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Chapter proposal for the Handbook of Urban Mobilities

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Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the life course approach to spatial mobility. Rather than mobility being analysed as a 'behaviour' at one point in time, the life course approach emphasises that movement, whether for work, leisure, or social activities, should be understood over the lifetime. It examines the stability and changes in mobility behaviours, its drivers and consequences, over people's lives. The forms of mobility that the researcher considers to be relevant, such as relocation, social visits, migration, business or tourist travel, are conceptualised as individual trajectories, in which past experiences and anticipated future are assumed to influence later experiences of mobility. These mobility trajectories are understood as being constructed dynamically through individuals' choices and actions within the opportunity structure and the socio-spatial context (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe, 2003; Giele and Elder, 1998). The socio-historical context, such as a recession, may induce distinctive mobility responses to the structural forces operating at that *time and place*, which results in *cohort* and *period effects* on spatial mobility. The determinants and impacts of mobility behaviours are also likely to vary according to the *timing* of mobility in individuals' lives, in relation to age or life course transitions, for example. Finally, the life course approach emphasises that mobility behaviours influence and are influenced by key events in other life domains. It is, for example, well known

that people who move to city suburbs or become parents are more likely to increase their car use (Scheiner and Holz-Rau, 2013).

A life course (or more broadly a biographical) approach has been successfully used in the field of migration and residential mobility since the 1980s (see Findlay et al., 2015 or Courgeau and Lelièvre, 1989 for a seminar study). But it is more recently that this approach has received the wide attention it deserves in transport and mobility research (see Müggenburg, Busch-Geertsema and Lanzendorf, 2015 for a recent literature review). While transport studies have stressed the importance of habits in travel behaviour and the relative stability of daily activity-travel patterns (Klöckner and Matthies, 2004), a growing literature examines changes in the ways people travel, such as reducing private car use (Redman et al., 2013; Rocci, 2015). A particularly promising research agenda focuses on mobility behaviour changes in response to major life events like childbirth, home purchase or a job change (Lanzendorf, 2010; Prillwitz, Harms and Lanzendorf, 2006, 2007; Scheiner and Holz-Rau, 2013). These recent developments and the growing availability of longitudinal data allowing researchers to track individual mobility histories, either prospectively (panel studies for example) or retrospectively (biographical studies using i.e. life history calendars or life story interviews), offer promising ways to extend the scope of mobility research and strengthen the importance of the life course approach as an indispensable framework for understanding changes in mobility behaviours.

In this chapter, I begin by briefly presenting the key principles of the life course approach applied to spatial mobility and provide an overview of the mobility biographies approach as a recent application in mobility and transport research. Then I discuss the idea that mobility behaviours across the life course have become less predictable, less stable, more flexible and more individualised due to pronounced changes in advanced societies. Following this, I emphasise that these changes are operating at a different intensity and pace, and with a different dynamic, across social

groups and across socio-spatial contexts. Evidence suggests that gender, class and race, the institutional, cultural and built environment, and their interrelationships, significantly shape life course mobility. These differences, I argue, can be successfully captured by using the life course approach. I conclude by critically discussing some deficits of this approach and by suggesting some avenues for future research.

The life course approach to spatial mobility

Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe (2003) recognise five principles of the life course approach: the lifespan, timing, human agency, historical time and place, and linked lives. While Elder et al. give little attention to the mobility or spatial dimensions of the life course, I briefly discuss each of these principles with reference to spatial mobility.

The focus on the *lifespan* means that mobility behaviours at any point in the life course are conceived as the product of earlier experiences and future expectations. A life course perspective points to lifelong dynamics and departs from approaches that emphasise the role of early socialisation in mobility. Through their mobility experiences (including immobility), individuals develop specific skills, values and attitudes (e.g. place attachment) that influence later experiences. A well-known result in migration studies is that people who recently migrated are more likely to migrate again in the near future (e.g. Fischer and Malmberg, 2001). This influence of past experiences (or *path dependency*) has been also observed between different forms of spatial mobility, for example when migration in youth or early adulthood fosters overnight business travel later in life (Vincent-Geslin and Ravalet, 2015). Evidence shows the complex and contingent character of this process, since people exposed to spatial mobility early in life can also develop negative attitudes toward spatial mobility (ibid). Mobility trajectories are viewed as interdependent with trajectories in other areas of life (principle of *multi-dimensionality*). Spatial mobility behaviours, key life events and transitions in other domains, and their respective outcomes (e.g.

associated roles, costs and benefits) may complement or conversely compete. It is a well-known finding that having children can trigger moves outside inner-city areas (e.g. Kulu and Steele, 2013). The lower fertility among women commuting long distances over many years is another example (Huinink and Feldhaus, 2012; Rüger and Viry, 2017).

These studies point to the importance of *timing* in mobility decisions and their relations to life course transitions. In particular, the determinants and impacts of mobility behaviours may significantly vary according to the timing of mobility. Experiencing a life event or transition which deviates from normative life-course patterns may be more problematic or may require more resources than conforming to the expected life transitions. Using the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Vanhoutte, Wahrendorf and Nazroo (2017) showed, for example, that frequent moving in childhood had no association with wellbeing later in life, a positive association in young adulthood and a negative association in midlife. In the authors' view, moving in young adulthood was often associated with favourable life transitions (higher education or family development), whereas later moves were more likely to reflect hardships, such as widowhood, unemployment or divorce. Life course researchers have shown that it is not just the timing of mobility in relation to life course transitions that matters but also the *sequencing*. For example, migrating before or after union formation and childbirth, but also single and multiple migrations, have different consequences for women's occupational achievement (Mulder and Van Ham, 2005).

Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe (2003) stress that individuals possess *agency* and construct their own life course through their actions and choices within the opportunity structure. This agency is situational, bound to the perceived circumstances of a place and time (see below), and with respect to the past and anticipated futures. Mobility biographies are therefore the joint product of structural incentives (e.g. affordable and reliable train services, promotion of rail transport) and

individual responses to this external reality to pursue certain goals (e.g. deciding to take the train, moving close to a railway station).

The life course is embedded *historically and geographically*. The spatial context, such as the transport infrastructure or the dispersion of activities and services, and historically specific socio-economic structures, such as a recession or economic globalisation, significantly shape the life-course mobility patterns of a given generation and society. For example, a series of socio-cultural changes over the past decades has offered new possibilities for (especially middle-class) young people to experience 'new' forms of living and mobility arrangements (e.g. independent living or studying abroad) between leaving the parental home and establishing a new household (Galland, 1995).

Finally, studying mobility decisions involves analysis of *linked lives*. According to this principle, the mobility trajectory of an individual develops in close relationship with the life course of household or family members. The partner's career or an elderly parent's health for example are likely to impact on people's mobility behaviours. This has focused attention on how people within a household or a broader family configuration negotiate from different age, gender, and class positions the relative desirability and benefits of being mobile. Depending on the research focus, not only are mobility decisions negotiated between the linked lives of household and family members, but they are also shaped by other close relationships, such as employers, friends and neighbours. Using panel data in Germany, Knies (2013) showed, for example, that residential mobility and easy access to a car or public transport is negatively associated with visiting neighbours.

Recent developments in transport geography around the concept of *mobility biographies* offer an interesting framework for examining travel behaviour change and their connections with key life events in a life-course perspective (Lanzendorf, 2003; Müggenburg, Busch-Geertsema and Lanzendorf, 2015; Scheiner, 2007). Lanzendorf (2003) suggests to analyse how changes in the mobility domain, including long-term

mobility decisions, such as purchasing a car or a season ticket for public transport, are related to changes in the lifestyle domain (fertility, household composition, employment and leisure) and the accessibility domain (access to daily activities, such as places of work and recreation). Scheiner (2007) also considers three main domains of individual trajectories, which are somewhat different from the ones used by Lanzendorf. He distinguishes (i) the trajectories in the employment sphere, comprising training completion and job changes; (ii) trajectories that belong to the household and family, including changes in co-residence, such as leaving the parental home or a divorce; and (iii) residential trajectories including residential relocations and changes in the environment. While interesting hypotheses can be drawn from the mobility biographies approach, a more integrated theoretical explanation of the interdependencies between these life domains and levels of analysis (individual action and societal opportunity structure) is needed – a point I will come back to in the conclusion.

Mobility behaviours over the life course: greater instability?

For authors such as DiPrete et al. (1997) or Mayer (2004), the deregulation of the labour market and other profound changes in work organisation of contemporary societies resulted in an increased discontinuity of life course patterns. By shifting more frequently between jobs and life projects than in the past, individuals would experience more unstable life trajectories. Some scholars claim that individual spatial mobility reflects and contributes to this trend with less predictable and less stable employment-related mobility behaviours in a context of deregulated labour markets, increased labour flexibility and casualisation (Callaghan, 1997; Ludwig-Mayerhofer and Behrend, 2015). More unstable careers would be accompanied by repeated and irregular spatial mobility experiences, either in the form of relocation or travel (e.g. Jirón and Imilan, 2015). Moving or travelling for work would be encouraged by employers and governments, including those of supra-state institutions such as the European Union, with the goal to increase employability, especially that of

vulnerable populations living on welfare (Jensen and Richardson, 2004; Orfeuil, 2004).

This increased instability in spatial mobility behaviours would be made possible by the wider access to high-speed technologies and (increasingly digitised) *mobility systems*, which open up a wider range of mobility choices (Urry, 2007). The widespread use of personal cars, planes and telecommunications has profoundly changed the spatial organisation of human activities, whether for work, leisure, family or social life (Larsen, Axhausen and Urry, 2006). Individuals can develop and maintain long-distance relationships in other parts of the country or the world and exchange goods, information, affection or care through physical travel and telecommunications. Other people choose to travel extensively (rather than relocating) to stay close to their loved ones. Because individuals are less bound by physical proximity, the spatial boundaries of human activities may become more blurred with fluid and changing spatial mobility patterns over the life course.

Demographic and family changes since the 1970s could also contribute to a greater instability of mobility behaviours over the life course. Dual-earner households, delayed and partial marriage, low and late fertility, increased union dissolution and pluralised family and cohabitation forms, such as 'solo living' or 'living apart together' could contribute to more complex life course mobility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2013; Green, 1997). Less influenced by traditional family norms and values, family responsibilities and relocation decisions would be more a matter of negotiation and choice than strict determination by the social structures and norms (Mason, 1999). This would result in more unstable, more individualised and more differentiated (or 'de-standardised') life course mobility in the sense that mobility experiences would occur at more dispersed ages and with more dispersed durations in the new generations.

Life course mobility across socio-spatial contexts

The changes sketched above are however likely to operate at a different intensity and pace, and with a different dynamic, across socio-spatial contexts of people's lives. The instability of life course mobility may particularly apply to some social groups at specific moments in their lives. Although the previous section discusses some important factors contributing to the instability of mobility behaviours, we can likewise identify some other factors contributing to their stability, including lifelong immobility. In a life course approach, all these factors are however likely to operate differently across people's lives and across historically specific socio-economic and spatial structures.

Research within the 'New mobilities paradigm' (Adey, 2009; Cresswell, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006) has stressed the unequal distribution of choice around spatial mobility of all kinds and scales (from everyday movement to global travel and communication) and how the mobility of some depends on the immobility, forced or precarious mobility of others (Bissell, 2016; Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006). There is considerable evidence that mobility behaviours over the life course is shaped by spatial structures, such as neighbourhood and accessibility, and social structures along age, class, disability, gender, ethnicity and citizenship lines. These structural forces operate at multiple levels, for example within the household through gender roles as discussed in the feminist geography literature (e.g. Hanson and Pratt, 2003; Uteng and Cresswell, 2008), at the local and regional level in the housing or labour market through class and ethnic divisions as stressed in the literature on spatial mismatch between where people live and where jobs are available (e.g. Gobillon, Selod and Zenou, 2007) or at the national and global levels with international mobility flows, including multiple forms of forced migration engendered by political and economic instability in the most vulnerable parts of the world (see e.g. Castles, 2003). It is therefore not only important to examine continuity and change in mobility behaviours but also how these changes (or their absence) are experienced and what consequences they have depending on the

populations concerned and the socio-spatial contexts in which mobility occurs. For instance, the experience and consequences of short and repeated periods of extensive business travel are likely to be different for precarious workers and a global, wealthy kinetic elite (Cresswell, Dorow and Roseman, 2016). Below, I summarise some recent studies on two forms of mobility – employment-related mobility and the residential mobility of families – that provide evidence that life course mobility remains strongly organised by the spatial and social structures within which individuals behave.

Travelling extensively or moving to another region or country for a job strongly depends on individuals' earlier mobility experiences and their positions in both the life course (e.g. parenthood) and social structure (e.g. Schneider and Meil, 2008). Highly mobile workers are often highly qualified young people without children and older men who had been 'on the move' for many years. The willingness to migrate or commute long distances is also influenced by changes in the economic context and people's personal financial situation. A panel study in four European countries showed that people in Spain were significantly more willing to be mobile for a job after the 2008 economic crisis than before the crisis (Viry & Kaufmann, 2015). This was particularly true among those who experienced a deterioration of their financial situation (see also Ahn, De La Rica and Ugidos, 1999 for similar results on unemployed people in Spain). Using data from a sparsely populated Swedish region, Cassel et al. (2013) similarly showed that job seekers' willingness to commute long distances significantly varied with work history and sociodemographics. Women, young parents, people with low education and those with long spells of unemployment had lower intentions to accept long commutes. The propensity to commute long distances has also been recognised to change with the characteristics of the spatial contexts within which people reside and work, such as jobs-housing balance, traffic congestion and accessibilities (Holz-Rau, Scheiner and Sicks, 2014; Horner, 2004). For instance, long-distance commuting is more likely for residents in lower-density areas who commute to larger cities (e.g. Öhman and Lindgren, 2003).

There is less evidence about how changes in the spatial characteristics of home and work location impact changes in journey-to-work patterns. An exception is the study by Prillwitz, Harms, & Lanzendorf (2007) using panel data from Germany who found that both professional and residential changes appear to increase the average commuting distance.

Residential trajectories of households and families were also found to be strongly determined by the wider spatial and social structures within which individuals act. Research on the geography of families has long identified the various factors that contribute to the residential proximity between generations, such as intergenerational support (e.g. grandchild care) or transmissions (e.g. housing inheritance) (Hallman, 2010; Imbert, Lelièvre and Lessault, 2018). Despite significant differences across countries, studies show that a large majority of Europeans lives in the same region as their parents (e.g. Hank, 2007) and spatial proximity to parents reduces the chances of moving long distances (Ermisch and Mulder, 2018). Evidence shows that the lack of resources may prevent some disadvantaged social groups from moving away from their family and friends (Fol, 2010; Zorlu, 2009). The local presence of parents and siblings acts as a significant barrier to relocation for young people from poor backgrounds and ethnic minorities. Families who are more scattered are often those of immigrants who have strong incentives to migrate for economic or political reasons. Proximity to parents varies also substantially across the life course, reflecting changing needs of both generations over time. For instance, childbirth may trigger a move closer to grandparents for childcare support (e.g. Blaauboer, Mulder and Zorlu, 2011).

Such evidence does not necessarily deny that mobility behaviours over the family and professional life course has become more unstable due to macro-level changes in technology, demography, culture and the economy. But it suggests that spatial mobility often requires important resources by unequally positioned social actors in raced, classed and gendered relations and remains strongly organised by the

institutional, cultural and built environment of the specific place, region or country where people live. The growing availability of longitudinal data opens the prospect of examining more fully the changing nature of life course mobility for different actors and generations, and in different places.

Conclusion

The life course approach has recently gained considerable attention in transport and mobility research. There has been a growing interest by mobility researchers in adopting this approach to study mobility changes over the lifetime. Researchers can use various methods for collecting biographical data on mobility behaviours (e.g. life story interviews, life history calendars, panel survey) and for analysing them (e.g. narrative analysis, event-history analysis, sequence analysis, statistical methods for longitudinal data). Following people in time and space offers a unique way to examine the fluidity of present-day mobility biographies, for work, for pleasure, to sustain family and intimate life and so on.

Research from various fields has provided evidence that individual mobility behaviours vary greatly depending on the life circumstances and the historically specific socio-spatial contexts, to which individuals adapt in their mobility choices. The profound transformations in mobile technology, demography and the organisation of work over the past decades is driving changes in spatial mobility. Yet, these changes are likely to operate at a different intensity and pace, and with a different dynamic, across social groups and environments.

The life course approach is well suited for understanding how spatial mobility changes in relation to these structural changes, by analysing the variation of mobility behaviours over the lifetime, and across generations and socio-spatial contexts. Recent developments of the mobility biographies approach (Lanzendorf, 2003; Müggenburg, Busch-Geertsema and Lanzendorf, 2015; Scheiner, 2007) offer an interesting framework in which to analyse drivers of change in travel behaviours,

such as key life events and transitions in various life domains (e.g. housing, work, family, leisure). The life course approach also provides enough flexibility to analyse a wide range of mobility behaviours, socio-spatial contexts and life domains identified as relevant by the researcher.

Like any framework, the life course approach is however limited by its ontological and epistemological foundations. This approach additionally lacks the status of a unified theory (Huinink and Kohli, 2014). The mobility biographies approach, which stems from it, yields a series of propositions and research questions. But a theoretical understanding of the ways in which past experiences and anticipated future, key life events, socio-spatial contexts and linked lives influence mobility-related decisions needs further development. In particular, the social processes by which social actors adjust their mobility choices to structural incentives and the interdependencies across the life course between mobility and other life domains and roles are largely left underspecified.

Despite these theoretical limitations, recent life course studies have improved understanding of mobility behaviour change and much empirical work remains to be carried out in several areas. First, future studies could examine possible cohort and period effects on spatial mobility in relation to structural changes at multiple scales (new transport infrastructure or new transport policy, for example) that promote certain mobility options and preclude others. Second, the determinants and implications of more fluid mobility trajectories needs further investigation. Third, the linked lives principle has not been applied extensively in mobility studies due to a lack of appropriate data. Measuring how mobile lives are linked over time and space entails important challenges but offers promising avenue for future research. Researchers interested in studying processes of change in the spatial organisation of households, for example, could use household panel survey data to analyse travel mobility biographies of both partners in relation to their careers or the household's residential history. Researching linked lives beyond the household and

neighbourhood is also a very exciting possibility. In studies on social visits, the network dimension is recognised (Axhausen, 2008; Axhausen and Kowald, 2015), but evidence on the relationship between life course mobility and personal networks remains limited. Overall, depending on the research questions to be addressed, there are many possible combinations of the forms of mobility, life domains and contextual scales that have yet to be explored.

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