Exploring the interplay between (im)mobility and imagination

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This special issue explores the interplay between imagination and human mobility. It presents theoretical, empirical and methodological explorations on how imagination and mobility shape each other. It asks questions such as: how is imagination triggered or blocked by people’s experience of mobility? How does the creative process of imagining alternative worlds and lives in turn affect people’s capacity and (im)possibilities to move? This editorial, in particular, highlights the contributions of the various articles and addresses a series of emerging ways of studying the interplay between mobility and imagination. It presents the specific ways through which the various articles of this issue offer important explorations on the imagined and potential character of mobility, and on the always changing and shifting nature of imagination on the move.

Mobility is a crucial aspect of human life. As more than mere physical movement, mobility relates to the act of moving (Cresswell, 2006; Kaufmann, 2002) entangled with power, norms and meaning (Frello, 2008), and involving social, material, temporal and symbolic components that make movement (im)possible. The capacity and potential to move can be located ‘in the dreaming of, planning for, or fear of mobility’ (Leivestad, 2016, p. 143), in our fantasying on where, when and how we move. The field of possibilities to move physically can be infused with the act of imagining origins, traversals and destinations, with the aspiration for other lives and future selves. Or a person’s imagination can be triggered, blocked or changed across time by the actual experience of (im)mobility. For one can move all around the world, and still have a limited imaginative experience; or conversely, one may be placebound, be stuck in an endless present and have the feeling that life
goes nowhere, yet travel fast across places and times through imagination (Rapport & Dawson, 1998; Salazar, 2011). One can jump in time with the mind and live unlived lives (Phillips, 2013), or can go physically and imaginatively back home, while psychologically or socially never be able to return to the place that was before (Schuetz, 1945). The interplay between these two phenomena, namely imagination and human mobility, is the focus of the present special issue. In particular, the issue presents theoretical, empirical and methodological explorations on how imagination and mobility shape each other. It asks questions such as: how is imagination triggered or blocked by people’s experience of mobility? How does the creative process of imagining alternative worlds and lives in turn affect people’s capacity and (im)possibilities to move?

In what follows, we first discuss the current state of research with regard to the interplay between imagination, imaginaries and mobility. After, we propose our approach based on a cultural psychological perspective. Finally, we present the specific ways through which the contributions of this issue offer important explorations on the imagined and potential character of mobility, and on the always changing and shifting nature of imagination on the move.

From imaginaries on mobility to imagining on the move

That people, images, capital, ideas and objects alike, move in a more accelerated rhythm than before has become a common belief in the contemporary world. Mobility and globalization studies have particularly emphasized how constant flow becomes more and more a specificity of our times (Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 1993; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). This new paradigm combined new ways of theorizing various forms of movement of different temporal durations and spatial distances (e.g. migration, tourism, pilgrimage, international business and humanitarian work, international education) through the lens of movement and started to explore these phenomena under the register of ‘mobility’. Since the 1990s, this ‘mobility turn’ has largely been debated across the social sciences. Some scholars, by focusing on experiences of immobility in the context of a ‘mobile world’ (Bissell & Fuller, 2010), for example, have challenged some of the assumptions common in the ‘nomadic’ discourses on mobility, in particular people’s increasing ability to move, the sense of freedom and positive change implicit in the concept of mobility as well as the binary logic of movement versus stasis (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). A mobility approach, both on the analytical and empirical level, challenged static perspectives grounded on a taken-for-granted correspondence between identities, places and cultures, in favour of a more processual understanding of contemporary social configurations. It also brought to question traditional ways of conceptualizing migration, and questioning its normative and nation-based assumptions (Dahinden, 2012, 2016).

While building on these new perspectives, scholars interested in the issue of imagination in the context of mobility, however, have maintained a rather static perspective on imaginaries, as the cultural material that people use to make sense
of their experiences. In sociology and anthropology, studies have explored how imaginaries of distant others, times and geographical destinations shape people’s experience of migration and travel (Appadurai, 1996), in particular: individuals’ choice to move (Jasper, 2000), tourist campaigns and tourism services (Ivy, 1995; Salazar, 2011; Salazar & Graburn, 2014), as well as migrants’ trajectories (Salazar, 2011, 2014), and their sense of ‘homeland’ in the context of diaspora (Axel, 2002). Other scholars in geography have more explicitly brought the concept of ‘geographical imaginaries’ to migration studies (Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007). Other studies have started to unpack the interaction between imaginaries and people’s active imaginings in the context of tourism (Salazar, 2011), and have explored how imaginaries become significant to people in the experience of different forms of mobility.

Here, we aim to take this research further and propose to move the focus from a stable concept of imaginaries as the output of imagining, to the dynamic ways ‘in which we construct, wittingly or unwittingly, horizons that determine what we experience and how we interpret what we experience’ (Crapanzano, 2003, p. 2): in other words, from imaginaries as a socially shared and transmitted toolkit, to imagination as an ever-changing embodied and creative activity both embedded in and shaping the social and cultural world around (Harris & Rapport, 2016; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Cultural psychology in this regard can offer a great contribution. In cultural psychology, although there have been studies on tourism (Gillespie, 2006a, 2006b), pilgrimage (Beckstead, 2010; Murakami, 2014) or migration (Abreu & Hale, 2011; Bhatia & Ram, 2009; Kadianaki, 2014), these have very little been addressed in terms of mobility. It is only recently that debates and issues related to the mobility turn have entered in cultural psychology (Adams, 2016; Ellis & Bhatia, 2019; Schliewe, 2017; Zittoun & Levitan, 2019; Zittoun, Levitan, & Cangià, 2018). Nevertheless, cultural psychology has developed an important reflection on imagination as developmental and social dynamic over the last five years. At the basis of creativity, imagination represents an ongoing process, a ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 2004) and ‘expansion of human experience’ (Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013), through which people can move from the immediate environs and present, distort what is the case (Preston, 1991) and reconfigure the world into what is not the case (Sartre, 1963).

In order to understand the interplay between imagination and human mobility, we draw upon these perspectives and upon approaches that in sociocultural psychology explore the symbolic dimension of geographical mobility. These approaches have theorized the distinction between the movement of bodies in geographical space and the movement of self and other at the level of meaning and representations, in other words the distinction between geographical movements and semantic movements:

the semantic world enables us to move between and occupy many social, temporal, and imagined geographic positions simultaneously or in rapid sequence. At a semantic and psychological level, the past, present, and future can coexist along with
counterfactual presents, imagined pasts, and wished-for or feared futures. (Gillespie, Kadianaki, & O’Sullivan-Lago, 2012, p. 697)

We now turn more specifically to the not-yet character of mobility and how imagination is triggered and transformed by mobility, as the two combinations in which imagination and mobility shape each other.

The not-yet and imagined character of mobility and how mobility can trigger (or not) imagination

The contributions of this special issue offer an exciting insight into trajectories of imagination and forms of im/mobilities, by bringing together empirically and ethnographically grounded theorizations across a range of contexts, practices and experiences. The articles offer different case studies from sociocultural anthropology and sociocultural psychology, and draw upon a variety of methodologies (narrative and biographic interviews, participant observation, visual methods, diaries). The authors focus on different mobile trajectories and present empirical case studies on various national, urban and rural contexts (mountains and towns in Switzerland, the city of Athens in Greece, Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, transnational migration between Africa and Europe, repeated international mobility), and different intimate, historical, and biographical scales (retirement homes, family life, diaries from the Second World War). They explore different and intersecting forms of mobility and immobility, among spatial, symbolic, social, intragenerational and existential (urban, internal and transnational migration, unemployment, trauma, emerging adulthood, transgender), variously linked with geographical mobility. These contributions show the multiple focal points we should zoom in to better understand the interplay between imagination and im/mobility, in particular the embodied movements, the transitions they go through as well as the possible transformations.

Furthermore, in the same way as imagination has long represented a methodological a priori for some methodological approaches (like for ethnography) (Willis, 2000), movement as a mobile method per se can become a methodological strategy to better grasp the creative making of individual and social imaginings on the move. Movement, as ‘a creative act of poesis’ (Irving, 2013, p. 292), generates visual and sensory data that can support in unpacking people’s imaginative reveries, streams of thought, inner dialogue and imagination (Irving, 2016, 2017). This movement, in the case of some of the articles of this special issue, includes people’s moves across spaces as part of the ethnographic and qualitative data collection, including people’s participation in ethnofilm-making, urban walking and art projects (visual arts, music and dance) (Lashua & Cohen, 2010); multisited fieldwork; or mixed qualitative methods (like in the case of some articles, a combination of visual methods, interviewing and participant observation) (Freudendal-Pedersen, Hartmann-Petersen, & Drewes Nielsen, 2010).

The various articles are ordered along two combinations of the interplay between imagination and im/mobility that we wish to explore, namely: (1)
imagination enabling and supporting forms of mobility and personal/collective change (imagined mobilities) and (2) experiences of mobility and immobility triggering or blocking imagination (im/mobile imaginations).

**Imagined mobilities**

Imagination can trigger mobility (Baas, 2010), yet also slow down, accelerate or even immobilize the rhythm and possibilities of mobility. It accompanies the ‘journey’ in all its tempos, suspensions and directions, while supporting individuals and communities as they develop amid material, social and political constraints. Through imagination we can imagine ourselves being or becoming mobile, we can cross material borders and make mobility possible where it does not seem to be the case. Mobility, when not physically occurring, can be ultimately imagined. Tania Zittoun (Zittoun, 2020), Alexandra D’Onofrio and Johaness Sjoberg (D’Onofrio & Sjoberg, 2020), and Jovchelovitch et al. (2020) in their studies show this very creative character of imagination, and how imaginative power can support and enable mobility also in cases in which mobility is not actually happening or when borders (or symbolic boundaries) seem difficult to cross. They make the case of various experiences where people or communities imagine moving, returning or alternative lives as migrants. At the same time, the actual movement can trigger the capacity of imagining oneself in the past and in the future, or transform the ability of a person to travel with the mind, while being in fact highly mobile.

In *Imagination in people and societies on the move: A sociocultural psychology perspective*, Tania Zittoun (Zittoun, 2020) makes explicit all these three cases. The author explores how trajectories of imagining enable mobility and how mobility in turn transforms people’s imagination by considering three very different cases of im/mobility: residents in a retirement home in the Swiss mountains, the war diary of a young woman during the Second World War moving internally in the UK and the case of families in repeated international professional mobility. Imagination, as a form of symbolic mobility, represents the mental journey people can embark upon to escape the here-and-now of the present, independently from real opportunities and capacity to move. Imagination is what supports or at times slow down geographical mobility. In the first case, the static nature of the retirement home constrains the person’s geographical mobility, yet the person can activate imaginative trajectories and move symbolically across space and time. In the second case, big transformations in the surrounding social environment (the war) trigger a person’s actual migration and then as a result symbolic movements of imagination. These in turn open up new horizons and possibilities both in terms of symbolic and geographical mobility. In the third case, the social environment promotes an imaginary of positive accelerated mobility for professional reasons, the person becomes highly mobile geographically while imagination can take different directions and follow different timings. Imagination can vary along with physical movement and change over time as people move.
In *Moving global horizons: Imagining selfhood, mobility and futurities through creative practice in ethnographic research*, D’Onofrio and Sjoberg (2020) explore the not-yet character of (imagined) mobility and people’s expectations and aspirations on being elsewhere. They discuss how collaborative and co-creative practices such as improvisation in ethno science fiction applied theatre, story-telling, photography, filmmaking and participatory animation can help provide access to individuals’ imaginative worlds and their imagination of mobility. The authors explore different experiences, in particular migrants travelling from rural villages of Egypt to Milan in Italy; transgendered sex workers in São Paulo, Brazil; and British youth in Yorkshire (UK) experiencing environmental transformations. They present three ethnographic films referring to different stages of migration, namely dreaming about leaving, dreaming about returning, and imagining past and future selves after arriving to the actual destination of migration. The imagination of moving somewhere both physically and existentially represents a mental journey for these people towards new potential destinations, selves and lifeworlds, regardless whether or not physical movement actually takes place.

In *Imagination and mobility in the city: porosity of borders and human development in divided urban environments*, Sandra Jovchelovitch et al. (2020) address mobility by exploring spatial movement across urban borders between Rio de Janeiro’s favelas and the rest of the city, movements undertaken through participatory activism, also characterized as ‘insurgent citizenships’. These actions, as forms of physical movements across space, but also symbolic movements across different social boundaries erected along with territorial borders, include practices of walking through the city, occupation of inaccessible spaces, itinerant art, music and story-telling. These creative actions challenge dominant representations of marginalized and stigmatized urban areas, contribute to reimagining the city by increasing the porosity of its internal borders as well as foster imaginative capacities of communities to transform identities. Their study shows that actual urban mobility across borders and imagination in combination can support human development through participation in social practice and undermine urban divisions through the semiotic re-construction of identities and so-called disadvantaged contexts. Spatial and symbolic mobility across borders and boundaries in the context of the city is hence imagined and promoted through creative communities’ participation and artistic imagination.

**Im/mobile imaginations**

Mobility is not only about movement, but also about how human beings experience transitional and transformational passages through spaces and times. It creates zones of liminality between places, identities and moments of life where the individual can remain stuck in a space of in-betweenness, can experience an ambivalent condition between *not being anymore (there)* and *not being yet (here)*. A focus on imagination can help challenge the common assumption that experiences of immobility, stuckness, wait and deceleration lack the transformative
power brought about by mobility: as demonstrated in the articles of this special issue, immobility also can create zones of liminality that show potential for change precisely through imagination. It is in the potentiality of liminal experiences that imagination, when not blocked by the sense of immobility of this condition, can support in escaping in time and space, and navigating between what it is and what it may be. In this sense, imagination lies exactly in between our human experience of mobility and immobility.

Some of the articles explore this condition produced by transnational migration and how this triggers and blocks imagination. Gail Womersley (Womersley, 2020), Flavia Cangià (Cangià, 2020) and Angela Veale and Camilla Andres (Veale & Andres, 2020) in particular investigate the liminal movements between different states and spaces in the context of life and work transitions for refugees, children and families, including transnational families between Nigeria and Ireland and the partners of internationally mobile professionals. These authors show how imagination enters into the experience of (physical, existential and social) immobility for these individuals, and how transiting in time and space through important changes in life or traumatic events occur along an ambivalent continuum of past, present and future, before during and after the move, departing and never-arriving. These represent liminal experiences of – not always achieved or not completed – transformation, where people can paradoxically feel immobile while on the move, or mentally move through imagination while being physically immobile. These transitions and the resulting condition of being stuck can prevent people’s imagination and the capacities to take distance from a (immobile) present. Other times, imagination can be the only way out where people can escape their immobile condition and mentally move towards alternative destinations and times.

Gail Womersley (Womersley, 2020), in her ‘I thought Athens was a shiny country’: exploring the past and constructing possible futures among refugee victims of torture in Greece, explores the imagination–(im)mobility nexus by drawing on her fieldwork among refugee victims of torture transiting in Greece. Her article investigates forced migrants’ mobility choices and trajectories in order to understand how both emotional experiences and the sociocultural surroundings are involved in people’s plans to migrate and in their transformational imagination of a better future elsewhere. The relationship between imagination and trauma in refugees’ migration brings to the fore important aspects of the nexus between (im)mobility and imagination: migration becomes more than physical experience, an imaginative process of picturing destinations and arrivals; trauma related to forced migration (a form of psychological immobility in itself) can block imagination, yet the capacity to imagine alternatives and the future can be restored within a supportive sociocultural environment and through the symbolic resources available, so as to repair from the ruptures created by the traumatic event and migration. Imagination, like in the case of these refugees in Athens, is not a static process, but is constantly transforming in relation to the ever-changing sociocultural environment where people move, and is shaped by collective imaginaries about migration to Europe.
In *Mobile Imagination. On Trailing, Feeling Stuck and Imagining Work on-the-move* Flavia Cangià (Cangià, 2020) explores the experience of ‘stuckness’ in the context of work transitions for those people who follow their partners in an overseas assignment in Switzerland, and experience a period of unemployment and deceleration in their working life. She investigates how these people go through a condition of in-betweenness between different phases of their (working) life, a liminal passage from being professionals to unemployed to a ‘not-yet-in-place’ work situation, as well as a long wait for a new employment or for the next destination of migration. As part of their migratory experience, these people confront with new roles in the family as they become the accompanying, non-working and staying at home spouse. This condition resulting from repeated geographical mobility across different countries can both trigger and block people’s capacity to re-imagine their new working lives somewhere. This article also sheds lights on the ‘potentiality’ associated with liminal experiences associated with migrating to other places: imagination in the experience of immobility for these partners can support in escaping from the condition of stasis and in portraying the not-yet achieved possibilities that migration can bring about.

In *The role of the imagination in transnational relating: the case of Nigerian children and their migrant parent in Ireland*, Angela Veale and Camilla Andres (Veale & Andres, 2020) explore the imaginative mobile trajectories and physical (im)mobility experiences in the case of transnational relations between asylum-seeking migrants in Ireland and their children and caregivers in Nigeria. They ask how imagination supports distal relating in the experience of physical immobility ascribed by the parental status of being in asylum in Ireland. Through multisited and mobile ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Nigerian transnational families both in Ireland and Nigeria, Veale and Andres (2020) demonstrate how transnational relating becomes an imaginative space, where the ‘global’ enters the imagination and relational world of the developing child with consequences for development and social relationships. The article, by exploring three interrelated dimensions of imagination, namely the temporality of imagination, the use of resources in imagination and the imagination as relational, sheds light on the complex dynamics between imaginative mobility and physical immobility in the context of transnational migration.

Conclusions

This special issue aimed to unpack ways in which imagination and mobility shape each other. The different contributions of this issue demonstrated how a focus on mobility can strongly contribute to the cultural psychological understanding of imagination, as well as how imagination can offer an important analytical vantage to the study of mobility. A perspective on mobility that takes into account the dialectic between movement and stasis at the geographic, temporal and semantic level can help explore movements of imagination across time and space, specifically
how individuals’ trajectories of imagining are never static but can be transformed as people move. As discussed previously, the mobilities paradigm has challenged sedentarist approaches and questioned the taken-for-granted correspondence between people, places, borders and cultures. On a similar vein, imagination should be viewed as deeply connected to the sociocultural environment but not in a static way, not to bounded cultures, places and people. Imaginative trajectories can change through time, space and context: a lens on mobility can help us understand how imagination itself can be triggered, blocked or transformed across time through the embodied act of moving.

At the same time, as demonstrated by the articles in this issue, imagination offers a significant conceptual tool for understanding not only the actual physical movements occurring in mobility, but also and most importantly the potential character of mobility. Through imagination, we can move to places where we are not yet moved, we can engage with the absent, the not-yet there (Adam & Groves, 2007), the elsewhere and nowhere (Jovchelovitch, Priego-Hernández, & Gláveanu, 2018). The capacity and potential to move (in a word motility), the not-yet-realized, or might-never-happen character of human mobility, represent a methodological challenge, because mobility can also remain an aspiration rather than an actuality (Kaufmann, 2002), ‘because there is no mobility, yet or never’ (Leivestad, 2016, p. 144). Imagination can support in understanding how the potential to move is not only embedded in socio-political dynamics, but can also relate to people’s desires, aspirations and imaginations of mobility. Migration, for example, even before the physical move itself, entails the experience of existential mobility, a feeling that life is ‘going nowhere’ (Hage, 2005), and as a result a reflection on the multiple possible directions of our lives as well as the projection of a potential life elsewhere. In return migration, we can physically go back home, and, although we could never feel like we felt in the past, through imagination we can also travel back to the memories of that very same place and make the not-yet-realized aspects of return possible. In the case of tourism, finally, the journey can follow different temporal directions: forward, with the tourist striving to actualize some aspect of an imagined future and self (Gillespie, 2007), or backward, with tourists looking for a nostalgic journey to an imagined or lost past (Ivy, 1995; Salazar, 2011). What becomes important then is not only whether or not mobility actually occurs as a ‘brute fact’ but whether and how mobility becomes significant and how it is imagined in very different contexts and under different circumstances (Salazar & Smart, 2011). Imagining origins, traversals and destinations can represent a form of mobility in itself, when mobility has not yet taken place and has not been completed, or when it is never going to be realized. After all, imagination presents to us possibilities or even impossibilities that our social and material reality cannot.

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