



Citizenship and the embodied practice of wheelchair use



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ABSTRACT

Citizenship has been associated with members of a community that engage in paid work (Painter and Philo, 1995; Desforges et al., 2005). This idea constructs remunerated work as a key determinant of citizenship (Brown and Patrick, 2012). The outcome in terms of mobility is the provision of infrastructure and technologies that potentially privilege the movement of those considered to be 'productive bodies' between their workplaces and homes at specific times, while disadvantaging disabled people and their everyday mobility practices (Imrie, 2000). This paper explores the ways in which the formation of citizenship and movement, as embodied and sensory practices, and wheelchair use may be constrained by infrastructures, means of transport and social practices that are often insensitive to the needs of disabled people. In particular, the paper contributes to fleshing out the notion of 'embodied citizenship' in relation to women wheelchair users and the role played by their devices and other mobility technologies in their citizenship struggles. The paper is divided into three sections. First, I set out a framework for exploring the relationships between citizenship, mobility and disability with a focus on wheelchair users. Second, drawing on original qualitative research data, the paper concentrates on the embodied mobility practices of women wheelchair users who live in Greater London and Leicestershire, United Kingdom. Here I highlight the prejudices, barriers, discrimination and exclusions that they face, which, potentially, impact on their claims to citizenship. Finally, the paper concludes that an approach based on the subjective experience of the wheelchair user in context is useful in revealing the complexities of citizenship.

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Introduction

Citizenship has been associated with individuals who are considered valuable 'member[s] of an everyday community of living and working' (Painter and Philo, 1995: 115; Desforges et al., 2005). This conception, as Brown and Patrick (2012) suggest, places emphasis on remunerated work as a key determinant of citizenship. Such a narrow notion of citizenship is problematic because it leaves out those groups of the population who are not always able to engage in paid work, as is the case with many disabled people¹ (Patrick, 2012). The outcome in terms of mobility is the provision of infrastructure and technologies that potentially privilege the movement of those considered to be 'productive bodies', or non-impaired bodies, between their workplaces and

homes at specific times, while disadvantaging disabled people and their everyday mobility practices (Imrie, 2000). For instance, means of transport intensely used by commuters, such as the underground, have limited access for people in wheelchairs, marginalising them and creating a sense that they are somehow 'lesser citizens'. This reflects the still pervasive influence of the individual/deficit model of disability in which people with impairments are expected to 'get better' and, thus, to be able to navigate the environment and use 'mainstream' infrastructure (Pfeiffer, 2002).

Although there are policy initiatives that seek to facilitate the mobility of disabled people, their implementation does not always work, partly because they lack engagement with everyday mobility issues. For instance, time is an important factor for disabled people when it comes to travelling. Sometimes they are excluded from the use of public transport at rush hours. Also, everyday practices of mobile bodies, such as walking and ideas about it, serve to stigmatise people with mobility impairments when attempting to move in and around the built environment. It is through everyday experiences of (im)mobility that (non)citizenship is produced. Although mobility and geography have featured in discussions around citizenship, hitherto they have been considered mainly in theorisations revolving around migration, diaspora and transnationality,

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¹ I use the term 'disabled people' instead of 'people with disabilities' following the British social model of disability (see UPIAS, 1976). This model separates disability and impairment suggesting that disability is any disadvantage caused by physical, structural and institutional barriers, which restricts people with impairments. According to this model, people have impairments; they do not have disabilities (see UPIAS, 1976).

largely overlooking *everyday* mobility (Blunt, 2007; Ehrkamp and Leitner, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006). While there are insightful writings exploring the everyday micro-geographies of citizenship such as Valentine and Skelton (2007) and Staeheli et al. (2012), there is relatively scant research examining how the ways in which people move daily intersect with social categories such as gender and disability, and impact in the formation of citizenship.

This paper seeks to contribute to bridging these gaps by exploring how citizenship unfolds through struggles, negotiations and conflicts in the *everyday* embodied mobility of disabled women. In particular, the paper contributes to fleshing out the notion of embodied citizenship in relation to women wheelchair users and the role played by their devices and other mobility technologies in their citizenship struggles. The paper explores two interconnected themes of this special issue: 'mobility, identity and practice' and 'hybrid citizens'. While the former concentrates on sensory and embodied aspects of mobility that create new identities and claims to citizenship, the latter addresses how the social value given to mobility practices is connected with 'hybridity and the materialities of movement' in the differential constitution of citizenship (Spinney et al., 2015). In this context, hybridity refers to subjectivities that are constituted by bodies and technologies relating to movement such as the car-driver (Urry, 2007). As I have addressed the constitution of the hybrid body-wheelchair elsewhere (see Gaete-Reyes, 2012), in this paper I explore how the social value given to the practice of wheelchair use and the materialities of movement influence citizenship formation.

In focusing on the *everyday*, this paper draws on the concept of *everyday life*. Sztompka (2008) defines everyday life as the materialisation of social existence. Consequently, it involves social relations, the body and emotions and it is situated in, and influenced by, space (Sztompka, 2008). Although everyday life and its social relations, experiences and practices,² are often (seen as) mundane, they are also dynamic, unpredictable and contradictory and, therefore, an interesting focus of social inquiry (British Sociological Association, 2014). The study of everyday life is a longstanding tradition in sociology. Contributions to the examination of everyday life include Erwin Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, Schutz's (1970) phenomenological approach and Lefebvre's (2003) urban perspective to name but a few (for a review see Kalekin-Fishman, 2013). Also, feminist scholars Stanley and Wise (1993), who inspired my research, called for examining women's oppression and marginalization in their different everyday life contexts. Following Pink's (2012) everyday life approach, I explore the sensory, embodied and mediated elements of women wheelchair users' mobility practices and place as a route to understanding citizenship. I also draw on Latour's (1992) work on the exploration of the agency of mundane objects.

The paper is divided into three sections. First, I set out a framework for exploring the relationships between citizenship, mobility and disability with a focus on wheelchair users. Following Spinney et al. (2015), citizenship here is understood as a continually negotiated process, in which the disabled embodied subject engages through everyday practices of mobility and movement. In the case of wheelchair users, the process of claiming citizenship is mediated to a large extent by their mobility devices in context. I take up an approach which emphasises that barriers to movement and negative connotations of wheelchairs and wheelchair use are largely socially produced, while recognising the embodied and sensory aspects of struggling to claim citizenship when attempting to move around the built environment. As suggested earlier, gaining membership as a citizen is linked with moving in able-bodied ways and being productive, in the sense of engaging in paid work.

Second, drawing on original research data collected in a qualitative study, the paper focuses on the mobility practices of women wheelchair users who live in Greater London and Leicestershire, United Kingdom. Here the paper explores the ways in which the formation of citizenship and movement, as embodied and sensory practices, and wheelchair use may be constrained by infrastructures, means of transport and social practices that are largely insensitive to the needs of disabled people. I argue that the prejudices, barriers, discrimination and exclusions faced by women wheelchair users, potentially, impact on their sense of citizenship. Finally, the paper concludes that an approach based on the subjective experience of the wheelchair user in context, which explores emotional and sensory dimensions of mobility and movement, is useful in revealing the complexities of citizenship. The paper also highlights the relevance of connecting the subjective experiences of mobility of disabled people with broader socio-political values, as citizenship may be constrained by disabling and disablist socio-political processes.

Citizenship, disability, mobility and wheelchair use: an embodied account

This section presents a framework for exploring the relationships between citizenship, mobility and disability with a focus on wheelchair users. Citizenship has been understood as a collection of practices, rights and responsibilities that determine membership and status (Isin and Wood, 1999; Patrick, 2012; Rankin, 2009). Dominant models of citizenship, such as the liberal, communitarian and civic republican, highlight engaging in paid work as the main obligation and prerequisite for citizenship (Ellis, 2000; Patrick, 2012). This, as Patrick (2012: 5) suggests, brings 'exclusionary citizenship consequences for those who do not engage in the formal labour market', as is the case with many disabled people. It is well documented that disabled people have been excluded from citizenship (see Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1992; Rankin, 2009). As Rankin (2009: 2) asserts, 'the established division between citizen and outsider has acted as a formative dimension of the disability rights movement and their quest for empowerment and autonomy, inclusion [and] valued citizenship'.

Although the disability rights movement began to take shape four decades ago, many disabled people are still excluded from citizenship. Such exclusion is characterised by 'the denial (or non-realization) of the civil, political and social rights of citizenship' (Imrie, 2014: 3). A prerequisite for exercising citizenship rights such as inclusion, participation and autonomy is having access to means of transport and public spaces. The marginalisation of disabled people is materialised, for instance, in socially produced barriers to movement and in specialised transport measures that regulate where and when disabled people can move (Imrie, 2014). As Imrie (2014: 10) asserts, 'disabled people's abilities to express autonomy [are] constrained and curtailed by socio-political and institutional practices that de-value particular bodily dispositions, capacities and experiences, and, consequentially, may reproduce disabling relations of dominance'. The devaluation of disabled people stems from the links between citizenship and those seen as 'productive bodies', and the deficit or individual model of disability, which defines the body with impairments in medicalised terms.

Such interpretation of the body with impairments relates, in part, to citizenship theory and public policy being largely informed by instrumental conceptualisations of the body (Bacchi and Beasley, 2002; Oliver, 1990). As Dean (2000: xi) suggests, 'social policy and processes of social welfare have always been focused on bodies: on bodily potential, bodily functions and bodily needs'. For instance, health professionals focus their expert gaze on the ability of bodies to produce (Dean, 2000; Oliver, 1990). This exemplifies the ways

² Practices are compounded by four interconnected elements: 'practical knowledge, common understandings, rules, and material infrastructures... which are reproduced at particular moments in time and space' (Strengers, 2010: 3).

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