Place and im/mobilities among Chicago's immigrant taxi drivers

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Just as scholars must work to understand mobility, we must also work to understand implications of place and immobility in mobile work environments. For those with jobs that require mobility, where earnings depend on mobility, immobility becomes a source of tension within the greater mobility landscape. Mobility can be both physical and social and is understood to represent a certain kind of power, for not everyone has the legal right or financial capability to be mobile (Urry, 2007). This paper is based on a qualitative study of communication among Chicago's immigrant taxi drivers. Immigrant taxi drivers embody the deeply mobile nature of social life today – from the physical mobility of migration and chauffeuring passengers throughout the city, to the hope of social mobility by earning enough money as a driver to move on to other careers. Drivers in the study experienced tension surrounding physical immobility (e.g., waiting in airport lots, waiting for customers) as well tension around a sense of social or economic immobility with their job. This paper argues that drivers strategized their work lives to minimize these tensions that immobility creates for them. The paper then explores theoretical questions about the friction between and differing roles of place and mobility.

Introduction

Between globalization and advancements in transportation and communication technology, people have changed the way they create and maintain their personal and professional communities. Even if people are not themselves mobile, they are likely connected to someone who is, and, as such, mobility (and immobility) impacts us all. Despite all this motion, communities adapt in order to endure.

Taxi drivers are a group that embodies the crossroads of community, globalization, and mobile communication that many people negotiate today. Although they are an important part of Chicago's transportation system, taxi drivers tend to be overlooked in scholarly and public discourse (Luedke, 2009). In Chicago, the majority of taxi drivers are immigrants (Bruno & Schneidman, 2009), indicating that these individuals are locally mobile through their job and also globally mobile give their migration (whether as a single move to the U.S. or as a regular

back and forth between one or more countries).

The focus of this paper is on immigrant taxi drivers in Chicago, an undervalued labor force that also plays a role in the city's global economy. It is derived from a larger study, completed in 2012, which explored community and communication practices among this labor group. In this paper I explore in more detail questions about place, immobility, and mobility that arose during the course of the research. In building our understanding of mobilities, and mobile communication in particular, scholars must consider "the social contexts in which these components come together in communication" (Jensen, 2013, p. 27). Understanding that mobility has always been a part of social life in some way or another, it is important to ask ourselves what is the impact of the growing incorporation of mobile devices, and the mobile communication that they afford, on society (Wei, 2013)? The following research questions guided the larger study: 1. To what extent does community have meaning for people in the context of local and global movement? 2. In what ways are mobile communication technologies integrated in the community creation process? More specifically, for this paper I asked the following questions: 1. In what ways do the tensions surrounding the negotiation of mobility, immobility, and place affect drivers? 2. How do these tensions influence their working strategies?

Researching community can tell us a lot about people and society. Moreover, "examining how communities adapt to social changes can illustrate how broad forces, like globalization, impact people at the everyday level" (Williams, forthcoming). For the purposes of this work, community is something that adapts and grows as circumstances change; in other words, community is a process (Fernback, 2007). I defined community as the interaction and sharing of knowledge, information, beliefs, and practices among members. Communication, particularly

under mobile circumstances, keeps communities together (Dewey, 1927).

Mobility, mobile communication, and globalization go hand-in-hand. As essential characteristics of globalization, systems of mobility enable the global flows of information, ideas, people, goods, capital, etc. (Sheller, 2014). Globalization as we experience it today emerged from a number of policies initiated in the 1970s: 1. "deregulation of domestic economic activity," 2. "liberalization of international trade and investment," and 3. "privatization of publicly controlled companies" (Castells, 2000, p. 137). The faster and more affordable communication and transportation that characterize globalization "have resulted in greater mobility of people and quicker communication within and across borders" (Williams, forthcoming). According to United Nations (2013) data, the number of international migrants has reached 232 million people, an increase of more than 55 million people since 2000. Migration and mobility, then, are common experiences under the influence of globalization. As a result, communities are faced with physically dispersed members, and, as such, they adapt to incorporate those who are physically distant.

Mobility has become a key concept to consider when researching social life today. But, equally important is the parallel concept of immobility. After all, mobility is dependent on vast networks of immobility to support it (Urry, 2007). The growing area of interdisciplinary mobilities research crucially highlights the facts that: 1. not everyone is mobile today, 2. that there is a long history of global mobility at least as far back as the colonial period and 3. that both voluntary and forced immobility characterize mobility today (Sheller, 2014). While mobility is not unique to social life today, the pace and amount of communication technology choices that we have today, it can be argued, are unique features of contemporary social life (Sheller, 2014).

With the ever-increasing adoption of mobile technology, mobile communication is an exciting area of mobilities research. The question of place with regard to mobile technology and social changes, like increasing migration that follows globalization, has become an important dialogue in the social sciences. Some scholars see place as "gradually being erased" while others see it as "being rediscovered as something in-between" (Massey & Thrift, 2003, p. 277). Place is not "some mere point on a map or a kind of neutral container into which things can be put or from which they can be taken out. Place arises in the dynamic interrelatedness of things, even though it is not reducible to any mere system of relations" (Malpas, 2012, p. 28). This study found that place remains an important and persistent factor with regard to the development and maintenance of community in a mobile environment. That is, place is negotiated and rediscovered to accommodate a globally and locally mobile labor group.

Understanding the dynamics between mobility and immobility are important because they are interrelated concepts. In the urban context, Jensen (2010), inspired by Erving Goffman's work, has developed the notions of 'mobile sense making' and 'negotiation in motion' to describe how people move about the city and interact with each other and the environment. In observing behavior at Nytorv square in Aalborg, Denmark, the author explains how the transit qualities of the square forces people apart in that people are obliged to go in certain directions and it is generally seen as a space of movement to get to other places. At the same time, however, the square was also a meeting place, a space that draws people together (Jensen, 2010). This pushing people apart and drawing them together dynamic is indicates a kind of crossroads of mobility and immobility. Similarly, in the present study I found that the places of immobility (e.g., restaurants, airport taxi lots) where I conducted interviews and observation had qualities that push taxi drivers away from the rest of the city, but within those spaces there was a sense of

coming together. Drivers in the study experienced tension surrounding this immobility that came with the nature of their otherwise mobile work, and they also experienced tension around a sense of social or economic immobility with their job. This paper argues that drivers strategize their work lives to minimize these tensions that immobility creates for them.

Methods

I adopted mobile methods to conduct the interviews and observations for this study. Mobile methods are ones that need to be flexible and "on the move" similar to the subjects of study (Urry, 2007; Büscher, Urry, & Witchger, 2011). I focused on "places of slowed movement" (Büscher, Urry, & Witchger, 2011) in order to observe movement and interview members of this labor community. I used observation and interviews in order to collect data.

Fieldwork lasted for 18 months (April 2010-September 2011) and primarily spent time at restaurants that cater to taxi drivers and airport taxi lots. I also visited a taxi company garage, a dispatching office, and a few city offices where drivers attend to professional business. I used both short and long interview structures in order to respect taxi drivers' limited amount of time and the fact that if they are not driving they are not earning money. The short interviews were approximately 15 minutes and the longer interviews were about an hour or more depending on how much time the driver had. I completed 48 interviews with drivers and non-driver industry professionals – 41 with drivers and seven with other professionals. Of my 41 interviews with drivers, 12 were from Pakistan, nine were from Sudan, and the remaining participants were from the following countries: Algeria, Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Palestine, Peru, Russia, Senegal, Somalia, and Syria. All named participants and locations have been assigned a pseudonym.

The three restaurants where I did fieldwork have pseudonyms for the purposes of the study: "Indo-Pak Palace," "Indus Valley Restaurant," and "Falafel Plus." Indo-Pak Palace and Indus Valley both serve Indian and Pakistani cuisine while Falafel Plus serves Middle Eastern cuisine. Slowly I developed connections with a number of people in the industry, who I call non-driver industry professionals. These professionals were helpful and granting me access to additional fieldwork sites like airport taxi lots, a taxi company garage, a dispatching office, and city offices.

Results and discussion

I will focus on two types of immobile places in the taxi driver community - restaurants and airport taxi staging lots - and I will also touch on aspects of social mobility that the drivers I met negotiated.

Restaurants

The three restaurants where I did fieldwork are places of slowed movement essential to drivers for developing contacts and community. They provide an immobile place near downtown (where a lot of drivers find passengers) for drivers to eat, pray, socialize and read/watch/discuss news. Some drivers stop in briefly to get food on the go while others spend and hour or more. Although there are a small percentage of female drivers in Chicago[1], most drivers are male and the only drivers I was able to interview were men. Many drivers are Muslim and relatively conservative. As such, being a white, unescorted, American female I was an outsider on multiple levels. Being an outsider, these restaurants felt like another world far from Chicago with unfamiliar (to me) languages, smells, foods, and media, and seeing an American or a woman

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[1] According to a 2006 newspaper report, less than 1 percent of Chicago's taxi drivers were female (Garcia, 2006).

walk through the front doors is uncommon, let alone an unaccompanied American woman

hoping to engage in conversation with the restaurant guests.

All three of the restaurants have international calling cards, scented oils, pain relievers and

regionally ethnic foods for sale; parking available in front or nearby; and a mosque[2] for those

who want to pray. As an outsider, the mosques were not obvious. However, men would

disappear downstairs or in the back for fifteen minutes or so and then emerge either before or

after ordering food. In Islam, a number of Muslim drivers explained to me, praying with others is

preferable to praying alone when possible. As "Aseef," a 39 year-old veteran driver originally

from Sudan, said, "You get more points [from Allah]" when one prays in groups. At the time of

my fieldwork in summer 2010, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to witness parts of

the Ramadan[3] celebrations because each of the restaurants served *iftar* dinner. They were often

crowded and felt festive. Although it may be preferable to take part in *iftar* in one's home with

family, for many of these drivers whose families live in other countries or who must work long

hours, the restaurants seemed to be a welcoming alternative to celebrate Ramadan and partake in

fellowship with other taxi drivers and Muslims.

Televisions and newspapers are also a part of the experience at each restaurant. Televisions

were usually tuned to *Al-Jazeera* (Arabic), *GeoTV*, or Express News (Pakistani news channels).

The newspapers usually available included "*Hackney Monthly*," *Pakistan News*, *Urdu Times*, the

English language *Pakistan Abroad*, as well as flyers about taxi companies needing drivers,

Muslim organizations, and occasionally an advertisement for a local fitness club. When I asked

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[2] At first I perceived these spaces as more generalized "prayer areas," thinking that a mosque was more of a traditional building dedicated solely to worship. However, the drivers with whom I spoke about these spaces in the restaurants referred to them as "mosques." As such, I refer to these spaces in the restaurants as mosques.

[3] Ramadan is a holy month in Islam when Muslims fast each day from sunrise to sunset. When they break the fast each evening, it is known as *iftar*.

"Daniel," editor of *Hackney Monthly*, about the paper's distribution he said, "We go where the cab drivers go" and listed the immobile places where they leave copies of the paper each month and these restaurants were among those places.

For those drivers that did not meet a friend at the restaurant and also stayed to eat, they would usually read the paper, watch television, or talk on their mobile phone. However, I also observed many drivers meet friends at the restaurant and when I asked about this during interviews I learned that drivers often make these meeting arrangements via the mobile phones while working/driving. Others simply arrive at a restaurant at a popular time, such as non-rush our or a prayer time, and hope to meet friends while there.

The restaurants are strategically located in the city – close to downtown and in or bordering trendy neighborhood, with parking available – but they are also somehow hidden or isolated. Indo-Pak and Falafel Plus are on the edge of a trendy, gentrifying neighborhood around the corner from a shopping center, and about half a mile from the nearest "el" (i.e., subway or metro) stop. Customers must know to walk or drive around the shopping center in order to find the restaurants. There are few women at these restaurants, often with men standing in front smoking and drinking tea. A shy woman like myself would likely feel hesitant about going in alone if she were even able to locate the restaurants in the first place. Indus Valley, on the other hand, is located in an established trendy neighborhood, one block from an "el" stop. It is the least hidden restaurant that I located and it was also the location where I observed more non-drivers getting food. Proximity to public transit in an urban setting is important for drawing business since many people do not have cars. Throughout most of my field research I did not have a vehicle, making access to restaurants along more isolated strips, along busy roads without a

sidewalk, and in locations far from public transit a challenge. For the average urban-dweller without a vehicle, these spatial qualities of these places contribute to their hiddenness.

This moderate sense of isolation at these places may contribute to what many drivers described as a sense of isolation from the rest of the city. "Radhi" said that he "feels outside the system" as a cab driver and worries about being an outsider when he has other jobs (he hopes to become a doctor). He drives people who are "part of the system and know how to do office jobs and talk to a boss," but as a taxi driver he feels like an outsider. "Aakif," a 35 year-old Sudanese man who has been driving a taxi for several years, sees the job of driving a taxi as a low form of work, but it is a step up from cleaning, which he described as "women's work." "Sammi," a 30 year-old Ethiopian fellow, expressed some shame when describing his friends working in Europe who (he believes) think he is a failure for leaving school to drive a taxi. "Sal," a 31 year-old Pakistani man, said he feels pressure from friends to have a more "professional" job, or at least to pretend he does not drive a taxi. He said, "I have to be professional. All of my friends are. It's kind of a stigma situation [driving a taxi]." His friends in Pakistan have encouraged him not to tell people there what he does for a living. "Lisimba," a 27 year-old Kenyan man and taxi driver of three years, who used to be an accountant for a farm in Kenya, views the job as one of the lowest forms of employment. Becoming a cab driver was an unexpected and unwelcome job to have to take. Nevertheless, the money he earns allows him to support his family in Kenya.

While the job itself feels socially isolating to many of the drivers I interviewed, there are immobile places, like the restaurants, where they can come together. Granted, these restaurants, as I have shown, are spatially placed on the outer edges of Chicago's wealthy neighborhoods, forcing drivers to physically experience some of the isolation they feel emotionally, they are also lively immobile places of coming together. Similar to Jensen's (2010) finding about Nytorv

square in Denmark, I found this pattern of immobile places that push apart at the same time that they bring people together.

Airports

Both of Chicago's airports have staging lots where taxis wait to be directed to a terminal. These lots are placed of temporary, forced immobility for any driver that wants to pick up passengers at an airport. The lot at Midway is smaller, about half the size of O'Hare's. The staging lot at O'Hare has space for 400-425 taxis (excluding limousines). There are 19 lanes that, when full, have room for 20-25 taxis per lane. At both lots, one lane of taxis is dispatched to the terminals at a time. Dispatchers at O'Hare are located in a second-floor office at the front/exit area of the lot. The dispatcher(s) work with a series of radios, phones, and cameras. Cameras enable dispatchers to monitor activity in the lot to watch, for example, if the lot is too empty for the expected amount of service at that time. Radios and phones facilitate communication between the dispatchers at the lot and "starters"[4] at the terminals to monitor which terminals need cabs and when. Taxi lanes are numbered and when it is time to move, an announcement is made over loudspeakers located throughout the open-air lots regarding which lane(s) are to proceed. Drivers generally keep a close watch so that they can return to their vehicles just prior to this announcement (e.g. when the lane before them has started moving). A raucous of shouting, honking horns, and sometimes a loudspeaker announcement usually occurs if a driver is delayed in his return or has fallen asleep in his parked vehicle, delaying the cars behind him anxious to get back to work.

During peak times there can be up to two-hour waits from the time of entrance until being dispatched to a terminal. As a result, many drivers talked about strategizing the time that they go

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[4] A "starter" refers to an "Aviation, Department, or other Authorized Personnel located at specific cab stands located at major transportation and tourist centers." (City of Chicago, 2008, p. 7). This employee monitors taxi traffic at his or her specific location.

to the airports based on when they want to take a rest, talking with family, etc. While waiting, drivers stretch their legs, pray, grab a snack, purchase stamps, socialize, read, browse the internet and/or watch a movie (if he carries a laptop or smartphone), play games, nap, etc. At Midway drivers gather in the stamp office (at least during the winter months that I conducted fieldwork there) and some use a small corner of the area for prayer. At O'Hare there are two small buildings and a trailer in addition to the dispatch and stamp office. Drivers tend to convene in one of the buildings for prayer and in the other for socializing. "Ghedi," a Somali man in his 30's, described how Somalis often congregate while their cars are parked in the long queue. He said, "It's like channel 5 news" because of the amount of information that they exchange there. People discuss current events back home, events in the U.S., and they discuss work, gossip, etc.

There is also a small, greasy spoon type of grill restaurant (without seating) at O'Hare located next to the stamp/dispatch office, especially if it is cold outside (Midway only has vending machines). If the weather is nice enough, other drivers socialize outside near the grill after eating or getting tea or coffee. During the spring/summer months that I was doing fieldwork I observed some drivers playing a board game in the front part of the lot utilizing concrete traffic dividers or other concrete curbing in the area as tables. Sometimes other small groups would power walk up and down the three fire lanes dividing the 19 lanes, presumably as a form of exercise, while other groups simply strolled through the fire lanes. Both lots also have bulletin boards with announcements for companies in need of drivers, accountants offering tax-preparation services and social activities like a Nigerian church's events.

Both lots are bustling spaces of temporary immobility where drivers await their turn to be mobile once again. One hears a multitude of languages in these lots along with periodic loudspeaker announcements, jets flying above, and the occasional honking car horn. This

temporary forced immobility creates opportunities for community-building through socializing, praying and eating together.

Despite these somewhat positive aspects of time spent at these lots, they are (for an outsider) difficult to locate and unwelcoming, if not mildly threatening. A non-taxi driver must have permission to enter the lot and so I rented a vehicle and drove to both airports to try and locate the lots before I had gained clearance from the city. They were difficult to locate and, had I not specifically been looking for the lots, I might have not noticed them at all because they are both surrounded by fencing. O'Hare's lot, in particular, is on a service road in one of the many networks of roads and highways around the airport. A chain link fence with green nylon screens attached and barbed wiring on top surrounds it. The barbed wire on top of the fencing is a menacing addition contributing to a sense of apprehension about getting in or leaving the lot and it is unclear what purpose it serves. During our interview in O'Hare's lot, "Abder," an Algerian man in his 30's, looked around at the hundreds of taxis and said that the fencing makes him feel that they are "like sheep" or in a "pig sty." He elaborated that inside the lot it is dirty, "not livable," and he does not "like the climate of the area." He went on to describe improvements he would make if given the opportunity – he would include a small gym for exercise, showers, cleaner bathrooms, a larger prayer area and better food.

The airport taxi staging lots are places of temporary immobility that on the one hand force taxi drivers away from view of other airport traffic and activity, but on the other hand bring the drivers together. They are herded and then fenced into these lots that lack many of the comforts that the restaurants can offer and told when they can leave. However, airport rides are generally the most profitable and so the hope of earning a good fare (i.e., from an airport to a downtown hotel where a driver might then pick up someone going to the airport) is what draws many

drivers there despite the, sometimes, lengthy downtime. But it is what drivers do during this downtime that contributes to the sense of coming together. While physically drivers are together, they are also socializing, praying, gossiping and otherwise building relationships with each other while they are there. Granted, they tend to stick to their own ethnic groups when communicating with each other (Williams, forthcoming), but there is a sense of community nevertheless.

Conclusion

When it comes to inherently mobile work, like driving a taxi, place and immobile places are key features that warrant attention. For Chicago's taxi drivers, there is tension around feeling socially isolated and immobile in terms of professional development. Many drivers spoke about feeling ashamed of their job and saw it as a temporary situation. When temporary immobility it required, such as needing to eat or pray, drivers make strategic choices about where to go and when. They choose specific restaurants because of their proximity to possible fares, parking, and food and chance of meeting friends. Similarly, many drivers I met talked about their reasoning for choosing to go to an airport based on the time of day, but also based on what they learn through their mobile phone connections as to how long the wait is at the airport. Both the restaurants and the airports create a sense of isolation, hiding these workers, to some extent, from the rest of the city. This physical isolation, I suspect, may contribute to the sense of social isolation about which many drivers spoke. Strategizing their work lives to minimize these tensions is a daily challenge.

Mobility and immobility go hand-in-hand, and the places of immobility that populate the taxi industry push drivers apart from the city, but, as I have shown, these places also bring drivers together. They create a certain amount of community helping drivers develop

relationships, connect with each other their home culture. These critical places in this mobile labor community are flexible enough to adapt, to some extent, to drivers' needs, but also placed and immobile enough to create a sense of outsider-ness.

When learning about a particular mobile group or phenomenon, it is important to consider what elements of immobility and what physical places contribute to the making of that mobility. This paper has been a preliminary look at one such group's negotiation of mobility and immobility, finding that the strategically located places of immobility offer a dynamic negotiation of pushing apart and coming together.

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