

1. Dictionary

Motility

By Vincent Kaufmann (Sociologue)

Every person, every group can be characterised by greater or lesser propensities for moving around a geographic, economic and social space. “Motility” has been the name given to these aptitudes, a reference to the use of this term in biology. Conceptualised by Vincent Kaufmann (2002), motility is defined as “the set of characteristics that enable people to move from one place to another,” in other words, the physical means, the earnings, the aspiration to either a sedentary existence or to mobility, the social conditions needed to be able to access the available technical systems of transport and telecommunications, plus acquired knowledge such as training, a driving licence and knowledge of international English in order to travel etc.

Motility therefore refers to the social conditions of access (conditions in which ‘supply’ is used in the broadest sense of the word), to the skills (which are needed in order take advantage of this supply) and the mobility projects considered (which can be realized by the effective use of the supply). Taking transport as an example, motility is the way in which a person or a group uses the travel possibilities available from the transport supply.

Further details

Motility leads one to consider that the individual is located somewhere between this supply and demand, and is able to assess the possibilities offered by the supply and then transform them into demand for a journey, according to his/her specific requirements. The advantage of this model is that it enables people to identify the relationships between the different possibilities provided by supply, motility and demand. These relationships have become all the more important given that travel possibilities have significantly increased in the last 50 years and that, as a result, there is no longer a mechanistic relationship between supply and demand, but instead a universe in which every individual is able to exercise choice.

Several recent studies have made it possible to measure motility (Kaufmann, Viry, Widmer 2009, Canzler et al. 2008, Kesselring 2005). Although these remain exploratory, to the extent that they have yet to lead to the validated methodology for a “standard measurement”, they have clearly demonstrated several types of aptitudes for movement – types that can be differentiated in social and spatial terms, albeit without a clear relationship with levels of wealth and education.

On the contrary, in his doctoral thesis on the inequalities of transport in Santiago, Chile, Regina Witter shows that the motility of the population is very closely linked to their levels of income and education. It’s an important finding since it suggests that motility isn’t necessarily a relevant concept for analyzing mobility in emerging countries (Witter 2012). In his work “Rethinking the city”, Vincent Kaufmann also applied the notion of motility to businesses, conceptualizing their strategies for mobility, which can be based on various

combinations of changes and movement. In the same book, he also applies the notion of motility to towns and cities, along with municipalities, in order to describe their ability to change certain aspects of the urban context, such as transport infrastructure, social relationships and ways of life (Kaufmann 2011).

Bibliography

Canzler W., Kaufmann V. et Kesselring S. (eds.) (2008) Tracing mobilities; Ashgate, Burlington

Kaufmann, V. (2002). Re-thinking mobility; Ashgate, Burlington

Kaufmann, V. (2008). Les paradoxes de la mobilité. Bouger, s'enraciner. Lausanne, Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes

Kaufmann, V. (2011) Rethinking the City; Routledge and EPFL Press, London and Lausanne

Kaufmann, V. et Widmer E. (2006) "Motility and Family Dynamics: Current Issues and Research Agendas," Zeitschrift für Familienforschung, 18. Jahrg., Heft 1/2006, pp. 111-129

Vincent Kaufmann, Gil Viry and Eric Widmer (2010) "Motility," in Norbert Schneider et al. (eds.). Mobile Living across Europe II – Causes and determinants of job mobility and their individual and societal consequences. Barbara Budrich Publishers, Opladen, pp. 95-112

Kesselring, S. (2005). New mobilities management. Mobility pioneers between first and second modernity. Zeitschrift für Familienforschung, (2), pp. 129-143

Witter R. (2012) Public urban transport, mobility competences and social exclusion. The case of Santiago de Chile, Thèse EPFL, Lausanne

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.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Motility

[En savoir plus](#) x

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.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Associated Thematics :

Theories

- Concepts
-



Vincent Kaufmann

Sociologue

Vincent Kaufmann, a Swiss sociologist, is one of the pioneers of mobility and inventor of the concept of motility. He is director of LaSUR at the EPFL, General Secretary of CEAT and professor of sociology and mobility analyses. He is the Mobile Lives Forum's scientific director.

The same author [See all publications](#)



Mobility, motility: What determines our ability to move?

Video by Vincent Kaufmann



Understanding the real reasons why people choose a particular type of transport

Video by Vincent Kaufmann



Engineering by Seduction

Video by Vincent Kaufmann

To cite this publication :

Vincent Kaufmann (10 December 2012), « Motility », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 15 May 2025, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/dictionary/451/motility>

Other publications



Travelling less to travel better!

Mobile Lives Forum



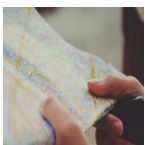
Mobility

Agathe Lefoulon, Mobile Lives Forum



The spatial underpinnings of the revolutionary protests in Algiers

Ghaliya Djelloul, Aniss Mouad Mezoued



Mobility and job hunting: a digital barrier?

Christian Licoppe, Hélène-Marie Juteau