

Analysing spatial data gained from walking interviews and psychogeographic group tours

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Summary

This paper asks whether there is potential to complement existing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) practice by taking different routes through the Census and other data which relates to places. For example, my PhD research researched ageing, the lifecourse and emotional attachments to place by deploying a methodology which includes interviews inspired by walks and psychogeographic group walking tours. One output from this project is a collective narrative structured along a six-stage walk of 5.8km. Mapped as a GPX line, could such threads be used to link with other data and therefore provide new ways of understanding the characteristics of places?

Key words: psychogeography, ageing, walking, qualitative, methods

1. Introduction to psychogeographic practice

This paper centres on a PhD project which gathered data through walking interviews and psychogeographic group walking tours. One output is a collective narrative of a place structured as a 5.8km walking line (Figure 2). This paper asks whether Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have potential to take such lines and link to other data.

Psychogeographical practice pursues deeper psychological connections to geography. Notable advocates were The Situationists, a group which included artists and architects who centred on France during the 1950s and 1960s. The Situationists developed a walking method to explore “the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment” which centred on group tours and playful activities - cited in Richardson (2015). The later author adds that psychogeographic forms since the 1990s have focused less on the playful and more on local history or finding place narrative.

The following PhD project was funded by the ESRC and Swansea University’s Centre for Innovative Ageing. The main aim was to explore emotional attachments to space and place, and how these change over the lifecourse. As well as considering the biographies of individuals, a significant objective was to explore why certain places have concentrations of older people. Place factors for a significant ageing population could include the nature of the built environment, local economy and a range of other considerations.

2. Ageing and attachment to place

There is no comprehensive administrative system in the UK for tracing where individuals have lived through their lives. However, a rare exception is the Lothian Birth Cohort, involving people born in and around Edinburgh in 1921 and 1936. Researchers hypothesised that green space made a difference to health outcomes, and so connected the Lothian Birth Cohort data with the extent of available parks (Pearce, Shortt, Rind, & Mitchell, 2016). Although the latter team could see

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“considerable analytical potential for researchers with an interest in the links between place and health”, they required much more resource to complete the task.

Given a lack of statistical data my research would therefore explore individual biographical accounts. The chosen research site was Caerleon, a settlement of nearly 8,000 people in Newport, south Wales, where older residents had grown from 20% in 2011 to 26% in 2017 (Newport City Council, 2019): the largest ageing population in the latter council area. My work developed a hybrid approach which first gathered a series of one-to-one interviews, then analysed the data to create public events with outdoor walking tours and workshop elements. The project included two cycles of interviews, analysis and walking tours.

3. Participatory walking interviews

The participatory walking interview is broadly defined by Evans and Jones (2011, p. 849) as one-to-one scenarios where the interviewee decides on routes through spaces important to their biography and everyday life. The interviewer then asks questions framed by the space itself or determined as we “go-along”. As a basic principle, these interviews are mostly unstructured to give agency to the interviewee and therefore to allow for unconscious and affective connections to be uncovered.

After one scoping interview I completed eight outdoor walking interviews with seven different individuals. The interviews were recorded on an audio device with photos taken of certain sites when the interviewee consented. An example walk is shown in Figure 1, which was 3.2km in length, took 42 minutes and which featured 26 points of interest. As the study was purposefully aimed at including older people some individuals were physically unable to go outside. The outdoor walks were therefore complemented with a further five indoor (six different interviewees) “walks of the mind”, where participants were helped to walk through their memories. To a large degree these indoor walks could be traced to specific spaces and therefore overlaid on a digital map.

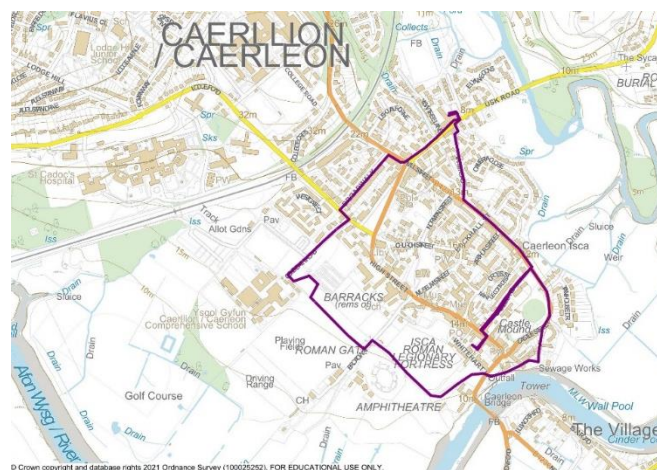


Figure 1 Walking interview April 2019.

4. Analysing interviews

A process of deeper analysis started after completing the first five interviews. As each interviewee had chosen a different walk, it was not feasible to examine the quality of specific streets or public spaces. However, it was possible to use thematic analysis to identify topics from each interview. For example, people mentioned work, family life, transport and shopping. Moreover, the accounts confirmed lifecourse theories that emotional attachments are made to spatial levels which relate to chronological age (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). To illustrate, the home and immediate street are important to children, whilst the wider neighbourhood matters more to older people.

To explore Caerleon in more depth, two public group walks would link these different accounts together. Such a precedent existed in *Rescue Geography* (Jones & Evans, 2012), where older adults had taken group strolls through Birmingham. The latter outdoor workshops also allowed people to compare their experiences. Of note, *Rescue Geography* used GIS to chart the walks, exploring emotional attachments by measuring how long people dwelled in locations. The chosen approach for the Caerleon project returned to the psychogeographic principles of place narrative, local history and playfulness. To that end a collaboration with performance artist Marega Palser helped to draw out accounts with dramatic appeal. For example, one person had highlighted the specific spot where a car crashed through a back garden. Although the story was nearly fifty years old, and the road had since been improved, it linked to the wider phenomena of increasing car use in the sixties and seventies.

5. Psychogeographic group tours

The line taken by the public walks was partly inspired by *The Hill of Dreams*, a novel by Caerleon-born author Arthur Machen, and partly from elements shared through the interviews – such as routes to taken to school. At the first event in July 2019 nearly forty people completed stages one to four of the line shown in Figure 2: walking along public footpaths, through parks and housing estates. At various points Marega created lively interpretations of accounts such as a car crash, which in turn helped to refine the place narrative and uncover the story of a massive steelworks built in the late 1950s. The industrial story helped to refine the topics covered in the interviews which commenced in late summer 2019. A second public event in November 2019 used this new material and was supported with an ESRC Festival grant, where nearly thirty participants attended an indoor gathering and walked stages five and six (Figure 2). Themes included the rise of the supermarket and the right to buy social housing: representing how life changed through the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s.

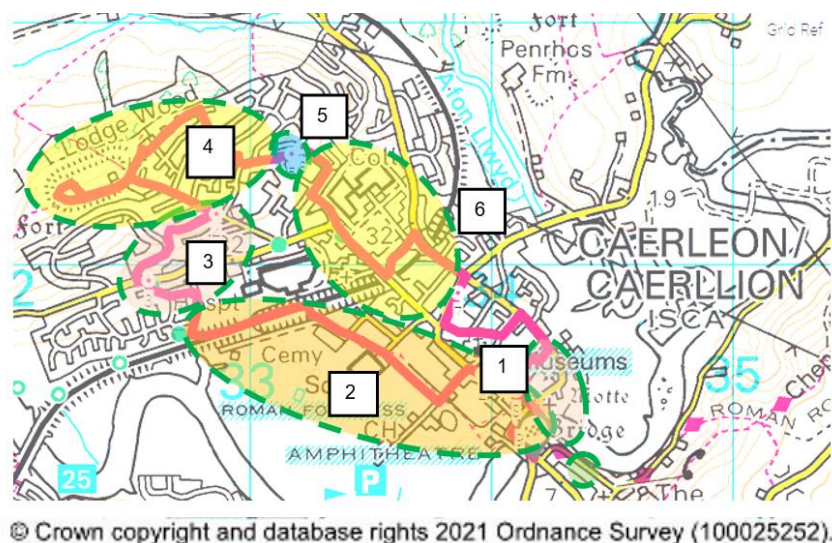


Figure 2 Combined walk in six stages.

These two walking tours undoubtedly helped to put the separate interviews into a wider context. Moreover, attendees themselves theorised that Caerleon had such a significant ageing population because residents had stayed for five or more decades due to well-paid industrial jobs, an ability to buy private homes and being close to schools. Although this hypothesis explains present-day retirees in Caerleon, urban space will always be complex, layered and keep on changing. Could this psychogeographic approach link better to GIS?

6. The future: opportunities to link with GIS data.

Interviews, such as Figure 1, were mapped onto specific streets and the psychogeographic group walks were also compiled as one line. It is therefore possible to link these locations to official statistics at an Output Area level and make comparisons over time. In one intriguing case, the Office for National Statistics' Societal Descriptions for one street in Caerleon supported the ageing narrative as it had changed from "younger blue collar" in 2001 to "hard pressed ageing workers" in 2011.

Altogether this psychogeographic approach allows researchers to plot lines (Figure 2) which can link to data and explore the nuance of place in ways which goes beyond the headline statistics, such as the *Caerleon Ward Profile* (Newport City Council, 2019). Although this method is relatively new, an essay was published in the Design Commission for Wales *Places for Life II* report (Singleton, 2021) which makes the case for walking to engage with places. The methodology can also incorporate virtual walks through space, using technologies such as Google Earth. In conclusion there are further applications for this innovative approach to take slices through spatial data, such as having potential to explore not just ageing, but also health outcomes, labour markets and more.

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8. Biography

Aled is an early career researcher interested in ageing, emotional attachments to place, creative writing, and innovative methods in human geography. Aled spent over a decade as a project manager of local regeneration initiatives before completing his doctoral research at Swansea University's Centre for Innovative Ageing in December 2020.