



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Walking for academics

Mol, A.

**DOI**

[10.4324/9781003189992-13](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003189992-13)

**Publication date**

2024

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Walking as Embodied Research

**License**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/policies/open-access-in-dutch-copyright-law-taverne-amendment>)

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Mol, A. (2024). Walking for academics. In C. Ernsten, & N. Shepherd (Eds.), *Walking as Embodied Research: Drift, Pause, Indirection* (pp. 157-164). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003189992-13>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## 8 Walking for academics

*Annemarie Mol*

In this analytic advisory text, I will compare a few ways of *walking* that are all good for academics, but in different ways. As there are. The holiday walk, which disentangles you from your ordinary life. The challenging walk, which has you breathing, minding your steps and shifting your attention to your body. The wayfinding walk, new to you and therefore begging for attention. The meditative walk, which, even if just for a bit, gets you away from your desk. The talk-walk, where you talk over your current intellectual project with a colleague. The supervision walk, to take with a student or a supervisor. The walking seminar, where you talk work with a range of scholars, one after the other. The catch-up walk, which deepens a friendship and helps with getting a grasp on life. The fieldwork walk, where you observe intriguing traits of your surroundings. The ethnographic walk, where you have an informant guide you. The gleaning walk, in which you pick up materials or make photos. This list is open-ended, and there is no need to elevate any one variant to the status of favourite walk. If your legs, your time, the terrain, transport systems, food supplies, the weather, other creatures, and what not, allow for it, you may want to experiment with all of them.

**The holiday walk, that disentangles you from your ordinary life.** Let go. Take your body and soul away from desks, classrooms, seminar settings. Out with us, outdoors. It may be for a week or two. You may take the holiday walk in a faraway setting – either a surprising landscape or one that offered you solace in earlier times. That said, a holiday doesn't need to be long, it may also last just a single day and this day does not have to be holy. If I have a chance, I escape the city where I live to go out for a walk on a Tuesday or Wednesday. It is part of the privilege of academic work that a lot of it is neither bound to a place, nor to a time. Granted, classes to teach are scheduled. Other tasks may just as well be done on the couch, on a Sunday – if your family life, too, is adaptable. But however privileged academic work may be, it is still necessary to sometimes take distance from it. Disentangle yourself. Staying immersed in thought for too long is a recipe for getting stale.

Southern France, a few years ago. I had a room in friendly *chambres d'hôtes* where I met others for breakfast and dinner. The hosts packed a lunch if you asked for one and gave advice on routes. It was possible to start by going uphill and then walk the crest, to go down again a bit further south. But it was almost as attractive to start by going down, find the river, take a break on a huge stone and then, a bit further north, climb up again.

**The challenging walk, that has you breathing, minding your steps and shifting your attention to your body.** A fine way of disentangling it is; a fine way of giving the mind a break from pondering words. Climbing comes with the requirement of serious breathing. This makes it difficult to talk while climbing. Words also recede when you cross a stream and you need to look at the stepping stones. Likewise on the beach, what with loose sand to negotiate. Things are easier on the edge of the sea, where the sand is harder, waves coming and going. But when you walk there on bare feet, you had better watch out for jellyfish, mostly transparent, ready to sting. Is it indeed my body that I am attending to on these occasions? If so, then my body does not end at its skin. It flows over into paths, hills, streams, stones, sand, water. It is spread out over surroundings that it incorporates through its senses. The *I* decentres.

As the pandemic locked us in, in the Netherlands we were still allowed to cycle and to walk. Taking the train was ill advised. The office had to be avoided. No indoor meetings elsewhere either. This meant that for my friends and me the urban edges became the décor for solitary escapes as well as blessed one-on-one encounters.

**The wayfinding walk, new to you and therefore begging for attention.** When we were children, my father would challenge us. On a Sunday, he would take us out for a walk and after some time, when it was time to head back, he would ask: “Where is the car?” I never knew. But being presented with this task again and again taught me to orient myself. What about you? Can you sense out where you are? Do you relate to the map? In mountainous lands, it is crucial to not end up in the wrong valley. The Dutch polders are flat and lack peaks and valleys. Here, the moot point is to take heed of where the waterways and where the bridges are. But one way or the other – the wayfinding walk prompts you to shift your attention to something else than what preoccupies you as a scholar. This is. How to call it? Good. The *mind* decentres.

This morning I took a train. I got out twenty-one minutes later, left the station and walked a few streets through the small town around it. A tarmac road beyond the town's edge. A wooden gate to the right. And then on to a path that is muddy for long stretches, even when it hasn't just rained. Volunteers have built a wooden path through this swampy

place, which they covered with metal chicken wire. Two planks side by side, and two more planks, and again. The wire makes it less slippery. There were bird sounds all around, a cuckoo stood out. A few bird-watchers, equipped with a huge monocular, pointed a white heron out to me. It stood at the far edge of a pond. A little later I saw, high in the sky, a stork, wide winged, flying.

**The meditative walk, that, even if just for a bit, gets you away from your desk.** On days reserved for writing, I write. At some point, however, my brain refuses. Does yours do that, too? I get stuck in some problem or other – how to tell this or that story, which specificities to foreground, which others to leave out, which points to push? At such moments, it is better to get up and go for a walk. A nearby wood, grass-covered fields, a park, city streets, urban fringes. Whatever is easy to reach and wherever it is possible to stop thinking for a while. To just be. One foot forward and then the other. If only the walk is easy and routine, if there is nothing particularly interesting about it, then it may offer a fine version of not-doing (often paradoxically generative).

The leaves on the trees are budding, or green, or they turn yellow again. The ducks swim around with their ducklings. Parakeets, loud, a whole group of them, behave as if they feel at home in this North-West European city. I pass by a building site with two huge cranes, trucks are coming and going. And then, at some odd moment along the way, all of a sudden, a way forward presents itself. Not in the walk, but in the text that I left behind, patiently waiting to be cared for.

**The talk-walk, where you talk over your current intellectual project with a colleague.** Going for a walk together is a wonderful way of working through difficult analytical problems. Here, once again, an easy path works best and it also helps if there are not too many crossroads, traffic lights, narrow side-walks and other distractions. The possibility of walking side by side is welcome. One person asks the other questions about their book, article, chapter, film, grant application-in-the-making – anything. What are you concerned with, why is it urgent, what do you aim to get across? As a part of the collegial conversation, it may be beneficial to point out frictions, incoherences, loose ends. Sometimes a suggestion: is this what you are after? The point is not controversy, but intellectual care. Explaining your project to a colleague is a good way of explaining it to yourself. After some time, the roles may be reversed.

From my window I can see people walking their dogs along the canal. It is not one of these famous canals in the centre of Amsterdam, but has been built a few centuries later to transport the water that is constantly being pumped out of our below-sea-level polder. There is a pleasant path along the canal, tarmacked, but with grass on both sides and trees

on the side of the land. Hence the dog walking. When the dogs meet, they tend to greet each other. Sometimes they play. But they are under the command of their humans and sooner or later these want to move on. When my friend G had a dog, we would take him along on our talk-walks. He was pleasant company, but also distracting. G had to call out to him quite often, to prevent his being run over, or chasing a rabbit. Dogs may be great companions, but they have a life of their own. Hence, taking a dog for a walk is likely to interrupt solitary meditations and conversation between humans. You may want to consider what your walk should do for you.

**The supervision walk, to take with a student or a supervisor.** This is a talk-walk again, now without role reversal. Even so, walking helps to tone down the professional hierarchy. The supervisor still accepts the responsibility of supervising, brackets their own obsessions, attunes to what the student might, here and now, need. But, while walking, the student may forget about being apprehensive. It is easier to disregard status and relate to another person when you are not face-to-face. Added advantage: tongues loosen up as legs keep moving.

Typical supervision questions may still be asked. What do you think is relevant about your topic? What are typical disagreements within the practices you study? Do the people in your field argue a lot, or just go about things in their own different ways? Did *they* tell you the things you write down here, or is this your own analysis? As you talk about your materials, I hear a few possible plotlines, which one do you want to focus on?

**The walking seminar, where you talk work with a range of scholars, one after the other.** The walking seminar combines the collegial with the supervision walk, and gives both a compelling twist. Two people walk side by side. First, they talk about the work of person A. After some 20 minutes, prompted by a timer, the chair (not sitting, but walking in the front) yells out: “Shifting care!” The walking couples then shift to talking about the work of the person B. After another 20 minutes, the yell is: “Shifting people!” For this particular shift, it is best to pick a spot where it is possible to shuffle around, so that it is easy to form new pairs. They then start their new conversations. First about the work of G (or F or M) and then, shifting care, about that of A. Or the other way around.

At the start of the walk all participants stand in a circle. One by one, they say their name, tell where they are currently situated and give an ultrashort presentation of what they work on. This helps those assembled to figure out who they might want to talk with. It may be helpful to start from a shared theme. *How do the questions you ask help to foreground some issues and hide others? How do you handle collaborations in the field? How do you*

*work with “big words”, so-called concepts, in your research? How to relate to the literature? What about the tensions between your mother tongue, the language of your field and English?* Your walking companions ask you questions about your research that so far you did not yet consider. Sometimes, the conversation also generates new answers. And you certainly learn to shortly pitch your project.

Part of the fun of a walking seminar is getting out of town. In Amsterdam we are lucky. It is possible to take a train for around half an hour going West to the dunes and walk all the way from the station to the beach; but we may also go South to polder paths between grassy meadows and over dykes along waterways that are higher than the land. Then there is an area to the South East with woodland and a patches of heath. There may be four of us, or more than twenty: it always works. Guests tend to express surprise and gratitude.

Sadly, I have no suggestions as to what you might do if in your context it is difficult to escape your urban setting; or if it is too hot or too cold, too sunny or too wet to walk; if the air is too foul or safe paths are missing. Walking seminars depend on so many conditions of possibility!

They are also demanding. I hit up against this when one of my legs hurt too much; and again when I was so exhausted that I was unable to care for four or five junior academics on a single afternoon. So we took a break. By the time I had regained my ability to walk and my energy, the raging corona virus meant that gathering together in groups of more than two had become a public health hazard. Now that (at least in this part of the world) vaccines are rolled out, we may be able to start again – a different *we* each time.

**The catch up walk, that deepens a friendship and helps with getting a grasp on life.** Do I need to explain this? Talk-walks do not just work wonders for the intellectual parts of life. They also facilitate sharing childhood stories or stories about what happened last week. Gosh, that sounds difficult. Or interesting, or funny, or something else again. What did you *do*? And how do you balance work with other things relevant to your life – activism, friendships, cooking and cleaning, music and theatre, novels and films, child care, care for parents, selfcare? Academic life and walking life – they may be mutually inclusive, but remain different all the same.

No, it is not inclusive. Some people’s legs hurt too much, or their bodies refuse to walk in other ways. Hay fever may kick in. For a serious walk you need good shoes and, certainly in the Netherlands, a good rain coat is also advisable. If your blood sugar levels tend to drop unduly, it is important to take the right kinds of food along. And everyone: don’t forget water to drink. Then there is the question of desire. Some people



Figure 8.1 Walking Seminar

Source: Photo by Ulrike Scholtes.

do not *like* to walk. It happens that going along on a walking seminar or other talk-walk makes them change their mind, or should I say their body. But this doesn't always happen and some people never try. *It is like that*. For some people, walking goes against their grain. So if here I sing the praise of walking of walking for academics and tell about all the good things it may bring, if this is not for you then let go. Don't do it. I seek to inspire, not to moralise.

**The fieldwork walk, where you observe intriguing traits of your surroundings.** Whether going for fieldwork walks is helpful or not obviously depends on both your field and your questions. But here, for an example. Currently, I am engaged in research into the valuing of urban spaces as either *clean* or *unclean*. Since we started this project, walking through cities has changed. I now see binbags deposited adjacent to the containers in which they belong, grass growing between the stones of the pavement, discarded face masks. There is litter everywhere. I also smell things that earlier I tried to avoid, such as urine in the vicinity of *pissoirs*, half open, spiral contraptions built for men to *piss* in. (There are no equivalents for women, whatever imaginary of the Netherlands you may have, this is a deeply sexist country.) And then there is

the loudness of the engines of the trucks that come to empty the underground containers filled with binbags deposited properly. Sound pollution is its own kind of *unclean*.

Ethnographers who work in countries other than the one/s where they were raised, studied and/or work, tend to settle in their fieldwork site. What they do there is not *just* research, they also *live* there. The people they talk with are not always *just* informants, at least some of them may also become friends. For ethnographers *at home* (at home? do I ever feel *at home*?) something else is going on. Our friends are not *just* friends, they also figure as informants. Life is not *just* life, it is also a puzzle. A personal puzzle, for sure, but, added to that, an intellectual puzzle, too. Walking, eating, shopping, cycling. Whatever we do. Questions keep on buzzing. *What is going on here?*

**The ethnographic walk, where you have an informant guide you.** Asking questions on a walk yields other answers than asking them during an interview indoors. Of course, this method is not suitable for every topic, but if it works, it works wonders. It makes it easier to avoid generalities, like “Do you consider the streets in Amsterdam to be clean?”, and instead zoom in on specificities: “So, there we are. What do you think of this street, is it clean enough?” An informant told us – in an indoor interview – that when asked general questions about cleanliness, people tend to remember dogshit, or something similarly unpleasant, that they encountered months ago. This makes them a lot more negative than when they are asked to assess this or that street, *here, now*, that they may actually consider to be quite okay.

Fieldwork in a hospital includes a lot of walking, too. So how is it that this half-running from one ward to the other, or from the outpatient clinic to the on-site restaurant, does not quite qualify as *walking*? In the office, likewise, you may walk alright – to a classroom, a seminar room, the coffee machine. Pedometers consider this walking, they count the steps. But in the present context, these steps don’t count. When I argue that *walking* is good *for academics* in that it may be relaxing, reinvigorating, generative, inspiring, facilitating conversations, companionable, levelling, informative, formative, and surprising, unarticulated ways, then I am dreaming of going outdoors.

**The gleaning walk, in which you pick up materials or make photos.** The image tasked to illustrate this sentence results from a walk along the urban fringes of Amsterdam. The sun was strong and low. My shadow allows me to depict that sun. What a photo tells, it may tell by stealth. And a text? A text may do that, too.





*Figure 8.2* By Stealth

*Source:* Photo by Author.

Thanks to frequent as well as one-off walking seminar participants and especially to Anna Mann, Annelieke Driessen and Ulrike Scholtes for coordinating and for their work on our blog (<http://walkingseminar.blogspot.com/>). Thanks as well to other walk-willing colleagues, students, friends and family members, especially Geertje Mak and Anita Hardon. Thanks finally to John Law for spirited text-care.