Rushing around: coordination, mobility and inequality

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Elizabeth Shove, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University

Everybody's in so much of a rush nowadays, now everybody's trying to make money, trying to get to places, they've got to get here, they've got to get there, they've got to do their shopping - this, that and the other, I think there's a lot more pressure, you haven't got the time to do as much as what you want in a day nowadays
Hedges (2001, part 4: 14)

Introduction

The purpose of this exploratory paper is to address the theme of 'mobilities, social capital and communities' by thinking about the social dynamics of coordination, that is the coming together of people and things in time and space. In tackling this issue, I start by emphasising the centrality of social practice. I argue that much consumption is occasioned by peoples' involvement in normal social practice: that is, their participation in relationships, activities and taken for granted routines, the effective accomplishment of which constitutes a necessary condition of societal membership. It is clear that different social groups revolve around – and are defined by - the reproduction of quite specific practices. In addition, individuals are likely to be involved in overlapping and multiple social worlds, each demanding or assuming different forms of consumption, including consumption of mobility.

This opening observation raises specific questions for a discussion of travel and movement. Most generally, we might ask: are social *practices* (collectively) changing such as to require greater mobility? Are particular social worlds distinctively demanding in this respect? And how and why might these demands be on the move?

In addressing these questions, I pay special attention to the sociotemporal patterning of society (Zerubavel 1979). There are several reasons for taking this time-practice related approach. Behind the decision to concentrate on mobility as occasioned by the coordination of things and people in time and space lies a further assumption, namely that physical mobility has to do with what various authors have referred to as the 'compulsion for proximity' (Boden and Molotch 1994, Urry 2002). Although getting together has both a spatial and a temporal dimension, most attention has been paid to the geographical and spatial aspect, as in discussions of the networked society. By contrast, I want to think about the *temporal* properties of social practice as a means of explaining different and changing patterns of mobility and their social consequences. In considering the implications of this approach for conceptualising social-spatial inclusion/exclusion, I argue that people who are socially-spatially excluded are those who are for whatever reason unable to participate in the social groups, worlds and networks membership of which would, for them, constitute 'normality'. In other words

they are unable to accomplish those practices (many of which involve co-presence and mobility) required for effective social participation.

In emphasising practice, temporal coordination and social participation and in thinking about the collective as well as individual consequences of change in these domains, I arrive at a number of apparently surprising propositions. For instance, I suggest that in *collective* terms, greater mobility is likely to increase social-spatial exclusion and decrease opportunities for effective participation. By implication, efforts to minimise social-spatial exclusion through the provision of more transport may have perverse and negative consequences. At the same time, individuals caught up in the pursuit of ever more demanding conditions of social participation are drawn into increasingly rushed lifestyles. For some of them, more mobility really does spell less social exclusion. As well as considering the *relation* between mobility and social participation, I pay attention to the collective transformation of ' normal practice' and what this means for individuals who have more or less control over their own temporal and spatial trajectories and those of others.

This is a speculative paper designed to stimulate further debate, and not to resolve the questions posed. With this caution in mind, I begin by saying more about the relation between mobility and practice.

Mobility and (social) practice

In a recent article Reckwitz (2002) notices and analyses a convergence of enquiry around what he refers to as ' practice theory' . As he explains, practice theory (loosely represented by authors such as Bourdieu, Giddens, Latour and others), shifts ' bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary' (2002: 259). A practice is thus a 'routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood' (2002: 250). Amongst other characteristics, Reckwitz argues that ' practice theory' underlines the intersubjective nature of practice. In effect, *all* practice is social. In addition routinized practice has a constitutive part to play in the making of social structure. Not only that, things including objects and infrastructures are implicated in and are also ' necessary components of many practices' Reckwitz 2002: 252). Developing this theme, the point that much consumption is undertaken in the course of, and for the sake of, competent practice is so obvious that it comes as a shock to appreciate the theoretical implications of this insight (Harvey et al. 2002), especially when applied to a discussion of mobility. Put simply, the proposition is that consumption, including consumption of mobility services, is undertaken in the course of achieving what people count as normal social practice, signalling membership of society, conforming to convention and reproducing social order. Changes in consumption, including changes in mobility, consequently suggest a rejigging of routine, convention and order.

This makes some sense: travel is increasingly essential for those who are to operate effectively as international business persons; having a foreign holiday is ' normal' for some sectors of society, and for certain sports fans, travelling to away matches is part of the enterprise. This is not a one-way process. Systems of mobility not only permit people to fulfil necessary practices, they have the further consequence of modifying what those practices are and how they are ' normally' configured and structured. The routinised trip to an out of town shopping centre is a prime example of such double construction. If you ' have to' shop there, you have to travel. Rather than seeing these

as separate events it is more appropriate to view travelling as *part of* out of town shopping. And if that trip is made in a car, we should take note of further practices including those of driving safely through a thicket of co-requisite conventions (laws, regulations, rules of the road) and material systems and infrastructures (roads, cars, traffic lights etc.). In writing about what he refers to as the ' missing masses' Latour (1992) reminds us of the extent to which practices are stabilised and organised by material systems and technologies, scripting and sometimes locking-in ways of doing things and making some courses of action much easier than others.

The detail of defining and meeting obligations that require travel therefore depends on the nature of those obligations (related to necessary practice and other forms of consumption), to facilitating and co-constructing infrastructures (e.g. the existence of cars rail, air, bus etc.), and to the resources (e.g. of skills, money etc.) required to mobilise them.

These rather abstract comments serve to tie mobility to social practice and anchor both in the material world. But how does this relate to the specification and analysis of social-spatial inequality?

Social-spatial exclusion/inclusion: practice, infrastructure and resource
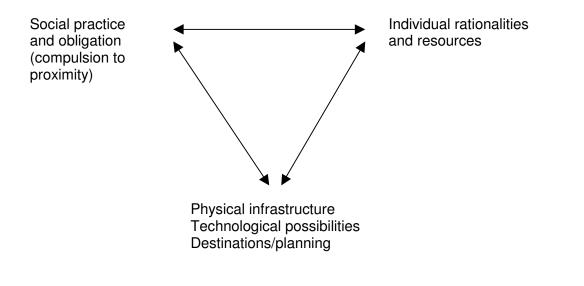
I do not want to go into the history of social exclusion as an idea, but it is relevant to note that it is frequently taken to be an objectively definable condition that people ' suffer from' or experience. Efforts to measure social-spatial exclusion have for instance focused on measuring the ease (or otherwise) with which people can access what are taken to be core entitlements: schooling, work, health care etc. (see, for example, the Index of multiple deprivation). Taking a different approach, but building on some of the points introduced above Cass, Shove and Urry (2002) have developed a schematic model of social-spatial inclusion and exclusion based on the following propositions:

- That social practices and obligations compel proximity and generate the need for mobility
- That infrastructures (road systems, parking spaces, cars, public transport etc.) influence peoples' ability to meet these obligations and at the same time shape expectations of normal social participation
- That individuals are variously able to marshal resources and capacities to meet such obligations in the context of existing infrastructures.

This suggests that social-spatial exclusion is best viewed not as a state of affairs or an attribute of one or another social group but as an emergent property of the three-way interaction between social obligation, individual or collective resources, and physical infrastructure, as illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 1. Defining social-spatial exclusion/inclusion

Social-spatial inclusion/exclusion is an emergent property of the interaction between social practice and obligation, individual resources, and physical infrastructure.

Social practice
and obligation
(compulsion to
proximity)

Individual rationalities
and resources

Physical infrastructure
Technological possibilities
Destinations/planning

In defining social inclusion/exclusion (i.e. failure or ability to meet normal conventions or accomplishments necessary for membership of society) as an emergent property of these three elements I stand back from making any judgement about the extent of exclusion within society or about its distribution. After all, much depends upon the social groups to which people belong (or want to belong) and what practices this requires of them.

Others have speculated more generally on the changing nature of modern society and the resources required for active and effective participation within it. Taking such an approach, Axhausen (2001) identifies a number of tools required for successful networking. These include a car (or budget for taxi), budget for long distance travel, location free contact point (answering service, email, web site) and time to manage the above. This list assumes a certain formulation of obligation, resource and infrastructure and implies that there is one dominant social order to which other arrangements approximate. Does the fact that such resources may not be meaningful for young children, for people who still live close to work and family, or for the elderly suggest that such persons are excluded? In terms of the model sketched above, it would be misleading and inappropriate to impose one tacit model of participation and practice on all. In addition, those who are equipped with all the tools identified above may yet find themselves unable to participate in networks and communities that matter to them. Indeed mobility may contribute to such exclusion. As Putnam observes, 70% of car journeys in the USA involve driving alone (Putnam 2000). Likewise, Hochschild (1997), writing about the management of ' time-bound' lives, identifies persons cut off from family networks because they are involved in so much rushing about at work.

Before going further, there are two issues to disentangle. First, there may well be long term collective shifts in the structuring of social obligation and practice such that mobility-related resources and infrastructures are - in general - of different or greater significance than before. However, the practical and social implications of such trends are unlikely to be uniform or to affect everyone equally. This suggests that the triangular figure can be read from different perspectives. It can be used to describe the changing social-spatial properties of society. The development of an increasingly ' networked' society would, for instance, suggest the development of different technologies, infrastructures and tools, and new priorities regarding the use of time and money. Alternatively, the triangle can be used to describe the routines, practices and arrangements of people whose social and material circumstances differ widely. More ambitiously, it may help to articulate the relation between collective trends and individual practice, thereby illuminating the constitutive role of practice in the making of social structure.

Mobilising society

Is society changing such that participation requires more mobility than 'before'? And if so what does that mean for the relation between infrastructure and the distribution of resources required to convert potential into actual accessibility? There is certainly evidence that the number of kilometres travelled is on the rise, and that the length of journeys is increasing. As families become spread out within countries and across continents the amount of movement required to maintain a quota of face to face familial contact escalates. Some authors suggest that we are seeing a more profound shift in the nature of social networks involving an increasing number of ' weak ties' (Granovetter 1983), and a proliferation of contexts in which individuals have multiple affiliations (Axhausen 2002). This is of relevance in that dispersed contacts require refreshing and maintaining in a manner that is distinctively travel intensive. Such accounts point to the physical spreading out of ties, connections and obligations but pay less attention to what this means for the coordination and scheduling of daily life, or the transformation of routinised practices.

Fragmenting the sociotemporal order

Those who write about ' busyness' , the ' time squeeze' and the ' pace of life' (Schor 1992) point to a relevant but relatively under-explored dimension of increasing mobility. This relates to the scheduling and co-ordination of social practice. The mobilisation of society is of some significance for the collective sociotemporal order. Although travelling is a practice in its own right, it is also one through which people move between other discrete activities, episodes and events. How, then, are these moments of co-presence distributed and structured and how are timetables co-ordinated in what seem to be increasingly fast moving streams of social action?

Being shared, the sociotemporal order constitutes a ' social fact' that exists beyond the individuals whose lives are organised and whose experiences are recalled and calibrated around it (Zerubavel 1979: 107). The day and the week are for instance of value because they reduce the resources and energy otherwise required to coordinate even the simplest social encounter. Where temporal regimes are very highly structured, as in prisons or schools, there is virtually no scope for personal time-management or independent mobility. Warde *et al.* (1998) suggest that convenience is a valued and relevant quality (of things or services) where there are problems of coordination and where individuals are obliged, and have scope, to construct schedules and spatial-

temporal trajectories of their own. Such situations are arguably associated with a loosening of formalised, collectively shared, temporal structures *and* with increased potential for individual mobility.

Speed and flexibility: space and time

It is useful to pause for a moment and consider the temporal aspects of mobility. As well as increasing the speed at which people move around, the private car offers a measure of temporal flexibility unlike that associated with public transport. Car drivers can leave and arrive more or less when they want, they have no connections to miss and few constraints. In addition, cars allow people to travel along routes of their own choosing, and to stop more or less where and for as long as they want (Sheller and Urry 2000). But in permitting such flexibility cars, like other convenience devices, have the ' unintended consequence of tying people into an ever denser network of inter-dependent, perhaps even dependent, relationships with the very things designed to free them from just such obligations.' (Shove and Southerton 2000: 315). The problem is this: by speeding things up, or offering increased flexibility, contemporary technologies, systems and infrastructures of mobility permit the fragmentation of episodes into smaller and smaller ' units' thereby increasing the challenge of co-ordinating what become separate events. In addition, and in order to cope, individuals adopt responsive strategies that enhance *their* ability to follow space-time trajectories of their own choosing. But when everyone else is doing the same, the problem of co-ordination increases further. The upshot is an increasingly ' do-it-yourself' society (Southerton, Shove and Warde 2001) held together in space and time through a patchwork of individually negotiated arrangements.

Organising co-presence becomes more demanding as traditionally shared schedules (e.g. of meal times, of the working day, etc.) give way to a twenty-four hour flux of possibilities. Symes' (1999) research on the rise of the appointments diary is relevant in this regard for it suggests a loss of collective coordination even *within* the frame of the normal working day. In documenting the growing importance of diaries and ' personal organisers' , Symes concludes that this trend indicates a shift from highly structured ' industrial time' to a more contingent form of ' professional time' . He associates industrial time with a period when ' most work was prescribed, continuous and unremitting, and workers had little in the way of chronological latitude' , contrasting this with a new order in which work is ' discontinuous and contingent' and in which workers have ' more autonomy to construct their own timetables' (Symes 1999: 372). The challenge of organising ever more fractured diaries is exacerbated by the fact that other peoples' time is also fragmented and less formally controlled. In a context where personal schedules are complicated and therefore fragile, making and meeting deadlines is a matter of urgency. As a result people do not just need to get to places: they need to get there on time. However, the paradox is that systems and devices that promise to increase autonomy and allow individuals greater discretion over the timing and scheduling of activity will, if successful, generate multiply idiosyncratic schedules which in turn increase the problem of coordination.

In this there is a rather direct relation between individual and collective modes of sociotemporal coordination, a decline in one almost always leading to an increase in the other.

Coordination and inequality

The personalization of scheduling is likely to have long-term and cumulative consequences for the social as well as the spatial and temporal order of society. Effective planning depends on being able to modify and coordinate what other people do and it is as well to underline the point that the powerful generally have ' greater capacity to exert autonomous control over their own trajectories through time and space, and to subordinate the schedules of others to their own' (Warde *et al.* 1998). What Breedveld (1998) refers to as ' time sovereignty' is of particular importance in a ' do-it-yourself' society in which social interaction is coordinated and organised case by case. In such situations, power is exemplified not so much by the presence or absence of ' free' time (as with the leisure classes), as by the capacity to respond flexibly and change plans at short notice (the mobile elite?).

Douglas and Isherwood (1996) touch upon similar issues of power and time in their discussion of the relation between status and periodicity and the association between high-frequency non-postponable tasks and low status and rank. They argue that social groups responsible for high frequency activities are tied down temporally and spatially and have limited ability to participate in low frequency but highly valued consumption events. Having described the social hierarchy in these terms, they go on to show how this patterning drives particular forms of demand. They conclude that ' future necessities in the present luxuries class will be sets of goods with effective periodicity-relieving properties' (Douglas and Isherwood 1996: 88). If we view mobility as a form of consumption, it may be useful to think about demand, access and control in these terms. Yet this would involve extracting mobility from the specificities of geography and journeying and separating it from other also valued (even central) goals like those of social participation. On the other hand, and as already noted, rushing around helps maintain some social networks whilst denying people access to others.

Those who have the power, resources and the capacity to exploit the latest technologies of speed and flexibility are potentially able to ' create' time for valued purposes. However the risk is that they do so at an unacceptable cost to equally important concepts of care and proper performance (Warde 1999). What practical concessions have to be made to cherished ideals when rushing around, and how does all this play out in the juggling lifestyle (Thompson 1996)? It is important that too much haste, mobility or convenience does not compromise practice, participation and performance. At the same time it is important to embrace speedy and/or flexible solutions in order to cope, that is in order to achieve coordination intensive but ' normal' and necessary practices like those of meeting friends, or having dinner with other family members (Southerton 2001). In negotiating these tensions, day in day out, new ' workable' conventions, practices and routines arise and with them, new forms of social order.
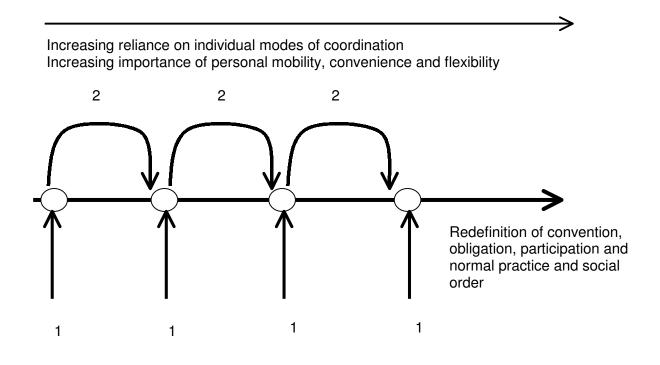
Mobility and social coordination

Taking a longer term perspective, it is clear that conventions and standards evolve and that what might once have been defined as socially inappropriate short-cuts (the working lunch) or exceptional arrangements (the day trip to Brussels) can in time become perfectly ordinary. Senses of obligation and of what is necessary and normal appear to creep as individuals seek ways of coping with temporal pressures of coordination and as they look for solutions to otherwise intractable problems of scheduling and order. This search for acceptable compromise draws in new mobile technologies, also requiring the

redefinition of standards, for example, of how much commuting is ' normal' , what constitutes a ' high' annual air-mileage, and so forth.

Drawing these features together, figure 2 depicts the relation between mobility and social coordination, also showing the consequent redefinition of normal practice. This image illustrates the continual demand for new more mobility intensive solutions to problems of scheduling and coordination that are in part generated by mobility itself.

Figure 2. Mobility and social coordination

Increasing reliance on individual modes of coordination
Increasing importance of personal mobility, convenience and flexibility

2   2   2

Redefinition of convention, obligation, participation and normal practice and social order

1   1   1   1

1   Demand for and adoption of new mobility services/convenience technologies to ease problems of coordination and achieve levels/forms of necessary social participation

2   Mobility engenders new divisions of time, facilitates fragmenting of events, exacerbates problems of coordination and so generates demand for new mobility services/convenience technologies to achieve (re-defined) levels/forms of necessary social participation

To summarise, the importance of mobility, speed and flexibility increases as individuals struggle to cope with the contemporary challenge of allocating activities and coordinating them and other people in time and space. The resulting dynamic has a life of its own: each solution adding to the menu of problems which future solutions seek to resolve.

The practical consequences of all of this differ between those who have the power to control their own schedules and those who do not. But in general terms, the cumulative effect is to engender and legitimise new, typically more resource intensive, conventions and expectations built around the successive appropriation of faster, more flexible, more convenient solutions, these representing a self-evidently sensible response to the unending problems of organising life in a 'do-it-yourself' society of the schedule.

Implications and observations

I finish by reflecting on the implications of this analysis for policy and for research.

First, the practice oriented approach sketched here is of considerable potential. It challenges much transport research in supposing that mobility is not 'about' getting from A to B, suggesting that it is instead about integrating everyday life and the activities required of 'normal' practice. People are rushing around in order to preserve the sense that they are behaving in normal and ordinary ways. They rush back home to eat together (as a proper family should), they rush out to sports clubs and activities (as active people like them should), and they rush around at work as busy people do. The doings of family life and the doings of work (for some sectors of society) involve and imply extensive moving about. At the level of experience, the issue is not so much one of movement as of spacing and timing. The practical challenge is one of getting to where you need to be on time in order to participate effectively.

Second, living in a society in which collective sociotemporal coordination appears to be decreasing, and which is, in addition (and at the same time) apparently more spatially dispersed than ever before, imposes certain unavoidable demands. More work needs to be done to specify what these demands are, how they vary and how they intersect. But in general terms, it seems that those who are unable to exploit contemporary technologies, systems and infrastructures of mobility are at a *greater* social disadvantage in such a society than they would be in other more proximate, more collectively scheduled cultures.

By implication, the fabric of a mobile, temporally fragmented society engenders inaccessibility, inequality and social exclusion.

In policy terms, the obvious solution to these inequities is to help people play the game. Referring to figure 1, the goal should be to improve the distribution of resources, increase the availability of infrastructure and thereby reduce differences in the potential for participation. This is likely to involve making it easier for more people to get around and to do so on time. But in terms of figure 2, this would only exacerbate the problem of coordination and generate demand for yet more resource intensive forms of mobility.

Are there ways out of this apparent impasse? Few would advocate deliberately poor infrastructures as a means of enhancing social inclusion. Such a strategy is likely to be rather problematic in terms of individual acceptability, but it is not so fanciful collectively (see the slow cities movement). In so far as policy does have an effect on the shaping of social practice and social order, the (mobility related) ambition might well be one of reconfiguring conventions of everyday life such that trends toward spatial dispersal and temporal fragmentation are reversed. On a micro scale there the notion of charging *less* for car-parking the longer the stay is intriguing. Instead of thinking about how to allocate mobility-related resources the longer-term policy enterprise might be one of fixing

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working hours, holidays and sociotemporal rhythms so as to cut down the personalised fine-tuning of social coordination. A more collectively scheduled society promises to be less socially exclusive in the sense that fewer spatial-temporal resources are required for effective participation and because command over these would be less effective as a means of command over others.

More ambitiously, transport-related policy might start by thinking about what effective membership of 'normal' society entails. What is the mobility 'burden' of social inclusion? As indicated above, this need not lead to the headlong pursuit of ways of ' meeting' the demand that might thereby be revealed. Far from it. It is important to remember that, policy including transport policy - is deeply implicated in the construction of such demand and in the shaping of social expectations and practices. What is so far missing is an explicit recognition of this point, and of the potential for a more broad-minded engagement with the social and political construction of need, including the need for rushing around.

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