WORKING WITH MENTAL MAPS & WALK-ALONGS

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ABSTRACT

In my doctoral thesis I am analysing the contradictory presence of "un-documented immigrants" in the city of Göteborg, Sweden. In this paper I will elaborate on two of the methods that I am working with – *mental maps* and *walk-alongs*. In order to analytically be able to put emphasis on the spatial aspects of citizenship I have asked my interviewees to draw a map of "their city" by free hand, and to take a walk with me at a place that means something to them. I will also briefly reflect on the dialectic relationship between method and analysis.

INTRODUCTION

As people's opportunity to move and communicate globally increases the national border becomes more and more of a symbol. A notion that the dividing line between citizens and non-citizens is to be found at the national border is created, even though in real life large groups of people around the world live their lives *within* the territorial borders of countries where they do not have any formal right to reside. The presence of this group – often referred to as "undocumented", "irregular", "illegal immigrants", "aliens" or "clandestines" – puts focus on issues regarding citizenship status and community membership (Bosniak 2000:982). Since people in this situation to a large extent seem to resort to big cities these become key sites when studying issues of this kind (Sassen 2005:90). In my doctoral thesis I look at how the contradictory presence of "undocumented immigrants" in the city of Göteborg in Sweden can be understood.

When I first started two years ago I was most interested in how asylum-seekers and "undocumented immigrants" experienced the insecure wait, but gradually my focus shifted towards spatial aspects of citizenship. The reason for this transition was both theoretical and ethical. To avoid ethnographic objectification and for my analysis not to become surveillance in service of the state my goal is to study "illegality" rather than "undocumented people" (c.f. De Genova 2002:422). I started off by working with interviews and participant observations, but as my study progressed I chose to also include mental maps and walk-alongs in my research design (see Soine 2001, Kusenbach 2003). I wanted to emphasise how the interviewees had come to make use of the city. I will use most part of this paper to elaborate on mental maps and walk-alongs as useful research methods in studies like mine and to conclude I will briefly reflect on the dialectic relationship between method and analysis.

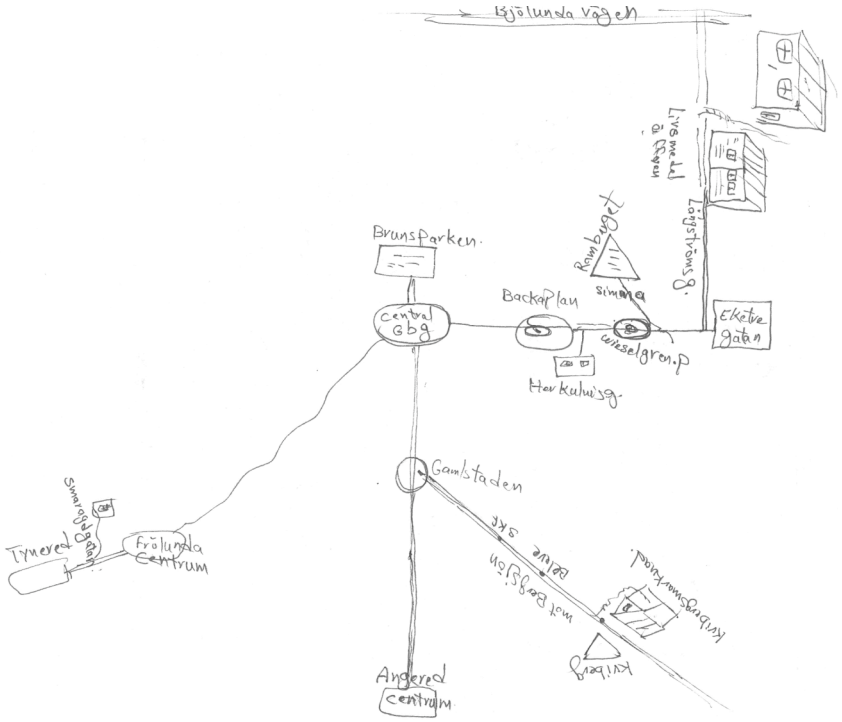
MENTAL MAPS

For a long time maps have been used when studying how people relate to their environment, especially in disciplines such as geography and anthropology (e.g. Soine 2001). Initially I intended to ask my interviewees to make marks on a map of Göteborg, but when I printed out maps of the city I realized how general they were. It would not be easy for a person to illustrate on such a map how she/he walks through her/his own block. As I searched for studies that included maps I also realized that there were other benefits with letting people draw by free hand. A geographer that has been working with maps when writing about street children is Ruth Payne (2004). The maps that the girls in Ghana produced do not only show in what parts of the city they live their life, but also gives you many clues about what their everyday life looks like. Some places were given a disproportionately large space on the paper, such as toilets, and some places were left out altogether (ibid.:48ff).

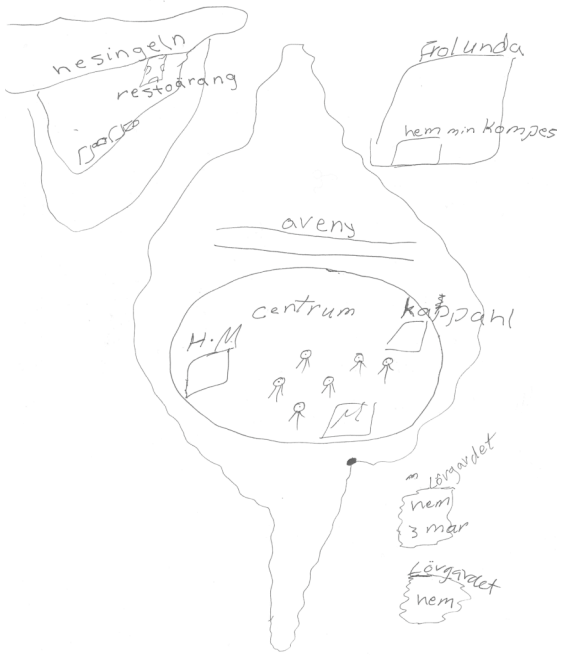
Right before my interviews, as I presented my research project, I told people that besides the interview I would like them to draw a map of "their Göteborg". All of them agreed to try it,

sometimes after a little persuasion. Some of them took on the assignment enthusiastically, while others felt insecure. When explaining what I wanted them to do I emphasised that the purpose was for me to get a better picture of what "their Göteborg" looked like, and I asked them to include places that meant something to them, positively or negatively, places they have often visited, places that they had avoided, and so on. I did not want to be more specific than that.

Below you can see three examples of what the maps that I have collected look like:



Map 1, interviewee 10



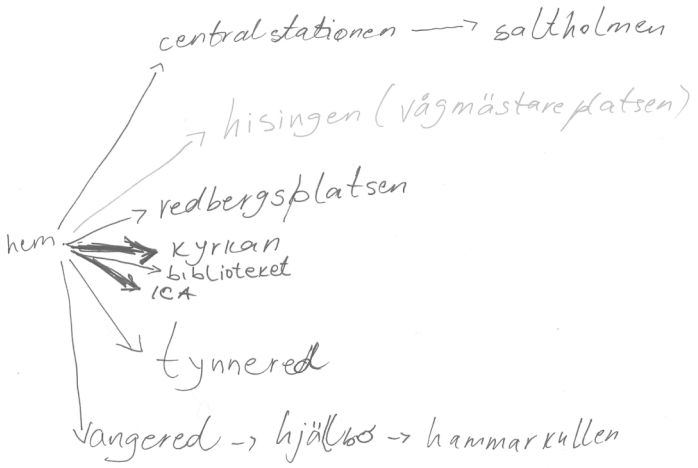
Map 2, interviewee 6



Map 3, interviewee 11

The interviewees tackled the assignment in various ways. Some of them placed the central station at the centre of the map (interviewee 6 & 10) while others started out from their own neighbourhood. Some tried to "do it right" and drew a map that was in accordance with official maps of Göteborg (interviewee 10), while others did not care about that at all (interviewee 11). Half of the maps are quite proportional (interviewee 10) and half of them are not (interviewee 6 & 11). Most maps include tram tracks and roads (interviewee 10), but a few of them do not even include an outdoor environment (interviewee 11).

According to Katriina Soine (2001:229) you can analyse maps like the ones my interviewees have drawn (made by free hand, focusing on spatial preferences) by looking for paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks (see also Lynch 1960). In my analysis of how the presence of "undocumented immigrants" can be understood one theme will be "deportability", that is that even though the authorities are not always actively looking for them these people always risk being arrested (De Genova 2002). In such an argument it is interesting to look at whom the interviewees see as a potential informer since these ideas is likely to affect their strategies when moving through the city. My hope is that the maps will be useful here. When looking at a map you often get a feeling about whom the drawer feels that she/he can trust. One interviewee that hardly left his apartment did not trust anyone. People he did not know could all be informers in his eyes, and consequently his map of Göteborg only includes his own block. Another man who was also afraid, but had to get out of the apartment to gather empty tins to pay the rent, included most parts of Göteborg on his map. That he put "home" [hem] as the central node is quite informative however:



Map 4, interviewee 4

Every week he travelled to the terminal stations of the tramlines, but only to return home as soon as he could. Unlike interviewee 10, who went to different parks and green open spaces just to take a walk, he did not move far from home if he did not have to. The three maps introduced above also tell a lot about the people holding the pen. For example, interviewee 10 told me in the interview that he is never afraid, while interviewee 11 told me that she avoided walking by her self and never went out in the evenings and nights. She was not only scared of being arrested, but also feared being sexually harassed by people who knew that she would not be able to report the assault. Looking at their maps these fears become more tangible. The way interviewee 10 drew his map does not indicate that there are areas that he avoids, but that interviewee 11's map lacks an outdoor environment does. Looking at interviewee 6's map then, finally, that she told me how she often felt a great need to get out of her apartment and go somewhere just to be among other people explains why Göteborg's largest shopping mall takes up most part of the map.

To sum up, my experiences from working with mental maps[1] are positive, but I have had some problems. The maps that I collected are drawn in about five minutes right after the interview, in which we discussed quite sensitive issues. I could probably have got more out of this method if I had made another appointment with the interviewee's just to draw the map. Another problem is that it is very hard to draw a map without marking different places in writing, something that was not always easy for the people I interviewed. Although they spoke Swedish very well, writing was hard for them. That many of the places are spelled incorrectly makes the maps look similar to a child's drawing, something that some of the interviewees seemed to be embarrassed of.

[1] I am thinking about calling them "communicative maps" instead of "mental maps" since I do not consider them as their mental images of the city, rather a way of communication.

WALK-ALONGS

Through the history of Sociology participant observation has been a frequently occurring qualitative method. Ethnographic studies, such as the monographs published by the sociologists in Chicago in the early 20th century, were often based on yearlong fieldworks (see Andersson 2003). When I started working on my thesis I made day long visits to different voluntary organisations that were working with "undocumented immigrants". As I got more and more interested in how my interviewees made use of and experienced public space I felt a need to make other kinds of observations. The question was were I was supposed to go to observe this group in the urban environment; "undocumented immigrants" do not necessary have more in common than their legal status and there are no specific places where they are to be found. Legally they live outside society, but spatially they live among the other inhabitants of the city.

During conventional observations the researcher hardly gets access to people's reflections on what is happening, and interviews often take place far from the locations that are discussed. Consequently, after reading Margarethe Kusenbach's article "Street Phenomenology: the Go-Along as an Ethnographic Tool" (2003), I decided to try this approach. The basic idea is to join people for walks that they would have made regardless, and to get them to reflect on the familiar surroundings. This enables the researcher to focus on how the physical environment affects people in their everyday life. "Walk-along" is Kusenbach's term[2], geographer Jon Anderson (2004) who has been working in a similar way refers to it as "walking whilst talking". They both emphasise that you get access to other stories this way compared to conventional interviews (se also Elwood & Martin 2000).

Kusenbach joined people for walks that they would have made irrespectively, but that seemed hard for me to accomplish. Instead I asked the interviewees to bring me to a place that had come to mean something for them, to take a walk there together, and while doing that continue talking about when and why they returned to these particular places. Anderson recorded the conversations during the walk, but like Kusenbach I chose to make exhausting notes afterwards. Here is an example of a summary from one of my walk-alongs:

> *Wherever interviewee 10 finds himself, he always looks for highly located places, he tells me as we stand at the top of Ramberget [mountain and recreation area] looking at Göteborg from above. The environment reminds him of Kurdistan where he used to go camping with his friends. In the interview he had been talking a lot about how he had often felt a great need to get out and experience nature. It was he who had suggested that we would take a walk at Ramberget as this was one of the places that he had often visited since he had lived nearby. On the other side of Göta älv [the river that divides the city in two halves] you could see my house, and we discussed different parts of Göteborg. Interviewee 10 likes this neighbourhood, but will soon be forced to move to Hjällbo [suburb with a large number of immigrants], which he is not that happy about. If he gets a residence permit he wants to move back here. On the way down hill we look for blackberries in the slopes. Interviewee 10 describes how he usually comes here with friends to barbecue and drink bear, but sometimes also by himself just to take a walk.*

In practice walk-alongs have made it possible for me to follow-up my interviews, make sure that I had got their story right and that the interviewees still felt comfortable in participating in

[2] Kusenbach uses the term "go-along" as an umbrella term for walk-alongs, that is to join someone for a walk, and "ride-alongs", which means to go ride by car with someone.

my study. Since this study focuses on sensitive questions, such an opportunity was very valuable. Above all this, to be "guided" in for me known or unknown places in Göteborg has also been very exciting. So far I have visited a large shopping centre twice, Ramberget and a summerhouse area. I have also followed two people to work, and they both worked as shop assistants.

One theme in my analysis will be "illegality" as a stigma. That non-citizenship is manifested spatially was never more evident to me than during my walk-along with interviewee 4:

> *On bar stools in the display window of the café I found myself drinking coffee with interviewee 4. A few days earlier when I had called him to set up a meeting I had suggested that we would take a walk somewhere in the area where he had lived as an "undocumented". He had just received a residence permit and I was interested in how he would describe this environment looking back. Interviewee 4 wanted us to meet for coffee though, and we decided to meet at Drottningtorget [a square next to the central station]. When I arrived he stood there waiting. He had bought new glasses. While small talking we started walking towards what he pointed out as his favourite café within the shopping centre Femman. He liked the window seats the best he told me, "so that you can sit there just watching people passing by", and we sat down there. Six months earlier I had interviewed him in an isolated room in the premises of a voluntary organisation.*

In the interviews people told me that they did not actually think that anyone could tell that they were non-citizens, but that it still always *felt* as if it were visible. Someone said that you could not be human without being a citizen, and that you always bear that with you. Even if they were not all afraid of going out some of them told me they seldom felt like it.

PROBLEMATIC EXPERIENCES

Focusing on people's experiences has a long tradition within sociology, especially among feminist scholars (Skeggs 1997/1999:45). It was also in this field of research that writers first started questioning the notion of experience some 20 years ago (e.g. Scott 1991). What I refer to as an interviewee's experience is what she/he chose to tell me at the time and in the place of the interview and the walk-along, what I chose to bring out in my analysis and, finally, my interpretation of her/his statements in relation to her/his map (c.f. Skeggs 1997/1999:50f).

ON METHOD AND ANALYSIS

On the one hand, it was because of my shift of focus that I felt a need to complete the interviews and observations, but on the other hand, it was because I started working with maps and walks that my research questions changed the way they did. Up to now I have made five walk-alongs altogether, and it does not make up a very large share of the total amount of my empirical material. Most of the analysis will be based on the interviews. However, this method has strongly affected the way I work analytically with the issue of the presence of "undocumented immigrants". Even though the maps showed that "their city" included most parts of Göteborg strolling with them in places that they had chosen was the real eye opener for me. The very concept of "hidden refugees" [the most commonly used term in Sweden] creates an illusion of

spatial demarcations (c.f. Coutin 2005:8f). It became clear to me that this group of people does not live their life "underground" and "outside society". They live their life among the rest of the inhabitants of the city – on other terms.

Interestingly it was as much *the very idea* of walk-alongs as the realization of this method that changed my perspective. When presenting my work I have noticed that the maps and walk-alongs help me to get people outside the department of sociology interested in my research, such as architects, criminologists, psychologists and artists. Having been able to meet scholars from other disciplines has given me many new influences. And opportunities. I have just recently been asked to take part in an art exhibition that deals with urban issues. The curator heard about my walk-alongs and wants me to present them in this context. Naturally I was very surprised, but I accepted the challenge.

To sum up, from my experience it seems evident that we have a lot to gain from including other methods than interviews in our research designs, both analytically and in order to reach out to scholars from other disciplines and to the public. ■

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