

WORK ON THE MOVE: EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an editorial introduction to a special issue of *Applied Mobilities* on mobile work and work on the move. Drawn from an open call for articles at a workshop held at Lancaster University in March 2015, contributors interpreted the workshop theme in a number of different theoretical and contextual perspectives. This introduction provides some of the overarching context for the study and theorising of mobile work and explores some of the connecting themes and possible future directions relating to the physicality of work.

Keywords: [Mobile work](#), [mobilities](#), [space and place](#), [mobile methods](#)

1. INTRODUCTION

This editorial introduction situates the individual articles of this issue within the body of theoretical and empirical work that has recognised the ways in which movement and mobility feature in, and in relation to, contemporary work practices. It draws on work that underpins the special issue, demonstrating how assemblages of materials and information, place and non-places, corporeal and affective movements, and the organisation of social life more generally, constitute work sites as densities of mobility shaping and shaped by mobile work practices and mobile workers. We also identify the ways in which existing understandings of mobilities research, and mobile work more generally, is challenged and developed by the individual empirical articles collected here.

Addressing and developing interconnections between social science, organisation studies and social innovation from a truly interdisciplinary context (from social work, history, health and management studies and across the social sciences), the articles offer a range of theoretically informed accounts of how “work” – as conceived, studied and accomplished – is increasingly characterised by complex interdependencies between people and practices, objects and settings, and information and ideas. Each article explores the socio-material consequences and contingencies of work done on the move and the forms of sociality that mobile work engenders and draws upon. The special issue explores relational juxtapositions of work and mobility: work that is done on the move, work that is enabled by movement,

and work that is movement. Various configurations of mobile work and the work of mobility are examined in relation to key themes of technology and communication, place and emplacement, interaction and practice, narrative and account, affect and experience.

We also draw out, here, and develop the cutting edge of mobilities research in relation to, configurations of mobile work around which the collection is organised. Specifically we explore place, temporality, method, as well as a key theme of “care and repair”. Following on from the discussion of these relations of movement, practice and place (and what each contributes to the understanding of mobile work practices) we introduce each article.

2. DEFINITIONS OF MOBILE WORK

Of particular importance in this introduction is the elucidation of definitions of “mobile work” grounded in emergent understandings of the relationship between knowledge, skills, place and movement. Indeed, this relation is considered as co-constitutive, with knowing and going found differently aligned and imbricated in the specific work practices discussed herein. It is widely recognised that non-formal learning or tacit knowledge is associated with the context of the workplace but when workplaces are not static, working relationships or “brushings” are more fragile and tend to be incongruent. Consequently, they may rely on rhetoric and material practices that bond work to place: protocols, authorisation regimes, monitoring and location devices, for example.

Mobile work has been widely studied within the field of mobilities research (Ferguson, 2011, Hislop, 2013, Nóvoa, 2012). Following the pervasive use of mobile technologies in both work and private lives, highly complex technological environments have been established around work on the move. Yet, as Kesselring (2014) stated in a recent issue of *Mobilities*, “There are many mobile jobs that do without mobile devices but are highly mobile.” Such work practices are frequently those not driven by a compulsion to proximity, but a necessity of proximity and the obligation for face-to-face, body-to-body contact, such as paramedic work, emergency response or cosmetic practices. The motivation to explore business travel or knowledge work has been primarily driven by socio-technical developments within information and communication systems and these studies have opened up a large body of knowledge concerning how people manage mobile working and how mobile working manages people. The carbon agenda has also turned attention to commuting practices and these forms of mobility associated with work (Cass and Faulconbridge), yet these studies often focus on forms of mobility rather than forms of work. Analytically addressing work on

the move provides a very specific way of looking at movement activities – that is, not simply a sole focus on mobility practices but on mobile occupations. In considering everyday mobile working practices to capture the routines of this work and the socio-technical relations and practices that they co-constitute, the places, spaces and temporalities and experiences of a greater range of mobile work become visible. Indeed, as Rachel Cohen (2010) has previously stated, working while mobile is a largely white-collar (and well researched) phenomenon whereas mobility as work and mobility for work involve more diverse occupations and have been omitted from sociological analysis of mobile work.

Our motivation for this special issue is, in part, influenced by Cohen's work. Specifically, we take up the suggestion of highlighting work on the move beyond a sole concern with knowledge work, rendered increasingly mobile by the affordances of advances in communicative technology and connectivity. Indeed, a focus upon this work alone, whilst important, replicates a hierarchy of mobility work and the privileged mobilities of certain mobile subjects – “kinetic elites” (Sheller) whilst ignoring those of others. There exists a highly complex network of work mobilities – a silent republic (Amin, 2006) – that underpins, orders, and holds together economies, communities, practices, places and lives. Taking a more inclusive approach to mobile work, and deprioritising white-collar work, thus adds an important contribution to the documentation of the lived contours of the “political economy of mobilities” within what John Urry described as the “post-mobilities” mobilities paradigm (Sheller, 2016). Readers will recognise the diversity and heterogeneity of mobile work and workers across this special issue.

In conceptualising mobile work or work on the move, we have gathered together multiple and sometimes disparate work practices. We are not, of course, suggesting that all mobile work is the same or even similar – indeed, the cases gathered here are intended to add nuance and variety to the understanding of what social scientists talk about when they talk about mobile work. In this sense, we suggest that exploring connections and contrasts between different mobile work practices is of paramount importance both for the further development of the mobilities paradigm and understandings of the organisation of contemporary work more generally. In essence and in sum, empirical studies of such mobile work-worlds enables an explication of what it means when work practices, protocols, people and technologies move outside of “organisational bases” to other arenas and settings.

3. SPACE AND PLACE

Theoretical positions, distinctions and beliefs relating to space and place are well documented from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Writers have considered and debated the social, cultural, economic and political relations on space and place for some time (Hubbard and Kitchin, 2010).

In a crude simplification of this body of work, places are embodied and experienced and spaces are geographically defined; or, as (Harrison and Dourish) state, “we are located in ‘space’, but we act in ‘place’”. A space can be considered the three dimensional structure in which objects and events occur in relative position and direction to each other (Harrison and Dourish, 1996). “Place” thus has invested understandings of behavioural appropriateness, cultural expectations and so forth. What this means is that “place” comes to be differently and unevenly experienced and performed by different categories of actor. The contribution of the mobilities paradigm to this discussion – in many senses drawing from and developing alongside the relational approach to space developed, primarily, by (Massey) has been to demonstrate the ways in which the movement and flows of people and materials do not simply move across and between spaces but are themselves generative (as a central aspect of socio-material assemblages) of space(s) and place(s) (Smith and Hall, 2016a).

Making such a distinction between place and space is important for understanding mobile work. Mobile workers move between, through and across spaces but are also constantly making work places. In the typology provided by (Smith and Hall) for example, workers arrive at workplaces by overcoming spaces but, also, create mobile work spaces and practices by working and moving with the environment. Here, mobile work is not that done in time stolen between a starting and finishing point, but is itself productive. In (Wood) article, workers are moving actions occurring in one space and pulling those spaces into another, through their actions, creating places that draw on a heterogeneous range of located practices.

We aim in and through this special issue to deprioritise an attention to bounded locations of work, home and the in-between. We attempt to break down the idea that work takes place in defined spaces (in the office, on the train, in this hospital) and look at the places that are created through work practices. As soon as we start to give accounts of this work, we see how it is lived and experienced.

4. TEMPORALITY

Work on the move suggests a new type of temporality for mobile work studies. Again, as for place and space, there is a different conceptualisation of the between. Mobility for work on the move is not time wasted or time to be filled. It is not time gained or time lost. Work on the move draws attention to the temporality of work. However, this is not about snatching time, or being more productive with time. Rather, it is about how movement is used for work. In looking at travel time, Laura Watts and Urry (2008) described looked at travel time use and how it is “filled with activities and fantasies”. In uncovering how travel time is utilised, the practices, places, and properties of people on the move become visible, including, for example, both mobile landscapes and waiting rooms. We also consider here how work time can be produced by movement in a different sense. That is to say, that whilst commutes and long distance travel make time for work, movement and mobilities can also be more actively co-ordinated as the work that produces time. Corporeal and local mobilities – taking a wander, going for drive, “taking the scenic route” – can actively produce moments in which certain forms of work can get done. Of course, time can also be a dominating condition and constraint upon many forms of mobile work; and particularly the various forms of mobile response work. Mobilities both form and must negotiate contingencies of time and space in order to arrive so that the work can begin. These insights, and varying relations of time, space and movement in, as, and around work are pursued throughout the articles collected here. Suffice to say that work on the move follows a mobilities disposition, indicating lessons for an applied understanding of work. The articles also prioritise the practical, inventive and methodical ways in which actors manage and organise such matters. This, we suggest, is an essential focus for future research on the proliferating forms of work on the move.

5. CARE AND REPAIR

It is worthy of note that in a special issue concerned with relationships of work and mobility, a number of the included articles are variously concerned with work practices that are, in different ways, examples of care and repair. There are, of course, a number of good practical reasons for this. We think, however, that there are good theoretical and empirical ones too. Vulnerable people – physically, socially, mentally, geographically – often experience mobility at one extreme of a continuum; from a hyper-mobile experience in which they live without secure footing or centre (such as homelessness), through to the radically emplaced who are

in need of removal or “extraction” of some kind. Broken down objects too. As discussed by Smith and Hall (2016b) there are parallels but also profound differences between the work required to repair broken down objects and broken down lives (see also, (Hall and Smith, 2015)). Nevertheless, repair work (whether concerned with objects or lives) routinely and necessarily finds workers moving: toward the site at which the object has broken down; around a locale in search of the object in need of repair or the cause of the damage; or with those in need of care. There is then, as discussed by (Roy) and others, a quality to the experience of shared mobility, and walking in particular, that affords shared understandings and a caring relationship to emerge. Shared space and time and movement allow lines of flight and connection to emerge in unexpected ways (Moles). Equally, participants in “live” scenes display and accomplish care and trust through reciprocal gestures and other forms of embodied practice (Peterson et al., 2016).

At the same time, need and harm can be exacerbated by constant movement; the process of repair can be greatly impeded by the difficulties of traversing a terrain; and some objects cannot be removed from the location in which they have broken down without further damages being inflicted (Goffman, [1963] 1991) In essence, vulnerability and need, and care and repair appear to be bound up within relations of mobility; something that is explored, in different ways, by articles in this issue.

6. METHOD

The development of the mobilities paradigm called for the development of new mobile methods (Büscher et al., 2010). This methodological development has, however, lagged behind conceptual and theoretical advances; good methodological work is hard to do, and the practical challenges facing the mobilities researcher are many. With regard to the concern of this special issue, studies of mobile have emerged within and alongside the mobilities paradigm, yet traditional interview and survey methods often prevail when thinking about and studying mobile workers. Büscher et al. (2014) have, for example, described how following people at work in the highly mobile domain of emergency response created tensions and challenges in terms of the methodological location of the multiple flows and mobilities that constitute the site. Missed beginnings when observing mobilities creates cuts in and of the phenomenon; developing ways in which to the “follow the phenomena” is perhaps the central methodological challenge (Wood and Buscher, 2012) for

the social sciences and will likely require augmented and enhanced forms of inquiry (Edwards et al., 2013).

With particular regard to the profusion of mobile work practices and settings we might ask, again, how traditional social science research methods are to keep up when “all the world seems on the move” (Urry, 2007). Various answers are supplied here, in and through the course of the various empirical cases. A thread that connects them, however, is a sense of research that travels with the flows and mobilities of bodies, information, and knowledge. It is significant that various articles, explicitly and implicitly, feature the mobilities not only of informants but also of the research and researcher. Still – as the articles gathered here signal – moving or travelling with, or following, work mobilities, whilst apt for the documentation and description of the geographic distribution of that work and the practices in and through which it is realised, find a remaining need for a further consideration of the affective, emotional and temporal and rhythmic organisation and experience of mobile work. This is both a source of challenge and opportunity for ethnographic methods in particular, and more generally. The focus on corporeal mobilities may also be supplemented and extended by a consideration of the non-corporeal mobilities that co-constitute the context of the worksite; a task likely to require the considered integration of traditional methods with emergent forms of data and analysis. Such potentiality is of course also being explored and negotiated by members in various applied work settings (as discussed, for example, by (Peterson et al.)). We intend this special issue both as an inspiration for future studies of work on the move and as a contribution that indicates where the lines of development might yet lie for mobilities research more generally.

7. WORK ON THE MOVE

The key themes of space and place, temporality, productivity, and care and repair (among others) are explored through the various articles gathered here. As is only right for a special issue of this journal, concerned as it is with the relationship of work and mobility, these themes differently intersect and emerge within each article. In addition to offering a nuanced and varied insight into the doing and organisation of work on the move, each case, we feel, offers good grounds for the further development of a programme of interdisciplinary theoretically informed applied mobilities research.

Smith and Hall’s contribution provides a typology of relations of work and movement, work on the move and movement as work. Drawing on fieldwork with an outreach team tasked to

“look out for” and “take care of” homelessness and rough sleepers, the authors describe how mobility is differently utilised, and differently shapes the context of the team’s practice. The authors also engage with the work of Erving Goffman to consider the relationship, and centrality, of movement to the “repair cycle” and, in particular, the contingencies in play when the object – the person – in need of repair is itself mobile. Such a situation requires movement. Not movement towards a known point, but searching, and, as such, a form of work that is inextricably mobile.

Wood’s article draws on a range of theoretical perspectives and empirical description to highlight the organisational practices at play in transforming and accomplishing an existing space as a specific work-space. Here, Wood describes the work of engineers as they set about the business of installing equipment in a medical setting. The analysis is particularly concerned, as are the engineers, with the production of a space/setting as “theirs” (the installation site) within a wider organisational and institutional frame (the hospital). Through this case, this theoretically informed analysis thus offers insight into the ways in which workers who are “off site” in an environment that is not designed for their practices (of which there are many such examples) manage and accomplish order, context, and potentialities of disruption and progress.

The next article further develops the theme of the organisational work of mobile work, this time in the context of crisis situations. Petersen, Becklake and Büscher apply insights from programmes of social studies such as ethnomethodology and insights from mobilities research and theory to emergent and innovative forms of communication and collaboration in crisis environments. Focussing, here, on situated practice, the authors consider and describe ways in which mobile workers in dynamic crisis situations manage the complex and massively distributed features of multi-agency responses to crisis. The article contrasts the practical management of the co-ordination of data and communication with the physical contingencies of mobilising response “on the ground” and demonstrates the centrality of situated action and “trust” to effective collaboration. The article, appropriately enough for the journal and this special issue, offers insight in to the work of the development and everyday realisation of the “virtually” mobile work (and intersection of corporeal and digital mobilities) of technologically augmented networked collaboration.

The article by Ferguson considers the local, embodied mobilities at play during home visits undertaken by social workers. Here, Ferguson considers how social work practice might be differently understood when viewed through an attention to mobility practices and in

relation to mobilities theory. As Ferguson demonstrates, such a lens not only enables a more nuanced understanding of the embodied work of social work but also an awareness of the way in which such work is organised and experienced as “negotiation in motion” (Jensen). What Ferguson calls “professional helping” is shown to be constituted in and through a sensitive and carefully choreographed movement of bodies in and around the home but also when walking, playing and moving with children. Ferguson thus makes a strong case for practitioners to recognise the ways in which welfare projects rest not upon static bureaucratic competencies but skilled movements.

Roy’s article similarly attends to the possibilities for communication and understanding that emerge when moving together. Reporting from an engagement with outreach project working with vulnerable young men, Roy considers the use of mobile methods both as a research tool but, more importantly, as an available resource for the project workers themselves to “get alongside” these young men in order to better engage, understand, and support them. Importantly, Roy considers such peripatetic engagements as far more than a technical practice – and certainly not as an extractive research device – but rather as a means of producing shared encounters in and through which the project’s staff come to better attend and reflect upon the experiences and concurrent movements of their clients.

The final article provides another conceptual framework, one concerned with the differently organised relations of business work and travel. Importantly, Hislop considers the impact of spatial scale and duration of travel both in terms of the work itself but also, in and through drawing on a mixed data-set, the ways in which these mobilities are experienced and impact upon workers lives both within and without the context of work. By distinguishing between four broad scales and journey types: localised land-based travel, long distance land-based travel, short haul plane-based journeys and long haul plane-based journeys.

In sum, we offer the articles gathered here both as a new insight in to the worlds of mobile work, as cases through which to further consider the key themes of current mobilities and as inspiration for the development of future researches of work on the move. As such, we ask the reader to approach the articles individually and as a collection with a critical eye to questions such as: what happens when work goes on the move? What organisational and practical contingencies emerge in work on the move and how are they managed? What are the emerging contours of work? How is the relationship between work and place shifting and what are the consequences of this? And, finally, what are the next areas of work for applied mobilities research?

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