Understanding everyday mobilities through the lens of disruption

Karolina Doughty & Lesley Murray

Introduction

Along with existing scholarship on everyday mobilities, our research has aimed to elaborate on the ways in which movement, and the lack of it or its disruption, is socially, culturally and materially contingent (Doughty and Murray 2016; Doughty 2013; Murray and Doughty forthcoming; Murray 2008, 2009). We suggest that the individualised approaches to mobility that dominate the policy debate need to be challenged by seeking to understand the many ways that mobilities are interdependent and culturally embedded. In the Research Council UK Energy Programme funded project, 'Disruption: Unlocking Low Carbon Travel', we examined the opportunities for changes to everyday mobility practices through moments when mobilities become 'disrupted' in some way (for a full report see Cass et al. 2015). The ethnographic element of this project, carried out in Brighton between 2011 and 2014, let participants themselves define what disruption means, and it reveals that rather than seeing disruption as a departure from 'normality', it is best understood as an inherent aspect of interdependent mobile lives. Our data shows that disruption to mobilities should not be assumed to relate exclusively to breakdowns in transport infrastructure, it is more often triggered by an array of non-transport related events, such as relationship break-downs and illness, and nor is it always experienced as negative. We argue that understanding how people define, experience and deal with disruption reveals the great complexity and uneven terrain of mobilities (see also Murray and Doughty, forthcoming).

Methodology

The methodology used in this research allowed us to permeate the range of social connections upon which mobilities are generated, as well as reveal the situatedness of mobilities. In reflecting the importance of relationships in mobile lives, the research focused on 'families' rather than households, with 23 families and 42 individuals in Brighton participating in the study. In seeking to understanding the myriad interdependencies of daily movement, we adopted a critical approach to the concept of family, encompassing all key people in participants lives that they identified as 'family', including parents and children, single parents, single people, non-cohabiting couples, intergenerational families living in the same house and a range of social characteristics that reflect the diversity of the city of Brighton. Working with families was particularly useful in understanding networks of support and interdependencies in coping with disruption. We adopted mixed and negotiated methods of data collection including: narrative interviews; participant-generated data using a 'toolkit' of methods (such as photography, video, scrapbooking, writing, blogging, and posting on Facebook/Twitter) and mobile interviews or go-alongs. This generated a set of rich data on everyday mobilities and their disruptions, which illustrate that how disruptions are responded to is largely dependent on social and material contexts and constraints, often embedded within caring relationships.

Meanings and experiences of disruption

Inspired by a mobility cultures perspective that incorporates understandings of experiential movement and its meanings, the social and cultural production of mobilities and the political contexts in which these take place (Urry 2008; Cresswell 2006; Packer 2008), we understand disruption to be similarly produced and situated, and result from complex interdependencies between different aspects of meaningful movements and the circumstances that sometimes constrain them. As we discuss in further depth elsewhere (Murray and Doughty forthcoming), disruption has often problematically been understood as a departure from 'normality', indeed much of transport policy involve interventions that rely on 'normality' as a baseline. However, our data illustrates (see fig. 1) that disruption is an inherent and expected part of 'normal' everyday life, as others in the mobilities field have also argued (e.g. Graham 2010; Graham and Thrift 2007). Furthermore, as figure 1 shows, most examples of disruptions are not transport system related (cf. Vollmer 2013), which points to the need to move beyond transport in understanding the intricacies of relational mobilities.

Definitions of disruption by participants

Transport related:
Traffic jam, transport delays, roadworks, car break-down, car not starting, traffic accidents, floods, changing seasons affecting numbers on the bus

Related to social and caring relationships:
Illness of people you care for, injuring yourself, break in chain of picking up and taking children to activities, knock-on effects of traffic delays, end of a relationship, personal life events, family problems, messy room, filling coming out, crowd trouble after football match, running out of money, being relocated at work, unwanted phone calls,

Positive aspects:
Breaking routines that are stuck, experiencing something new, creative process, stopping doing something disliked, recognising need to change arrangements that appear difficult to change

Figure 1, Definitions of disruption by participants.

Responses to disruption are not always deviations from aspects of 'normal' life such as norms or routines, but on the contrary may involve following another established set of practices (Jensen 2010) to produce mobilities in ways that are socially and culturally acceptable. At an everyday level, there is much variability in 'normality':

> "Well, as I say, there's no kind of normal day. At least, there are two kinds of normal day; there's a kind of day in the office and a day out of the office." (Nigel)

As Graham and Thrift (2007) point out, disruptions are only really noteworthy when they result in 'catastrophe', and most minor disruptions are absorbed into the fracas of daily life:

> "Tuesday was just a normal work day (Dad picked up the kids from Zumba), although Mum was the one who took me to the station, because Dad had trashed his car by putting water in the oil tank instead of the windscreen washer bottle." (Eleanor)

Nigel and Eleanor illustrate the changeability of normality and how it can be incorporated into their complex mobility practices, which are both dependent on and productive of mobility infrastructures, transport routes and family. These dependencies are rooted in unevenness.

Different people have different capacities and opportunities to deal with a disruption to their personal mobility. In this way, we can understand disruption as defined by difference. Successfully navigating disruption often depends on social support networks, while caring for others, or the breakdown of relationships can also be the cause of significant disruption in people's lives. Crucially, negotiating difference can mean needing to use more carbon emitting modes of travel, for instance due to disabilities:

> "Getting somebody around in a wheelchair by transport is no joke. Because my mum was in a wheelchair, and that really showed me up quite a few flaws in the system generally […] I did get very, very cross about the whole thing, shops were inaccessible, you know, general things were inaccessible." (Mary)

Hence disruption is framed within everyday mobility practices but also dependent on broader socio-spatial contexts. For example, mobility is gendered (Uteng and Cresswell 2008), and this was reflected in narratives around 'good parenting' and the difficulty when caring routines get disrupted. In our research, in line with previous studies (Murray 2008), this is more significant for women. The complex routines associated with 'good parenting' often are responses to social contexts and involve a range of interconnecting mobile trajectories. So when one set of practices change, the interdependent practices and relations also change. This has implications for lowering carbon in that for many of our participants, the car was not just a metaphor for freedom but an embodied mobility practice that enabled freedoms, especially for those encumbered with the gendered responsibilities of life in the modern family.

Concluding remarks

We have discussed some aspects of situated everyday mobility that become revealed through disruption. For us, a conceptualisation of disruption concerned with micro socialities and spatialities allowed a framing of disruptive events and their impacts on mobility decision-making at this everyday level (Jensen 2011). We found that it is important not to underplay the inherent flux that we observed in the mobility practices of our participants. Hence people are constantly negotiating mobility practices as they deal with varying scales of disruption. These negotiations are based on mobilities that are shared, contingent and situated, rather than individualised (Manderscheid 2013), and disruption is therefore characterised by a range of interdependencies. Given the embeddedness of mobility in everyday life, and the array of factors that determine experiences and effects of disruption, transport policy alone can never help us understand this complexity, and transport interventions can never be the whole solution. Mobility studies are an important way forward to helping move emphasis away from transport modes and choices towards the entanglement of travel practices with the daily activities and relations that produce and shape them.

References

Cass, Noel, Doughty, Karolina, Faulconbridge, James and Lesley Murray. 2015. "Ethnographies of Mobilities and Disruptions." Project report, University of Brighton/University of Lancaster doi: 10.13140/2.1.2179.4086.

Cresswell, Tim. 2010. "Towards a politics of mobility." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28: 17- 31.

Cresswell, Tim. 2006. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World.* London: Routledge.

Doughty, Karolina and Lesley Murray. 2016. "Discourses of mobility: Institutions, everyday lives and embodiment." *Mobilities* 11: 303-322.

Doughty, Karolina. 2013. "Walking Together: The embodied and mobile production of a therapeutic landscape." *Health & Place* 24: 140-146.

Graham, Stephen. 2010. "When infrastructures fail." In *Disrupted cities. When infrastructure fails* edited by Stephen Graham, 1-26. London: Routledge.

Graham, Stephen. and Nigel Thrift. 2007. "Out of order." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24: 1-25.

Jensen, Anne. 2011. "Mobility, Space and Power: On the Multiplicities of Seeing Mobility." *Mobilities* 6: 255-271.

Manderscheid, Katharina. 2014. "Criticising the Solitary Mobile Subject: Researching Relational Mobilities and Reflecting on Mobile Methods." *Mobilities* 9: 188-219.

Murray, Lesley and Karolina Doughty. Forthcoming. "Interdependent and embodied mobilities: Disruptions in 'normality', 'habit' and 'routine'." *Journal of Transport Geography.*

Murray, Lesley. 2008. "Motherhood, risk and everyday mobilities". In *Gendered Mobilities,* edited by Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Murray, Lesley. 2009. "Making the journey to school: The gendered and generational aspects of risk in constructing everyday mobility." *Health, Risk & Society* 11: 471-486.

Pink, Sarah, ed. 2012. *Advances in Visual Methodology*. London: Sage.

Sheller, Mimi and John Urry. 2006, "The new mobilities paradigm." *Environment and planning A* 38: 207-226.

Sheller, Mimi. 2004. "Automotive emotions; feeling the car." *Theory, Culture & Society* 21: 221–242.

Uteng, Tanu, Priya and Tim Cresswell, eds. 2008. *Gendered mobilities*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Vollmer, Hendrik. 2013. *The Sociology of Disruption, Disaster and Social Change*

Punctuated Cooperation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.