

On imagination and imaginaries, mobility and immobility: Seeing the forest for the trees

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Abstract

It is hard to talk about human mobilities without taking into consideration how mobility is being shaped by and shaping processes of imagination. The key concepts of imagination and mobility have rich and complex genealogies. The matter is even made more complex because there are many related concepts surrounding them. Imagination is associated with images, imagery and imaginaries, whereas mobility is connected to movement, motion and migration (not to mention its imagined opposite, immobility). To be able to see the forest for the trees, I focus in this critical reflection on a discussion of the concepts themselves. One of the analytical advantages of mobility studies, a relatively novel field of study, is that it shows us how imagination (a dynamic psychological process) and imaginaries (products of the imagination) are crucial for very different forms of human (im)mobility.

Keywords

Mobility, immobility, imagination, imaginaries, anthropology

Everything you can imagine, is real

Pablo Picasso

This special issue of *Culture & Psychology* explores, in various theoretical, empirical and methodological ways, the intricate relation between imagination

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and mobility. Both concepts have rich and complex genealogies—in Michel Foucault’s sense of connections between history, discourse, bodies and power. Reading the various contributions that make up the issue (Cangià, 2020; Cangià & Zittoun, 2020; D’Onofrio & Sjöberg, 2020; Jovchelovitch, Priego-Hernandez, Dedios, & Nogueira, 2020; Veale & Andres, 2020; Womersley, 2020; Zittoun, 2020), it becomes immediately clear that the respective authors are familiar with different bits and pieces of those genealogies. They do not necessarily share the same understanding and definition of both key concepts while, for the sake of simplicity, we are not even considering translation issues between languages and academic disciplines. The matter is even made more complex because there are many related concepts surrounding the couple selected here. Imagination is associated with images, imagery and imaginaries, whereas mobility is connected to movement, motion and migration (not to mention its imagined opposite, immobility). To be able to see the forest for the trees, it is useful to focus in this critical reflection on a discussion of the concepts themselves.

Imagination vs. imaginaries

The editors of this special issue define imagination as ‘an ever-changing embodied and creative activity both embedded in and shaping the social and cultural world around’ (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020). In other words, the focus is very much on the uniquely human mental capacity and practice to imagine or to enter into the imagination of others. Many common activities—reading novels, playing games, watching movies, telling stories, daydreaming, planning a vacation, etc.—involve this ability. As it is understood here, imagination is a concept indicating a dynamic psychological process.

According to Paul Ricoeur (1994), imagination can be used in several ways: (1) to call up things that are not present but exist elsewhere; (2) to create images in the mind of things that do not exist; (3) to bring about representations to replace things (e.g. paintings or diagrams); and (4) to represent things that are not present or do not exist, but which create the belief in the subject of their empirical observable existence—the domain of illusion. Ideas about imagination go all the way back to Aristotle (Brann, 1991), who referred to it as ‘fantasy’, a concept that we nowadays mostly use to denote more playful forms of imagination related to things that are improbable or impossible (Ricoeur’s second description).

Tania Zittoun’s (2020) ‘imaginary loop model’ is one way of trying to understand and explain, socioculturally, the process of imagination, as a symbolic kind of mobility through distal spheres of experiences, back and forth loops. It is important, however, not to confuse the *process* of imagination with its *products*, or what people imagine. We currently do not possess any precise scientific methods to know with certainty what people imagine. Neuropsychology, for instance, has been able to capture brain activity while people are busy imagining things, but in order to get access to *what* people imagine we still need to rely on how they translate their imaginings into observable expressions. These may take a variety of

forms—oral, written, pictorial, symbolic or graphic—and include both linguistic and non-linguistic ways of producing meaning.

Jean-Paul Sartre (2004) argued that the imagination is intimately connected with personal freedom, for to imagine is to escape from the world. This view is somewhat related to the one of psychoanalysis, where the imaginary is considered to be the realm of phantasy, an illusory realm from which we need to be freed by engagement with the real but, at the same time a necessary tool for humans to work through the ‘real’ issues they encounter in their daily lives. Contributors to this special issue struggle with how imagination is related to ‘reality’. Underlying virtually all of the contributions is the philosophical question whether there is a ‘reality’ out there, present in an objective, unmediated form. Zittoun’s (2020) model of imagination, for example, suggests imaginative loops out of the here-and-now experiences connected to (material) reality. Drawing on this model, Gail Womersley describes how imagination can be locked in an ‘alternative reality’ (2020). She looks at the relation between imagination and trauma in the context of forced migration. Her research shows how trauma may impede imagination and how imagination may help people to heal from trauma by temporarily disengaging from the here-and-now.

Alexandra D’Onofrio and Johannes Sjöberg argue that ‘human imagination has the ability to contradict reality’ (2020), but they end by acknowledging that ‘imagination is not merely an escape’ but that it ‘forms an essential part of the continuous process of crafting selfhood and concrete strategies for future mobility’ (D’Onofrio & Sjöberg, 2020). It may sound contra-intuitive, but for imagination to become ‘effective’, it has to relate relatively closely to reality (Lennon, 2015). We all construct, socioculturally, peoples and places as mixtures of the assumed ‘real’ and the imaginary. According to this perspective, identity is to be understood less in terms of geography, nation, ethnicity and culture, than in terms of how people imagine—Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) concepts of ‘imagined worlds’ and ‘possible lives’. Imagination can thus be conceived as a mental process, both individual and social, that produces the reality that simultaneously produces it.

The latter part of the editors’ definition, stressing the dialectic relation between imagination and the sociocultural world, reveals the cultural psychology perspective and is closely related to the contents of imagination. Here, the related concept of imaginaries becomes key. I define imaginaries as culturally shared and socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with the personal imagination and are used as meaning-making devices, mediating how people act, cognize and value the world. Others scholars have written about imaginaries in terms of a culture’s ethos or a society’s shared, unifying core conceptions (Castoriadis, 1987) or about cultural models or widely shared implicit cognitive schemas (Anderson, 1991; Taylor, 2004). According to Appadurai, ‘The image, the imagined, the imaginary [...] are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*. [...] The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both

labour and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility' (1996, p. 31).

Imaginaries are important in people's lives because they are part of the glue that holds groups together and because they act as the 'energetic source' that inspires social life (Baeza, 2008). The structuring function of imaginaries (Durand, 1999) resembles somewhat the reasoning of Immanuel Kant (2007), who saw imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) as a synthesizing faculty by which the chaos of sensation is ordered. Imaginings are implicit schemas of interpretation, rather than explicit ideologies. While they are alienating when they take on a life of their own as institutional(ized) imaginaries, we should remember that not societies imagine, but individuals do.

The current scholarly interest in imaginaries, as evidenced by the plethora of conferences and publications on the matter, is partially related to the felt shortcomings of the culture concept. Indeed, Google's Ngram Viewer nicely shows how the critique of culture, which became stronger at the end of the 1980s and 1990s, went hand in hand with a sharp increase in frequency of use of imaginaries, indicating a preference to talk about the latter instead of cultural beliefs. According to Claudia Strauss, 'the imaginary is just culture or cultural knowledge in new clothes. We need a way to talk about shared mental life: if culture is too redolent of Otherness, fixity, and homogeneity, then another term will have to be found' (2006, p. 322). The plethora of scholarship has made some critics argue that "'imagination" and "imaginaries" (arguably quite different but often conflated) have acquired too many meanings, which are in turn too imprecisely applied and combined' (Stankiewicz, 2016, p. 796). However, although sometimes used interchangeably, imagination and imaginaries refer, analytically speaking, to quite different things.

The editors of this special issue critique that scholars have maintained 'a rather static perspective on imaginaries' (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020). The identified unchanging quality of imaginaries is naturally related to their contents. Once imaginaries are formed it becomes very hard to change them, precisely because they are culturally shared and socially transmitted (Salazar & Graburn, 2014). However, Cangià and Zittoun do have a point that, while the existing literature on imagination is vast, scholars in general have been much less concerned with imaginative processes than with imaginaries—the content produced by those processes.

Mobility vs. immobility

The way mobility is being used in academia (Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman, & Sheller, 2013; Endres, Manderscheid, & Mincke, 2016; Salazar & Jayaram, 2016), the term entails, in its coinage, much more than mere physical motion. Mobility is defined in this special issue as 'the act of moving, entangled with power, norms and meaning, and involving social, material, temporal and symbolic components that make movement (im)possible' (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020). From a cultural

psychology perspective, the symbolic dimension seems to be the most interesting aspect to study. Mobility research in general calls attention to the myriad ways in which people become parts of multiple translocal networks and linkages.

The temporary to permanent character of the various existing mobilities has led to confusing terminological ambiguities (Salazar & Jayaram, 2016). Scholars have used a multitude of denominators, partially overlapping with one another, to denote various forms of mobility (Salazar, 2018b). The concepts of migration and mobility, for instance, clearly intersect (Salazar, 2019), but they are not really synonyms (even if some people, including in this special issue, use them as such). While migration by definition entails mobilities, most research on migration has privileged studying the causes and impacts of migration on points of departure and (settlement) destinations, so before or after the physical migratory movement (Hui, 2016).

The scholarly focus on processes of mobility almost automatically leads to an increased attention to immobility (Salazar & Smart, 2011). As any human mobility scholar should know, to assess the extent or nature of movement, or, indeed, even 'observe' it sometimes, you have to spend time studying things that stand still: the borders, institutions and territories of nation-states, and the (imagined) sedentary 'home' cultures of those that do not move. In other words, motion is always framed within a material and institutional infrastructure, and the circulation of people is constantly limited or promoted by economic coercions, political guarantees and sociocultural imaginaries. Moreover, most of the world's population stays put, whether they voluntarily choose this option or are forced to. The mobility of some has consequences for or corresponds to the immobility of others. Even those who do not move are affected by movements of people in or out of their communities, and by the resulting changes.

As is often the case, immobility is not as clearly defined as mobility in this special issue. Instead, it is implicitly assumed to be the (negatively valued) opposite of physical movement. Flavia Cangià (2020) is perhaps the most concrete when describing immobility as the experience of being stuck and waiting, conditions that either block or trigger imagination. Interestingly, her case study involves people who are in 'a state of immobility under conditions of geographical repeated mobility' (Cangià, 2020). Whereas many have written about the link between mobility and its (attributed) transformative qualities, Cangià's contribution shows 'the transformation of the experience of im/mobility and trajectories of imagination, as they change through time' (2020).

Sandra Jovchelovitch and her colleagues (2020) explore spatial movements across urban borders, which they see as 'a relational space comprising different possibilities of mobility and immobility' (Jovchelovitch et al., 2020). Stressing how territories, and the borders that separate them, are relationally constituted, is an important point to make. It reminds us that imaginaries are not only about places (the emphasis of most contributions here), but also about people. Moreover, it is good to openly acknowledge the ambiguous character of borders (Salazar, 2018a). Border crossings, be they physical or virtual, can be thought of as an entanglement

of movement, meaning, and practice, involving a complex politics of hierarchy, of inclusion and exclusion (Elliot, Norum, & Salazar, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to question mobility ideologies that associate certain forms of border crossings (or the lack thereof) with specific meanings and causalities. In addition to external borders (and the violence and sufferings they may impose on people), we must also examine the 'internal boundaries' pervading everyday life, to comprehend why and how certain borders are (not) straightforwardly crossed. This aspect, too, is acknowledged by Jovchelovitch et al., who neatly describe how 'mobility across socio-institutional, spatial and symbolic boundaries intersects with specific psychosocial outcomes in terms of identity, social representations and Self-Other relations in different areas of the city' (2020).

Angela Veale and Camilla Andres look at 'imaginative mobility in the context of physical immobility' (2020). Contrary to what they think, this is not really an under-researched form of mobility. Particularly in the African context, which is also part of their case study, a good number of scholars have looked at this (Graw & Schielke, 2012; Jónsson, 2008; Salazar, 2011). On the other hand, the attention of Veale and Andres to affect as an important dimension of imagination in the context of (im)mobility is an important contribution. Such a focus enables them to explore 'the triggers of imagination and the functional role imagination may play in transnational relating through affective practices such as in managing feelings of longing or loneliness' (Veale & Andres, 2020).

Imagination and mobility

Earlier research on mobility tended to separate the imagination, as being an external impact, from practice. Yet, as this special issue wonderfully illustrates, imagination is an embodied practice of transcending both physical and sociocultural distance. Even when a person is place bound, his or her imagination can be in movement, traveling to other places and other times (Rapport & Dawson, 1998). By extension, it could be argued that even when one is in movement, one's imagination can be focused on a singular place (e.g. people in the diaspora recreating their imagined 'homeland') and that these imaginaries of fixity can influence one's experience of mobility (Easthope, 2009).

Historically laden imaginaries are at the roots of many physical and imagined travels. The motivations to travel are usually multiple, but greatly linked to the ability of people and their social networks to imagine other places and lives. In the cultural logics of migration, for example, imaginaries play a predominant role in envisioning both the (often-mythologised) green pastures of the new land and the nostalgic memories of the homeland (Jackson, 2008). Migration is about these imaginaries as well as about actual physical movement from one locality to another and back (Salazar, 2013). The images and ideas of other (read as: better) possible places to live often misrepresented through popular media circulate in a very unequal global space and are ultimately filtered through migrants' personal aspirations (Salazar, 2014). Migration thus always presupposes some knowledge or,

at least, rumours of ‘the other side’. Imaginaries of such movements play out in uneven and even contradictory ways. The editors of this special issue are very right in pointing out that imagination can ‘slow down, accelerate or even immobilize the rhythm and possibilities of mobility’ (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020).

In her contribution, Tania Zittoun describes imagination as ‘the dynamic at stake’ in achieving symbolic (or semiotic) mobility, ‘the psychological integration of new experiences’ (2020). Importantly for our discussion here, she stresses that these symbolic moves are ‘socially guided or more personally built’ (2020), thus indicating the dialectic between imaginaries and imagination. Zittoun’s particular use of the term ‘symbolic mobility’ should not be confused with the perhaps more common usage of symbolic mobility, in a Bourdieuan sense, as some type of envisioned ‘climbing’—be it economically (in terms of resources), socially (in terms of status), or culturally (in terms of cosmopolitan disposition)—that many people link to voluntary forms of geographical mobility (Salazar, 2018b). There are many underlying assumptions regarding the supposed nexus between spatial and symbolic mobility, while the mechanisms producing mobility are still poorly understood (Faist, 2013).

D’Onofrio and Sjöberg discuss the use of co-creative visual methods and artistic expressions ‘to gain access to the imaginary worlds of the participants in relation to migration’ (D’Onofrio & Sjöberg, 2020). The catch here, as in most research on migration, is that the research is limited to the post-migration phase and, thus, involves a reconstruction of the imagination at work before and during the actual migratory move. As argued already above, we lack a proper toolbox to study imaginaries. Adding mobility to the mix only increases the complexity of the matter. The study of the relation between imagination and mobility itself often requires ‘imaginative mobilities’ (Elliot et al., 2017). So the creative methods described by D’Onofrio and Sjöberg (2020) are well worth exploring further.

Conclusion

We live in imagined (but not imaginary) worlds, using imagination and imaginaries to represent our lifeworld and attribute meaning to it. Paradoxically, human imagination helps produce our sense of reality, making the real possible. Imaginaries—whether true or false, or somewhere in between—have real enough effects. Imagination is an essentially creative act that facilitates people’s ability to move beyond structural imbalances of power and economic constraints. The process of imagination allows people to contemplate the gap between them and imagined ‘realities’ in ways that do not necessarily imply success or failure. Imagination can thus be conceived as a mental, individual and social process that produces the reality that simultaneously produces it.

The contributions to this special issue confirm that it is hard to talk about human mobilities without taking into consideration how mobility is being shaped by and shaping processes of imagination. However, the contributions presented here may create the impression that we are only talking about migration.

One of the advantages of mobility studies in general is that it has shown us how imagination and imaginaries are crucial for very different forms of human mobility. We thus need to look beyond migration to even better understand the process of imagination and its crucial role in human mobility.

A last comment relates to the assumed link between mobility and freedom. Mobility is mostly positively valued because it is commonly seen as a marker of freedom. It is a widespread idea that much of what is experienced as freedom lies in mobility. Many contemporary scholars therefore valorise, if not outright romanticise, ideas of mobility. Mobility ideologies generally equate geographical movement with social fluidity. At the same time, restrictions on human movement are commonplace. Ideas concerning the (dis)advantages of mobility, however, must always be seen as part of wider value systems. In general, the ability for people to move freely is spread very unevenly within countries and across the planet. In this context, it is important to remember that the ultimate freedom is not situated in mobility as such (because most forms of mobility are 'bounded' in one way or the other), but in the choice whether one wants to be mobile or not. In other words, we should not only scrutinize the imagination and imaginaries of the people we study but also our own academic imagination and imaginaries.

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