Multi-scalar inequality: Structured mobility and the narrative construction of scale in translocal Cambodia

CrossMark

Laurie Parsons*

Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, United Kingdom

A B S T R A C T

Focusing on three neighbouring villages in Cambodia, this paper argues the need for a multi-scalar interpretation of the relationship between mobility and wealth. It analyses migrant livelihoods in both sender and receiving areas to show that single scale measurements of mobility are inappropriate in the context of translocal livelihoods because livelihoods enacted across multiple places may possess multiple values of scale and mobility, each co-existing within the same migrant lifeworld. In seeking an improved conception of these complexities, the paper has combined spatial and qualitative analysis of translocal livelihoods to highlight the linkages between mobility in multiple places. On this basis, it posits that the mobility of translocal livelihoods must be assessed at least three scales: the scale appropriate to the sending environment, the scale appropriate to the receiving environment, and the scale on which potential migrations are judged. Making use of this framework allows clear relationships to be observed between mobility and inequality in both the narratives and structures of the communities under investigation.

1. Introduction

Mobility and distance have long been associated with elite status. In historical terms, travel and knowledge of the outside world were accessible to relatively few and therefore imbued with a symbolic value. Indeed, as Helms (1988: 4) argues 'in traditional societies, horizontal space and distance may be perceived in sacred or supernatural cosmological terms', imbuing both direct and indirect knowledge of distant places with a significance beyond their immediate value (Helms, 1988).

Nevertheless, this relatively linear relationship between distance and its value tends to be viewed as belonging to a time, or place, apart. As the world becomes more mobile (Castles and Miller, 2009) and interlinked (Castells, 2011), attitudes towards space have shifted, towards a conception of it as 'relational' (Jones, 2009: 487), 'stretched', (Samuels, 2001: 1) and 'inextricably inter-mixed with time' (Massey, 1999: 274). Indeed, some authors (e.g. Rogaly and Thieme, 2012) have demonstrated how multi-local livelihoods may strain the lifeworlds of their inhabitants to the extent that they 'protest' against their mobility (Bastia, 2011: 1514) by pursuing stasis. As distance has become compressed by technology, in other words, the value of mobility has been argued to become detached from scale (Rogaly, 2015).

This paper uses the translocal disapora of three neighbouring villages in Cambodia to interrogate this narrative, arguing that mobility remains both valuable and intimately intertwined with inequality, but that this value cannot be assessed at a single scale. Specifically, it argues that in translocal communities, inequality of mobility requires assessment on at least three scales simultaneously: that appropriate to the livelihoods of the sender environment; that which constitutes relative mobility in the destination; and that at which the community mediated hierarchy of migration is judged. Simply put, total distance travelled is a poor indicator of relative wealth, but mobility at source and destination, as well as motility – or flexibility of movement – in relation to migration destination, is a strong one. Those who are relatively deprived in their communities lack mobility in multiple places and at multiple scales, whilst the best off enjoy superior motility not at one scale, but at many.

What constitutes desirable mobility is therefore contextually determined. The ability to farm land spread over a wider area than one's neighbour constitutes no more or less important a degree of mobility than that required to visit a local market on days off from a factory job; or to choose Phnom Penh over a neighbouring village as a migrant destination. Undesirable mobility, similarly, is assessed and determined in place. Low motility is associated with community level narratives of denigration, which isolate the worst off within and between households (Bylander, 2015; Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2013; Elmhirst, 2007). Consequently, the pursuit of positive narratives – dutiful daughters; providers for the family – and the avoidance of negative ones – workshy; weak; uncaring – drives and links translocal mobility.

* Address: Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Surrey, TW20 0EX, United Kingdom.
  E-mail address: laurie.parsons@kcl.ac.uk.

After outlining the conceptual and empirical context of this study, as well as the methods employed, this paper will proceed in three parts. First, it will combine historical, contemporary and geospatial data on asset distribution to link differential patterns of mobility to wealth stratification in the three rural sites. Secondly, it will examine the role of community discourse and social tensions in shaping rural and rural-urban mobility. Finally, it will explore how rural wealth, expressed in migrant livelihoods via the mechanism of remittances, is a key determinant of urban mobility.

2. Towards a translocal conception of scale

In References to the current era as an 'age of migration' (Castles and Miller, 2009) are intended to signal a world in which mobility has become a key factor in structuring contemporary livelihoods. Migration is increasingly recognised as a process of 'social transformation' in which migrants and non-migrants alike experience changes to their social-structural, cultural, and economic environments (Castles, 2010: 1575). Concurrently, translocality frameworks (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2016, 2013; Brickell, 2011) have emphasized how even poorer members of mobile societies engage in complex, multi-sited patterns of movement over a variety of timeframes. Thus, it is the quality, rather than the quantity, of mobility in the 21st century; the technologically mediated ability to retain 'groundedness' in multiple, spatially segregated, locations simultaneously (Brickell, 2011: 3), that distinguishes it from the forms of movement that preceded it (Hilti, 2016).

This recognition has given rise to the 'mobilities turn' (Sheller, 2014) in the social sciences, a development that offers 'a conceptually more agile container' to study the meaning of movement than previous theoretical frameworks (Rogaly, 2015: 528). In particular, the adjustment of focus engendered by the mobilities literature (Sheller, 2014; Jensen, 2011) has contributed towards a more reflexive interpretation of the relationship between migration and inequality. Previously examined at both macro (e.g. Yeung, 2013; Neumayer, 2006; Jones, 1998; Stark et al., 1988) and micro scales (e.g. Bastia, 2013; McKenzie and Rapoport, 2007; Barham and Boucher, 1998), as well as the Cambodian context itself (Lim and Widyono, 2016; Davis, 2011), the nexus of these fields has invariably been viewed in economic terms. Yet new insights into mobilities have helped to demonstrate that 'neither mobility nor social inequality are set, static, or given categories' (Manderscheid, 2012: 27), but 'complexly interwoven' (Manderscheid, 2012: 27; Sager, 2006) in a manner central to the exercise of power (Rogaly, 2015; Kesselring and Vogl, 2004; Paquette and Domon, 2003).

Recognising that mobility and immobility 'always define each other' (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013), recent work has considered this relationship in terms of motility, a term first used in this context by Kaufmann et al. (2004) and later underpinning both viscosity (Doherty, 2015; Sheller and Urry, 2006) and mobile viscosity (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016a) frameworks. Work centred on the motility concept investigates flexibility of movement, rather than movement itself and builds on recent studies highlighting the downsides of hypermobility (Cohen and Gössling, 2015; Arnado, 2013; Rogaly and Thieme, 2012; Silvey, 2009) by demonstrating that highly mobile livelihoods may be associated with lower motility than relatively sedentary ones, generating strain via 'stretched lifeworlds' (Samuels, 2001: 1), without facilitating the ability to change or cease these patterns. Indeed, from this perspective, multi-local living may be associated with 'severe physical and spatial immobility' (Hilti, 2009: 152).

In parallel to these reassessments of the value of movement, a related body of literature (Rogaly, 2015; Söderström et al., 2013; Tufts and Savage, 2009; Silvey, 2009, 2004; Dupont, 2004) has begun to reinterpret scale as a factor in this value. Building on Swyngedouw's (2004, 2000) work on 'the politics of scale', these studies have shown how scale is socially constructed (Green, 2016; Stallins, 2012; Marston, 2000) via the 'abstract social structures' through which 'domination

takes place' (Loftus, 2015: 367). Thus, by highlighting 'the unpredictability of the relationship between intimacy, locality, and geographic proximity' (Vasantkumar, 2013: 919) they have both demonstrated the need for a multi-scalar perspective on the drivers of mobility (Cripps and Gardner, 2016; Osbahr et al., 2008) and sought to oppose the hierarchy of scale characteristic of migration studies, wherein moves over a greater distance are more important than shorter ones (Rogaly, 2015; Söderström et al., 2013).

From this perspective, not only do 'mobilities have context' (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014: 628), but this context is multi-scalar, multi-sited, and mobile. Narratives of praise and denigration are active factors in people's mobility decisions: gender norms of 'dutiful daughters' (Derks, 2008: 170) working in the factories to support their families, whilst profligate sons squander their salaries, increasingly structures decisions both to leave and to return; beggars are impelled to cyclical migration by stigma at home and in the city (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016a); and stories of nostalgia, both domestic and international, bind paratransit workers into decades long cyclical migrations (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016b). What it means to be mobile or immobile – and by extension the meaning of scale itself – is therefore grounded not only in socio-economic structures, but norms and narrative also (Cranston, 2016; Kochan, 2016; Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich, 2016; Boersma and Schinkel, 2015), a duality that has only recently begun to be explored.

By demonstrating how narrative and socio-economic inequality structure mobility at multiple scales (and vice versa), this paper aims to contribute to both the mobilities and broader geographic literatures in two ways. First, it furthers Rogaly's (2015) and Loftus's (2015) assertions on the subjective hierarchy of scale by highlighting that unequal mobility may be the product of both narratives and structures operating at multiple places and scales simultaneously. Thus, it rejects 'narrower assumptions' of economically rational mobility (Shubin et al., 2014) in favour of a complex, discursive and conflict driven interpretation of scale and the value of movement in translocal systems.

Secondly, the paper responds to Manderscheid's assertion that the relationship between mobilities and social inequalities is 'not yet sufficiently explored' (Manderscheid, 2012: 43) by offering a framework to understand unequal mobility in translocal systems. In doing so, it accords that 'customary numerical yardsticks of mobility be re-examined for their appropriateness and fairness' (Pirie, 2009: 22) and offers a bottom-up account of scale, rooted in the discourse of a translocal community. Using a combination of narrative and structural data, it builds on previous work emphasizing the dark side of hypermobility (Cohen and Gössling, 2015; Rogaly and Thieme, 2012), as well as Doherty's (2015) and Parsons and Lawreniuk's (2016b) notions of "viscosity" in migrant systems, to elucidate the multi-sited and multi-scalar relationship between mobility and wealth.

3. Methods

The research presented in this paper was collected using a mixed methods strategy designed to investigate migration as a multi-scalar system. Methodologically, it builds upon Xiang's (2013) exposition of multi-scalar ethnography by incorporating this strategy within a broader, mixed methods approach to multi-scalar research. It proceeded from an initial rural field site, Krang Youv commune in Kandal province, selected during a six week period of preliminary fieldwork in June and July 2012. This preceded the main six month research frame, from March to August 2013.

The project was conducted across three rural research sites, one peri-urban site, and one urban one. However, sites themselves were not pre selected, but sourced as part of an adaptive research process designed to effectively capture the social structure and migration diaspora of a rural village-system. As such, whilst a single village site – Ampil – was identified as an entry point to Krang Youv, the second and third rural field sites were identified following qualitative interviews with