



Fantasies of mobility: Mobile singles' attachments and desires of mobility



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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to research on intimacies and mobilities. Using the concept of intimacy, it focuses on mobile singles' hopes, desires and projections in response to mobility's promised and assumed opportunities. I interviewed sixteen participants from Canada and the UK about their experience of migration, focusing on its affective elements. As mobile singles, they are alone and detached in significant ways, which makes it especially relevant to study how they build intimacy in their new settings. Mobility produces fantasies of connection and attachment to local people and cultures: they wish to meet local people in the host country (friends, colleagues, lovers, etc), get to know their culture and develop a sense of belonging in the community. This is sometimes hard to achieve, and some react with alienation and anger, while others assess and revise their hopes and expectations in response to the difficulties they encounter by, for example, emphasizing the 'good' aspects of living in the host country. For a significant number of participants, dating and finding a partner is seen as a privileged way of forging strong ties to a local community. Many participants are willing to go forward with migration even if it means putting existing relationships in jeopardy, or moving again in the future. Despite doubts and disappointments, mobility seems to hold the promise of something better.

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1. Mobility as fantasy-production

Mobility studies examine questions of movement, migration, transport, and technologies (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Researchers in this field develop a growing interest in intimacies. For example, studies focus on transnational families (Cuban, 2013), living apart together couples (Levin, 2004), retirees (Ono, 2014), and couch-surfers (Bialski, 2012). Most studies with an interest in intimacy focus on mobile and migrant families, couples (e.g., professionals) and retirees. My research adds to this literature by focusing on singles, an understudied category in this field. Both intensive mobility and a high number of single people are distinctive of the 21st century. Elliot and Urry (2010) speak of a "golden age of mobility". Freedom of movement is the utopia of the 21st century, with manifold promised and assumed opportunities. Singles are slightly more mobile than couples (Jamieson and Simpson, 2013),

but the relation between singleness and mobility needs to be further explored. My research focuses on mobile singles' subjective experiences of migration. As singles, they moved alone to a new country, and their single status influences their wish to connect and build a sense of intimacy with a local community.

Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) believe that a focus on affect allows researchers to delve further into migrants' experiences and ways of belonging, against overly structural accounts of them: "Despite the plethora of qualitative analyses on the topic [...] the emotional side of the migrant condition seems still relatively understudied" (p. 73). According to them, the migration literature has mostly focused on economic and instrumental aspects of mobility. They believe that the economic and affective dimensions of migration should not be separated. Focusing on migrants' emotional life is "a source of meaningful insights into their subjectivities, their interactions with old and new reference groups as well as the faceted interdependence between emotion, space and place" (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015, p. 74). Similarly, Bude and Dürrschmidt (2010) argue against a vision of mobility as flow and deterritorialization, instead encouraging further research into issues of belonging (e.g. attachment to people and places). In this paper, I am using "affect" and "emotion" interchangeably, despite

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ongoing debates about the relationship and differences between them. I am channelling them through the concept of intimacy, which I discuss further below.

According to [Raffaetà \(2015\)](#), the idea of a “promised land,” a strong cultural trope, binds together emotions, time and space. Hope, a potentially illusory state, projects into an indefinite future promises that may never be fulfilled by the “land”. Indeed, empirical research show that decisions to move, to travel or to come back home are sources of excitement and anxiety ([Holdsworth, 2013](#)). It is common to believe that the grass is greener on the other side, and [Hendriks \(2015\)](#) reports that a sizeable proportion of migrants admit that they had been overly optimistic about their chances of seeing their wishes come true in their host country. Emotions, desires and intimate attachments shape mobilities and point to the embodied nature of migration. Love for a partner, lover, friend, child or other kin, as well as sex, can play a decisive role in the wish and enactment of the decision to move ([Mai and King, 2009](#)). Love and comfort, for example, play a role in the relocation decisions of queers ([Gorman-Murray, 2009](#)). In some instances, distance can revalue and strengthen certain bonds. Indeed, geographical displacement encourages expatriates to re-think their friendships, couple and family relationships ([Walsh, 2009](#)).

For my research, this literature on affect and migration indicates the difficulties in forging a sense of belonging in a new place: Migrants who respond to the appeal of mobility often find themselves having to adjust their hopes and expectations to various local realities. My research contributes to exploring the relationship between migration and belonging by examining its affective side. It focuses on mobile singles’ intimacies, including pre-existing attachments (to a culture, to relationships) as well as new connections in their host country.

2. Project: mobility dynamics of singles

I recruited sixteen mobile singles living in the northwest of England (7 participants) and in the province of Quebec, Canada (9 participants). Participants needed to respond to two criteria: being single and internationally mobile. Including two locations gave me the opportunity to identify processes that are reproduced across slightly different host cultures. These two locations affected the results of my research in that the rationales they mobilize are linked to the specific imaginaries surrounding these countries. Ten participants are women and six are men, all between the ages of twenty-two and forty-five. I recruited people from Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Peru, France, the United States, Algeria, Spain, Chile, Australia, New Zealand, and Scotland (UK). They could participate in the study whether they had moved away permanently or temporarily, but with the intention of staying in their host country for at least one year. At the time of the study, some had recently arrived in their host country and others had already been there for five years. I accepted participants from a variety of countries because I wanted to see what elements were repeated across their stories instead of focusing on a specific ethnic group. Although the meaning of singleness can vary across cultures, participants adopted the common sense, Western definition of singleness of not being in a steady relationship with anyone.² While some were open to or wished to meet someone (in the sense of long-lasting relationships), others did not (and some were critical of this normative ideal).

Empirical studies of mobility show that mobility is still the privilege of certain groups, that the possibility of return and the maintaining of family and friendship ties are not available to everybody ([Bude and Dürrschmidt, 2010](#)). People who migrate do so for a number of reasons, including market and immigration conditions, personal traits and cultural characteristics. The immigration policies of industrialized countries are oriented toward knowledge-based industries; they put emphasis on recruiting highly-skilled and well-educated newcomers ([Amit, 2007](#)). In this context, advancing a career is a central motive for migration. It is common to leave a place to look for better job opportunities, to earn more money and to settle somewhere else ([Meier and Frank, 2016](#)). Indeed, professional achievement, career goals and completing postgraduate studies motivated my participants to move. They are part of a trend of people who move voluntarily and have the resources to do so, but they are not part of an elite: “their more modestly prosperous situations likely reflect a much broader reorientation of global long-distance travel and movement around middle-class rather than either very affluent or very poor voyagers” ([Amit, 2007](#), p. 3). They are in a situation where they keep in touch with people abroad and can go back to their country of origin if they want to. Most of them have achieved higher education and a smaller portion are postgraduate students. They are professionals, working in or looking for a job in their field. They moved at their own initiative and most did not have a job waiting for them when they arrived in their new place of settlement. Some of them left an unsatisfying job and personal life, but many left a satisfying life to look for something better elsewhere. A minority of them display a mobile lifestyle, they moved multiple times for long periods of time, they travelled a lot and in different parts of the world.

The goal of the semi-structured interviews was to generate in-depth discussions regarding participants’ personal stories while covering a series of themes I had set out to explore ([Glesne, 2010](#)). Semi-structured interviews also leave space for adding questions that emerge during the interviews. In addition to the questions I prepared in advance and that I addressed with all the participants, I introduced more specific and personal questions for each of them along the way. I asked them about their motives for migrating, their understanding of singleness, the feelings they experienced as they moved from one country to another, and their connections to places and people (local and abroad). I chose to interview participants despite the fact that interviewing is delayed from the contexts it studies, making it less embodied, say, than following participants’ movements through methods like observation ([Keightley and Reading, 2014](#)). Interviewing allowed me to find people who responded to both criteria (singleness and international mobility) more easily and it allowed them to express their feelings in their own words.

Six participants agreed to keep a diary, to share it with me and then do a second interview, but only four were able to complete the process. This is a common problem with diaries, as participants realize the amount of work they require and see their motivation waning as time passes ([Harvey, 2011](#)). The diaries were not meant to be an end in themselves but a tool for the second interview. I asked them for approximately two weekly entries over a period of two to three months. [Meunier \(2010\)](#) refers to “recursive interviews” as those that sustain a relational dynamic between the researcher and the participants. Like the diaries, this method allows participants to become more comfortable to discuss their experiences of intimacy and their emotions ([Harvey, 2011](#)). The diaries allowed for a closer day-to-day following of their lives and to collect more details about certain experiences and events. They were useful for collecting more examples of their daily practices and to give them more time to reflect on their experiences. For example, participants talked more about relationships in their diaries, adding

² I specifically asked the question. Some participants were aware of the changing definitions of singleness depending on cultural context (e.g., one participant was separated but not divorced, and considered herself single, and another one compared the Western definition with that of “not being married” prevailing in Iran).

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