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Participant-Guided Mobile Methods: Investigating Personal Experiences of Communities Following a Disaster

Link to the Research Output

- Bryant, R., Waters, E., Gibbs, L., Gallagher, H. C., Pattison, P., Lusher, D., ... Forbes, D. (in press). *Psychological outcomes following the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires*. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*.
- Gibbs, L., Waters, E., Bryant, R., Pattison, P., Lusher, D., Harms, L., ... Forbes, D. (2013). *Beyond bushfires: Community, resilience and recovery – A longitudinal mixed method study of the medium to long term impacts of bushfires on mental health and social connectedness*. *BMC Public Health*, 13, 1036. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-13-1036> <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1023735821900>

This case study provides a critical account of the qualitative research component of a large-scale mixed-methods interdisciplinary project called *Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery*. The study is investigating the medium- to long-term impacts on individuals and communities of the Black Saturday bushfires of February 2009 in Victoria, Australia. For the qualitative research, we conducted in-depth interviews that incorporated participant-guided mobile methods. Participants were asked to take us to places that were important to them in their community, and we also photographed features that participants pointed out, using these images both as an additional data source for analysis and as a way to illustrate the project. The method yielded rich, contextually informed observational and interview data, and here, we discuss the benefits and challenges we encountered. These include the emergence of context-dependent data, a rebalancing of power and control within the interview with challenges to researcher assumptions, the value of preparing for and following up after

the interview and the inclusion of children in the research. Practical considerations for using this method are also highlighted.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the case study, you should

- Have developed skills in matching methods to research question and context by
 - Understanding how a mix of methods can be used to elicit different information
 - Taking into account vulnerability and sensitive contexts
 - Considering how a particular method fits into an overall investigation/study
- Be able to construct a methodology that increases participant control and choice
- Understand stages of the research process including
 - Preparation – connecting with community and participants before interviews
 - Flexibility and responsiveness on the part of the researcher
 - Follow-up

Case Study Context: *Beyond Bushfires*

In February 2009, bushfires devastated much of the state of Victoria, Australia. Although the fires raged for several weeks, the most severe occurred on Saturday, 7 February, and one of Australia's worst ever natural disasters was quickly dubbed 'Black Saturday'. The fires resulted in 173 lives being lost and the destruction of 3,500 buildings including 2,133 homes. In addition to the loss of homes and infrastructure, the social disruption in many affected rural communities was profound.

This case study, designed to inform teaching and learning about qualitative research, describes the qualitative research component of a large-scale mixed-methods

interdisciplinary project called *Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery* (see [Appendix 1](#) for a description of the larger study). The qualitative research consisted of in-depth interviews incorporating a participant-guided mobile method. Participants were asked to take us to places that were important to them in their community. During the interviews, we also photographed features that participants pointed out, and these images serve both as an additional data source for analysis and as a way to illustrate the project. As is described in this case study, much thought went into the most appropriate, ethical and effective way to engage adults, adolescents and children who have experienced trauma in this research. In Australia, ethical approval of research involving humans is generally required as a condition of funding, and ethics approval for the study and methodology described here was obtained from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee.

Designing the Qualitative Project Component: Choosing and Developing the Method

Authors Lisa Gibbs and Colin MacDougall originally conceived the method prior to its implementation in the *Beyond Bushfires* study, in collaboration with colleague Jeni Harden and in consultation with bushfire stakeholders and child trauma researchers internationally. This collaborative process was undertaken to respond to their concerns over the absence of children in public debates about the impact of the bushfires and recovery priorities. They designed the method to meet the challenge of creating conditions that promoted child agency to make a research contribution that represented their life experiences while still being mindful of the well-recognised power imbalance in child–adult interviews and children's particular vulnerabilities in this post-trauma context. These issues were addressed by developing a method that maximised child control over the topics discussed and the places visited, and therefore avoided the potential harm of probing painful memories or topics. It had the added advantage of utilising different methods of communicating meaning other than a verbal exchange, which can be challenging for some children depending on their maturity in social exchange and

their language competency. The option for parents and other family members to be present also allowed for prompting and support when children experienced shyness.

After developing the method as an appropriate way to engage children in the research, we recognised that it would be a useful method for all ages and was particularly well suited to conducting sensitive interviews in a post-trauma context.

It is axiomatic that the chosen research method must also be appropriate to answer the research question or questions being asked. For this project, we were particularly interested in the relationship between individuals and their communities and how this has been, and continues to be, affected by a disaster. Asking people to *show* us what was important to them in their community therefore seemed an ideal way to open up a discussion about why those places, people or things were important and to reflect on changes that had occurred or were continuing to occur.

We avoided asking potentially unwelcome and confronting direct questions about participants' fire experiences. Rather, we let them know that we were interested in how they were getting along now and what was currently important within their community, and expected that the method would allow participants to express their stage of recovery through what they chose to talk about and show us.

Stages of the Research Process

Sampling and Recruitment

The staged process used for the *Beyond Bushfires* study meant that we had already carefully established relationships with communities and potential participants through our community visits and earlier stages of the research prior to issuing invitations for people to participate in an interview. Interview participants were recruited from among people who had already completed the survey, which meant that we were approaching only those who already had an awareness of, as well as some degree of commitment to, the study. We used information collected in the surveys to undertake purposive sampling aiming for a range of participants in terms of levels of fire-affectedness, sex,

age and family structure. We also wanted to include people who were less publically vocal than those we had already heard from during our community visits. Recruiting from among survey participants thus gave us access to a range of voices beyond the usual (often self-appointed) community spokespeople. Our sampling strategy also drew on grounded theory methodology, whereby – particularly in the early stages – questions are very open and data are collected and analysed concurrently, enabling interviews to become more focused as themes emerge. A feature of grounded theory is that sampling can also become more focused and theoretically driven in response to emerging themes and theories arising from the analysis. Thus, during later sampling, we also sought participants who had moved to new communities following the fires, as relocation emerged from analyses of survey responses and of early interviews as a potentially important factor affecting wellbeing.

Invitations and information letters were sent to selected potential participants. The invitation specified the general topic and format of the interview as follows:

If you choose to take part in an interview, we will ask you to take us on a walking or driving tour of places that are important to you in your community. Our interest is on what is important to you and need not have anything to do with bushfires unless that is relevant to you and what you are showing us. You can take us on your own, with your family, or with a friend, depending on what you prefer.

The interviews began in 2013 and, at the time of writing, 27 adults and 4 children had participated. Of 79 invitations issued to date, 22 completed interviews have been conducted involving 31 participants. Six of those invited declined, and 51 either failed to respond or expressed interest initially but did not follow up when we attempted to arrange a time and date for the interview.

Conducting the Interviews: What Happened and What We Learned

Three of the authors (Karen Block, Lisa Gibbs, and Elyse Snowdon) conducted the interviews, with two of us attending each interview. The interviews were conducted in an open conversational style, generally beginning with a broad prompt such as ‘we'd like to hear about what is important for you living here ...’ We used additional prompts in response to issues raised by participants. The following discussion focuses principally on the benefits or challenges that we perceived as arising directly from using these mobile methods compared with a standard sit-down face-to-face interview.

The Emergence of Context-Dependent Data

In practice, most interviews developed in two phases. Because they had a choice of place to begin the interview, most participants invited us into their homes, and many of the interviews began with us sitting and chatting over a cup of tea or coffee – sometimes for an extended period – before beginning the mobile phase of the interview. Occasionally, the order was reversed and the interview began with a tour and finished sitting; and in only a few cases, the entire interview comprised a single stage – either a walking/driving tour or a seated interview (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Karen Block is being shown the impact of the fires on this couple's rural property.



One of the striking outcomes of the two-stage interviews was that the topic of conversation almost invariably changed, with very different information emerging, according to the setting. In most cases, participants spoke more about personal issues and experiences while sitting in their homes and then, while touring around, focused much more ‘outwardly’ on community and environmental features and changes. Although we did not ask direct questions about fire experiences, almost all participants spoke about what they had been through at the time of the fires – with the location of those conversations varying – sometimes sitting and at other times while showing us where the fire had been and its effects.

Power and Control

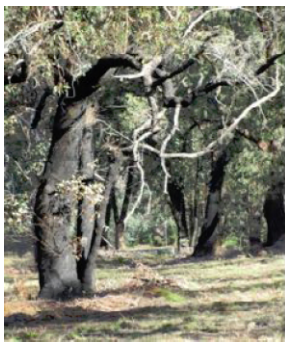
Asking participants to take us on a guided tour of their community explicitly cast them as the expert steering the interview. The method therefore gives participants a greater degree of control than they may experience with a more traditional interview format and helps to rebalance the asymmetrical power relations between researcher and participant, recognised as problematic by many qualitative researchers. The walking or driving interview also more easily accommodated silences than a face-to-face discussion would do – providing additional time for participants to reflect and think about what they wanted to say.

Several participants mentioned that they had spent time planning the interview, thinking about, and in some cases discussing with family members, where to take us. It is likely that this planning process and time spent reflecting on the significance of places added to the subsequent richness of the data that were collected. In one case, in preparation for the interview, a participant sent us a piece she had written about her experiences on the day of the bushfires when she had stayed and fought the fire – managing successfully to defend her property – which provided valuable contextual information for the interview. In another case, the interviewee reported that she had spent some time the day before the interview thinking about what she should show us and that when she reflected on what she had chosen it had given her new insight into her recovery experience which she found quite helpful.

Challenging Researcher Assumptions

One of the objectives underpinning the *Beyond Bushfires* study was to investigate the role of social connectedness and the social environment on people's mental health and wellbeing following a disaster. Thus, when planning the qualitative interviews, we had tended to assume that our interviews would be similarly 'social' in orientation. We had spent some time and effort, for example, considering how we would manage the process of gaining consent to use photographs of all the people we would be shown! One of the advantages of the method was that the focus of participants' attachment became evident through what they showed us. While many of our participants did indeed speak about their social environment and the importance of community members and family in particular, almost invariably what they chose to show us were features of their physical environment. In fact, some of our interviews focused almost entirely on trees! Trees were clearly particularly important for environmental and aesthetic reasons to many of those who had chosen to live in bushfire-prone forested areas. In some interviews, they also appeared to symbolise other things that were going on in the community, featuring in disputes over the most appropriate ways to reduce fire risk or over the choice of species to be replanted in regeneration efforts (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2. Trees as a metaphor for community – partially recovered but permanently changed 4 years after the fires.



For almost half of our interviews, the entire tour was conducted without leaving the participant's property. We therefore discovered the primacy of the natural and home

environments (rather than the social) for quite a large number of our interviewees and the powerful impact that fire-associated changes to those environments had had on them.

The 'expert' status of the participant also helped to open up opportunities for 'naïve' questions on the part of the researchers. Such questions can prompt the interviewee to explain what they mean in more detail – rather than just assume that the researcher understands what they are talking about. One interviewee responded to a researcher comment about the beautiful view from her rebuilt house, for example, by emphasising that she had preferred the way it looked before the fires, when the house was surrounded by dense forest. She explained that losing that sense of privacy led to a feeling of 'nakedness'. Another interview with a married couple very much challenged any assumptions we city-dwelling researchers might have had about the 'niceness' of having near neighbours:

- (P.1) I guess the other big change in the area is that we didn't realise we had so many neighbours. You couldn't see anybody before. You look around and there's houses everywhere but before the fires we were much more private.
- (P.2) And at night you couldn't really see any lights whereas now there's lights everywhere.
- (Int.) Oh that's quite nice!
- (P.2) No.
- (Int.) Why is it not nice?
- (P.2) I just liked it better when you couldn't see them.
- (Int.) What is it about it that you liked?
- (P.2) It's just nice to not be able to see a whole lot of other houses around.
- (P.1) I think that's sort of why you live here...you live in the country because it's private.
- (Interview with a couple living in a severely affected area)

‘But Wait There's More’ – Following Up after the Interview

A day or two after each interview, we followed up with participants by sending an email to thank them for their time and contribution to the study and to check in with them about how they were feeling after talking about their, quite often traumatic, experiences. In many cases, along with reassurance that the interview process had not had a negative effect, we received replies that offered us new information and data including written accounts of the fires, and other relevant documents or photographs. These additional data sources provided rich contextual detail and knowledge for our study. The follow-up process also led to a continuing dialogue between the research team and participants in some cases, providing opportunities to hear about subsequent community events and issues as well as, on occasion, offers to assist with further recruitment. We also let participants know that we would be sending four monthly updates on the project.

Several participants also told us at this follow-up stage that they had been somewhat anxious about the interview beforehand but had ended up enjoying the experience. One participant, for example, wrote back thanking us for our visit saying, ‘we found it to be very easy and casual, it was in the right atmosphere, we did have reservations with you coming, thinking we might be led in our discussions. But you allowed us to be ourselves’. He then offered some additional details about his community that he had forgotten to mention during the interview.

Including Children in the Research

We were keen from the outset to include participants of all ages in our interviews as we were aware that age was likely to have a powerful influence on experiences and priorities following a disaster. Children are often excluded from research, because it is assumed they have little to contribute, because they are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, because the chosen research instruments and methods are unsuitable or because it is easier to gain ethics approval for research with adults. Yet,

from a child rights perspective, it is clearly important that the particular needs of children are considered along with their capacity to contribute and have their voices heard. Accordingly, and as described earlier, the method we used here was initially devised to be appropriate for including children and we had hoped that whole families might agree to be interviewed, either as a group or individually.

Despite this, we faced considerable challenges in recruiting children and young people to participate in the study. Quite understandably, parental gatekeepers were in many cases reluctant to encourage their children to participate in a process that might bring back traumatic memories of the fires. In other cases, parents were willing for their children to be involved, but children and (especially) adolescents were not interested in speaking to us – perhaps feeling that ‘they’d had enough of bushfire talk’.

After the first few interviews with adults, and hearing about the apprehension they had felt before the visit, we realised that a staged recruitment and consent process was likely to be more successful. By interviewing a parent or parents on their own first, we have (to date) been able to recruit and interview several young children eager to talk to us about their lives.

While interviewing children has been, on the whole, useful and rewarding, there are additional challenges to consider. During our first child interview, for example, with a 7-year-old boy who was allowed to take us on a tour of the small town in which he lived, we found that attempting to empower children during the interview process was not without its challenges. From the beginning, he proudly took charge, confidently issuing directions and instructions as to which were the important features we should be photographing. Later in the interview, however, we felt we had no choice but to wrest back some control as he charged off across the main street without appearing to check for cars first and tried to persuade us that we should let that practice continue!

- (Early in an interview with a 7-year old boy)
- (Child) So come on. We'll start the journey. You'll be able to take some close up photos on the way.
- (Child) Keep on going this way...Oh look a rainbow parrot - worth taking a photo of...
- (Int.) You can take some of these photos if you want.

- (P) Yeah. I would...I'm good at taking photos. That sign has been there for like a long time.
- (Int.) Can we take a photo of that?
- (Child) No. It's not important.
- *****
- (Later in the interview)
- (Int.) ... you've got to promise me one thing. If we cross the road again can you promise to stop and look?
- (Child) No.
- (Int.) Well we won't be able to cross the road then!
- (Child) ... I'll look at the same time as I'm running.
- (I) No!

Conclusion and Practical Considerations

While there were no major drawbacks to the method, we did find it particularly important to be flexible and ready to respond to the circumstances of each interview. For this reason, during the interview, the researchers needed the experience and the authority to make decisions 'on the go'.

The two-stage process invariably extended the interviews. As noted, we often began by sitting and talking – and at the point where the conversation started to wind down, a more traditional interview would probably have ended. In our case, however, that point usually signalled the start of a tour during which new topics of conversation would be discovered. Many of the interviews were consequently long – up to two or more hours – and the process could be quite exhausting.

Most interviews were completed in rural areas requiring a long drive for the researchers coming from the city – at times adding to the exhaustion. However, this drive was also an opportunity for us to debrief after any distressing or confronting interviews, as a way of taking care of our own personal wellbeing. In practice, these discussions in the car also comprised a valuable opportunity (for the non-driver) to make field notes and for us to undertake the first stage of analysis of the interview material as we had ample time to confer about our impressions and thoughts.

There were additional practical issues to consider beyond those encountered in a more traditional sit-down interview including adapting to the weather – at times too wet, and at others too hot to accommodate the participant's initial plans for a tour. We needed to consider both the weather and the terrain when thinking about what to wear for the interview – we found a pair of gumboots in the car a good idea for traipsing around some rural tracks. Who drives and who sits where in the car were additional considerations when interviewees proposed driving to different community sites.

In conclusion, we would agree with health researcher Richard Carpiano (2009), who described what he calls ‘the go along’ interview as ‘a unique tool for meeting the challenges ... regarding the need to examine how physical, social, and mental dimensions of place and space interact within and across time for individuals’ (p. 264). We prefer the term ‘mobile methods’, however, as the walking or driving tour is more than an interview, providing opportunities for gathering observational and visual data as well.

We felt that our participant-guided mobile methods enabled us to develop a much deeper understanding of the contexts of participants' lives and elicited different types of information and reflections than would have emerged with a more traditional interview format.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- 1. In what ways can mobile methods contribute to equalising power relationships between researchers and participants?
- 2. What are some potential problems with mobile methods and vulnerable populations and how would you address these problems?
- 3. What plans should researchers make to protect and look after themselves when using mobile methods?
- 4. *Matching methodology to the research question.* Collect research articles from *Qualitative Health Research* that are relevant to your research area and carefully read the introductory sections that review the literature and derive the research question(s), taking care to avoid reading the methodology and methods section. Then,

- (a). write down the research question from each article and use your knowledge and skills to derive an overall methodology and particular methods that you think are best placed to answer the question(s).
- (b). compare the methodology and methods that you have developed with those in the published article.
- (c). debate with peers and mentors the similarities and differences between your methods and the published methods and reflect on any learning you need to do to be more confident in matching methodology to question.
- (d). using a methodology that combines different qualitative methods, write a paragraph that could be included in a methodology section showing how you thought through the need for each method considering their capacity to elicit different types of information.
- 5. *Incorporating mobile methods into your research: practical implications.* Conduct a literature search in journals from a range of research areas and disciplines using variations of terms used to describe mobile methods and qualitative research. Briefly describe each approach to mobile methods, and then,
 - (a). classify mobile methods into groups using criteria of your choice, and consider the relevance of each group of methods to your research area.
 - (b). select the methods that you think are most relevant and analyse them so you can match them with the practical implications of including them in your research. Practical implications could include for example cost, time, training, characteristic of researchers needed, and so on.
 - (c). draft a proposal to incorporate mobile methods into research stating how it contributes to your research.
 - (d). prepare a budget and timeline for the mobile methods component of your research.

Further Reading

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Appendix 1

Beyond Bushfires: Community, Resilience and Recovery

The *Beyond Bushfires* study (<http://beyondbushfires.org.au/>) is investigating the medium- to long-term mental health, wellbeing and social impacts of the Victorian 2009 bushfires using multiple methodologies and involving multiple community, agency and government partners. It is a 5-year study funded by the Australian Research Council with additional support from study partners including government and non-government organisations. It involves investigators with backgrounds in psychology, psychiatry, social work, sociology, social network analysis and public health as well as from government departments and service organisations.

The *Beyond Bushfires* study is participatory, comparative and longitudinal. Community visits and consultations are an important feature of the study. We have conducted well over 60 visits since 2010 entailing extensive discussions between the research team and people living in affected communities. The initial purpose of the visits (prior to beginning the research) was to gauge support for the study, gain local perspectives on the important research questions and sensitivities surrounding the research, and inform the research design. Later visits functioned to promote the project and aid in recruitment of participants for the quantitative survey component of the study. As the data from the study are progressively analysed, community visits are continuing as a

way of presenting our preliminary findings back to participating communities and gaining their input into our interpretation of the results.

Just over 1000 people, in communities ranging from minimally affected to the most severely affected, completed the first round of surveys in 2011–2012. These participants' responses will be sought again in 2014 and, funding permitting, in 2016, to track their mental health and social functioning over time. The quantitative survey component of the research uses a range of measures including standard mental health scales, epidemiological analysis and innovative tools such as social network analysis to provide insights into both individual and community-level recovery trajectories and the interplay between them.

The qualitative component of the *Beyond Bushfires* study, which is the focus of this case study, entails an in-depth analysis of a smaller number of participants' experiences and complements the surveys by providing a deeper understanding of people's experiences and the meanings they attach to them.

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