To move or not to move. Spatial immobility as social exclusion in developing countries

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Abstract

Spatial mobility constitutes one of the most salient aspects of contemporary urban life. Throughout the world everyday life is becoming increasingly mobile because there are a growing number of activities that individuals have to do outside stable spaces such as the household or the workplace. At the same time the own shapes, rhythms and schedules of contemporary cities (due to processes of suburbanization and spatial extension) force us to travel longer even for basic activities such as to go to the supermarket or to visit relatives and friends. For some social theorists this situation is an indicator of a more general process: the fact that we are living in a mobile society. In this new societal order "mobilities" are increasingly replacing "places" as the most basic structuring principle of social urban life (Kakihara 2002; Urry 2003). Today what is central is the movement per se, not the departure or arrival points.

Even if one does not completely agree with this radical statement it is difficult to ignore some undeniable facts lying behind it. Mobility is a central feature of contemporary urban life and the ability to move is becoming increasingly a stratifying factor, such as access to education or social networks (Bauman 1998; Shove 2002). To be immobile is not only to be stuck in one place, but more important to be outside networks of mobilities that constitute the very essence of urban life. Especially in the context of developing countries, these 'immobile' groups are in a even more disadvantage position due the lack of state assistance and other welfare systems that can "bridge" their difference in mobility with the rest of the population.

The present article, based in ethnographic case studies of 20 low-income families, inhabitants of the city of Santiago (Chile), shows empirically how family members are forced to develop certain strategies and practices to deal with immobility. Some of these strategies include the selection of certain kinds of mobilities above others and the distinction between mobile and immobile members of the household, along with the use of certain technologies, such as mobile phones, in order to deal with the requirements of mobility from their social environment. But in general, what this research shows is that the impact of such strategies is always limited and dependent on structural sociocultural factors (such as the availability of money, the age of family members, a culture of immobility, etc.) that diminish the positive effects of it. Immobility is an everyday reality and it has an impact on the well being of these families. It is still not as important as other exclusions, but is more pervasive and less visible. Immobility in not single unitary phenomena, but a complex system of immobilities strongly related to each other. This character makes the actions against it quite difficult, not only in terms of public policies but also at the very level of the everyday life of the family members under study.

References

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