

## **'Wait, really, stop, stop!': Go-Along interviews with visually disabled people and the pitfalls of ableist methodologies**

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**Jedná se o text, který byl právě accepted, prosím nešířit, dokud nevyjde oficiální verze.**

Despite the growing interest in walking methods in disability research, their methodological difficulties are rarely examined. Therefore, we debate the challenges of doing go-along interviews with visually disabled people when geographically studying blind experience with urban space. The article is divided into two parts. The methodological part examines the difficulties we encountered to contribute to the critical discussion of the ableist nature of both methodologies and post qualitative inquiry, and their interconnection with ableist conceptions of walking, talking, and space. Second, we discuss the epistemological consequences of go-along interviews, which have the potential to challenge existing thinking, ableist conceptions of space, and, consequently, the given discipline. The result is a constructivist conception of science that modifies human geography through visual disability and visual disability through human geography.

Keywords: go-along interviews, mobile methods, ableist methodology, visual disability, disability, post qualitative inquiry, ableism

### **Introduction**

After some time, I noticed that I was somewhat in Robin's way. When I made it explicit, he [a communication partner using a white cane] told me I was walking on the side of his

## 'WAIT, REALLY, STOP, STOP!': GO-ALONG INTERVIEWS WITH VISUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE AND THE PITFALLS OF ABLEIST METHODOLOGY

guiding line. I had the feeling I was making him nervous, but he was very diplomatic, and despite my repeated requests to tell me where I should walk or when to step aside, he never told me even if a similar situation happened over and over again. These moments were not easy to recognize, and he would not talk about it for some reason. He simply kept walking. And this was making me quite nervous, too. (reflection after the go-along interview with Robin, 22 September 2020)

The aim of our research project, conducted in metropolitan areas of Brno and Prague, Czech Republic, was (a) to articulate the forming of the relationship between visual disability and urban space (see Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2016), (b) to express the mutual co-creation of subjects and space (see Simpson, 2017; Wylie, 2010), and (c) to perform a critical reflection on geographic concepts and inscriptions based on visibility (see Rose 2003; Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2016). In order to do so, we have chosen to work with poststructuralist theory, which does not approach either subject or space as stable points of departure for analysis but rather sees space and subject as the dynamic results of practices attaining temporary contours. This is also pivotal for disability geography (Hall and Wilton, 2017; McCormack, 2008), which we intend to develop through our research.

We, authors of this text and all research members, needed to find a methodology that could help us answer our research aims and also comply with the chosen theory. Furthermore, we needed to find ourselves in situations where relationships between blindness and space would be formed. The methodological choice was made to combine sit-down and go-along interviews, that is, interviews while walking (Evans and Jones, 2011) as they help to enunciate moments that often fail to be seen as researchable (Stiegler, 2021), and defy positivist understandings of movement dominant in urban studies (Scott, 2019).

But go-along interviews placed us in situations in which we did not know what to do. We, three female and two male researchers, do not have any disabilities that would interfere with

the spatial standardization of the urban space during the go-alongs. Neither we, nor our communication partners knew what to expect in certain moments and there were various misunderstandings, despite of our prior experience with research with visually disabled people (using sit-down interviews and ethnography), and close friendship with some of them. Even the literature that we read on go-alongs was not of much help, as studies that would critically examine this method conducted with people with disabilities or the topic of health are scarce (e.g. Carpiano, 2009; Castrodale, 2017; Mcpherson, 2016).

Methodologies draw on particular assumptions about what is going to happen. Only after these are made a methodology can be *applied*, and methodological books and articles can be written, discussing *the right process* amidst warnings of the pitfalls that may occur. But these assumptions draw on certain conceptions of how people communicate, behave, or walk—a standardized 'respondent' is created. This standardization may or may not clash with people with disabilities. Sit-down interviews with visually disabled people proceed without much trouble. Of course, the researcher must ensure that the space is safe for the communication partner and pick them up at an agreed location. Occasionally, further assistance is needed. But these are just details, which are not difficult to consider. Ethnography can attain diverse forms, and in our prior research, we would assist our communication partners every time they needed. However, the purpose of go-alongs was different, studying their movement without our assistance.

The go-along interview is designed according to a specific perception of moving and talking. This perception is ableist (Castrodale, 2017), built on 'processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body' (Campbell, 2001: 44), the 'corporeal standard' (Campbell, 2001: 44). Thus, when unreflected upon, methodologies are drawn on contours of ableism (Schnellert et al., 2021), constructed according to ableist practices and values (Townsend and Cushion, 2021) and linked to ableist academic systems (Bitman, 2021).

## 'WAIT, REALLY, STOP, STOP!': GO-ALONG INTERVIEWS WITH VISUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE AND THE PITFALLS OF ABLEIST METHODOLOGY

Here we take the troubles we encountered while doing go-along interviews as an opportunity to contribute to the critical discussion about the ableist character of methodologies, epistemologies, and consequently, of science. Like Rice et al. (2018), through failure, we reimagined and 'crippled' research so it complies with disabled bodies, and respects plurality of experiences. In addition, we also critically reflect on post qualitative inquiry, since both methods and anti-methods can be based on ableist assumptions about space and walking, which clashes with blindness. Last but not least, the detailed analysis of the pitfalls we experienced might serve as advice about what to ensure, negotiate, and discuss when conducting mobile methods with people who defy spatial standardization, which concerns various, not only disabled, people.

Already at the beginning of our project, we had started to collect data that would illuminate our steps and help us to adjust our methods. While working in research pairs, we formulated written reflections on what we experienced during the go-alongs, what were the methodological risks, and what could be modified in the future. Subsequently, we established a closed Facebook group where we discussed our comments further.

However, these notes did not seem sufficient for the gradual collection, recollection, and clarification of what we had taken part in. Therefore, we held a focus group (on April 22, 2021) in which all team members participated. The group dynamics were intended to help us remember other things, generate new questions, and answer at least some of them. The meeting lasted 3 hours and was transcribed into 75 norm-pages of text. It took the form of a group autobiography, mixing the positions of researcher and subject. The questions focused on choosing the research paradigm (What pre-understanding did we enter the research with? How did we formulate our research questions? etc.), on modifying the methods to be able to study the visually disabled experience (What had to be done differently from research with sighted people? What were we afraid of? What did we not understand? etc.), and on negotiations within

the team and beyond (What had to be negotiated? Where did the misunderstandings originate? etc.).

The article is divided into two parts. The first and longer part is methodological. Go-along interviews with visually disabled people can be perceived as a 'magnifying glass' that problematizes components of research that otherwise do not get much attention—from planning the research and collecting data to inscription devices and recording such data. We discuss how the troubles we encountered relate to ableist methodologies, and show how these methodologies are intertwined with ableist conceptions of space, walking, and talking.

In the second part, we discuss the epistemological consequences of go-along interviews that have a potential to challenge the ableist conceptions of space and, consequently, of the given discipline. We oppose the idea of 'representation'; instead, go-along interviews can be seen as a 'laboratory', which enables the research to be assembled. This results in a constructivist conception of science that modifies human geography through visual disability and visual disability through human geography, and thus produces knowledge that is not based on ableism and vision-centrism.

### **Research methodology**

We used a combination of fourteen sit-down and thirteen go-along interviews. Only one condition had to be met for the fourteen communication partners to be approached for the research—that they do not use eyesight to move around the city. All of them are legally blind, four since birth, others have been visually impaired since early childhood and their eyesight gradually deteriorated. Ten of them use a white cane, three a combination of a guide dog and a white cane, and one uses a red and white cane as he has also a hearing impairment and uses a hearing aid. Otherwise, they do not have other disabilities. They were informed about the content and the purpose of the study, the dissemination of the research, the anonymity of the

data and the voluntary nature of the research event (the possibility of not answering the questions or terminating the interview according to their will at any time).

As already stated, we, researchers, are considered able-bodied in relation to urban space. Our bodies differ in height, size, and strength from short and slender to tall and strong. This could affect the possibility to intervene in dangerous situations, as stronger bodies have a greater capacity to hold a communication partner and prevent a fall. Fortunately, none such situation happened, so the researchers' bodies did not play a significant role. Different heights of researchers and communication partners could make conversation in a noisy environment more difficult. However, we did not keep track of such situations, and thus we do not have any data to support this. Gender of researchers and participants did not play a significant role in methodology, however, it affects experience with urban space (more in Authors, manuscript submitted for publication). Participants and researchers are white and native Czechs, which is a vast majority in the Czech Republic.

### ***Research stages***

Our research gradually established the following pattern: We would start with (a) a sit-down, semi-structured interview in order to get to know the communication partner, understand their mobility behavior, discuss their idea of space and its limits, identify their most common routes, build trust and mutual understanding so as to approach them with a go-along request, ask them to select a suitable route they frequent, and ideally arrange a go-along date straight away. The interviews took place in safe-space chosen by our communication partners—at their place, in a restaurant or a café, and due to the pandemics, 3 interviews were carried out online over Skype, their preferred software. When a restaurant or a café was selected, we offered to accompany them from/to a place which they knew very well and from which they could get anywhere they

needed, typically a public transport stop. We carried out seven interviews with male and seven with female communication partners, amounting to over thirty-four hours of recordings. The initial pilot interviews were very long (up to four hours), with enthusiastic communication partners. Whenever necessary, we took a break. As some of the topics had become covered, we aimed to keep the interviews between two and three hours in duration, including short breaks initiated mainly by the researchers. Then (b), we would perform a researcher's reflection immediately after the interview.

The next step (c) was the realization of the go-along interview using the chosen route. We asked the participants to take the route as they would normally do and to describe what was happening, what they were doing, how they were doing it and why, what they noticed, and what was important to them. We told them we would ask questions during the go-along and that a second team member would be watching us from afar and take photos. Usually, we went on foot, but in several cases, we took public transportation. Ideally, the go-along was carried out at maximum a few weeks after the interview; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this break was extended as much as half a year in exceptional cases. Besides the delay, the COVID restrictions did not affect the research methodology. Seven go-along interviews with female and six with male communication partners were conducted. We did not address one person with a go-along request as he was very nervous during the interview, and we did not want to put him in any more uncomfortable situations. The total length of the go-along and follow-up interviews was eighteen hours.

Immediately after the go-along, there was an unstructured follow-up sit-down interview (d), which took place in a nearby safe-space chosen by our communication partners, and sometimes suggested by the researchers. In such a case, we accompanied them there and then to a place from which they could depart safely on their own. During these interviews, we

reflected on topics that were not mentioned during the go-along. (e) The process would end with researchers' reflections.

### *Working in research pairs*

All the above-mentioned research stages were conducted in teams of two, with various compositions of researchers. The decision was made based on Author's B prior experience with go-along interviews with wheelchair users, which he had conducted on his own. Vannini and Vannini (2017: 192) suggest not to consider go-alongs (or 'walk-alongs' referring to going on foot) as a method of gathering data but something for unfolding sensorial events. As Vannini et al. (2012: 8) remark, 'in our everyday lives, most of us pay little conscious attention to how we sense.' However, the many activities and sensorial experiences overwhelmed Author B and made him feel lost, which resulted in abandoning the method. Engaging more people thus was not motivated by an effort to collect 'more data,' but to make the go-along interviews manageable. Being confronted with blindness made us notice things, become aware of our bodies, feel the wind, the sun, hear noises that our communication partners were talking about. We were gathering data *and* unfolding sensorial events that we created together with people in the study.

Whereas the sit-down interviews were designed with a standard distinction between the main and second interviewer, we faced a more complicated division for the go-alongs. We chose a model in which one interviewer would walk with a communication partner and the other would observe, walking behind and following the movement of the communication partner and their dog (if applicable).

The main task of the interviewer was to make the communication partner describe the walked space and ask for explanations. For two reasons, they walked a little bit behind the communication partner: First, because a sidewalk would narrow due to an object (a



pillar/bench/car etc.), making it necessary to walk in single file—the interviewer could not be the first, as they did not want to indicate the narrowed path—and second, because the interviewer's closeness would distract the communication partners since the interviewer made noise and complicated the potential use of echolocation. Moreover, so as not to disturb the guiding lines and free use of a partner's cane, the interviewer often had to change sides.

Data collection includes also inscription devices, such as a voice recorder, which is not a dormant machine but an active agent (see Kinney, 2017). Our communication partners usually walked with a white cane in one hand and their guide dog in the other, or they kept their other hand free for tactile control or prevention of falls. At the same time, the interviewer was supposed to walk behind; thus, the placement of the recorder was no trivial matter. We found an option to hang the recorder around the communication partner's neck. Even so, this was not a universal solution. Occasionally, we had to shorten the string or place it on the chest strap of a communication partner's backpack to prevent moving.

The original intention of the observer's role was to compare the observation with the communication partner's description, thus also contrasting visual and nonvisual perception. However, this proved almost impossible as with a greater distance from the communication partner and noisy urban environment, the more the audibility deteriorated until it would disappear completely. The distance from the communication partner was not constant—the observer would walk around them, observe them from different angles, stop here and there and take photos, study notably interesting places, all while the communication partner and the interviewer kept walking. Therefore, they had to catch up with them afterwards. On the other hand, when there was a longer period of standing, for example, while waiting for public transport, the observer could come close to them and even ask questions.

During go-alongs, observers took spoken notes and visual images, often using just one recording device—a smartphone. All communication partners agreed with the recordings,

## 'WAIT, REALLY, STOP, STOP!': GO-ALONG INTERVIEWS WITH VISUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE AND THE PITFALLS OF ABLEIST METHODOLOGY

understanding the photos would only capture places, not them, and would be described in the follow-up interview. We mostly photographed places that connected in some way to our visual observations and attempts to understand them. These could be guiding lines, different surfaces, breaks in continuity, places that were surprising to us for some reason, complicated spots where the communication partner and interviewer stopped (see figure 1), and so on.



Figure 1. This photograph depicts an irregular intersection of sidewalks in a panel housing estate, changing direction in gradual curves (without a right-angled structure). At this intersection, two ways of passage are indicated. In the first case (solid arrow), the path leads through a detour to the perpendicular sidewalk, which is crossed only at the end of the curve (where a change of direction at a right angle can be utilized). In the second case (dashed arrow), the perpendicular detour is crossed earlier and passes over a canal cover that is located near to a spot where there is still a curve. The second route option can be used in a quiet environment (e.g., at night), when the sound of flowing water in the canal can be used for changing direction.

### **Walking interviews and disability research**

Recently, mobile research methods have received increased attention in social sciences. The go-along as a type of mobile interview (Lloyd-Evans, 2017), often labelled a hybrid between interview and participant observation (Evans and Jones, 2011), has chiefly been used in research aiming to uncover hidden or unconscious relations with place/environment

(Kusenbach, 2003). Studies based on this method concentrate on perceiving the environment, spatial practices, biography, social architecture, or social realm, and the go-along is thus used for studying various (spatial/lived) experiences across scientific fields (Kusenbach, 2003).

Walking interviews appear to be particularly useful in disability studies as it is believed that engaging in everyday activities can be the best method for understanding embodied experience of disability (Butler and Derret, 2014), and go-alongs can be prolific at identifying the processes of disablement and able-bodied privilege (Castrodale, 2017). For instance, Söderström (2019) studied the urban feelings of people living with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and Castrodale (2017) wrote about the experiences of Mad and disabled students at universities. Wästerfors (2021) practised go-along interviews with people that had bodily and sensory impairments, discussing barriers in diverse environments; Adekoya and Guse (2020) did research with older adults living with dementia in long-term care facilities, studying their walk around the premises; and Butler and Derrett (2014) walked with people with acquired disability.

Also research with visually impaired persons has utilized the go-along interview. Macpherson (2017) mentions the use of this method while accompanying visually disabled people on hiking trips; however, she does not describe it further. Similarly, Middleton and Byles (2019) state go-along interviews as one of their methods, but their description suggests the focus was more on teaching their communication partners to work with another technique. Contrariwise, Bell (2019) describes the go-along method directly, employing it as part of an in-depth qualitative study focusing on blind people's experiences of different types of environments.

Despite the growing interest in walking methods with people with disabilities, there are just a few studies scrutinizing problems that might occur. Macpherson (2016) points to the importance of considering bodily capacities of research participants, and Carpiano (2009) raises a question of safety for the participant and the researcher and warns of the vagaries of the

weather. Although different seasons of the year and weather conditions affect accessibility and our initial plan was to carry out go-along interviews throughout the entire year, another vagary stepped in—the pandemics. Consequently, we did most of the go-alongs during spring, summer, and autumn, when lockdown measures allowed us to meet. Only one go-along interview was carried out in winter, with nearly melted snow.

In light of the recent development of go-along interviews, numerous articles critically discussed the method. Merriman (2014) stresses the problems arising from this shift towards mobile research methods at the expense of traditional ones, Spinney (2015) discusses the benefits and limitations of mobile methods, and Warren (2017) identifies some of the assumptions of go-alongs as Eurocentric. We contribute to these reflections by elaborating two kinds of critique that we confront with our experience of using this method: One that sees the go-along as an ableist method (Castrodale, 2017), and another of the go-along as too systematic and following a positivist logic of science (Vannini and Vannini, 2017).

### **Entering the field**

At first, go-alongs represented a way to overcome the ableist logic of sit-down interviews for us. As Macpherson (2009) points out, in sit-down interviews, visually disabled people often reproduce discursive and political structures, as well as collective regimes of truth that are predominantly visual. Conversely, go-along interviews seemed like a perfect tool to study micro-geographies and micro-activities that are central to our research and tend to be overlooked and not talked about. We anticipated the go-along interviews to allow us to ask our communication partners about situations that we did not understand, leading us into less disciplined environments (Carpiano, 2009), bringing about unforeseen socio-spatial interactions (Castrodale, 2017), and challenging the vision-centrism of human geography (Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2016).

Despite our initial optimism, we soon started to realize the inherent relationship between methodologies and ableism. Castrodale (2017: 9) discusses his experience when doing go-alongs with Mad and disabled persons, saying mobile interviews were troubled and did not go as he had imagined. Like him, we were confronted not only with ableist methods that are based on the corporeal standard of walking and talking (see Campbell, 2009) but also with ableist conceptions of urban space (Bezmez, 2013; Fabula and Timár, 2018; Parr, 1997).

So as not to reproduce ableism, it may seem like a good idea to free walking and, consequently, methodology from methodological expectations and imaginations. Vannini and Vannini (2017: 179) argue that go-along interviews 'still suffer from many of the same ailments that go-along methods were devised to cure' as they are 'often too methodical, systematic, and pre-determined by a priori research agendas.' They (2017: 188, 193) note that '[the walk-along should be] a wild walk out in the open, a walk that feels more like wayfaring than a kind of pre-planned transition from point A to point B.' The Vanninis (2017) are not alone in raising such a critique. Stiegler (2021: 2) complains that 'doing of the go-alongs seems to foreclose rather than generate the flow of conversation between participant and research.' Also post qualitative research, which has attracted a lot of attention in the past few years (e.g., Bodén, Gunnarson, 2021; Le Grande, 2018; Østern et al. 2021), opposes pre-planned methods. As St. Pierre (2019: 10-11) puts it, 'perhaps the best a teacher can do is get out of students' way and help them refuse this or that necessity. They will 'do' and 'think' something, and if that doesn't work, they will 'do' and 'think' something else. That's the nature of post qualitative inquiry.'

As appealing as the idea of opposing pre-planned methods is, it finds different contours when confronted with people who do not comply with the standardization of urban space. Neither methodologies nor anti-methodologies are neutral; they produce and reinforce situations that researchers study (Law, 2004). When unreflected upon, they are built on 'ableist methodological bias' (Bitnam, 2021), turning researchers into 'agents of ableism' (Towsand

and Cushion, 2021), and can become tools that further deepen inequalities and oppression, putting communication partners in complicated, uncomfortable, or even dangerous situations.

Walking with a white cane or a guide dog requires lots of planning, forecasting, and concentrating. That was why we asked our communication partners to choose a well-known route. At the same time, they needed to know what to *expect*, what *our plan* was, as every change could disrupt their pre-planned route. We had to do the planning to comply with our visually disabled communication partners as their routes are not 'wild walk(s) out in the open,' but 'pre-planned transition(s) from point A to point B' (see Vannini and Vannini, 2017: 188). Having wildness unfold and thinking simply of something else should things not work (see St. Pierre, 2019) was out of the question. Therefore, doing sit-down interviews that precede go-alongs is a substantial part of the research process that brings pre-understanding of movement of people who defy the standardization of urban space.

### **Anticipations, improvisations, asymmetries**

Walking alongside a communication partner offers a means to mitigate power imbalances, as it is conducted in an environment familiar to them, not the researchers, and walking side by side endorses partnership better than sitting opposite to each other. Therefore, the walking interview can be potentially benign to vulnerable participants (Kinney, 2017). However, what might be of a great benefit for some, can be a pitfall for others, and, conversely, deepen the asymmetries.

During the go-alongs, many unanticipated situations that stemmed from asymmetrical access to the visual world occurred. Even on frequently walked routes, we encountered new situations, and it was we, as sighted persons, who were able to find quick solutions. Thus, go-along research disclosed a lot about our own positionality and privilege (see Castrodale, 2017),

which was accompanied by particular expectations; not only that of able-bodied people towards the disabled ones but also vice versa (see Tregaskis and Goodley, 2005).

We fully realized this during one of the first go-along interviews. People with visual disabilities are used to being accompanied/guided, which clashed with the research. Moreover, the nature of basic research was not comprehensible to many of the communication partners, and we needed to negotiate our roles more. Apparently, Robin had imagined the research as applied and saw our roles as similar to that of coaches who teach visually impaired people new routes. He wanted to go through a route that he had not walked for a long time, and thus he welcomed our company. He put certain expectations on us—that we know what to do and how to communicate such situations. He felt strangely safe with us and attempted things that he would most probably never do alone. But we did not have the competences of assistants/instructors who could have told him: 'Now you should stop. Don't move, and just listen.' We did not want to touch him, stop him, or guide him. And so, he kept on walking, and suddenly he was standing on a traffic island in the middle of a road surrounded by buses, trams, and cars. It was wild. We had to intervene.

To avoid such dangerous situations, we strived for a clear description of our roles for the next go-alongs. It was necessary to explain in detail what the individual team members were going to do, and what the communication partner could expect and what not. We defined ourselves against the roles of assistants/instructors and stressed that in case of any problems, we must be asked for help, otherwise we would not intervene.

The experience from our research highlights the importance of situated and grounded ethical praxis that exceeds procedural ethics (see Macleod et al., 2018) manifested in institutional protocols that often acquire formalized and rigid contours (Guillemin et al., 2012). We tried to establish our own, grounded rules of what to ensure to keep the research ethical and safe. However, even these rules could not be applied every time (see figure 2).



**'WAIT, REALLY, STOP, STOP!': GO-ALONG INTERVIEWS WITH VISUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE AND THE PITFALLS OF ABLEIST METHODOLOGY**

Dana: It's usually very muddy and messy terrain here. So, I tend to walk here carefully, as it is dangerous. It's slippery and really idiotic, so...

Researcher: Dana, I might want to stop you.

Dana: Yeah? (keeps going)

Researcher: Wait, really, stop, stop!

Dana: What? Why?

Researcher: There is a large puddle of water in front of you. (go-along interview, 31 August 2020)



Figure 2. The photograph depicts a sidewalk with a large puddle and a significant amount of mud at its right edge. On this sidewalk, two passage options are marked. The first one (solid arrow) represents the actual path that we the communication partner walked with our assistance after alerting her to a



potentially hazardous situation ahead. The second one (dashed arrow) is the route along the natural guiding line (the edge of the sidewalk and the grass), which the communication partner uses and would likely have used again without our intervention.

Despite the prior explanation of our roles, we often found ourselves confronted by situations where we faced ethical dilemmas and risk assessments of what can be hit or stepped in and what not; when something will cause a light bump, which our communication partners are used to and happens often; and when it could hurt as well as when it would be inappropriate and impolite not to intervene. At what moment do you tell a person they have missed the entrance to their home? How far from a puddle would you stop them? These situations interfered significantly with the a/symmetries in our research, showing that it is necessary to negotiate as much as possible in advance but that not everything can be planned; a certain amount of improvisation related mainly to ethical issues is unavoidable. Therefore, it was also necessary to adhere to principles of processual ethics accentuating the need to cope with ethical issues that arise during the research process (Rice et al., 2018).

### **Asking, answering, disrupting**

During the research, it was necessary to connect methodological practices with spatial practices. Often, we did not register these aspects much during the go-along itself, but they came to light primarily through subsequent reflections documented by both the interviewer and the observer. At first, these inscriptions were intended as tips for the fellow researchers, but gradually they revealed our own assumptions, often based on visibility. We saved all inscriptions on a protected drive and later, all team members read them and discussed them in our closed Facebook group established in order to coordinate and share our research findings.

One of the methodological practices that interferes with spatial practices lies in the very core of go-along interviews—asking and answering questions. During the first, pilot go-along with Richard we did not make stops on the way and our intention was to interfere as little as possible. But this perspective changed with Ema, the second go-along. She began making stops and even returned to some places, explaining she needed to grasp and articulate what she had done and why. This is not feasible during walking, which requires concentration, whether for a blind or sighted person.

Interviewer: What are you noticing right now?

Ema: Right now, there's not much to notice, because it's just buildings, buildings all the time, always the same. There's nothing interesting here at all, like really nothing. It will be interesting when these buildings end, which will be in a moment.

Interviewer: Do you perceive that it sounds different?

Ema: Not now, it's the same, just when I'm coming back, my house sounds different. So, now the buildings have ended, and now there's like a gap on the right.

Interviewer: Do you always slow down at that gap?

Ema: Mostly, yes, but now I'm stopping to describe it somehow, well, I don't know, now there's this sort of grass coming up, the path to follow, then there will be some bushes coming up after that. (go-along interview, 30 July 2020)

We found those stops extremely productive. The original intention of having our communication partners walk the route as much as they were used to, describing it, and asking questions only seldom, started to change. Trying to understand in a greater detail why our communication partners did what they did, and how it happens that they do and do not understand something, came to the fore. We would ask about incomprehensible places and

activities, stopping and occasionally returning to them during the go-alongs, exploring them and circling around them, letting the person's movement be repeated, asking in different ways.

While talking can become easier when walking (Jones et al., 2008; Kinney 2017), it does not hold true for visually disabled people. We tried to ask questions during appropriate moments so as not to disturb the route and orientation of our communication partner. The most suitable were longer tracks without any distinctive changes, without any passages (see Law and Moser, 1999). Before a passage is about to come, lots of concentration is needed. Immersed in the research as we were, we did not always adhere to this in the presence of a guide dog, as they freed the talking capacity of our communication partner. We became conscious about this especially when listening to the recording, although none of our communication partners objected to our behavior, perhaps out of courtesy. But we recognized the necessity for strict self-control during go-along interviews, and the need for ongoing negotiations with communication partners regarding appropriate moments for asking questions to avoid disturbing the concentration of either the partners or the dogs.

A good way to communicate with each other was to stop along the way, which our communication partners initiated, and we embraced. At first, we tended to stop at places where something interesting or puzzling occurred in order to ask about it immediately on the spot. However, later we came to realize that these were not always good places to pause and stand. Able-bodied persons can stop at any place as long as it does not require swift motion, like crossings, doors, or crowds, because urban space is created for them (see Law and Moser, 1999; Moser, 2006). Consequently, their movement remains smooth and unproblematic, and able-bodied people seem disembodied, transiting in an autonomous and independent way (Moser, 2006). The same logic gets projected into go-alongs, and that is why Vannini and Vannini (2017) can criticize them as disembodied.

However, people with disabilities find the materiality of movement constantly present, as 'materiality defies disabled subjects: there are always bad passages, missing links and problematic bodies' (Moser, 2006: 385). Walking ensures the direction of movement, which might get lost when you pause. A communication partner could have remained standing in the same direction, but it was not always the case. Sometimes, we moved a little bit during a conversation or made room for passers-by. At other times, we walked into the shade to avoid standing in the blazing sun, or the observer would move forward and ask questions, and the communication partner kept turning toward whomever they were speaking. Thus, they might have changed their orientation several times and found it difficult to resume the initial direction. We did not notice this happen; however, the communication partners were very diplomatic, and, moreover, some of them did not want to show us they were having difficulties.

### **Epistemological consequences**

#### ***From patterns to critical reflection***

All these methodologies, assumptions, plans, research agendas, and reflections have epistemological consequences that result in creating specific knowledge, constructing specific *science*. Therefore, after introducing the pitfalls we encountered during the data collection, we want to discuss the epistemological dimension of the research, which is inseparable from the empirical. The matter of un/planning and interfering with the movement of our communication partners opens questions of what knowledge has been constructed and how, and what is the relationship between science and the lived experience of communication partners.

St. Pierre (2019), Vaninni and Vannini (2017), and Benozzo (2021) associate the critique of pre-planned research with pre-planned results in which researchers look for themes and patterns and apply concepts to data (St. Pierre, 2019: p. 4-5). Thus, the whole research process

reproduces the already existing thinking and inequalities without much reflection, postulating recognition and representation (see Castrodale, 2017; Law, 2004).

One of the aims of the study was to critically challenge the existing geographic concepts and inscriptions based on visibility (see Rose, 2003; Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2016). We had no intention to reproduce inequalities. Post qualitative inquiry objects to pre-planned methods and coding, as these are drawn on already existing thinking (St. Pierre, 2014; 2019). St. Pierre (2019) criticizes looking for *themes* and *patterns*, which are *represented by applied concepts*. Yet, we did use pre-planned methods and coding: we used codes to articulate the forming of the relationship between visual disability and urban space, and highlighted *remarkable situations* which awoke our imagination and helped us to *critically reflect concepts* and paradigms important to human geography (or any other discipline). Thus, the relationship between data and results are not a matter of *representation* but of *assembling* (see Deleuze and Guattari, 2005).

We strive to defy the hegemony of the ocular in research that is built on the separation of modern divisions between mind and body, social and material (Daza and Gershon, 2015). Concepts such as space, route, way, movement, or walking are inherently tied to visibility in human geography (Rose, 2003; Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2016), with the map remaining one of the central representations based on the visual logic of an effective view of the 'divine eye' from above seeing space as a stable (and sometimes curved) canvas. This development has caused Western modernity 'cartographic anxiety' (Gregory, 1994), whereby a visual objectivist epistemological approach to space is vigorously defended as the pure and true one in opposition to any other, consequently deemed merely subjective and universally false.

As spatial concepts are shaken and reshaped in the course of research, so are other concepts intertwined with them (autonomy, in/dependence, corporeality). We do not critically discuss these concepts to necessarily reject them and come with different ones, but to show

them as dynamic, as taking on different forms as well as acting and producing a certain reality that the blind experience may encounter. 'The real risk to be run is to have the questions you were raising *requalified* by the entities put to the test,' notes Latour (2004: 216), one of the anterior representatives of science and technology studies.

### ***From Authentic Situations to Laboratory***

Kinney (2017: 2) reminds us that during the go-along interview, 'the researcher accompanies the participant on an outing that *would have normally occurred* even if the researcher were not present' (our emphasis). However, we *did interfere* with their walking, and thinking about planning, adapting, and realizing go-alongs raises a question of what we have actually researched. We could state that we studied experience or rather practices and affects (see Deleuze and Guattari, 2005) *created during and by the research*. The original research question 'How do visually impaired people experience urban space?' thus attains different contours.

This does not mean that we studied something totally different from what our communication partners usually experience—the conditions were adjusted only slightly. Only by modifying them, we got access to the experience of visually impaired people with urban space (see figure 3). As Macpherson (2009) notes, even though some visually impaired people developed strong receptiveness to tactile and acoustic sensations, it does not mean they can talk about their experience easily. We used and adapted the go-along method so that direct experience would make the talking and asking easier.

Our intention was never only to observe situations in an *uninvolved* manner. We needed to deliberately alter some things like asking, stopping on the way, and returning to some places, which changed the ways communication partners *normally* walk (see Kinney, 2017). Only then, they could explain us what they were doing, like Jakub:

## 'WAIT, REALLY, STOP, STOP!': GO-ALONG INTERVIEWS WITH VISUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE AND THE PITFALLS OF ABLEIST METHODOLOGY

Jakub: Of course, I recognize that. And it would be significant in a case if I was looking for something specific, then I can use it as a reference point. Yes, there's a solid wall here [harsh tapping sound with a cane], this looks like [muffled tapping sound]... this seems like insulation. [Harsh tapping sound] This is a solid wall. [Muffled sound] Insulated again.  
(go-along interview, 24 July 2020)



Figure 3. The photograph shows a sidewalk alongside a row of two houses, which serves as a natural guiding line. On this sidewalk, the direction of passage for the pedestrian crossing guard (KP) is indicated by an arrow along these houses. Each house has a foundation made of a different material. While one has it bordered with ceramic tiles, the other has a concrete foundation. Two metal gutters separate both houses.

Under normal circumstances, we would not have access to such information as Jakub would not tap against each surface. We needed to create a suitable environment, a 'laboratory'. Conventionally, the word 'laboratory' evokes a highly controlled environment, but we use it to highlight the process which intentionally gathers in one place what was previously distant, and thus enables the research to be assembled, to compare, combine, and connect things (see Latour,

1999)—like a research interview with space and walking. Otherwise, we would simply not have had access to blind experience with urban space. ‘The more scientists work, the more artificial set ups they devise, the more they intervene, the more passionate they are, the more chance they offer for phenomena to become articulated through their “logos” and “graphos”, Latour (2004: 219) adds.

### *From Representations to Translations*

Transferring one thing (blind experience) somewhere else (into geographic research) requires it to be translated gradually, which transforms it. ‘Translation [...] means displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements or agents’ (Latour, 1994: 32). Communication partners were translating the experienced into the spoken, and able-bodied researchers were also translating the seen into the spoken to facilitate analysis (see Carpiano, 2009) and to render it understandable for the wider social science audience, like in the following example:

Dana: So, I am leaving home, keeping myself to the right, and I walk maybe around ten meters, maybe not even, from the house, and I come—

Interviewer: Can I interrupt you at the beginning? Now you have walked into the middle of the sidewalk, and there were some shrubs on the right, and then you kind of moved away, walked to the left and then walked straight?

Dana: Yes, yes. I reach the lawn, I turn to have it on my left, and then I keep walking straight.

Interviewer: And why are you walking on the left when you have it [the cane] across?

Dana: It doesn't matter in the end. I don't mind. The truth is that walking with the cane across is a bit worse. It is not that comfortable, not that pleasant. But I am more used to it



'WAIT, REALLY, STOP, STOP!': GO-ALONG INTERVIEWS WITH VISUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE AND THE PITFALLS OF ABLEIST METHODOLOGY

here because here, as we keep walking... I keep to the left. It really is a bit across, but I don't mind it in this case because I don't want to be counting the entrances (laughter).

Interviewer: I see, it's that on the right, there are—

Dana: Yes, there are houses and because there are these entrances, I would have to be counting them, so I do it this way, keeping to the left all the time, just keeping to the left.

(go-along interview, 31 August 2020)

Having left her house, Dana changed the sides without mentioning it in her commentary. The purpose of the questions and comments of the interviewer was not only to understand why this happened, but also to transfer this shift to the voice recorder that enabled written inscriptions. Moreover, the translation of the seen into the spoken *problematized* Dana's automatic and thus non-articulated moves, which rendered her talkative.

Translations of visibility were also one of the responsibilities of the observer, who kept focusing on the visual modality of information. The observer would thus record space closer to the visual spatial logic, about which we asked the communication partners in the follow-up interview after the go-along, which resembled a focus group—all three participants had experienced the same go-along but their experience differed.

Photographs played an important role in translating the observers' reflections; often they were the object of analysis rather than its tool (see Cosgrove, 2008; Doel and Clarke 2007). The taken photographs served as visual notes for the observers, as a reminder of what they noticed and what captured their attention enough that they wanted to inquire about them. They had to be verbalized for the communication partners, providing them not only with some control over the collected data but also with a source of understanding of what we, as sighted researchers, are interested in—to explain to our communication partners what we do, how, and why, and why it is important for us.

The shared experience of go-alongs, in which we tried to decipher what happened, resulted in situations where the roles of the researchers and the researched reversed, and our communication partners signified their wish to understand our desire for photographs and our understanding of space, asking how sighted people imagine infinity or how we pictured a concrete space.

Sometimes, our communication partners intentionally pointed us to places which they did not understand (see figure 4). Then, *together*, we were trying to interpret what had just happened, like with Ema:

Ema: So now there's this kind of place that I never really know how to explain to someone, even though maybe it's just about figuring out how to describe it, like going along this, and now you have to somehow find that tactile paving and sort of find your way, because from that 'T', it actually turns into what used the top [of that confusing thing], which is now behind me, and what is like the bottom is turned, yeah, it's just stupid, I don't know, you would probably say that it's still straight ahead or something, I don't know, but I just... (laughter).

Interviewer: And is it difficult to find this tactile paving here?

Ema: Not for me, but if I had to explain it to someone, like what they should look for—

Interviewer: So, you don't have a problem walking through that area, but explaining it to someone is the challenge?

Ema: Well, yeah. (go-along interview, 30 July 2020)

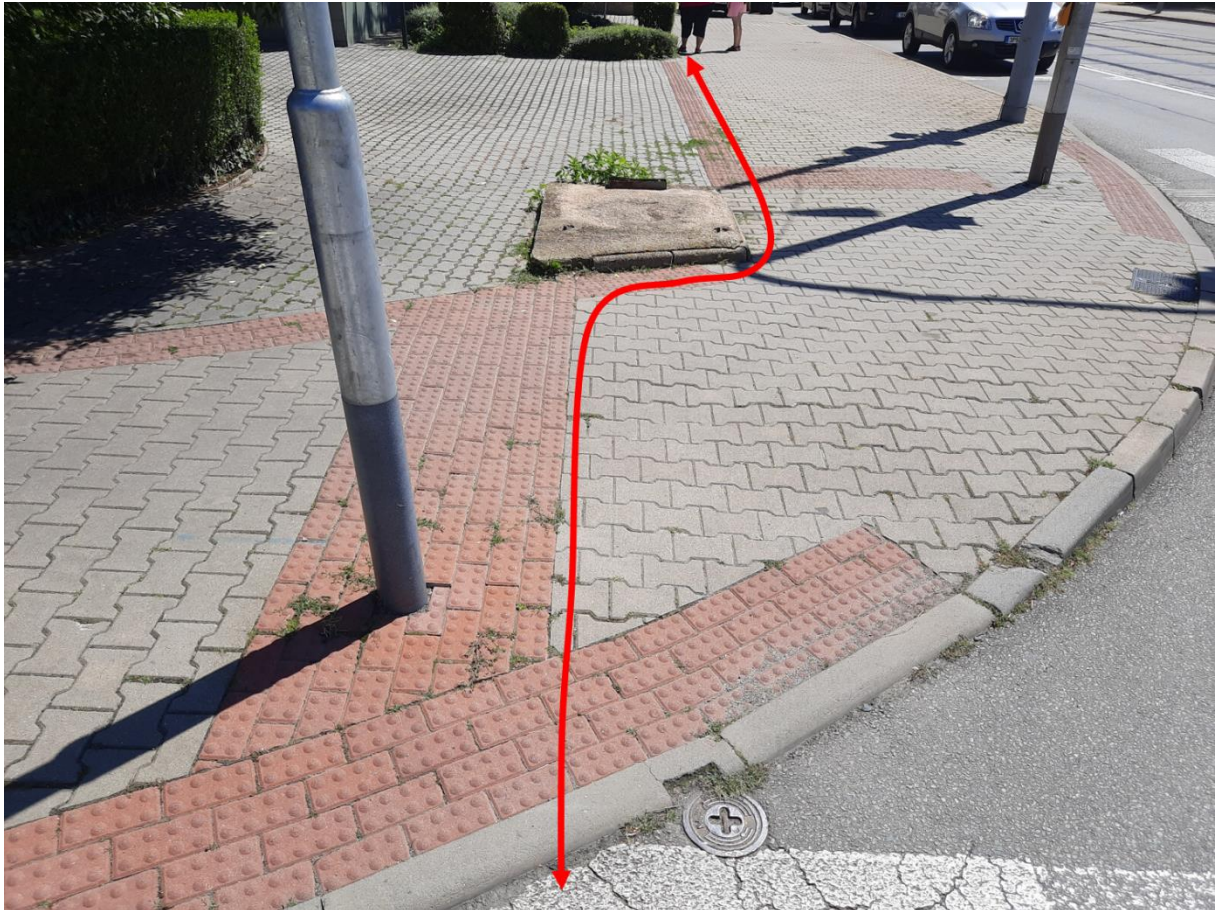


Figure 4. The photograph features a disorganized open space on the sidewalk right next to a signal-controlled intersection. In the area, there are two traffic light poles, one public lighting pole, and in the center, a concrete remnant of the base under a former public telephone booth. The space is also interspersed with a large amount of tactile paving. In this area, the passage of the communication partner is marked. She, although moving through the space in a straight direction, must navigate around that remnants of the booth, which has a trapezoidal shape.

There were no experts and guides in the research, just mediators (see Latour, 1994). The goal need not be one joint understanding but mutual understanding. A communication partner's feedback about their experience that is translated *well* into a scientific text need not be 'Yes, that's *exactly it!*' but 'Yes, you can say it *this way, too.*' Thus, not only was the blind experience translated into human geography but also human geography and visibility into blind experience,

as translations are always collective and generate mutual qualities; something new, connected, shared, and thus mutually comprehensible was arising.

Displacement, transitions, inventions, and translations produce research that makes two things possible: to modify geography through blind experience and, at the same time, modify blind experience through geography. We 'bring into being that which does not yet exist', which St. Pierre (2019: 1) pleads for. This, however, does not exclude the finding or describing, which St. Pierre (2019: 1) opposes to. Realism and constructivism intertwine. 'What a transformation, what a movement, what a deformation, what an invention, what a discovery!' says Latour (1999: 51). In our research, researchers together with participants were constructing *and* discovering blind experience with urban space.

## **Conclusion**

The notion of objective, neutral, representative science has ceased to be unshakable in qualitative social science research, and the idea of co-productive, constructive character of scientific knowledge (Latour, 1999; Law, 2004) has gained significant influence. Therefore, new questions should be asked—not *whether* there is something represented or constructed, but *what* is constructed, *how* it has been constructed, and what are the consequences of such construction. This is what we have tried to clarify in our text.

While mobile methods have recently gained attention in disability studies as they can be useful tools for understanding embodied experience of disability (Butler and Derret, 2014), methodological literature addressing difficulties that may occur is scarce. This is not only a problem because of the lack of the critical reflection on ableist academic systems (Bitman, 2021), but also because these methods are potentially dangerous.

Standardized methods, however flexible they are, have been developed for studying standard research subjects moving in standard ways. Even though methodologies are not

necessarily ableist, they can be—which applies also to post qualitative inquiry, despite its opposition to methodologies, standardization of research, and linear logic of the research process. The rejection of standardization and planning may run up against unconscious assumptions woven into ableist notions of space, walking, and talking. Sometimes knowledge, empathy, openness, flexibility and improvisation are just not enough. Wild walking (see Vannini and Vannini, 2017) can go terribly wrong. What can be smooth, exciting, and adventurous for an able-bodied and privileged person, can be troublesome, anxious, or even dangerous for someone who is disabled or/and unprivileged due to racism, sexism, classism, and so forth. Where researchers can let things flow with some, they must plan carefully with others (see Carpiano. 2009).

Only by focusing on interlinks between methodological and spatial practices can we critically reflect on the ableist nature of methodologies, disciplines, and science. Therefore, before employing mobile methods with people who defy standardization of urban space, we highly recommend doing sit-down interviews to prevent creating unpleasant or even dangerous situations. It may also be safer to conduct research in teams rather than alone. Then, a clear division of roles among researchers and communication partners needs to be set to deal with the ableist asymmetries and different anticipations. It is critical to consult in detail what communication partners could expect from researchers and what not. Still, unforeseen situations that require researchers' intervention will likely arise—and researchers will face ethical dilemmas and risk assessment about how and when to intervene. The different needs of the research and communication partners should be negotiated as they may be in conflict. This might concern stopping along the way, or finding appropriate moments for asking questions and responding. These above-mentioned points are based on our experience of able-bodied researchers and visually disabled communication partners, and we make no claim to their

universal validity. Yet, we believe they can be of help for future research using mobile methods with people with disabilities.

At the same time, it always depends on what researchers are trying to do. And while some research does not require pre-defined research questions like the proponents of post qualitative inquiry promote, some does, especially if one wants to confront specific concepts, paradigms, or questions that are relevant to the discipline, such as the visual conception of space prevalent in geography. A common problem with the social sciences is that at times, they do not offer much more than good journalists do—and the latter do it better because their texts are more accessible, understandable, and gripping. The role of scientists, whether sighted or blind, is also to ask questions that others do not. How to think about space and movement in a non-visual way? In what ways is geography intertwined with visibility? How to engage the other senses? How to observe by hearing? By touch? How to reflect the able-bodiedness of researchers?

Sometimes, it is necessary to create opportune situations that enable the asking. During both the sit-down and go-along interviews, communication partners often told us that they had to give some thought to questions because they had never occurred to them. We needed to build an environment where one talks about experienced movement, responds to questions, and is made to become aware of and articulate movements and sensorial perceptions that go otherwise unnoticed. In other words, establish a go-along laboratory (see Latour, 1999), similarly to natural scientists who can only ask certain questions in their laboratories.

The matter then becomes how to create such a laboratory in the best possible way, that is, in a way that allows not only prepared questions to be asked, but also new and unexpected ones to be generated, answered, and recorded. Further, to do so in accordance with research ethics principles and common human decency, ensuring that no harm comes to anyone and that the go-along interview is a positive experience for all parties. In this way, it is possible not only

to construct research that will be valuable for the discipline, and thereby for the social sciences, but also to build mutual understanding.

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'WAIT, REALLY, STOP, STOP!': GO-ALONG INTERVIEWS WITH VISUALLY DISABLED PEOPLE AND THE PITFALLS OF ABLEIST METHODOLOGY

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