

MAPPING STORIES: USING GPS AS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO SOCIO-SPATIAL RESEARCH WITH FAMILIES DISPLACED BY WAR

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Abstract

There is an unprecedented number of displaced persons in the world today. This number is still rising as solutions to stem armed conflict and its subsequent displacement continue to fail. With the sudden arrival of large numbers of refugees in resource poor settings, sites for refugees have developed rapidly without attention to the social and spatial implications. Research methods with populations affected by war do not always include sensitive methods by which to better learn about their everyday mobilities. Furthermore, there is scarce research that uses geographic positioning systems (GPS) as an ethnographic approach with families displaced by war. Using a variety of data gathering methods including collaborative family interviews, drawing/mapmaking, GPS-tracked neighborhood walks, daily diaries, and GPS-tracking of everyday mobility, this presentation reports on a mixed methods research study exploring the everyday lives of Syrian families living in Lebanon. The presentation will describe how this particular combination of methods with GPS encourages individual and family voices and results in rich data on families' socio-spatial experiences. Strengths of GPS as an ethnographic approach includes the ability to triangulate different forms of data from a variety of sources and avoiding preconceived questions in favor of learning about local categories and understandings of experience. However like other ethnographic methods, GPS also poses ethical challenges related to access, confidentiality, surveillance, and dissemination of research findings. In addition to exploring the strengths and challenges, this presentation will underscore the value of GPS as an ethnographic approach that has the capacity to shed light on the everyday realities of war-affected families and therefore contribute to solutions to ameliorate the negative consequences of war.

Using GPS as an Ethnographic Approach to Research with Families Displaced by War

The past several years have witnessed increased numbers of people fleeing war and violence in their home countries. Contexts range from Rohingya refugees fleeing Myanmar for Bangladesh and Syrian refugees fleeing to neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. The number of displaced continues to rise as new conflicts begin or worsen and solutions to stem the conflict and its subsequent displacement continue to fail. With the sudden arrival of large numbers of refugees in resource-poor settings, sites for living, working, and learning have developed rapidly without attention to the social and spatial implications. The precarious setting within which war-affected families live poses logistical obstacles for collecting meaningful and rich data.

Given the challenging context, how can researchers learn about the everyday social and spatial experiences of these marginalized populations in a methodologically rigorous and sensitive way? In this presentation, we report on the methodological insights garnered from a novel research methodology that includes a range of methods including participant-observation, collaborative family interviews, drawing and mapmaking, neighborhood walks, and mobility tracking using geographic positioning systems (GPS). We argue that there is value in utilizing a mixed methods approach, which yields robust data through the synergistic application of complementary research methods.

Considering families from a socio-spatial perspective means including their social environments (e.g., parents, children, peers, community members) in the research process, while also acknowledging the role of the physical or spatial environment (e.g., home, school, neighborhood community). In other words, a socio-spatial approach to families' experiences emphasizes how the physical environment interacts with the multiple layers of the social ecological system.

To learn more about the experiences of war-affected families, our research team has used geographical information systems (GIS) in two different primarily qualitative studies. The first study was conducted in 2012 with 18 Palestinian families living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. GIS was not the primary method of data gathering in this study, but was piloted in conjunction with other data collection methods in order to create a multi-faceted and dynamic picture of people's lives. The research started with a collaborative family interview (CFI) that discussed the family's everyday lives and their experiences. The CFI included elements of drawing and mapmaking, which encouraged children's voices in the research process. After completion of the CFI and with their parents' permission, children were invited to lead the research team on a walk of their neighborhood community, while the research team carried a GIS device to record the walk (Akesson, 2019). The children were encouraged to explore places where, for example, they were allowed to visit, places where their daily activities occurred, and places where people they knew were located. With the children's permission, these places were photographed by the research team. Conversations about these places facilitated dialogue between the children and our research team, prompted by the people and places encountered along the way. In addition to observing the children in their natural environments where they expressed their multidimensional place experiences, the GIS technology yielded quantitative data on the length of the neighborhood walk in both distance and time, which revealed that there was a relationship between level of violence in the family's community and the length of the neighborhood walk (Akesson, 2014). Combined with the other methods of data collection, the GIS data revealed more information about family members' relationship to school. For example, some children showed us their school as a place of significance, elaborating upon stories related to traveling to school and attending school. This method is best suited to children's natural ways of communicating, using a physical and mobile approach far more active than the traditional interview setting, as a means for gathering data.

In light of the small success of this method piloted with the Palestinian cohort, we decided to expand the method to a larger sample size and in a different setting. In 2016, the second study—with 46 Syrian families who were displaced in Lebanon—made the GIS approach a more

prominent part of the overall methodology. The purpose of the research with Syrian refugee families in Lebanon was to understand the experiences and mobility patterns of these families. The research was funded by the Canadian Social Sciences Research Council, with data collection taking place from 2016 to 2017.

Similar to the Palestinian study, we conducted collaborative family interviews with 268 individuals within 46 families who had fled Syria due to the ongoing conflict that has wracked the country. The families had "temporarily" resettled in three regions of Lebanon: northern Lebanon, Beirut, and Bekaa Valley. Families included index family members (e.g., the "nuclear" family, or mother, father, children) and extended family members (e.g., aunts, grandmothers, cousins, etc.).

To start each interview, the research team gathered demographic data about the family, which also included the research team's reflections on the research process. Discussions during the family interviews consisted of life in Syria before the war, making the decision to leave Syria, the journey from Syria to Lebanon, life in Lebanon, and dreams for the future. Interviews used place-based methods that sought to understand the research participants' connection with their social and physical environments. Children participated in the research through drawing, mapmaking, and narrative methods. During the family interview, we provided time and space for the participants—both adults and children—to ask us questions about our backgrounds, our interest in this topic, as well as more specific questions about the research design and goals. We also asked participants what they thought about certain questions and processes of the research design to ensure their feedback throughout the process.

Once the collaborative family interview was complete, we invited the children to take us on a walk of their neighborhood communities (with parental consent and child assent). During the walk, the children were asked to carry an activity logger, a small device that collects GPS data regarding physical movement. During the neighborhood walk, children were encouraged to show us the places where, for example, they were allowed to visit, places where their daily activities occur, and places where people they know are located. Children were also asked to indicate any important places that we should take a photo of. Throughout the course of the walk, the children had full control over the research process.

After the neighborhood walk, the research team asked three family members (one parent, one older child, and one younger child) to carry the activity logger for a period of one week. Like the use of the activity logger during the neighborhood walk, GPS technology registered the family members' movements over the course of a typical week, thereby serving as an ethnographic mechanism by which to better understand their experiences. In fact, we liked to think of the activity logger as a miniature ethnographic researcher being carried around on the pocket of the research participants. The GIS data combined with the CFI data has been used to create sensory maps of sights, sounds, and their corresponding feelings related to everyday mobility. To aid in recall, family members were asked to keep a simple diary of their daily activities while carrying the activity logger. In addition to observing the family members in environments of displacement, the GPS technology yielded quantitative data on elements such as time spent

outside the home, distance travelled, etc. (See www.outofplaceresearch.com for a sample of the maps that were created using the GIS data from this study.)

At the end of the one-week period, the research team revisited the family for a follow-up interview. During this final interview, the family were asked to reflect upon their experiences over the past week and to share anything else that they did not get a chance to share during the first interview.

Practical challenges in the use of GIS as a qualitative approach are related to the volatile environment within which these groups live. In Palestine and Lebanon, several neighborhood walks were not conducted because there were environmental dangers (e.g., a sandstorm or heavy rain) and physical danger (e.g., when the level of violence was so high that the children were not allowed outside). Like any research method, GIS also poses ethical challenges related to access, confidentiality, surveillance, and dissemination of research findings (Akesson, Hoffman, El Joueidi, & Badawi, 2018). Yet despite these challenges, GIS is a promising qualitative approach to learn more about the everyday experiences of marginalized populations.

Citations and Works Cited

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