The Sociabilities of Travel

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Thank you very much for inviting me. As well, thank you for all the hospitality that I have been shown since arriving here. I'm very pleased to be here and I suppose this hospitality illustrates one of the points that I am going to make today, namely, the "sociabilities of travel".

However in this talk I'm going to, as we say in English, "bite the hand that feeds me", because one of things that I want to show is that the very term "travel behavior" is not a very helpful term. There is, I suggest, no such thing as "travel behavior". What there are, are various forms of social practices and some of these social practices from time-to-time contingently demand various forms of traveling. Decisions about traveling are thus highly relational and depend upon multiple social practices. Especially the practices of work, but I shall particularly focus on friendship and family life.

Moreover, travel itself, is not merely behavioral but on occasions contingently consists of meaningful actions tied into and interconnected with people's social practices. I particularly want to link this set of questions to issues of people's social networks. People meet-up intermittently to cement their social networks; to enjoy each-other's companies and carry out certain obligations. As societies appear to have become more distributed, as people's links are spread out more geographically, people are less-likely to bump-into their social contacts and hence scheduled meetings and various kinds of "meetingness", become highly significant. Thus we might say transport and meetings at a distance are increasingly necessary and obligatory to social life, particularly for leisure activities or through attendance at peoples' birthdays, weddings, funerals or

visits.

So-called "travel demand" thus seems to stem from a "compulsion to proximity", to feel the need to be physically co-present with others and to fill certain cultural and social obligations with significant others.

This talk explores the social obligations that result in various kinds of physical travel. In a way, one of the things that I'm going to say is that conversation, or more prosaically talk, is central to thinking about how and why and when people are physically co-present and thus physically travel. I also try to link these issues to a more general consideration as to the significance of movement to social life. In general I think issues of movement, of too little movement for some, or too much movement for others, or of the wrong sort of movement, or at the wrong time, are central to many people's everyday lives, and to the operation of countless operations from SARS to plane crashes, from airport expansion controversies, to SMS texting, from refugees to global terrorism, from obesity to oil wars in the middle east, from global warming to slave trading, issues to what I term mobility are center stage on countless policy and academic agendas. Consequently there is what I like to call a mobility "structure of feeling" in the air and it is that which I'm very keen to try to develop.

One of the ways that I've sought to develop this is through the "mobilities paradigm". This has a number of features. First, all social relations involve diverse connections. I'm using "connections", rather than the more specific term "travel", as all sorts of social relations, social travel practices, are more or less at a distance and they are never simply fixed or located in place, but are to varying degrees constituted through circulating entities.

Secondly, these processes stem from and are reproduced by "five interdependent mobilities": the physical travel of people; the physical movement of objects; imaginative travel perfected through images of places; virtual travel; and communicative travel. One of things that I'm interested in exploring is how different sorts of travel practices depend upon particular and changing combinations, or "assemblage" of those different forms of mobility.

But thirdly, there's something very specific about face-to-face connections. From time-to-time people feel the need to come face-to-face. That somehow, connections at a distance have to be embodied. We have to be physically in the same place and to see each other, to meet face-to-face. I term this "contingent meetingness".

These patterns of contingent meetingness come about through a very complex process in which various kinds of environments, technologies, and machines are put together with social life, with human life, and various kinds of human actions. Examples include the actions that constitute itself within a conference, but also constitute itself within a family meeting, or a friendship group meeting-up.

These are organized through "mobility systems", such as automobility but also the pedestrian system, the cycle system, and so on. These mobility systems endure through patterns of path dependency, such as the awesome path dependency of the automobility system. Further, these systems are involve highly expert forms of knowledge that make those systems often difficult to monitor and difficult to change or transform. These systems I also see as self-organizing and co-evolving within each other as well as being interdependent.

Sixth, these systems have the effect of producing various kinds of movement and those movements are highly significant for the ways in which contemporary societies are governed. The governing of mobile populations, becomes, has become, and is becoming an incredibly significant feature of the governance of contemporary societies. This is another way in which issues of mobility are sort of centered - have come to occupy center stage. The governing of mobile populations that move across so called territories is utterly central.

Seventh, some of the time mobilities are not just something to enable other activities, but are in part meaningful activities in their own right.

That's a very brief account of what I like to call the "mobilities paradigm".

I now want to turn to specifically say something about meetings. I use the term meetings, as a very general or generic notion, to capture what happens not only in relatively formal meetings, but also in informal contingent meetings that happen in all sorts of more informal practices around friendship and family.

I think the significance of meetings is highly important in relationship to the distribution of social networks across space. The literature on small worlds demonstrates the ways in which there are relatively limited connections that link people across the world. Networks demonstrate the combination of tight clumps with a few random, long-term connections through weak ties. These weak ties based on intermittent travel connect people to the outside world, and central to the connections are various kinds of intermittent meetings. I think the social network literature, which

has a more formal notion, has ignored the significance of meetings.   Meetings seem to be everywhere, and one of the things we might note is that for all the growth of the Internet and mobile telephony over the last fifteen years, there also seems to be overwhelming evidence that meetings are empirically more significant.

In relationship to business meetings or professional meetings, we can note the way in which, as the Henley Centre says, we increasingly live in a connecting economy.   Since few of us actually make anything, what we really do is to make meetings, and those meetings are crucial to the influence that we might have over social networks.   Over almost twenty years ago, the US's major 500 companies were said to have had 11-15 million formal meetings each day, and 3-4 billion meetings each year.

One key thing about meetings is that often people have to travel to get there.   Maybe it is walking down the corridor, but a lot of the time it is traveling substantial distances.   One of the things that I think is much under-researched within organizations is the significance of meetings.   One piece of work by Strassmann describes how there are meetings about meetings. There are meetings to plan reports and meetings to review the status of reports.   What these meetings are about is people trying to figure out what they are doing.

One of things that is also interesting about meetings is that invariably at those meetings are various technologies that enable future meetings to be planned and arranged.   Therefore, the cycle of meetings is self-sustaining.   They are not simply a one-off event.   What can be said more specifically about what happens in meetings?

My late colleague Dede Boden, wrote very interestingly about the business of talk.   She writes, "the drums beat, from far and near the chosen gather, face-to-face across the shiny table, the shiny podium".   Meetings are complex encounters and as she says, "(w)hen in doubt, call a meeting. And when one meeting isn't enough, schedule another."

The English novelist David Lodge writes about academic conferences. This can be generalized, and I thought this quote might help us to understand what we're all doing here.   "You journey to new and interesting places, meet new and interesting people, and more new interesting relationships with them, exchange gossip, exchange confidences, eat drink and make merry and return home with an enhanced serious of mind."

There is something important about the pleasures, the routines, and the rituals.   This is a topic for anthropological studiy, namely the rituals of meetings, such as a plenary address.   There is

something about different kinds of meetings and their pleasures. What David Lodge brings out is the consequences that are beyond the formal events, namely, the informal kinds of relationships, the distributions of power and authority, gossip and the building up or dissolving of trust relationships between people.

Central here, it is argued, is eye contact which enables certain things to be done face-to-face which could not be done at a distance - or so far cannot be done as effectively at a distance. The German sociologist Simmel writing in the early part of this century talked about the significance of the eye as a significant achievement, since looking at one another is what affects the connections and interactions of individuals.

Simmel terms this the most direct and purest of interactions which are moments of intimacy, since one cannot take through the eye without at the same time giving through the eye. There's a kind of mutual inter-dependence, that eye contact, or face-to-face contact, can establish. He calls this "the most complete reciprocity of person-to-person". The face-to-face the look is returned and trust relationships can get established and reproduced.

Many other writers in the social sciences have explored other aspects of these properties of face-to-face interaction. I argue that this is utterly central to why travel takes place. Eye-to-eye contact enables people to develop encounters, to display attentiveness, and commitment and detecting where a lack of trustful commitment is with others. One thing that happens in all of this is that the eyes get "joined".

Conversations themselves are completely central to explaining travel in travel behavior because conversations are a kind of complex kind of performance and achievement. Conversations are often necessary to talk through problems - "we have to meet to talk this through," is a common refrain.

Through the centrality of those face-to-face conversations, topics can come and go, trust can get built up, misunderstandings can be quickly corrected, commitment and sincerity can be quickly assessed. Often those conversations take time and they have to take that time in particular places. They are therefore occasioned in time and place. As well, they are often rich, multi-layered and dense.

Conversations are not just made up of words, but they also consist of other things. They consist of such things as body language, facial gestures, intonation, status, and silences. The processes of

talking, talking when you have met because of the fact that some or all have traveled significant distances. Particular characteristics of talk can mean that one has a good conference, a good family meal, or a good meeting-up with friends or acquaintances.

One thing that is central to these conversations is turn taking. There's a whole social science literature on turn taking, "turn taking works like a revolving door, demanding and facilitating entry, and exit, and effectively managing the flow of talk by spacing speakers and pacing topics."

How will these conversations or this talk develop over time? In some research, it is argued that such talk, such co-present talk (being with others to talk), will interestingly become particularly significant. Boden argues that work places will become highly interactive, not just with technology, but with people.

The pacing and sequencing of work tasks may become even more talk-based. According to Weber and Chon, "since much more information can now be exchanged by various technologies", technologies that produce instantaneous information flow, "there is a greater need to build relationships when getting together," for face-to-face meetings. "Consequently," they continue, "meetings in the future will focus more on the social aspects rather than on the business." To put it another way, they mean the exchange of cognitive information can be done mainly by technology. However, it is the social aspects that which will be central to meetings of the future.

Meetings of the future are not just work meetings. In fact, the most interesting meetings are probably not those which are principally work meetings. In some research on architects in the UK, Kennedy argues, the significance of meetings and networks, "friends move and or form other networks, with more like-minded individuals, in the next host country, and because previous contacts are maintained, yet more friends get added to." He refers to this as, "the revolving circuits of trans-national social life". This study is based on architects, but it became a study of friendship and of the "trans-national social life" that people working within the same occupation developed and extended.

An interesting Rowntree report in the UK talks about the kinds of things that people feel that must do. It asked people what are the social customs, obligations, activities that they feel they have to do. It was a study of poverty and social deprivation, and the top necessities of life were thought to be celebrations and special occasions, the attending of weddings and funerals, visits to friends and families, including those who are in hospital and so on.

That was rather interesting because the ways in which these were thought to be obligatory. People,

if they had the money and time would necessarily want to do those things. Over four-fifths of the population sees those celebrations as matters of obligation. I use the term obligation quite often in the rest of this talk. One example of such an obligation are certain kinds of meals. Travel behavior research might study more meals and eating out, and who to eat with. As well, what are the kinds of obligations that were necessary to make a person be present at that meal, at that time? A UK study regarding eating out argues that it is important to be present, because the meal symbolizes a socially significant occasion. The authors say that to have eaten the same meal the day before, or the day after, would not have been a satisfactory substitute, even if the same people were present. It is to eat that meal, at that time, on that occasion that is significant. Therefore, there is a kind of ritual involved in being present at that meal.

Social networks are extremely complex and difficult things to research. There is an interesting website, *wheresgeorge.com*, which tracks the movement of dollar bills in the United States. Dollar bills are normally physically carried in people's wallets or purses. The authors of this report use this to demonstrate the incredibly far flung character of those notes. They suggest that this shows something about the ways that people have traveled and physically carried those notes and therefore had to travel. This travel was probably linked to their changing social networks. That is just one way of tracking people's movement.

People's movements are significant. I've tried to encapsulate this in a concept called "network capital". In a mobile society, that is the way that people make or remake their social networks. In relationship to the social sciences it would be another basis of social stratification. Societies are often seen as stratified by income, political power, or social status. I argue that "network capital" would be another basis of social stratification. Many different sorts of things constitute such network capital. The possession of various kinds of competences, to physically move all sorts of things, including the capacity to walk distances within different environments, to board different means of mobility, to carry or move baggage, to read timetable information, to access computerized information, to arrange and rearrange connections and meetings, the competence to use mobile phones to perform text messaging, email, Internet, Skype, and so on.

Secondly, there are various kinds of information and contact points. There are sites where information and communications can arrive, be stored, and be received. Once upon a time they had to be physically located. Now, through mobile systems, they can be on the move.

Thirdly, there is possession or access to various kinds of communication devices to make and remake engagements, especially on the move. This is increasingly in conjunction with others who

are also on the move.

The availability of appropriate safe and secure meeting places, while on route and at the destination. The destinations can include offices, club spaces, hotels, public spaces, or university campuses.

Fifthly, the physical and financial access to a such things as a car, road space, fuel, lifts, aircrafts, trains, ships, taxis, buses, trams, or minibuses.

Finally, there is the time, money and resources to manage and coordinate points one to five and to manage and coordinate them when, from time-to-time, there is a system failure.

This produces a highly significant set of social inequalities in the contemporary world. There is huge variation in access to network capital and network capital is a major source of social stratification, or social inequality. This is over and above inequalities of income and wealth.

I turn now to report on some research that Kay Axhausen, myself, and a researcher Jonas Larsen were engaged funded by the Department for Transport in the United Kingdom. This is reported in a the book *Mobilities, Networks, Geographies* (Ashgate, 2006).

I am going to talk only about some of the more general findings and arguments that we put together in that book.

First of all, we were interested in how meetings and visits are becoming more significant as societies are becoming more geographically spread out (according to the empirical evidence). Those meetings and visits are part of the ways in which social networks are accomplished. "Accomplishment" is a social science term that describes the performances that are necessary in order that a social network has an existence over time and intermittently across space.

Social networks involve a lot of work. In particular, social networking involves some intermittent long distance travel by some or all of the people in such a network. In this project we were particularly interested in this intermittent, longer distance travel as opposed to shorter commuting patterns.

We were also interested in the relational commitments that people have to their social networks of work, friendship, and family life, both domestically and especially overseas. We argue that those social networks are crucial to emergent travel patterns.

We were also interested in pointing out that people both visit *and* receive visits. The receiving of visits has been less examined. People receive the hospitality of close friends, workmates and family members when they travel elsewhere. Or they provide hospitality to visitors. There are complicated relationships of reciprocity. This reciprocity over time is the sort of thing anthropologists discuss; it involves the giving of time, because you've taken some time to travel somewhere, and also the giving of hospitality to others.

Let me say a little more specifically, drawing on some of the more qualitative data. We described the way that people are enmeshed in social dramas where travel is not something that is simple and direct, but depends upon negotiation, approval and guilt.

We thought guilt was fairly important in explaining how and why people intermittently travel. We came up with the idea that guilt trips set in motion physical trips. One respondent described how he does not like going to visit his family in Italy. This respondent was a relatively poorly paid person in the security industry in the UK. "I didn't particularly like going to Italy, I must admit, I'm not a massive fan, but I did. My mum wanted me to go there, so I got the old guilt trip, and then I felt like, I have to go."

In that description there is moral work, the use of emotions, indeed of emotional blackmail, to encourage, force, or coerce the person into going. Another respondent comments about their wedding, "I think my father probably put a lot of pressure on his brothers and sisters, my aunts and uncles, to come over from Ireland, because they were all there."

That demonstrates the role of social pressure - how it enforces, coerces, or makes it impossible for people not to travel. If you happen to be absent, then this may well be remembered. Your "social face" could well be damaged if you are not present. Another respondent described how, "my partner's family are very rigid in that there are certain days of the year when it's kind of compulsory family get together." Note how they say, "kind of compulsory". The significance again is that there are certain dates in the year where your absence would be noted if you weren't there. You would lose "face".

I think these quotes bring out some of the powerful emotions and moral work involved in being present on certain occasions. If you're not there, you'll have to make up for it in all sorts of other ways. You haven't given, as Glenn Lyons describes it, "the gift of travel time" to those other people.

We also found that being in relationships means a lot of traveling, whether that's being in a marriage or having a regular partner. This particular respondent describes how they had lots of different groups of friends, "her friends and my friends". He explained that, "there's this terrible burden" that he has when he goes to London. He has many people that he feels obliged to go and see. "You have to try and see everybody and at the end you have to come back on a Sunday and you wish you had another couple of days off." He found the burden of having to travel a lot of work. It was a lot of pressure and a lot of work to have to do. "It just never feels like a weekend when you go down there."

"There will always be arguments because someone will find out you'd been down to London, but you didn't tell them purposefully because you'd have to fit them in to your busy schedule." This again brings out the obligatory and complex overlapping networked character of these patterns of traveling.

The second quote brings out the significance of particular key events in people or families' calendars. I love this quote, "this year I've got seven weddings to go to, and I'm going to have to take out a mortgage." This reminded us while we were doing this research of the film "Four Weddings and a Funeral."

That's an example of how obligations are part of the ways in which relationships organize and structure people's patterning of sociability. In that patterning of sociability, people may have to travel.

We were also interested in how this related to tourist travel. We came to the view that a lot of what is called tourist travel (and this begs the question what is meant by tourism here) is actually as much about sociability and meeting-up as it is a search for what we might loosely call the exotic, or the tourist gaze.

Thus tourist type travel essentially enters many peoples' lives including otherwise relatively immobile people. That is, meetings with friends and family have often what we might call a tourist type element to it. So tourism is less the privilege of a rich few but more something involving and affecting very many people. Thus tourists can thus be found in city flats, suburban homes, local supermarkets and other every-day places. The obligations to engage in such tourist-type travel can be as persuasive and as demanding as other kinds of travel.

To illustrate these points I consider a couple more quotations.   Firstly, "it's usually a combination. Obviously with the cost of travel and the cost of staying somewhere, if we can get the best out of the trip, the better. So if we can get in doing the tourist thing, doing the relaxation thing, and doing the family thing all in one go, then that's a convenient bonus."

They put together in their patterns of family and friendship travel, a kind of tourist travel, or what this person calls "the tourist thing".   Then he goes on to say, "if my friend's in Berlin, then that's great because I've never been to Berlin before so I'm killing two birds with one stone.   I'm looking forward to going to Berlin."   This shows a highly complex combination of both the sociabilities and "the tourist thing", as this person puts it.

Another person describes, "I'm organizing a trip to Mexico because I know he," this particular friend, "is only there for another year, so there's no point on missing out on free accommodation." So again there is this so-called tourist who will be in free probably modest accommodation in a suburban streets and not in a hotel.   He continues, "you know, say it was somewhere like Azerbaijan, I don't think I would be that keen on going, but you know Mexico, I'd quite like to go there."   This once more brings up the combination of practices of friendship and tourism.

We were also struck how these youngish people in this research were extremely effective at describing the systems of coordination in order to do their traveling.   Going out, they described, involves continuous coordination, negotiation and movement, a bit like a swarm of birds moving through the air.   "It's usually a loose arrangement, say meet up roughly," not *exactly*, but *roughly*, "8 o'clock in this bar, but most of the time that gets changed.   Because you've got mobiles, you can do that… I'm running late, or we've decided to go a different bar, meet us in that bar or whatever." We suggest what that does is produce a shift in the forms of coordination away from strict punctuality, to a more fluid coordination process in which certain kinds of places, such as bars or cafes, conference centers, hotel lounges, and so on become crucial.   We refer to these as "interspaces", which are spaces in-between spaces to work or home places and so on.

There seems to be a shifting from punctuality to a more indeterminate, fluid, meeting culture where there are these interspaces.   In this sort of fluid negotiation, mobile phones, messages and texting were particularly significant.   However, e-mail seemed much more significant, from this research, with increasing distance.   E-mail seemed to be a substitute for face-to-face sociality when distance makes frequent travel too time consuming and expensive.

Using this data we mapped the local, the national, and international ties of some of our respondents.

I'm just going to mention just two of them that bring out one or two points.

The first is a man working as a university porter in the UK.   On the face of it, this man has a large number of local ties from Lancaster down to Manchester and further down to Preston and Southport. These are all in the northwest of England and are about a 30 mile distance apart.   These connections bring out the patterns of connection with those people who are most important in his life.

If you look to the map on the left of the UK, it would appear that he has rather localized traveling, but in fact he has a number of friends and family members who live abroad. E-mail is particularly significant in maintaining the links that he has with them.   He says, "I've got an uncle who lives in America, so I email him a lot, as it's a lot cheaper.   I've also got former friends", from Preston, "who also now live abroad."   What's significant here is how he combines highly localized networks *with* highly far-flung networks. In maintaining the far-flung networks, email is particular significant, but in which a certain amount of physical travel takes place.   However, much of the physical travel that he does with his far-flung networks is because those people travel to the UK partly to see him. This shows how he provides hospitality.   He does not do the traveling so much, but he still has a very strong sense of the importance of these far-flung, intermittent links in his social network.

A different pattern is somewhat found in a woman who is working as a personal trainer. She seems to have a more distributed pattern of local ties between Manchester and Liverpool, some ties nationally, linking Manchester and London, but also a significant number of international ties.   The text here describes how she keeps in touch with those.   One thing that this person demonstrates is how this person's previous working practices produced friendship patterns.   For this person the three most important people in her life all live in the United States and they were all met through various workplace mobilities.

This person organizes her network through weekly emails and phone calls flowing between Manchester and the USA.   At least once a year she meets up with these friends in the US.   They travel to see her or she travels to see them.   This brought home to us the significance of reunions - the importance of reunions in academic conferences, within workplace groups, but especially within family groups, and friendship groups.   That is, how often should you have a reunion of that group or of that network?   This particular person, in her description of the social dynamics of her life was incredibly insistent on the importance of reunions.

I come now to the conclusion.   What I tried to demonstrate through varieties of arguments and

some evidence are the ways in which the understanding of physical travel should significantly shift from an individualistic homo-economicus to a network actor engaging in sets of social practices often involving many far-flung networks.   These networks in work, family, and friendship are a key feature of contemporary life.   Hence, much work is undertaken to establish and to sustain those networks within these different domains.

Central to these networks are travel and communication practices. They extend and strengthen such networks.   All these networks, more or less depend upon intermittent meetings involving travel and communications.   Such travel and communications generates network capital which is a major source of social stratification in contemporary societies.   Therefore, it gives a significance of traveling that makes it much less a very specific thing, studied by specific groups to being something that is a much more generically important feature that structures and organizes the distribution of opportunities around the world.

But also significant to the understanding of that travel is the understanding of meetings and the character, properties and consequences of those meetings.   Studying people's meetings are a methodological challenge.   Some of the time, you have to be present at those meetings in order to do to the research which implies that there are significant methodological challenges in this.   In the research that I reported we had to reply upon people's accounts of what happened in the meetings with their friends or family.   We were not present at all of those meetings and yet in order to conduct more in-depth research, this would entail being present at some of those meetings.

I have also suggested that there is something interesting in the shift in the nature of meetings from punctuality and specific spaces of movement to a more informal, fluid meeting-up culture and also "interspaces".   And thus I have tried to say that the sociabilities before, during, and after the travel are utterly central to understanding contemporary patterns of a networked life that is partly conducted on the move.   The sociabilities therefore of talk, meetings, guilt, emotions, and so on are thus central topics to researching how and why people are intermittently and contingently on the move.

Thank you.

Andre: Thank you very much for your very nice talk.   I have two questions.   The first question is concerning the theory that says that people travel 1.1 hours and that this is rather constant over time and space.   Can you explain this constant law, which seems to be true on average?   But, my second question is concerning another theory by Marshall McLuhan that says, "the medium is the

message" and the idea is that the type of media that you are using conveys information about what you want to say. I was wondering, when I was listening to you, if this might explain partially this face-to-face interaction. We are surrounded by a lot of information, so you must compete for the attention of people. To prove that you have something important to tell someone, you go to see them, rather than sending an e-mail. Thank you very much.

Urry: Thank you very much. Those are interesting questions. On the second one first, I think it's very interesting the way you put it there, that is, the significance of the medium of face-to-face that you've captured very well. There's obviously an interesting question, as to whether it will be possible, in some future time, that the medium of virtual electronic communications so changes that it can simulate the properties and characters of this physical co-presence.

I think that this electronic substitution effect of virtual communications for physical co-presence will only occur if it is able to reproduce those very properties of the medium. Actually, the way you put it, in terms of "the medium is the message", from McLuhan, helpfully clarifies that for me. Thank you for that comment.

On the first point about travel time and its supposed constancy, I know there's a big debate about that. One of the things I suppose I was pointing to, and I don't know quite what implications this will have, is that quite a lot of what we might call travel time is now spent engaging in activities, including the activities of making and remaking your social networks on the move. Whether that means the amount of travel time might extend because less of it is now "pure travel time" and more of it is a kind of travel time and the activity of maintaining one's social networks.

I know there's some suggestion that there are some increases in travel time, in some studies, and if that were the case then what I pointed out here might be part of that process. Certainly there is something of a dissolving of a distinction of travel time and activity time through the sorts of processes I've been talking about.