking is that of… human anatomy" Solnit (2014) p.3).

Walking is embodied (cf. Shilling, 2007) mobility (cf. Urry, 2012) in its simplest form, without being 'enhanced' or *encumbered* with dehumanising technology such as Debord's deplored "present abundance of private automobiles." But foregoing technology is not the focus – simple technologies which empower pedestrian-paced embodied mobility are affirmed: "walking includes sticks, wheels and any other mobility aids" (Rose, 2015, p. 76).

ii. Micropolitical Activism

Second, we have walking as *activism*.

Note immediately this is not partisan campaigning. Rather, it is what Richardson (2015) calls "a micropolitical act," in that the very act of "undertaking walking, while being cognizant of the urban decor around you, draws your attention to the power structures that are laid down in urban topography." Or for Rose (2015), "loitering was a form of stealth politics," "a participatory tool to disseminate radical theories and stimulate critical debate."

The idea is not just to do research that may later have some social *impact* (bureaucratic academia's favourite buzzword), but to be open to the transformative possibilities in the unexpected live (Back & Puwar, 2012) encounters of the research process.

iii. Eccentric Experimental Exploration

Third, we have walking as *exploration*.

But the exploration is not of the city as such, as perhaps with Garrett (2013). Rather the exploration is of the *relationship* between the city and its human inhabitants, by the conscious and intentional scientific act of positioning oneself as a generic urban human, experimentally isolated from the specificities of any other "usual motives for movement," to deliberately experience the city as force.

As Self (2016) explains, the new psychogeographers "all want to unpick this conundrum, the manner in whch the contemporary world warps the relationship between psyche and place" (p.11).

And since focus of research is neither centred on the city itself, nor centred on the inhabitants of the city in themselves (which would be *ethnography*), it is *eccentric* (Oxford, 2019): which in its technical sense means "not placed centrally." And thus psychogeography embraces eccentric (in the sense of 'uncoventional') methods to decentre and "disorient oneself" (Debord, 1956)..

VII. Neo-Pentecostal Prayer-Walking and Spiritual Mapping

Having delineated the method we are investigating, I want now to compare it with the neo-pentecostal practice of prayer-walking (Hawthorne & Kendrick, 2014), which will help frame my critical evaluation.

This paragraph from Sinclair (2004) is a clear example:

> "the Lord challenged us to go out into our local High Street and to see things as He saw them… We walked around the local area and we were devastated at the things the Lord began to show us. He showed us that there was a spirit of death over the ara but we didn't know quite what to do about it. In a quiet area not known for trouble, a couple of days later, two men were shot dead in a local gym. The Lord really had our attention and we cried out to Him to teach us how to pray and show us how to deal with this…" (p.95). Another would be Schikora (2011), whose website includes reports of prayer-walks in forty-eight European capital cities.

In their anthology of social walking-research, Bates & Rhys-Taylor (2017) contrast walking "understood primarily as a meditative practice" with that which "concerns itself with theorising the world through… everyday pedestrian practices" (p.1). They do not mention psychogeography (although two of the contributed chapters in their book do), but they place "the Christian tradition of prayer walking" with "the existential introspection of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche" in the first category. Regarding a contemplative pilgrimage, they are surely right. But *prayer-walking* within contemporary evangelical Christianity belongs firmly within the second.

It is not primarily contemplative, but *exploratory*, in its desire to understand not eternal truths but the relational dynamics of a particular place. And it is also *activist* (cf. Bebbington (2003) p.3) in its desire to achieve social transformation of that place. While psychogeography's Marxist roots mean its analysis is directed towards the economic forces of capitalism, neo-pentecostal prayer-walkers use the biblical language of spiritual warfare (eg. Eph.6:10-12) and geographic principalities (eg. Daniel 10:13) for 'naming the powers' (cf. Wink (1984)).

Otis (1999) suggests that *spiritual mapping* "is actually a close relative of both cultural geography and cultural anthropology" (p.88). He suggests various Biblical precedents for spiritual mapping (pp.90-91): the twelve scouts sent into the Promised Land (Numbers 13); Nehemiah's night-time inspection of Jerusalem's walls (Nehemiah 2:12-15); Paul's missionary walking-tour of Athens (Acts 17:16,23). And he offers "four ways in which a spiritual mapper can gather useful research data" (p.169): observation, interviews, background research, and listening prayer.

I should make clear that within evangelical theology, the concept of spiritual mapping is controversial. Moreau (2000) cautiously affirms it as "a useful way to help the people of God pray more specifically," while Holvast (2008) sees it as a theologically deficient form of neo-imperialist Americanism.

Putting psychogeography and what we might call *pneumocartography* side-by-side generates a number of surprising commonalities. For example:

- *Relational Spatiality.* What might the "alternative approach to space" (p.9) of Massey (2005) "as the product of interrelations" contribute to the thorough-going effort of Schluter & Ashcroft (2005) to spell out "a *relational* and coherent vision" "for Christian social reform?"
- *Enchanted Materialism* cf. Eagleton (2016), Žižek (2014). Psychogeography's implicit ontology seems parallel to the "unique, noninterventionist supernaturalism" which James Smith (2010a) suggests is distinctive of pentecostal spirituality.
- *Affect & Emotion.* Compare the "love," "curiousity," "concern" and "rage" of Rose (2017a) for her city, with Jesus' feelings for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41, Matt. 23:37).

VIII. Possible Research Questions

At any rate, regardless of which theoretical tradition the researcher is coming from, there are a number of specific questions for which the method could suitably *generate* data (Mason, 2002, p. 16). Here are some examples:

- What different *neighbourhoods* which make up a particular city, and how should we delineate them?
- How can *walking* facilitate an understanding of the urban environment?
- What are the *powers* that shape our urban societies, and how might we personally engage them?
- How can social research empower people to recognize and respond to systemic *injustice*?

IX. Practical Ethics

We now consider the practical ethics involved in responsibly using this method.

First, *researcher safety*: "there is always a need to be prudent when traversing the city" (Rose, 2017b, p. 91), perhaps particularly if one is not a "white man of education" (p.32). Rose is particularly sensitive to the feminist implications of this inequality, and describes various degrees of misogynist harassment faced by herself and the women she walked with (pp.92-94).

Second, *by-stander impact and consent*: "They are unaware of this study and thus unable to give informed consent to participate" (p.92). Rose navigates this dilemma by "only engaging in conversation with non-participants when it was initiated by them," and keeping consequent

descriptions "broad enough that bystanders are rendered unidentifiable." Richardson (2015) dwells on the risk of voyeuristic *scopophilia*, and highlights the importance of ensuring that walking research is "neither touristic nor colonial" (p.249)

Third, *legality of access*. Smith (2019) spoke somewhat blithely about tresspassing in the course of one of his walks; in contrast Rose (2017b) emphasises that she "ensured there was no straying into private property" (p.91). Ethical questions regarding exploration of restricted urban space are addressed more directly (confrontationally!) by Garrett (2013); who in turn is critiqued by Bennett (2011). A Christian ethic must recognize the occasional need for conscientious civil disobedience (Acts 5:29), while in general advocating submission to established legal authority (Romans 13:1).

Fourth, *spiritual safety*. The need "to prevent backlash from the [satanic] enemy" is a concern of neo-pentecostal prayer-walking guides (Wentroble, 1999, p. 170); the psychogeographical literature on the other hand unworriedly engages (ironically?) in various occult practices (Smith, 2010b). But I was interested to find a recent article in *Qualitative Research* considering the dangers of "witchcraft and supernatural harm" (Roxburgh, 2019).

X. Summarizing Evaluation

As has been noted, this method is logistically very *simple* to use: "All you need is a curious nature and a comfortable pair of shoes" Richardson (2015).

This makes it *accessible* and potentially very *participatory*; three of the method's many strengths. To these I would add that its prioritisation of embodiment is an implicit affirmation of human nature; its intrinsic openness to unexpected encounters makes it helpfully resistant to dishonest 'disowning'; its spontaneity forces constant reflexivity; and its engagement with narrative and psychological factors offer unusual points of connection with Christian spirituality.

Forced to reflect on its weaknesses, I would admit that psychogeographical exploration is an extreme case of the various qualities that make quantitative geographers sceptical of the value of qualitative research: it can seem idiosynchratic in its practice, nebulous in its focus, and unrepeatable in its results.

But in my view these criticisms (each of which could be rebutted) are linked to the fact that human nature cannot be reduced to anonymized data points (Barassi, 2019) in some over-arching matrix. To be human is *qualitatively* different; that is why even in the era of *big data* (Kitchin, 2014), human geography will always need the *thick data* (Wang, 2013) of qualitative research.

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