

Residential mobility

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Introduction

Where do people live? Why do they move? How do they choose their dwelling and residential location? These questions are crucial to understand the dynamics of cities. Population flows are indeed a major driving force shaping urban regions and are at the core of processes such as suburbanization, gentrification or reurbanization.

Broadly defined, residential mobility refers to a household’s change of residence over short distances (e.g. within a region or a metropolitan area). Thus, it does not usually affect the whole organization of daily life in terms of work, shopping and leisure locations. Migration on the opposite involves longer distances across national borders (international migration) or between regions (internal or inter-regional migration). It redefines the spaces of daily life through a process of uprooting and re-rooting.

The distinction between residential mobility and migration is not always clear though. Migration implies decisions with respect to residential mobility such as selecting a neighbourhood or a dwelling. The institutional organization and size of countries differ greatly which makes the definition of internal migration variable. Moreover, the spaces of daily life are blurred due to long-distance commuting. However motivations vary according to distances: the shorter the move, the more it relies on the characteristics of the dwelling and the residential context; the longer the move, the more it refers to employment or education (Owen and Green 1992, Niedomysl 2011).

Residential mobility has been addressed by geography, sociology, demography and economics. In this chapter I first outline the classic approaches and then discuss the notion of residential choice. I also give an overview of urban phenomena where residential mobility is at stake and conclude with some final remarks.

Classic approaches¹

Perspectives addressing residential mobility can be distributed between macro and micro-analytical perspectives (Cadwallader 1992). The former look at aggregate residential

¹ This section extends a previous text on residential mobility (Rérat 2016).

phenomena and explain them based on the context (e.g. characteristics of spatial entities). The latter focus on individuals and their motivations and study decision-making.

A second categorization separates “deterministic” and “humanistic” perspectives (Boyle *et al.* 1998). The former suggest that moving is an obvious solution given the context (and/or structures) and tend to minimize the role of individuals. The latter consider that actors consciously make decisions and have a certain freedom of choice.

Research on residential mobility have often referred to one of five traditional theoretical approaches whose principles are outlined below.

The neo-classic perspective regards individuals as economically rational (*homo economicus*). They optimize their utility based on differences of income, amenities, costs, etc. The public choice theory (Tiebout 1956) for example posits that individuals decide to move based on the combination of services provided by a local community and its price in terms of tax that best matches their preferences. Thus, by moving, individuals “vote with their feet.”

The behaviourist approach highlights the importance of socio-psychological mechanisms in the decision to move. Individuals tolerate a degree of discomfort but, once a certain level of stress is reached, they seek a residential context that offers what is perceived as a better quality of life (Cadwallader, 1992). Households choose from among a limited number of alternatives based on a minimum level of satisfaction (“satisficer”). For Rossi, residential mobility is a spatial process through which a family adjusts its housing consumption to its needs notably in terms of dwelling size (Rossi 1955).

The structuralist approach highlights the social constraints that affect individuals and limit their room for manoeuvre. It explains residential phenomena on a structural level (economic and political framework, conflictual relations between classes, etc.). Authors turned to (neo-) Marxist theories to analyse residential phenomena with regard to the organization of the capitalist mode of production. Gentrification for example can be interpreted in light of neoliberal policies and capital investment-divestment-reinvestment cycles within the built environment (Smith 1996).

The humanistic approach refers here to the human geography movement that emerged in the 1970s, which highlights action (agency). Much research – in sociology and anthropology – share these principles. They focus on individual experiences and characteristics such as beliefs, feelings, values, emotions and attachment (Christie *et al.* 2008). To go back to gentrification, humanist accounts have highlighted the residential aspirations of parts of the middle class in favour of urban areas and their reject of suburban lifestyle (Ley 1996).

The institutional approach does not have the status of an established theory. It is concerned with the roles of managers and institutions without proposing an interpretive grid (Pahl 1969, Knox and Pinch 2000). It examines the role of intermediaries in the housing market (builders, developers, real estate agents, local authorities, financial institutions, etc.). These gate keepers

link available resources (e.g. land and capital) and potential clients, and structure the housing supply (Teixeira 2006, Briggs *et al.* 2010).

Given the variety of approaches to residential phenomena, recent developments in mobility and migration studies are characterized by a call to incorporate different points of view – each of which highlight specific mechanisms and are not necessarily incompatible – and to adopt theoretical and methodological pluralism based on the line of questioning. This is what allows the concept of residential or housing choice.

Residential choice

The term residential/housing choice, at first glance, does not seem to transcend the conflict between deterministic and humanistic approaches, given its positive connotation. However, residential choice should not be regarded solely as the result of aspirations but as a choice under constraints. More specifically, it depends on households' needs and preferences within a limited range of options defined by the opportunities and constraints of the housing market (availability of certain types of housing in a given residential context, prices, etc.) and the resources and restrictions associated with households themselves (Van Ham 2012).

Restrictions can be objective (income, location of workplaces, etc.) or subjective (schemes of perception and action arising from belonging to a social class, etc.). Residential choice thus appears to be socially constituted. Because of the existence of constraints and restrictions, residential choice is the result of trade-offs, be it between the people affected by the move or various criteria related to housing. The development of transport infrastructures and the increase in travel speed have lowered the constraints of distances and have widened the search area of households.

The concept of residential choice means that people enjoy a certain leeway, even if the range of possibilities varies greatly. This theoretical position legitimates the study of five sets of characteristics: the unit of analysis, profile, trajectories, criteria and decision-making.

Unit of analysis

Works on mobility have long focused on the individual as a unit of analysis partly due to theoretical perspectives (e.g. neoclassic) and to data availability. Rossi's research on "Why family move" (1955) paved the way to studies integrating the family or the household as a unit of analysis. Household location choices involve several members with heterogeneous preferences and influences and imply trade-offs, negotiations and compromises (Coulter *et al.* 2012). Differences may be observed between choices made by single individuals and those made by the same individuals when choosing collectively (Marcucci *et al.* 2011).

Scholars have also stressed the importance of the entourage that includes parents, children, spouses, and siblings who do not share the same apartment in the residential choice (Mulder 2007). This importance may refer to the proximity of mutual aid networks such as taking care

of children (Vignal 2005), the transmission of housing preferences (Lux *et al.* 2018) or the intergenerational financial support to access homeownership (Hochstenbach 2018).

Profile

The second dimension, profile, refers firstly to classic variables such as position in the life course (age, type of household, etc.), socio-economic status (education, etc.) and national origin. The impact of age has been well documented (Rogers 1988): the highest mobility rate is observed among young adults when they leave their family, gain residential independence, study or enter the labour market, and start an adult life. After the 20s the mobility rate declines and residential stability becomes the norm. A rebound is hypothesised at retirement (although not observed in all countries) and a last peak takes place at the end of life due to the move to nursing homes.

To this "vertical" differentiation can be added a "horizontal" distinction based on lifestyles. This relates to individualisation theories that argue that contemporary societies are characterised by the actors' 'disembedding' from traditional social constraints, releasing them from traditional scripts dictating how they should live their lives (Rye 2011). The contemporary individual is characterised by a level of choice unavailable to previous generations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and has led to a diversification of lifestyles and residential aspirations even within social classes and age groups.

The concept of lifestyle is subject to a variety of definitions based on either practices in time and space, latent variables (opinions or values), socio-demographic variables or a combination of these (Jansen 2014). The commonality of the body of work dealing with lifestyle is its assertion that traditional demographic and socio-economic variables are insufficient to explain residential choices. It has been used to analyse the difference between urban and suburban middle classes (Lufkin *et al.* 2018). Some, albeit rare, studies have explored residential choice (Coolen *et al.* 2002, Rössel and Hoelscher 2012) through residents' values such as tradition, success, autonomy and safety (Schwartz 1994).

Profile is important as residential mobility is doubly selective. On the one hand and as said above, the propensity to move varies according to population groups. In general, the average is higher among young adults, singles and childless couples (versus married people or families), tenants (versus homeowners) and highly qualified people. Moreover, each territorial context has a specific hosting potential (Kaufmann 2011) that is more or less attractive to certain population groups. For example urban centres are characterized by an under-representation of families and an overrepresentation of singles, childless couples and flat shares (Rérat 2012a).

Trajectories

The third aspect, trajectory includes past, present and future housing locations and characteristics. It is a way to analyse a move in the perspective of the biographies of individuals. The concept of life cycle featured successive stages in the progression of a family marriages (Glick 1989). Given that the family institution has been subject to major challenges (unregistered partnership, divorces, remarriages, etc.), it has been replaced by the concept of

life course. This approach is a way of structuring a complex set of events that include decisions about occupational, marital and housing careers (Mulder and Clark 2002).

The life course approach takes into account three interdependence between (1) the past, the present and the future; (2) the different spheres of action (family, education work, leisure, etc.) and (3) individual action and contexts, “since life course patterns are embedded in macro- social structures and cultural beliefs and guided by market opportunities, institutions and social networks” (Heinz *et al.* 2009).

Life course approaches thus look at residential choice within a triple framework: personal (formation or separation of a couple, birth of a child, etc.), residential (location and characteristics of past and current housing) and professional (entering the job market, job changes, retirement, etc.). Other scholars have suggested to reconceptualise residential (im)mobility as relational practices that link lives through time and space while connecting people to structural conditions (Coulter *et al.* 2016).

Criteria

Fourth, residential choices are complex and involve a multitude of criteria. Three angles of analysis exist: residential satisfaction, aspirations and motivations which focus respectively on the current situation (factors that might encourage a move), projects in a more or less distant and defined future (stated preferences) and criteria underpinning a residential choice (revealed preferences).

Moving can be based upon different factors. Clark and Onaka (1983) distinguish forced (e.g. expropriation, home foreclosures), induced (by a change in the household structure or work location) and adjustment moves (Clark and Onaka 1983). In the latter case, moving is an attempt to improve quality of life and housing in terms of occupation status, size, comfort, accessibility, etc. As housing is a composite good, households must make a certain number of trade-offs and prioritize between these elements since they cannot meet all their aspirations. Research have addressed specifically some criteria such as the tenure choice (Andersen 2011, Lux *et al.* 2018), the importance of the neighbourhood (Andreotti *et al.* 2013), the role of school choices (Boterman 2013), mobility practices (Rérat and Lees 2011), amenities and workplaces (Frenkel *et al.* 2013), etc.

Residential choices refer to several logics of action: a functional logic (“using”), a social logic (“meeting”) and a sensitive logic (“inhabiting”) (Lufkin *et al.* 2018). Households are simultaneously characterized by a calculating relationship to the world (objective factors such as price and functional qualities), a socio-cognitive relationship (representations such as reputation), and a sensitive relationship (attraction and repulsion).

Decision-making process

Fifth, the decision-making process has to do with the way households find a dwelling, e.g. through the market (agencies, ads) or networks (family, friends) (Authier 1998). Households

are not equal as these logics depend on their economic (income), cultural (ability to process information) and social (relations) capital (Boterman 2012).

Among other factors, time or the urgency of the situation may force a household to revisit certain criteria. Furthermore living on site – the location-specific advantage or the ties that bind people to a place (Mulder and Wagner 2012) – imply a better knowledge of the context and reactivity when it comes to seizing opportunities, whereas migrating from another region or country requires a certain understanding of the local context (which can be done through several residential stages).

Other dimensions related to decision-making refer as mentioned above to trade-offs between members of a household and criteria. It may also imply trade-offs between residential mobility and everyday mobility and strategies to avoid moving and to preserve local moorings such as opting for longer commuting trips or multiresidentiality (Rérat 2014). Residential mobility should also be seen as a process: the focus should not be on actual moves only but take also into account the stages preceding the moves (Kley and Mulder 2010).

In addition to these dimensions other crucial issues regard what happens after a move. A first one refers to what is called post-occupancy evaluation (Preiser *et al.* 2016) that refers to the study of buildings once inhabited, so that lessons may be learned to guide the design of future buildings (Meir *et al.* 2009). Participant-observer ethnography has also been used to analyse residents' adaptation and appropriation of their residential context (Gans 2017). Another issue refers to the households' spatial practices, in other words, daily mobility downstream of residential choice in the light of the compact city debate (see below).

Research perspectives

There are several on-going debates on the urban realm where residential mobility is at stake: multiresidentiality, demographic transition, urban changes and social structure, and environmental sustainability.

Multiresidentiality

In the introduction residential mobility was defined as a change of residence. However, a growing number of households live in more than one place (multiresidentiality). The reasons are manifold: job or education, leisure (second-homes) or familial configurations (children of separated couples, couples living apart together, etc.). Multi-local living arrangements imply a cyclical use of more than one place of residence, include moorings and immobilities as well as the recurrent movement between these places (Schier *et al.* 2015).

Demographic transition

Ageing is one of the major demographic trends and the rise of senior living is an important issue for housing. One key element is the residential mobility of this (heterogeneous) age group. Studies show several practices. Ageing in place is the most common one although not geographically and socially evenly distributed. Downsizing strategies are also adopted to cope

with difficulty (maintenance, stairs, etc.). This reduction of housing consumption (from owning to renting) seems much more common in the US than in Europe (Banks *et al.* 2012). Residential choices could become more diverse as baby boomers retire. Some authors hypothesis that the elderly today are more willing to change residence to accommodate for changing lifestyle and poorer health than earlier generations (Abramsson and Andersson 2012).

Age is becoming a core dimension of urban socio-spatial change (Hochstenbach 2018) and not only in term of ageing: some central and dense areas have been experiencing rejuvenation or youthification (Moos 2015). Young adults are making location decisions in a context of lower employment security, higher costs, new residential aspirations. Studentification (the transformation of urban areas due to the move of a growing student population) and gentrification also contribute to change the age structure of central areas (Smith 2002, Smith and Holt 2007).

Urban change and social structure

The analysis of the selective geographies of residential (im)mobility represents a way to understand urban changes. Reurbanization for example refers the new period of demographic growth of cities (Rérat 2019) or to a process of populating and diversifying the inner city with a variety of residential groups (Haase *et al.* 2010). Other cities are on the contrary shrinking which affects differently population groups (Pallagst *et al.* 2014).

Gentrification shows a diversification of residential aspirations within middle classes although importance differences are observed between countries (Rérat 2018). Suburbanization or urban sprawl are another major trend. They have been interpreted among others as the result of the housing choice of families towards bigger dwellings, ownership, detached houses, children -friendly environment, etc. (suburban familism) (Fishman 1987). In many post-industrial cities a suburbanization of poverty can also be observed which limit the housing options of low-income households (Hochstenbach and Musterd 2018). Spatial segregation, social polarization and the concentration of minority ethnic groups remain a central issue given the barriers in tightening markets (Briggs *et al.* 2010), the way residential mobility between neighbourhoods may bring about changes in the pattern of ethnic segregation (Bolt and Kempen 2010) and policies implemented such as housing subsidy programme for low-income households (Basolo and Yerena 2017). A focus is also put on the housing choice after migrating and the spatial assimilation theory (migrants would adopt the same residential practices after a few years) (Andersen 2011)

Environmental sustainability

Housing is closely related to environmental sustainability. This refers to the impact of location and of urban form upon the consumption of energy and resources notably through mobility practices (Rérat 2012b). Urban sprawl has become the most dominant trend in urbanisation since World War II (European Environment Agency 2016). Yet it has been strongly criticised as it implies a high level of land consumption and automobile dependence.

To regulate urban sprawl, the compact city has been promoted (Holden 2004). It has been argued that the densification of the built environment would slow down urban sprawl and limit resource and energy consumption by reducing the role of the car and increasing the number of trips made on foot, by bicycle or by public transport. Scholars have addressed these issues by studying residential aspirations or satisfaction between various types of environments (e.g. Mouratidis, 2018) and the links between residential choice and mobility practices (Rérat and Lees 2011, Ettema and Nieuwenhuis 2017, Humphreys and Ahern 2017).

Concluding remarks

Residential mobility may be analysed through two perspectives. It is an object of study in itself as in research addressing the housing choices of population groups in a context of demographic changes and diversification of lifestyles. It constitutes also an indicator at the service of other scientific objects such as the understanding of urban dynamics. Current issues such as market (de)regulation, ecological transition, spatial justice, strengthen the importance and relevance of this field of study.

For more than a decade scholars have re-conceptualized how contemporary life is configured by mobilities (Sheller and Urry 2006). While there is a burgeoning literature on international migration, far less attention has been devoted to re-thinking residential (im)mobility (Coulter *et al.* 2016). This might be surprising as residential location is crucial in the way people (have to) deal with distance and space. A closer dialogue with the new mobilities paradigm could invigorate approaches of residential mobility regarding several issues presented above such as the experiences and meanings of both residential mobility and immobility as well as their articulation with other form of spatial mobilities.

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