

1. Dictionary

Residential mobility

By Patrick Rérat (Géographe)

Broadly speaking, residential mobility refers to a household's change of residence within a life basin.

Residential mobility is one of the four main forms of spatial mobility, along with daily mobility, migration and travel. Each of these forms refers to a particular combination in terms of time and space.

Residential mobility is considered in a long-term perspective (compared to reversible forms like daily mobility and travel) and takes place over short distances. Thus it does not usually affect the organization of daily life (e.g. in terms of work, shopping and leisure locations, social ties, etc.).

Migration, on the other hand, involves longer distances - either across national borders (international migration) or between regions within a country (internal or inter-regional migration) - and results in a redefining of the spaces of daily life (Niedomysl, 2011).

This typology should not, however, overshadow interactions between the major forms of spatial mobility. Migration, for example, is not simply a change of country or region; it also involves numerous decisions with respect to residential mobility (selecting a city or residential area, habitat type, etc.). What is more, the limits of spatial mobility categories fade with the emergence and spread of practices like long-distance commuting (Ravalet et al. 2014), weekly commuting (one residence during the week, another on weekends) (Kaufmann 2011) and cross-border residential mobility (international migration over short distances) (Rérat et al. 2011).

Theoretical approaches

Of the different ways of studying residential mobility, the following perspectives can be cited:

- **Deterministic and humanistic perspectives** (Boyle et al. 1998). The former minimize the role of individuals and suggests that moving is an obvious solution, given the context (and/or structures) that surrounds and extends beyond them. The latter consider that actors consciously make decisions - even if they are not necessarily rational from an economic standpoint - and have a certain freedom of choice.
- **Macro and micro-analytical perspectives** (Cadwallader 1992). The former look at aggregate residential phenomena and explain them based on context (e.g. the physical and socio-economic characteristics of the spatial entities in question). The latter focus on individuals and study decision-making processes, residential motives and aspirations, etc.

This research field is organized around the five main theoretical approaches, which are briefly described below (see R  rat 2010 for more details):

- **The neo-classic approach** regards individuals as economically rational (*homo economicus*). Cebula (1979), for instance, suggests they optimize their utility based on differences of income, amenities, costs and the benefits of local government policies. This last point is at the heart of public choice theory (Tiebout 1956), which posits that individuals move based on the combination of (services guaranteed and proposed by a local community) and price (in terms of tax burden) that best matches their preferences. Thus, by moving, individuals “vote with their feet.”
- **The behaviorist approach** highlights the importance of socio-psychological mechanisms in the decision to move. In this perspective, individuals are willing to tolerate a degree of discomfort but, once a certain level of stress has been reached, they seek a residential context that offers a better quality of life (or residential satisfaction) (Wolpert 1965, Cadwallader 1992). They choose from among a limited number of alternatives based on a minimum level of satisfaction (*satisficer*). The behavioral approach focuses on the subjective environment (i.e. as it is perceived), and aims to identify behavioral patterns, particularly through questionnaire surveys.
- **The institutional approach** does not have the status of an established theory. It is concerned with the roles of managers and institutions without proposing an interpretive grid (Knox and Pinch 2000). It examines the values and logics of action of intermediaries in the housing market (builders, developers, real estate agents, local authorities, financial institutions, etc.). These players have in common the fact of linking available resources (real estate, land and capital) and potential clients, and as such structure the housing supply and the possibility of home ownership. They can also play a key role in the process of concentration of certain population groups in certain neighborhoods (Teixeira 2006).
- **The structuralist approach** highlights the social constraints that affect individuals’ behavior and limit their room for maneuver. It explains residential phenomena on a structural level (economic and physical characteristics of a society, political framework, conflictual relations between classes, etc.). On this basis, authors turned to (neo-) Marxist theories to analyze residential phenomena with regard to the organization of the capitalist mode of production. This is the case for gentrification, which is interpreted in light of neoliberal policies and capital investment-divestment-reinvestment cycles within the built environment (Smith 1996).
- **The humanistic approach** refers here to the human geography movement that emerged in the 1970s, which highlights the importance of action (agency). Much research - both in sociology and anthropology - share these principles without necessarily bearing the label. Using qualitative approaches, they focus on the description and analysis of individual experiences and characteristics such as beliefs, feelings, values, individuals’ emotions and their attachment to a territorial context (Christie et al. 2008).

Given the variety of approaches to residential phenomena, recent developments are characterized by a call to incorporate different points of view – each of which highlight specific mechanisms and are not necessarily incompatible – and to adopt **theoretical and methodological pluralism** based on the line of questioning (Boyle et al. 1998). This is what allows the concept of residential choice.

Going further: the concept of residential choice

The term **residential choice**, at first glance, does not seem to transcend the conflict between deterministic and humanistic approaches, given its positive connotation. However, residential choice should not be regarded solely as the result of households' aspirations, but rather as a choice with constraints (Bonvalet and Dureau 2000, Brown and Bonvalet 2002, Authier et al. 2010).

More specifically, residential choice depends on households' **needs and preferences** within the framework of a limited range of options defined by the **opportunities and constraints** of the housing market (availability of housing in a given residential context, prices, etc.) and the **resources and restrictions** associated with the households themselves (Van Ham, 2012). These can be objective (income or available capital, location of workplaces, etc.) or subjective (schemas of perception and action arising from belonging to a social class, gender, etc.) in nature. Residential choice thus appears to be socially constituted, with the individual deciding based on the habits, norms and values he has internalized (Authier et al. 2010, Thomas 2013). Because of the existence of constraints and restrictions, residential choice is the result of tradeoffs, be it between the persons affected by the move or different criteria related to housing and residential context (see below).

The concept of residential choice means that individuals enjoy a certain leeway, even if the range of possibilities varies greatly depending on the case. Unlike the structuralist vision, this theoretical position legitimates the study of **six sets of characteristics**: the unit of analysis, profile, trajectory, selection criteria, decision process, residential lifestyles and relationships.

The first element to consider is the **unit of analysis**. While works on spatial mobility have long focused on the individual, many authors stress the importance of households and entourage (i.e. parents, children, spouses, and siblings who do not share the same apartment [Bonvalet and Lelièvre 1995, Mulder 2007]). The preferences and interests not necessarily being the same for all of the individuals concerned, residential choice involves trade-offs, negotiations and compromises (Rérat, Gurtner and Baehler 2014).

The second dimension, **profile**, refers firstly to classic variables such as position in the life course (age, type of household, etc.), socio-economic status (education level, socio-professional category, employment status, etc.) and national origin. To this "vertical" social differentiation can be added a "horizontal" distinction based on individual values, a dimension that, as yet, is little considered in the analysis of residential mobility (Jansen 2011).

Profile variables are important because residential phenomena are doubly selective (Rérat et al. 2008). On one hand, the propensity to move varies according to the population group. In general, the average is higher among young adults, singles and divorcees (versus married people or widow(er)s), people living alone and unmarried couples (versus married couples, especially those with children), tenants (versus homeowners) and highly qualified people (Carnazzi, Weber and Golay 2005). In addition, each territorial context is characterized by a specific hosting potential (Thomas, 2013) that is more or less attractive to certain population groups. Thus do we find an under-representation of families and an overrepresentation of singles, childless couples and houseshares in urban centers (Rérat et al. 2008).

The third aspect, **trajectory**, strictly speaking includes past, present and future housing locations and characteristics. More broadly speaking, this concept underlines the importance of recontextualizing residential choice in individuals' life courses (Heinz et al.

2009). Biographical approaches thus look at residential choice within triple framework: personal (formation or separation of a couple, birth of a child, etc.), residential (location and characteristics of past and current housing) and professional (entering the job market, job changes, retirement, etc.).

Fourth, it should be recognized that residential choices are complex and involve a multitude of factors and **criteria**. Three angles of analysis exist - residential satisfaction, aspirations and motivations (see Rérat 2010 for a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches) - which focus respectively on the current situation (factors that might encourage a move), projects in a more or less distant and defined future (i.e. stated preferences) and criteria underpinning actual residential choice (i.e. revealed preferences).

Moving can be based upon different factors. Clark and Onaka (1983) distinguish between different **types of moves**, depending on whether or not they are forced (e.g. expropriation, for example), incurred (by a change of career or household structure) or are adjustments. In the latter case, moving is an attempt to improve quality of life and housing (in terms of location, occupation status, size, comfort, accessibility, etc.). As housing is a composite good, households must make a certain number of tradeoffs - partial prioritizations between these elements - because they cannot meet all their aspirations.

The decision to move works at several **registers of action** (Thomas and Pattaroni 2012). Building on the work of pragmatic sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991), Pattaroni et al. (2009) identify three logics of action that, in a differentiated way, link residential choices: a functional logic ("using"), a social logic ("meeting") and a sensitive logic ("inhabiting"). Individuals and households would therefore be simultaneously characterized by a calculating relationship to the world (which builds on objective factors such as price and/or function and morphological qualities and based on which strategies are developed), a socio-cognitive relationship (informed by various representations, such as reputation, that feed aspirations), and finally a sensitive relationship that feeds on attraction and repulsion.

Fifth, the decision-making process has to do with the way households locate housing. Authier (1998) identifies two main logics: the market (agencies and ads) and networks (family or friends). Households are not equal as regards these logics depending on their economic (income and wealth), cultural (e.g. ability to process information) and social (networks of relations) capital (Boterman 2012). Among other factors, living on site - the location-specific advantage, to use Cadwallader's term [1992] - has certain advantages, such as knowledge of the context and reactivity when it comes to seizing opportunities, whereas migrating from another region requires a certain understanding of the local context (which can be done through several residential stages). Time is yet another such factor, as the urgency of the situation may force a household to revisit certain criteria).

The final aspect is households' spatial practices, in other words, daily mobility downstream of residential choice. While the latter may be largely motivated by the former in the case of the choice to live in a downtown area (Rérat 2012), other works show lack of anticipation of new mobility constraints brought about by the choice to live in a peri-urban area (Baudelle et al. 2004, Rougé 2010). The concept of residential relationship refers to the "forms of appropriation and representation of the housing unit, but also the building, neighborhood and city, generated by the individuals in a given household" (Authier 2001, 4). Residents' spatial practices are characterized not only by geography but also by time (existence, frequency, etc.) and modal choices; they pertain to job

activities, leisure activities and social networks (ibid.). The definition of residential relationship echoes that of lifestyle proposed by Pattaroni, in other words the “composing of daily activities and experiences that give meaning and shape to the life of a person or group in time and space.” Residential choice thus reflects the application of lifestyle (Authier et al. 2010).

Research perspectives

Residential mobility is receiving renewed interest in the social sciences and humanities: on one hand, it is a field of study unto itself and should be explored on the basis of a changing context, as demographic changes (especially the aging of the population), the complexification of life courses, the diversification of lifestyles and various economic crises demonstrate (Coulter, van Ham and Findlay 2015). On the other hand, residential mobility can be regarded as an indicator for understanding other issues. It therefore seems particularly important to study residential mobility, as it is a key mechanism in urban changes (such as peri-urbanization, gentrification and relegation phenomena, or the “city at three speeds,” to use Donzelot’s [2004]) expression, regional disparities (Davezies 2012), regional development policies (like the “presential”/residential economy, which concerns consumption linked to the presence of people in a territory) and different planning models (the attractiveness of neighborhoods arising from densification or urban renewal operations, the impact of the urban morphology on mobility practices, etc.).

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Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Residential mobility

Broadly speaking, residential mobility refers to a household's change of residence within a life basin.

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Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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Motility

[En savoir plus](#) x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- [Change in practices](#)
- [Housing](#)

Theories

- [Concepts](#)
-
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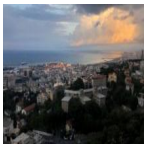
G  ographe

Patrick R  rat teaches the geography of mobility at the University of Lausanne's Institute of Geography and Sustainability. His work looks at residential mobility (and gentrification/re-urbanization phenomena more specifically), as well as the transition toward sustainable mobility (most notably cycling).

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