Mobilities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmob20

Methodological Challenges and Innovations in Mobilities Research

Anthony D'Andrea a, Luigina Ciolfi b & Breda Gray c

a Institute for the Study of Knowledge in Society (ISKS), University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland
b Department of Computer Science and Information Systems, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland
c Department of Sociology, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland


To cite this article: Anthony D'Andrea, Luigina Ciolfi & Breda Gray (2011): Methodological Challenges and Innovations in Mobilities Research, Mobilities, 6:2, 149-160

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2011.552769

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Methodological Challenges and Innovations in Mobilities Research

ANTHONY D’ANDREA*, LUIGINA CIOLFI** & BREDA GRAY†

*Institute for the Study of Knowledge in Society (ISKS), University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland
**Department of Computer Science and Information Systems, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland
†Department of Sociology, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

ABSTRACT This article introduces a collection of methodological reflections on mobilities research, and additionally discusses the general status of methodology in the scholarship. Fast advancements on empirical and conceptual levels of mobilities studies have not been equivalently matched by efforts on the methodological front. While microsociological and phenomenological approaches are predominant in the scholarship, large-scale studies on mobility tend not to systematically analyse research frameworks used in the process of knowledge production. The articles featured in this special section examine some of the methodological challenges and innovations arising within several topical strains of mobilities studies. This introductory article argues that multi-scalar and critical methodologies are necessary for further expanding the analytical and interventional possibilities of a mobilities research agenda.

KEY WORDS: Methods; methodology; epistemology; phenomenology; structuralism; ethnography; micro-macro; sociology; anthropology; mobilities

Methodological Dilemmas in Mobility Studies

This collection intervenes in the emerging scholarship on mobilities phenomena, by examining some of the main methodological challenges and innovations in the investigation of movement, mobility and motility. This special section derives from the observation that empirical and theoretical advancements in mobilities scholarship do not seem to have been equally matched by a systematic assessment of research strategies at operational or epistemological levels. Though implicit in the work of mobilities analysts, systematic analyses evaluating how conceptual and empirical elements of research integrate into analytical frameworks for knowledge production are still at an embryonic stage. Therefore, in this introductory article, we would like to consider some of the main methodological innovations, challenges and dilemmas that the study of mobilities gives rise to. A particular consideration is the relationship between

Correspondence Address: Anthony D’Andrea, Institute for the Study of Knowledge in Society (ISKS), University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland. Tel.: 353 61 234 607; Email: a-dandrea@uchicago.edu

1745-0101 Print/1745-011X Online/11/020149–12 © 2011 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2011.552769
macro and micro research approaches, which we address in our introductory discussion, while also noting that contributors in this collection focus primarily on phenomenological and micro elements in methodological analysis. In doing so their articles are instructive in identifying some of the tensions, intersections and innovations that mark mobilities research.

The contemporary picture of global flows (of peoples, capitals, commodities, practices, ideas etc.) accelerating and complicating contemporary life in unprecedented ways, and markedly since the 1980s, has provided the backdrop for a wide range of studies from a variety of disciplinary angles and backgrounds (Giddens, 1989; Harvey, 1989; Lasch, 1994; Appadurai, 1996; Clifford, 1997; Marcus, 1998; Sassen, 1998; Stoller, 1999; Bauman, 2000; Gille & Riain, 2002; Sheller & Urry, 2004; Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007). By interlinking migration, transport and tourism studies, the new mobilities scholarship addresses emerging challenges and discourses concerning environmental, development, justice and security issues at local and global levels. Indeed the causes and effects of increasingly pervasive systems and processes of mobility are closely entwined with institutional regimes enabling and constraining movement, reconfiguring sociality and labour toward new forms of collaboration and exploitation, such as those emerging in ‘flexible’ capitalist regimes. As both predication and opportunity, new globally-related mobilities do not mean free movement in a ‘flat world’, but rather index a complex of actual, potential, uneven and disabled possibilities that are unequally actualized across multiple domains and fractures of social life. This order of phenomena poses specific challenges to social research, and as such, through different scopes and scales, the emerging mobilities scholarship signifies an emblematic shift in social research, marking a move into a space of flows, and depicted as a ‘global turn’, a ‘mobile turn’ or a ‘spatial turn’ in the social sciences, also reflected in a ‘nomadic turn’ in computer/digital sciences (Kleinrock, 1996; Marcus, 1998; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Ciolfi & Bannon, 2007; Perry, 2007; Warf & Arias, 2009).

Prior to the global (and mobile) turn initiated in the late 1980s, social analysts have largely sidelined mobility as an epiphenomenon of more basic material, social or cultural formations. In variants of Marxist theory, for example, while expressing the expansive drive of capitalist practices towards an integrated global market, mobility was nonetheless neglected in any examination of capital reproduction, social struggle and political ideology. Yet, in contemporary conditions of globalization, chaotic and polysemous complexes of movements, mobilities and motilities seem to carry a heavier empirical and epistemological weight in mutually constraining social, material and cultural domains hitherto seen as autonomous. Within this purview, current mobilities scholarship reflects the deregulatory, commoditizing and ubiquitous trends imposed by neoliberal capitalism expanding and ‘colonizing’ multiple spheres of life: interiorities, sociabilities, institutions and ecologies. Nonetheless, mobilities deserve to be examined in their own singularity, centrality and contingent determination, as they may destabilize and recode social and natural formations in ways that cannot be properly understood through the lenses of classical (sedentary) social theory. Responding to this scenario and its analytical challenges, across the Atlantic, journals such as Public Culture and Mobilities, the research network Cosmobilities and research centres such as the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University and the Mobilities Research and Policy Center at Drexel University have
emerged as scholarly constituencies harnessing fresh multi-disciplinary efforts for the socio-cultural investigation of rising complexities posed by mobility-related non-equilibrium systems. As noted however, in contrast with the fast empirical and conceptual advancements made in mobilities studies, methodological efforts have somewhat lagged behind in timing and dedication. In general, intellectual formalizations of research practices and procedures in a new field of studies or discipline often arise as an afterthought, once initial investigative impulses have identified fruitful analytical paths and challenges, or, in Kuhnian terms, ‘normalized’. Correspondingly in mobilities studies, the examination of basic research protocols has only emerged recently (Burawoy & Gille, 2000; Sassen, 2007; Büscher & Urry, 2009; Büscher et al., 2010; Fincham et al., 2010). While new methodological findings gradually disseminate across the research community, the predominant stance has been the adoption of conventional and innovative approaches contingently combined or experimented with, although sometimes producing static accounts of mobility. Systematic assessments of methodological strategies remain necessary in mobilities research, in order to ensure that research practices (of design, formulation, data collection, testing, analysis, representation and generalization) are capable of capturing diverse forms and conditions of (im)mobilities, and, productively inform and intervene in debates about the epistemological and politico-ethical foundations of knowledge production.

**Methodological Innovations in Mobilities Research**

In considering methodological strategies for research on mobilities topics, this special section examines several developments that address some of the main challenges and innovations marking the scholarship methodologically. The collection results from the First International Seminar on Mobilities Research, which took place at the University of Limerick, Ireland, in May 2009. Sponsored by EU Regional Development Funds and Ireland’s Higher Education Authority, the event was part of the research project ‘Nomadic Work/Life in the Knowledge Economy’ which integrates a team of social and interaction design scientists researching issues of high-tech labour, mobility, connectivity and sociability in contexts of regional innovation-based development in the Irish Midwest. Physically located within the National Technology Park, the university is one of the institutions that make up part of a regional mobility hub of regional development, which also includes Shannon airport and a free trade zone (Shannon Development, 2010). As such, the hub is an ideal location for examining the interplay between mobilities and modernization, as it leverages institutional initiatives to capture transnational mobilities of professionals, capital and knowledge to and from the region.

From sociology, anthropology, performance studies and geography, the authors featured in this special section draw on their own empirical research in order to address current methodological approaches that respond to challenges, innovations and limitations in contemporary mobilities scholarship. Their work reflects on the possibilities of harnessing and formalizing ways to investigate mobilities phenomena, in line with the transdisciplinary efforts necessary to foster this emerging field. In the following summary of the articles that follow, we point to some of the limitations and opportunities for advancing methodologies for mobilities research.
Opening the sequence of articles, Justin Spinney explores mobile video ethnography as a method for expanding the representational capabilities of description and analysis of movement and spatial experience. His underlying argument is that the researcher may gain insights into mobility by being mobile and by being able to record and replay representations of mobility in controlled settings. This claim is tested on a study about cycling, deemed a meaningful kinaesthetic practice engendering the embodied albeit fleeting experiences of journey. In contrast with the emphasis on material infrastructures prevalent in transport geography, Spinney notes that cycling gains significance in the proximate contexts of the journey itself. Paths of mobility, he argues, are not merely defined by larger sustainable transport structures and policy, but are also created by means of deliberate decisions of local mobile actors as informed by immediate perceptions and sensations of space while on the move. Nonetheless, Spinney remarks that the ephemeral nature of these journeys as subjectively experienced creates difficulties for both researcher and subjects to describe and account for such fleeting experiences in detail or nuance. Thus, Spinney demonstrates how video ethnography expands the possibilities for describing, dissecting and interpreting the various mobile techniques, experiences and settings enacted by cyclists.

Examining mobilities through performance studies, Misha Myers develops a multimedia methodology that conceives wayfaring as a narrative mobile practice. By means of an open-air peripatetic experiment involving spontaneous conversations with international refugees, she explores how wayfaring is a process of negotiation involving changeable and undetermined paths. By noting shifts in modes of performance occurring between prior knowledge of place and travel and new experiences of space of the mobile subject, Myers shows how such practices and representations of space are enmeshed in original home memories, as well as in the home making of participants. Map sketches and home narratives are integrated in a multimedia digital artwork, which evinces how representations of movement and homing through space provide empirical grounds for a holistic work of analytical insight and aesthetic power. As importantly, Myers ponders upon this methodology as a collective process of knowledge production, in which participant and analyst engage in a dialogic process involving questioning, rule breaking, and unstable normalization of game rules which ultimately leads to a new aesthetics of spatial mobility.

From an anthropological angle, Jo Vergunst discusses how ethnographic fieldwork can be employed to access, register and interpret movement. In reviewing current debates underpinning the transition from locality-bound to multi-site anthropological fieldwork, Vergunst examines how observational and participative modes of fieldwork through places constitute insightful ways to investigate movement. Based on a study of trekking practices, cultures and policies in northeast Scotland, Vergunst seeks to reconcile the embodiment of ethnography in the field with old and new technologies of field noting, while emphasizing the notion of ‘technique’, anthropologically understood as the typical way a subject interacts with surrounding objects and landscapes. In thinking and writing mobilities as more than a succession of instants, Vergunst critically explores a range of technologies enabling ethnographic work that researchers use in the field: paper, typing machines, laptops, audio and video recorders, GPS, digital applications, etc. However, in a productive tension with Spinney and Myers’ accounts, Vergunst warns that the excessive attention paid to high-tech
devices being employed in ethnographic and mobile practices tends to distance both ethnographer and participants from the immediate experience of movement which they seek to seize in first place. For this reason, drawing from Marcel Mauss’ classical conceptualization, Vergunst proposes the distinction between ‘technology’ (objective tools) and ‘technique’ (culturally learned skills) as a way to bring light to the cultural dimension of mobile practices. Between lived experience and technology mediation, Vergunst argues that, while engagement with movement is the most significant technique in his fieldwork, an additional focus on ‘techniques’ enables the researcher to produce meaningful ethnographic knowledge, particularly as it provide insights for external audiences, such as policy makers, as also examined in his article.

Finally, from the emerging scholarship on lifestyle migration, Michaela Benson revisits the centrality of mobility in fieldwork methodologies used to investigate mobile formations. At the most immediate level, Benson notes that the investigation of dispersed populations poses obvious operational difficulties constraining the ethnographer’s own patterns of movement when collecting data in the field. As a remedy, she proposes a multi-faceted approach that embraces innovative thinking and flexible ways of building rapport with the subjects by engaging in mutual forms of everyday life mobilities. However, she also warns against reducing methodology to the application of specific methods, and instead proposes that such methods are better situated when defined according to the specific theoretical and epistemological commitments of the researcher. For example, a methodological reorientation in lifestyle migration studies has followed a shift of topical interest in the scholarship, from the investigation of forces driving migration to a more nuanced examination of ‘life after relocation’. This type of scholarly shift thus poses a critical question to mobilities researchers about the role of mobility.

Although lifestyle migrants, by definition, relocate to a different country or region and keep moving about in their quotidian life, mobility does not appear to be the determining category defining the life narratives or meanings for most middle-class expatriates (in contrast to, for example, the hypermobile ‘global nomads’ examined by D’Andrea, 2007). In short, informed by the inductive tradition that constitutes the research canon in anthropology, Benson argues that alternative fieldwork strategies for mobilities studies, while sensitive to mobility, must not be determined or bound by it as an a priori category.

These articles seek to unbundle some of the complex arrangements interrelating the mobilities of researchers, subjects, methodologies and theories. Given the breadth of this field of research, their contributions emphasize particular kinds of mobilities research, notably ones prompted by the experiential, the embodied, and the phenomenological. Their contributions are important in opening up questions about how mobilities, as an object of study and methodological concern, involve a rethinking of mainstream social sciences against the new challenges posed by mobilities. Thus, at the most immediate level, the analyst’s own movements across spaces, institutional settings and disciplines are significant expressions and conditions of research. The researcher must move towards the subject or topic of research, whether a people located somewhere or a database stored in a physical or virtual repository. In distance and frequency, these encounters may take place across a variety of spatial and cultural sites, as the analyst remotely accesses a database via computer, makes a local trip to conduct an interview, relocates temporarily to a
more or less familiar region, or even, engages in a series of complicated displace-
ments towards a remote field site repeatedly over the years.

Although conditioned by mobility in various forms and degrees, the logistics of
research are not usually discussed by mobilities scholars, even when displacement is
not a mere ‘externality’ but often define the ways by which the researcher establishes
rapport with their subjects or materials (Geertz, 1973; Clifford, 1997; Marcus, 1998;
D’Andrea, 2007; Salazar, 2010). Despite work carried out by a former generation of
anthropologists of globalization, the impact of movement (and motility) upon a
researcher’s own research remains largely unproblematised at the level of analytical
representation. Although institutional, occupational and personal issues may define
the contours of research project and execution, the prevalent assumption is that of a
relatively privileged, unproblematic and metropolitan analyst enjoying favourable
conditions of movement (backed by powerful regimes of developed nation-states),
temporarily inhabiting the field. In turn the field is assumed to be populated by
subjects defined as question and concern: the subaltern and disadvantaged subjects
whose motility is, in fact, limited, deemed dangerous and unwelcome (Malkki, 1992).
Nevertheless, as ‘getting there’ and ‘being there’ are practical tropes of research
feasibility and, in many cases, its own legitimacy, the research journey itself is perma-
nently negotiated along the limitations, expectations and opportunities that end up
constituting the actual field of research (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Marcus, 1998;
Sheller, 2003; Gray, 2004). Thus, even as urban and cyber studies have exposed
implicit assumptions about displacement in conventional anthropological fieldwork
(Passaro, 1997), research mobility remains embedded in complex motilities that
enable the field encounter, to be ultimately redefined according to formal protocols
and goals of data collection, analysis and representation.

Multiple arrangements of spatial, social and imagined mobilities thus codetermine
research constructs in a dynamic interplay unfolding across varying degrees of imme-
diacy, exposure and representation established between analyst and reality (Sheller,
2003; D’Andrea, 2007; Salazar, 2010). In other words, the very practices, subjects
and processes of mobility scrutinized by the researcher also condition the range of
available choices regarding the scope, scale and goals of mobilities research. In the
intrinsic process of investigation, analytical and theoretical components must be
brought together in a sound methodological framework capable of generating neces-
sary and sufficient levels of data required for answering both predefined and emerg-
ing questions.

The relational nature of mobility in research practice can be evinced in operational
and epistemological ways. Most evidently, the process of data collection about mobi-
licity issues may not necessarily occur ‘on the move’. While observation, interviewing
and recording are basic procedures in mobilities research (Büscher & Urry, 2009,
p. 103), these activities usually take place in stationary, immobile positions.
Conversely, the empirical process of research may occur in mobile situations, as field
circumstances may require the analyst to collect data while on the move (e.g. inter-
viewing a subject in a moving vehicle). In developing appropriate methodologies, it is
necessary to consider the nature, centrality and interconnectedness among mobility
forms both empirically and conceptually. While the process of investigation may be
partially anticipated and planned by the researcher, even if somewhat arbitrarily so,
the usually messy, unpredictable and serendipitous nature of empirical realities also
redefine the terms of research and representation (Marcus, 1998) as new questions, threads and insights are closed and opened up along the way.

The multidimensionality of mobility is entwined with the researcher’s own relative positionality before, during and after empirical research. Researchers’ choices in design, methods and representation are affected by their own social locations and politics as well as by the views of involved constituencies in relation to roles, aims and motivations. Indeed, the researcher’s own stance may vary significantly according to intellectual and institutional settings, defining approaches that can be more or less observational, more or less participatory, more or less theoretical, and more or less interventional. As such, in sections of this collection, the process of investigating mobilities appears as a physically demanding, even extenuating process for both researcher and subjects, such as in the study of bicyclists’ and trekkers’ practices, experiences and sociabilities at the scale of micro mobilities (Spinney, Vergunst). Elsewhere, the focus lies on understanding social and cultural conditions of mobile subjects, assessed through analytical strategies that are highly creative, improvisational even if relatively less mobile-intensive (Benson, Myers).

While direct participation in analyzed mobile practices is not at all new in social (anthropological) research, what emerges in the new scholarship on mobilities is a concern with the singularity of mobility as a \textit{sui generis} node of phenomena requiring particular methodological and conceptual work. From phenomenological exegeses to holistic ethnographies of mobile formations, the contributors to this collection make an effort to develop and hone techniques and strategies for eliciting embodiments, affects, practices, meanings, institutions and structures of mobility (even as the predominant orientation leans on former rather than latter elements). In some cases, methodological innovations appear to borrow from established protocols found in cognate disciplines. In other cases, there is a more active engagement in rethinking current methodologies by addressing implicit assumptions not commonly reflected in the scholarship. These efforts do not seem to indicate a methodological revolution in mobilities studies, but rather a contingent process of adjustments of methods, procedures and concepts to specific needs and requirements of research projects. In other words, a gradualist approach of methodological increments and adjustments, particularly in the pragmatic deployment of methods reconceptualised proximately according to discreet project needs, is evident across mobilities studies. Yet, it is worth noting that methodological and conceptual innovations are often brought about by outside perspectives, and that the forging of trans-disciplinary bridges is a necessary step in engendering new languages and insights that facilitate the understanding of emerging aspects of a (im)mobile world.

**Methodological Challenges in Mobility Studies**

These developments can be briefly contextualized for a meaningful understanding. Building on initial studies on transnational flows (Appadurai, 1996; Clifford, 1997; Sassen, 1998; Marcus, 1998; Cresswell, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006), subsequent developments in methodology have mostly occurred in behavioural and phenomenological approaches rather than in institutional, structuralist or systemic ones (Urry, 2003; Verstraete, 2004; Cresswell, 2006; Kaplan, 2006). A significant challenge for mobilities studies is the systematic unbundling and formalization of research protocols,
methods and analyses that can integrate macro and micro components, rather than allowing these to continue developing separately. The question of how both sides can speak to one another thus requires closer attention. The descriptivism of empirical forms still reproduces earlier methodological propositions of 1990s globalization studies with their ‘tendency to read social life off external social forms – flows, circuits, circulations of people, capital and culture – without any model of subjective mediation’. (Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999, p. 7). Throughout the 2000s, efforts to remedy this trend have led to a predominance of micro-sociological and phenomenological takes. Despite the significant impact of systemic, historical and geographic research in setting the tone and directions of mobilities scholarship, methodological propositions remain underdeveloped. They address fundamental philosophical and theoretical questions about the predicaments of modernity, but are not as engaged in systematically examining ways to probe, test, replicate, represent and generalize knowledge about mobility. Perhaps not surprisingly, main references in mobilities studies are often recognized for their ground-breaking contribution exactly because their erudition and intellectual depth are devoted to explicate meanings, connections and directions upon swats of crude empirical data rather than exploring ways to produce and formalize research frameworks. So, between grand narratives of mobility and specific applications of mobile methods, there lies a gap requiring systematic articulation.

Different orientations in mobilities scholarship can be briefly mapped against two traditions of Western intellectual thought. At one pole, a harder version of scientific investigation follows the Anglo-Saxon empiricist tradition that conceptualizes methodology as a question of methods to be employed at tactical and operational levels, meaning: the choosing and honing of techniques of data collection and hypothesis testing as critical grounds for knowledge accumulation in a predominantly gradualist process. Behavioural analysis and pragmatic phenomenology are influential expressions, primarily concerned with the sensorial and experiential, to be observed and described in proximate (tangible) settings. The immediate relationship between researcher and subject is a common topic of concern, as it is calibrated, objectified or reaffirmed in the methodologies devised under this general orientation. The other pole is represented by a positivist tradition historically associated with classical French idealist-positivist philosophy. It fundamentally interrogates methodology as an epistemological question, by which a series of cognitive, intellectual and social mediations are recognised as being ontologically constitutive of the very process of knowledge production. While phenomenology and hermeneutics have benefited from the awareness of such mediations at the micro level, it undoubtedly is structuralism in its several versions that has served as the hegemonic reference throughout most of the twentieth century, from Marx, Saussure and Freud, to Parsons and Levi-Strauss, and even, if we may add, Deleuze and Guattari. Predicated on the hermeneutics of suspicion, structuralism seeks to unveil basic – determining yet invisible – mechanisms that regulate societies and individuals. Notably, these mechanisms are typically anchored on macro and meta-theoretical levels of determination driving investigations that clearly follow a nomothetic orientation. The underlying assumption is that structural regulatory mechanisms are not self-evident at a surface level but require a conceptual architecture that grants explanatory (often predictive) power to the workings of reality. In contexts of complexity, reflected for example in the undermining of structuralist thought by chaos theory, it is interesting to observe how macro and micro
Methodological Challenges and Innovations in Mobilities Research

angles of analysis can be paradoxically reintegrated within a structuralist principle that is founded on fluidity and unpredictability.

The need to bridge micro and macro components empirically and methodologically becomes evident when we consider the limitations of studies situated at one or the other side of this intellectual map. For example, in examining the social factors associated with the hurricane Katrina catastrophe in Southern USA in August 2005, it is evident that registering the practices and representations of mobility of the displaced, mostly African-American population, provides important clues for informing and illustrating that traumatic event, but does not suffice for capturing the deeper social, institutional and historical antecedents leading to the event. Yet, in addition to understanding structures, practices and imaginaries as provided in related studies (Cresswell, 2006; Hannam et al., 2006), it is important to elaborate on analytical resources that will enable other researches to identify, examine and compare such empirical interrelations. Another example of the need for a more integrated approach arises in relation to explaining the rise of lifestyle (‘north–south’) migration with recourse to mechanistic explanations of macro-economic determination, which misses the point of how cultural motivations shape agency, as relatively autonomous metropolitan subjects relocate to imagined paradises in the periphery in order to pursue an ideal of a better way of life (Benson, this issue; D’Andrea, 2007).

By attending to the empirico-conceptual mediations articulating micro descriptions and macro explanations, the process of investigation, representation and generalization of mobility phenomena can be positively rethought. Beyond method technicalities and meta-theoretical premises, the problem of methodology resides in the ‘middle ground’ of research, where ways to develop systematic interfaces between the empirical and the theoretical, the specific and the generic, the trivial and the significant can be unbundled in order to facilitate the process of knowledge production, testing and generalization.

In considering how links across scales of research can be established and replicated, social scientists could more substantively rethink mobilities by primarily engaging with categories of class, race, gender and age. This strategy tends to reveal conditions and effects of power and meaning (dis)allowing movement as mobility or motility. Practices and representations of mobility can be examined as structured and signified along processes of economic transformation, social stratification, institutional surveillance and cultural identity (Ong, 1999; Cresswell, 2006; Fortier, 2006; Gray, 2006; D’Andrea, 2007). A critical reorientation that interfaces experiential and structural dimensions of mobility, while methodologically demonstrating how they are interlinked and how they can be systematically examined, will also enhance the interventional and social capabilities of mobilities research.

In considering strategies to overcome such analytical dichotomies, Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, and Michel Foucault’s interpretive analytic have been main foundational references inspiring such methodological efforts. Their work seeks to reveal how structures of power intermingle with processes of subjectivity and identity formation by means of mechanisms and resources of constraint and agency, inasmuch as embodiment and narratives of practice, power and meaning underscore typical or disruptive responses to changing social relations (McNay, 2000). As these connections are further explicated,
the workings and determinations of classificatory schemes are exposed through space, time and body (Fortier, 2006, p. 326). These integrative approaches indicate that methodological questions are largely subsumed under theoretical and meta-theoretical assumptions of knowledge production, so that the question of mobilities methodologies, which includes but transcends a narrow focus on technical aspects of methods of data collection on the move, needs to address structure, power and meaning at multiple levels.

Integrative approaches in mobilities research may be developed by examining how particular forms of movement or motility are materially and historically constructed in line with institutional and ideological formations embodying multiple negotiations and ruptures locally and beyond. The analytical embedding of the phenomenological moment of analysis into politico-economic regimes enabling mobility may thus evince its dual ‘structuration’ (Giddens, 1988). This work of multiscalar analysis is not unlike recent scholarship in the geography and anthropology of globalization (Sassen, 2007). In fact, this process of unbundling and embedding may reveal that clear-cut micro-macro distinctions are misleading, for, as subjects and objects move across spatial, social and cultural settings, they are not doing so independently of the political and economic structures that shape subjectivity, locality and mobility, but are actually embodying, recoding and updating larger material and symbolic regimes. As such, the methodological challenge is not to examine how centres of power generate discourses that regulate mobility also appropriated by mobile formations that inadvertently transform power-knowledge relations, but it is to systematically provide analytical guidelines that enable other researchers to examine and compare similar formations.

This realisation of mobility as a complex, diverse and multidimensional phenomenon calls for a care with methodological frameworks sensitive to complexity. From micro to macro, as experience and structure, this effort to structure the very process of inquiry emerges from the need to examine a variety of spatial, social and cultural possibilities. This special section seeks to make a contribution to this collective effort in the scholarship on mobilities.

Acknowledgements

This publication stems from seminar proceedings and research activities sponsored by the Irish Social Science Platform (ISSP) with funds from Ireland’s Higher Education Authority (HEA PRTLI) and EU Regional Development Funds. We are grateful to our sponsors, as well as to Mobilities reviewers for their thoughtful feedback on earlier versions of this article and the overall collection.

References

Methodological Challenges and Innovations in Mobilities Research


