

VIDEOS

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The weight of daily life: women facing mobility

By **Anne Jarrigeon** (Anthropologist) 23 April 2019

Making sense of mobility in a different way, properly capturing women's experience of mobility, this is an important challenge given how the question of what characterizes women's mobility is often insufficiently considered. Anne Jarrigeon uses multiple observational approaches, both anthropological and film-based, that enable her to directly shed light on what is at play in women's mobility. She can then observe the two stages of this mobility - its implementation, but also its preparation - in order to identify how it is specific in terms of physical or mental constraints.

Taking a different approach to mobility and properly capturing women's experience of mobility is important because, as I have pointed out several times already, the question of what defines their mobility is often insufficiently taken into account. In my work I tend to draw on anthropological approaches, based more on observation, as well as more cinematic approaches, that can truly reveal what is happening both during the performance of mobility - so what is at play in the daily experience of mobility, and this is a rich and complex experience, made up of obstacles, impediments, different rhythms and accelerations - and also before the performance of mobility, when we are getting ready, when for instance we are still only preparing for movement but physically we're already engaged with something that is in motion.

A mobility subjected to constraints

The mental load

And what is striking when we try to understand mobility in that very precise moment when women leave their home, is that we find something which at first glance isn't necessarily visible, namely the mental load that weighs on them, all their everyday responsibilities. For example, the way women will equip their bodies to be mobile, the kind of objects they will take with them, the type of bags they will carry. And it is very, very striking - and a simple experiment to perform - to look at what men carry when out in the street compared to what women carry when out in the street. And it is clear and obvious just by observing that women carry around far more things than men do.

Mobility of accompaniment

Another very important element that filming people when they leave their homes allows us to understand and capture is, for instance, that the act of accompanying children on their trips or movements – what we call the “mobility of accompaniment” – isn’t just about an origin or a destination as it may be accounted for in statistical surveys. A child is a person who resists, who doesn’t want to get dressed, who knocks things over, who can’t tie her shoelaces, who makes mistakes, who covers his sister’s face in toothpaste when it’s time to go; in other words, there are all these daily microgestures dealing with myriad situations in order to be ready and out the door on time. And so this mobility adjusts itself before even actually being performed. By taking the example of bags, or the example of what happens around a child through the lens of an instrument such as film or a camera, what we can see is the multiplication of ways in which women must pay attention to everything around them and the gestural sequences that overlap in their behavior. In other words, we see an extremely complex pattern of microgestures that reflect the content and density of this mental load, a load that really isn’t abstract at all but something very concrete.

“The discipline of bodies”

Now, of course there is a weight to this mobility. This can be the weight of the bags I mentioned earlier, that we can see as a mobile piece of equipment but also as a hindrance. It is very interesting from an anthropological point of view to seriously consider how the socialization of women, and especially girls, hampers their freedom of movement at an early stage. And there is no need to go back very far in time or very far away geographically to see how the equipping of bodies – what Michel Foucault called “the discipline of bodies” – forces women to contend with a certain number of physical constraints. A good example is that of shoes, in particular heels which require some gestural skills and therefore some learning, the result of which is a posture and walk that may sometimes appear more or less assured, but which in any case isn’t an instrument that helps women enjoy a more free and fluid movement. For young girls, it’s fairly obvious that if we dress them in a certain way, such as in skirts which are the preferred kind of clothing for them, this will quickly bring with it a set of constraints, such as the necessity to behave accordingly, to take up less space, to keep their legs close together, to be more aware of the gazes they elicit, gazes they aren’t really prepared for when they are young – but this is all a way of normalizing women’s bodies to the discipline of being viewed. And this means both how they view themselves, and more importantly how men view them, and anticipating this.

Mobility governed by anxiety

This responsibility for people’s gazes is something of an important tipping point in the unbalanced or asymmetrical system between men and women in the access to freedom of movement, given that women will constantly

internalize the fact that they must be careful and on their guard because they feel responsible for the gazes that others will direct at them. More than 10 years ago, Swiss researcher Marylène Lieber conducted a very important study that was groundbreaking at the time because little work had been done on this topic, namely the construction of the vulnerability of women and of young girls: how we raise girls to be afraid when outside, precisely when they are mobile, and how this type of education, while making them more fragile and creating for them a world full of things to be afraid of, comes with the added imbalance wherein boys are taught not be scared, even though in many situations, they are more often the victims of urban violence . And this priming of girls to be on their guard or vulnerable, not only will it contribute to the view that male violence is somehow natural – given we are in social processes – this social construction of vulnerability will largely be relayed as a need for women to be more responsible. And when Marylène Lieber conducted her research, she studied a number of cases where women of different ages and social backgrounds were instructed to be more careful. For instance, she studied the guidelines given to women by the French Ministry of the Interior not go out alone at night, to be accompanied, to favor certain kinds of outfits, thereby making them openly and explicitly responsible for the kind of aggressions that they are often victims of, or at the very least that they worry about.

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

More

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

More

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The mobility of women: a constrained freedom

Video by Anne Jarrigeon

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