

## 1. Dictionary

# Mobile methods

By Monika Büscher (Sociologue)

Mobile methods produce insight by moving physically, virtually or analytically with research subjects. They involve qualitative, quantitative, visual and experimental forms of inquiry, and follow material and social phenomena.

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## Detailed definition

How people, capital, objects, images and information move, are prevented from moving or become immobile is consequential, given that multi-modal and intersecting (im)mobilities configure social and material realities. It is critical for societies to understand everyday practices and their cumulative systemic effects. To this end, one of the core commitments of mobile methods is to move with subjects of inquiry, often as participant observers. Mobile methods thus allow researchers to establish 'some form of literal, physical presence with an explicit logic of association or connection' (Marcus, 1998).

Different qualitative, quantitative, visual and experimental techniques are used to study mobilities (Büscher, Urry & Witchger, 2011; Fincham, McGuinness, & Murray, 2009), including arrested, blocked or disrupted movements (Adey & Anderson, 2011; Sheller, 2012) and stillness (Bissell, 2007, Lan et al 2013). Examples of mobile methods include:

- walk alongs (Kusenbach, 2003; Pink, 2007; Ingold & Vergunst, 2008),
- ride alongs (Laurier, 2004, Ferguson 2011, Aldred & Jungnickel 2012),
- shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007; Jiron, 2011),
- tours (Kusenbach, 2012),
- travel, transport or technology diaries (Palen & Salzman, 2002; Axhausen, Zimmermann, Schönfelder, Rindsfuser, & Haupt, 2002),
- longitudinal studies with migrants (Kalir, 2012),
- home and away studies with tourists (Larsen, 2008),
- virtual ethnography (Molz, 2006),
- multi-sited and global ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Burawoy, 2000; Tsing, 2005, Kien 2009),
- Geographical Positioning Systems (GPS) or mobile positioning studies (Hein, Evans, & Jones, 2008; Ahas, 2011),
- biomapping, comobility, audiowalks (Nold, 2009, Southern, 2012; Chapman 2012)
- interventions, collaborative design, collaborative creation (Watts & Lyons 2011, Büscher 2006, Southern 2012)

Researchers may follow people, objects, images, ideas, information or connections. By engaging with multiple perspectives, practices and experiences, mobile methods provide novel analytical insight on distributed, connected, fleeting phenomena (e.g. complex lived

practices of mobility and/or (im)mobilisation at different scales and their sensory/affective dimensions.

## **Specific points**

Mobile methods are not new – insistence on studying social and material orders through movement has long been part of scholarly enquiry in a variety of disciplines, from Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin's cultural phenomenology, through *dérive* in art (Debord, 1959), mobile video in anthropology (Mead & Bateson, 1977), the discovery of social order from within in ethnomethodology (Macbeth 1999), to time-geography (Hägerstrand, 1985). The mobility turn has fostered mobile analytical sensitivity and methodologies in sociology (Urry 2000, Sheller & Urry 2006), geography (Thrift 2004, Cresswell 2006, Adey 2009), transport studies (Axhausen, Zimmermann, Schönfelder, Rindsfuser, & Haupt, 2002) and other engineering disciplines such as mobile computing (Weilenmann 2001), as well as in commercial marketing research (Robbins 2011).

## **Mobile methods and Method Assemblage**

Innovation in mobile methods often focuses on generating qualitative insight into the fleeting, scattered, multiple, embodied and affective practices of mobile living as well as processes of immobilization and exclusion. However, mixed mobile methods that integrate quantitative and visual/experimentation methods are emerging, especially around the use of databases, open data, big data, life history and longitudinal data, Geographical Information Systems, GPS, sensors and personal mobile technologies. Actuarial datamining and 'qualculation' of transport, financial, marketing and security data (Thrift 2004) allow for unprecedented dynamic qualitative predictions regarding futures. Pervasive calculation of consumer choices based on loyalty card use, for example, enables producers, logistics companies, warehouse operators and supermarkets to become 'dynamic to sale' (Harvey et al. 2002), that is, able to monitor demand, predict trends and gear swiftly responses to change. Mixed mobile methods are necessary for a more critical understanding of the hypermobile, connected, micro-coordinated 'just-in-time living' that such qualculation enables. Mixing may integrate qualitative and quantitative methods, such as in mobile positioning studies (Ahas 2011), or may come together as method assemblage (Law 2004).

## **Politics of method: Ethics and Inventiveness**

Finally, mobile methods reflect an ontological and epistemological (as well as ethical and practical) shift in research methodology, raising new ethical challenges for researchers, research participants and research users, particularly around informed consent, privacy and personal data security and researcher-researcher-user relationships. At the same time, however, recognition of the fundamental nature of (im)mobilities for material and social realities is fostering collaboration between mobilities research, social innovation, design, management and policy, and can enable 'carefully radical' and 'radically careful' innovation (Latour 2008) — a new politics of method. The latter centres on how mobile methodologies tend to create a nuanced understanding of complex socially organised phenomena and the rise of 'mode2', participatory forms of knowledge production and utilization, such as living laboratories and collective experimentation (Wynne and Felt 2007, Nowotny et al 2001, Bærenholdt et al 2010). Mobile methods often move research teams to act on new understanding; it is in this sense they are inventive methods (Lury & Wakeford 2012) that can play an important part in configuring futures.

## Examples

Mobilities research is a fast growing field. A brief review of several examples offers a glimpse into the varied insights and inventive momentum produced. Riding along with a sales representative on the motorway, Eric Laurier (2004) shows how mobile office work is part of emergent social and moral orders that produce careers in both the slow and fast lanes. As he observes 'Ally', respond to emails (sometime literally reading them on the steering wheel while moving at high speed); the art of fitting into the embodied, augmented sociality of motorway traffic becomes an element of analysis. Building on this work, Harry Ferguson (2011) follows social work done at the office, on the move, in parked cars and inside the homes of service users. He sheds light on the affective dimension of social work, entering the sometimes frightening worlds of service-users' homes, and documents power struggles over how much access is demanded, granted and resisted, alongside his research subjects. Following other multi-faceted, scattered, fleeting phenomena requires vicarious methods. By equipping research subjects with diaries, sensors or GPS trackers, researchers are able to document actual experience and their negotiating of intersecting mobilities. Artist Christian Nold, for example, asks people to wear galvanic skin sensors as they move through their cities. Experiences of low and high arousal are monitored, mapped, annotated and visualized like a kind of 'emotional cartography' (Nold, 2009). In a more experimental approach, artist-sociologist Jen Southern picks up on emergent practices of 'comobility' – a form of connection with other, faraway individuals that is experienced in motion through locative media. By building speculative 'apps' that visualize networks of people (and animals) simultaneously on the move that are then downloaded onto personal iphones, she and her colleagues allow people to experiment with surveillance as well as connected sociality (Southern, 2012). This type of connection and involvement with research subjects reflects how an analytical orientation towards (im)mobilities shifts the research from focus from 'mere' investigation to actual involvement, thus combining socio-technical change and research. Mobile methods as 'inventive methods' grapple with, shape and inform socio-technical change in a concrete way. Other examples include the 'travel remedy kit' devised by Watts and Lyons to improve railway journeys for passengers (Watts and Lyons, 2011) and method assemblages designed to 'follow the information' across interoperable databases in disaster response (Büscher et al. 2013).

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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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## **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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# Mobilities paradigm

The mobilities paradigm is a way of seeing the world that is sensitive to the role of movement in ordering social relations. It serves to legitimize questions about the practical, discursive, technological, and organizational ways in which societies deal with distance and the appropriate methods for their study.

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## Associated Thematics :

### Lifestyles

- [Digital technologies](#)

### Theories

- [Concepts](#)
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- 



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Professor Monika Büscher is director of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University. Her research connects different fields: Mobilities Research, Design, Ethnomethodology, Science and Technology Studies, Participatory Design.

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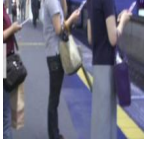
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