



## Social networks, mobile lives and social inequalities <sup>☆</sup>

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Social networks  
Network capital  
Social capital  
Social inequalities

### ABSTRACT

A central argument of much contemporary literature is that the advent of digital and mobile technologies creates new kinds of mobile lives, new socialities and new ways of relating to the self and others. In this paper I specifically examine how mobile lives unfold through social networks, facilitating the forming and reforming of connections people have with others, near and distant. I argue that movement itself is not so significant. Its importance rather stems from how it enables people to be connected with each other, to meet and to remeet over time and across space. Movement makes connections. These connections form patterns or networks, which many commentators see as the critical feature of contemporary life. Much travel thus involves making new connections and extending one's network or sustaining one's existing networks.

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### 1. Introduction: mobile lives

Movement makes connections and connections make inequalities. Such connections form patterns or networks, which many commentators see as the critical feature of contemporary life. Much travel thus involves making new connections and extending one's network or sustaining one's existing networks. Network formation and reformation is central to contemporary relations of power.

This is most evident in the lifestyles of global elites who roam the planet with multiple careers and homes, overseeing vast capital investments, transnational operations and organisational restructurings. But it is true much more generally and is experienced quite differently according to patterns of pre-existing inequalities. Such networking is a form of *working* with consequences for people's lives. Travelling, communicating and networking are not cost free; networking requires substantial resources, of time, objects, access and emotion. Those high in what I call network capital enjoy many benefits that are over and above their possession of economic or cultural capital. Networking is a resource-intensive form of work; and mobile lives involve the planning, the holding and the interpreting of meetings of very many different sorts. Movement is all to do with 'meetingness' (for earlier formulations see Larsen et al., 2006; Urry, 2007).

I begin with analysing some features of networks before turning to the importance of such meetings. I then examine the nature of network capital and new kinds of mobility-generated inequalities.

<sup>☆</sup> This paper is drawn from Elliott, A., and Urry, J., 2010. *Mobile Lives*. Routledge, London.

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### 2. The role of networks

Castells (1996: 246) argues that networks: 'constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture'. This has been called a 'connexionist' world. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007: 335) describe how this world is found where: 'the realisation of profit occurs through organising economic operations in networks'. Such networks engender new forms of opportunism different from those of market opportunism. They describe the networker or head of a networked project as: 'mobile, streamlined, possessed of the art of establishing and maintaining numerous diverse, enriching connections, and of the ability to extend networks'.

Especially significant is the person who can exploit what Burt (1992) terms 'structural holes' that others have somehow missed or not taken advantage of Boltanski and Chiapello then make a strangely characterised distinction between 'great men' and 'little people'. The former do not stand still while the latter are rooted to the spot. It is they say that by moving around, by their mobility especially in exploiting structural holes, that great men create new links and extend their networks. Indeed in this connexionist world, where high status presupposes displacement: 'great men derive part of their strength from the immobility of the little people' (2007: 263). This cumulative process means that in such a network world many live in a state of permanent anxiety about whether they are being disconnected, abandoned on the spot by those who are moving around (ibid). And finance capital has added to this fear of being rooted, of being stuck in place and not being able to move and to network. There is heightened anxiety of being too localist and not networked enough, not able to exploit the structural holes. Such variations in the capacity to

move are structured by gender, ethnicity, age, dis/ability and social class.

Other analysts of networks in economic life argue that such connexionist economies generate more productive outcomes compared with more hierarchically organised economies. Benckler (2006) in *The Wealth of Networks* describes the emerging nature of a 'networked information economy'. This involves decentralization and peer production amongst very many people as shown in the enormously elaborate networks involved in developing open source software or large collaborations such as Wikipedia. This 'we-think' as Leadbetter (2008) expresses it, reflects the more general process by which accumulation within networks, that is *who* you know, becomes more significant than *what* you know.

To the extent that some knowledge is tacit and informal so organisational success results from how people are able to develop, access and use information. The more there are informal networks, then there is more opportunity to create, circulate and share tacit knowledge, so developing and building new capital. In such contexts, meetings and especially informal discussion face-to-face becomes especially significant to the operation of power. Social networks can enable the exchange of tacit knowledge and to allocate resources. This has been described as 'learning through interaction' and hence the necessity for travel, co-presence and mobile lives in order that there is some shared social context for developing and exchanging such tacit knowledge (see Gertler, 2003). Accessing such interactions is of course hugely unevenly distributed.

Wellman and colleagues more generally argue that: 'w[W]e find community in networks, not groups... In networked societies: boundaries are permeable, interactions are with diverse others, connections switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies can be flatter and recursive' (Wellman, 2001: 227). Such networked communities are not confined to a particular place but stretch out geographically and socially. Wellman suggests that these involve historic transformations in societies in the rich North from door-to-door to place-to-place to person-to-person communities. The person they say 'has become the portal' (Wellman, 2001:238). The turn to person-to-person relations or networked individualism stems from mobile telephony and related technologies. Each person becomes the engineer of their own ties and networks, and mostly connected no matter where they are going or staying. Even while on the move connections can be sustained. Licoppe (2004: 139) reports that: 'the mobile phone is portable, to the extent of seeming to be an extension of its owner, a personal object constantly there, at hand... individuals seem to carry their network of connections which could be activated telephonically at any moment'.

This 'networked individualism' thus involves most people possessing many distant connections or weak ties, connecting people to the outside world. Each person possesses a distinct individualised pattern. According to Wellman et al.: 't[T]his individualisation of connectivity means that acquiring resources depends substantially on personal skill, individual motivation and maintaining the right connections... With networked individualism, people must actively network to thrive' (Wellman et al., 2005: 4). Obviously there are huge variations in network capital and hence in the placing of people within a stratification order where networking practices are so central.

This in turn connects to research on the so-called 'small worlds' thesis. Physicist-turned-sociologist Watts seeks to explain the empirical finding that everybody on the planet, whatever their social location, is separated by only six 'degrees of separation'. This is based on Granovetter's (1983) argument that extensive *weak* ties of acquaintanceship and informational flow are central to successful job searches and by implication to many other social processes such as the spreading of rumour (Granovetter, 1983; Burt, 1992;

Barabási, 2002). Such weak ties connect people to the outside world, providing a bridge other than that provided by the densely-knit 'clump' of a person's close friends and family. Bridges between such clumps are formed from weak rather than strong ties. If there are just a few long-range random links or weak ties connecting each of these 'clumps', then the degree of separation massively reduces.

There seems to be a huge increase in very weak ties in which others are known in one limited respect. Axhausen (2005) argues that people in major European countries know an increasing number of other people but that less effort is spent in keeping up with most of those weak or very weak ties. Wellman et al. (2005) maintains that the median number in people's personal community network is 23 with a variance between 200 and 1500 very weak ties.

Simultaneously much time has to be spent in sustaining these far-flung contacts since there is less likelihood of those quick, casual meetings that occurred when there was overlap between different localised social networks. As we have seen people thus spend much time planning and sustaining meetings with a fairly small proportion of those who are known in some loose sense, communicating especially to make arrangements and then travelling from a distance in order to keep in touch (Larsen et al., 2008).

Coordinating meetings was particularly examined by Simmel who described how metropolitan life at the beginning of the 20th century was dependent upon clocks, pocket watches and punctuality. He states that: 'if all clocks and watches in Berlin would suddenly go wrong in different ways, even if only by one hour, all economic life and communication of the city would be disrupted for a long time. Thus, the technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule' (Simmel, 1997:177). Clocks and watches made possible the mobilities and meetings of metropolitan life a century or so ago. Contemporary metropolitan life and its meetings are now examined.

### 3. Meetings

Goffman (1971:113) noted decades ago that: 'The realm of activity that is generated by face-to-face interaction and organised by norms of co-mingling – a domain containing weddings, family meals, chaired meetings, forced marches, service encounters, queues, crowds, and couples – has never been sufficiently treated as a subject matter in its own right'. Such face-to-face interactions, such focussed encounters, presuppose the *movement* of one, some or all of the participants, to attend such weddings, family meals, chaired meetings, forced marches, service encounters, queues, crowds, couples and so on. Each of these meetings is an element within a more complex social-and-material system, of family or business networks, social movements, service industries, sports crowds, relationships and so on. The meetings are part of and help to sustain such networked relations. Networked individualism we might note is anything but individualistic!

The importance of such physical travel and organised meetings helps to interpret Watts' (2003: 113) criticism of much network literature: 'Network ties... are treated as costless, so you can have as many of them as you are able to accumulate, without regard to the difficulty of making them or maintaining them'. But establishing and maintaining ties for many social groupings is not cost free because of the importance and complexities of travel, a word originally derived from *travail*.

Although people may know others in a short chain of acquaintances and hence generate the 'it's a small world' experience, this produces less affect than if people intermittently meet. Indeed in some senses people might be said only to know each other if they

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