Hybrid Mobile Interviews as an Inclusive Social Research Method

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Introduction

Urban regeneration is often applauded for improving inclusivity, diversity and opportunity within cities. Yet, who makes the city and who makes up the city suggest different definitions of 'success'. In Kings Cross, antisocial activities have gradually been replaced by sites of culture, class and consumption in order to curate a "new 'cultural quarter' for London" (Deckha, 2000:35). While Kings Cross' regeneration differs from London's usual urban practice in its consideration of local voices, those which defy normative definitions of ability may be muted under traditional social research methods.

When studying spatial (re)construction, mobile (walking) interviews offer a robust lens into social relations in the living city. By allowing participants to share their experiences while walking with researchers, the constitution and contestation of space comes alive (Owens, 2025). Reflecting on the use of mobile interviews, this paper critically addresses perspectives that may go silenced under static and able-bodied assumptions of space, and considers how mobile interviews can be adapted to (quite literally) move with the times to cultivate greater inclusivity through hybrid mobile interviews.

Evolving understandings of space

Historically, space was considered a stationary surface on which people and places were situated (Massey, 2005). However, such fixed accounts ignore how space is set in motion by social interactions (Gregory, 2008; Massey, 2005). Today, space is understood as made up of the interactions that shape – and are shaped by – the material world. This realisation emphasises a shift in how the city may be experienced by those inhabiting it, with space being in continuous motion rather than a static moment in time.

From this perspective, studying space becomes more nuanced than studying merely what is located inside it. Rather, material and immaterial makings that construct space

influence how people move through it. Methods ‘on the move’ (O’Neill and Roberts, 2019), such as mobile interviews, can account for the fluidity of space while removing the pressure of a formal interview setting. By letting participants take the lead through space, participants are given increased power to navigate the interview’s direction, both through the act of walking and the spoken word (Owens, 2025). Observing and participating through mobile interviews thus yields rich data which “attends to the textual, embodied and phenomenological aspects of place-making” (Pink, 2008, p. 14).

Mobile interviews allow researchers and participants to experience space together while exploring social realities that may otherwise remain invisible. While traditional interviews rely on a static encounter using spoken language to communicate complex ideas about what may be going on where and why, mobile interviews embrace lived experience by walking through participants’ ‘natural’ setting in order to uncover how everyday experiences are moulded by different infrastructures involved in space (Kusenbach, 2003).

Mobilising Social Research Methods

My research used twelve mobile interviews around Kings Cross to generate rich data representing diverse, local experiences of urban regeneration. Participants were recruited using posters displayed in community spaces around Kings Cross and on social media. To participate, they were required to be at least eighteen-years-old and to have lived/worked in Kings Cross for at least five years in order to comment on changes that have occurred amidst its ongoing regeneration.

During mobile interviews, participants were asked to walk me through areas of personal significance to better understand their lived experiences of these spaces while answering semi-structured interview questions. Although they had freedom to design their own routes, participants were given examples of possible locations relevant to the research, such as their favourite pubs, community spaces, former ‘vice’ areas, regenerated areas, and/or spaces evocative of salient memories. Therefore, the routes walked were unique to each participant and were mapped along the way.

As an everyday practice, walking may seem like a mundane activity. Walking to the shops or to the bus station do not appear to carry much significance in our daily lives. Yet, the way we experience walking can speak volumes about time, space and social transformation. Mobile interviews position individuals as socially located and mobile, recognising the shape-shifting character of social relations (O’Neill and Roberts, 2019). Walking can also be done in solitude or in company, for leisure or for labour and can be a means of activism, performance or laying claim to landscapes and places (Ernsten and Shepherd, 2024). From commuting to collective organisation and everything in-between, the

way in which one walks through Kings Cross speaks volumes that words alone may only whisper.

To account for this, I wrote a brief reflection about my experience walking with participants after each mobile interview, including the route taken, the sensations associated with different spaces and the pace walked. Alongside interview transcripts, these reflections breathed life into the different relationships around Kings Cross. For example, walking through certain spaces quickly versus lingering in others illuminated social barriers in the city relating to accessibility, perceived safety, and spatial use more generally.

Although walking has the ability to mobilise previously static social research, it also presents different accessibility constraints, namely who may be excluded from walking research? How can differences in mobility be accounted for by the social sciences, which aim to foster inclusivity?

Hybrid Mobile Interviews

While mobile interviews offer a more "transcendent and reflexive" (Kusenbach, 2003:455) approach to studying space than traditional ethnographic methods like participant observation and conventional interviews, concerns surrounding vulnerability and exploitation arise in cases where participants' mobility is limited. As O'Neill and Roberts (2019) indicate, mobile interviews are either enabled or constrained by the participants' and researcher's ability to walk. To ensure my research was inclusive, it utilised what I refer to as hybrid mobile interviews where participants expressed concerns about the walking element of the research. During hybrid mobile interviews, I met participants in a location of their choosing in Kings Cross, and they were given a map to mark locations while explaining their significance. I then travelled to these spaces individually afterwards while listening back to their interview recordings.

Of the twelve mobile interviews conducted, three were hybrid. This approach was particularly useful when speaking to two elderly participants and a participant experiencing homelessness, Alex. Because Alex spent most of his time outside, an indoor venue was deemed most appropriate. Coupled with his lack of regular sustenance, we sat at a café sipping hot chocolate and eating sandwiches while he recounted his experience of homelessness in Kings Cross. However, "for the person who is hungry, the researcher has an unfair advantage" (Gunn et. al, 2013: 8). Reflecting on this, it becomes clear that even harm mitigators may be exploitative, as they involve making moral and practical judgements about (vulner)ability. Aldridge (2012:114-115) writes about the need for adjustments when working with vulnerable individuals:

> *"More conventional qualitative methods…may require some adaptation…This is especially important if such methods are to fulfil the principles and objectives of democracy and mutuality and if messages from these studies are to be transformative in broader social and political contexts."*

That said, a potential criticism surrounding the use of hybrid mobile interviews is that participants needing adaptations were only offered a 'reduced' version of the interview, whereas able-bodied participants were offered a more wholistic knowledge-sharing experience. By explaining the walking element of the research to participants verbally and on consent forms, however, they were able to make an informed decision about what they were comfortable with. As such, I was careful not to disable participants myself by making assumptions about their physical abilities.

The criticism above would also imply that I received 'reduced' results from hybrid mobile interview participants. While the methods slightly differed between the traditional mobile interviews and hybrid ones, it could be argued that hybrid mobile interviews reflected a resistance to societal norms by further highlighting how space is negotiated by the people using it (or not).

Given that Kings Cross' regeneration has continued over nearly three decades, older voices were seminal to understanding the impacts of regeneration over time, as were marginalised voices – such as Alex's – who represent a concern over 'antisociality' in a pocket of London redefined by culture, class and consumption. Thus, hybrid mobile interviews were crucial in fostering a democratic approach to investigating Kings Cross' gradual transformation from 'seedy' to 'seemly'.

Conclusion: Moving towards more inclusive social research

While traditional mobile interviews breathe life into seemingly static social relations, they are not always enough to address the ethics and empathy needed for truly rounded ethnographic research. As Booth (1996) outlines, 'textbook' social research methods tend to exclude vulnerable individuals. The decision to use hybrid mobile interviews with more vulnerable participants thus expands the transformative potential of the research, as space and place were explored within wider contexts of social interactions, lived experience and meaning-making for those more marginalised from shared space in Kings Cross.

More generally, hybrid mobile interviews can offer a creative and alternative method of data collection for voices that may remain unheard under static and able-bodied assumptions of space. They challenge mono-dimensional spatial constructions, allowing for a grater multiplicity of social meanings to emerge. In the case of Kings Cross, this means the

‘containment’ of space is further liberated, giving rise to new understandings of space, place and the people in it.

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