



## INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE: “YOUTH TRANSITIONS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT: A MOBILITIES PERSPECTIVE”

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Article abstract

This special issue focuses on the geographical and spatialized mobilities related to youth transitions to post-secondary education and employment. The “mobility turn” in social sciences in the last decade recognizes that life is increasingly organized and shaped by mobilities (and immobilities) across varying spatial and temporal scales. Yet these mobilities have only recently been examined and theorized as central to understanding the complexity and diversity of young people’s experiences. The collection of articles in this special issue presents a multiplicity of young people’s relationships to mobilities, particularly as they pursue post-secondary education and employment. The papers are concerned with: (a) the motivations for and expectations of imagined mobility (the innumerable reasons why youth choose, or are compelled, to move or stay), whether focused on the outmigration or immigration of mobile youth; (b) the lived experiences that youth have in their mobility practices (focusing on multistranded relationships between places of origin and destination, or recognizing the temporality of that mobility); and (c) the value that these youth mobility studies have for policy issues and policy recommendations. The papers in this issue are case studies concerned with youth mobility prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. They use qualitative and quantitative methods, representing inter- and cross-disciplinary approaches from anthropology, sociology, education, communication, and rural development studies. They derive from a collaboration through the On the Move Partnership, an 8-year interdisciplinary research initiative with a key focus on young people’s employment- and education-related geographical mobilities in Canada.

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## INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE: “YOUTH TRANSITIONS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT: A MOBILITIES PERSPECTIVE”

**Angèle Smith and Nicole Power**

**Abstract:** This special issue focuses on the geographical and spatialized mobilities related to youth transitions to post-secondary education and employment. The “mobility turn” in social sciences in the last decade recognizes that life is increasingly organized and shaped by mobilities (and immobilities) across varying spatial and temporal scales. Yet these mobilities have only recently been examined and theorized as central to understanding the complexity and diversity of young people’s experiences. The collection of articles in this special issue presents a multiplicity of young people’s relationships to mobilities, particularly as they pursue post-secondary education and employment. The papers are concerned with: (a) the motivations for and expectations of imagined mobility (the innumerable reasons why youth choose, or are compelled, to move or stay), whether focused on the outmigration or immigration of mobile youth; (b) the lived experiences that youth have in their mobility practices (focusing on multistranded relationships between places of origin and destination, or recognizing the temporality of that mobility); and (c) the value that these youth mobility studies have for policy issues and policy recommendations. The papers in this issue are case studies concerned with youth mobility prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. They use qualitative and quantitative methods, representing inter- and cross-disciplinary approaches from anthropology, sociology, education, communication, and rural development studies. They derive from a collaboration through the On the Move Partnership, an 8-year interdisciplinary research initiative with a key focus on young people’s employment- and education-related geographical mobilities in Canada.

**Keywords:** youth, mobilities, transitions, education, employment, precarity

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Youth transitions to post-secondary education and employment have been the subject of a large body of research. Yet while geographical and spatialized mobilities are related to such transitions, these mobilities have only recently been theorized and examined as central to understanding the complexity and diversity of young people's experiences. The "mobility turn" (Cresswell, 2010; Faist, 2013; Sheller & Urry, 2006) taken by youth scholars reflects in part a broader interest in mobilities as a central factor of contemporary life. As Cresswell (2006, 2010) and others have pointed out, it is not that spatialized mobility is new; rather, the mobility turn reflects the observation that life is increasingly organized and shaped by the mobilities of some and the immobilities of others across spatial and temporal scales. Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar (2018) developed a "mobile transitions" framework to examine the unique character of young people's relationships to mobilities. Rather than conceiving mobilities as a linear pathway to adulthood via education or employment, these authors pay attention to "the multiplicities of youth mobilities and transitions" and propose a framework that focuses on three "'domains' of transition — economic opportunities, social relations and citizenship practices" (pp. 209–210). In Canada and globally, young people are pursuing post-secondary education and training at higher rates than previous generations did (Statistics Canada, 2017b). At the same time, young people today are experiencing high unemployment rates and increased precariousness (Foster, 2012; Morissette, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2017a), and this is especially true for rural regions experiencing high rates of outmigration of youth (Foster & Main, 2018). In this context, governments, employers, and communities are interested in the relationship between young people's mobilities and their education and employment. This special issue focuses on youth transitions to education and employment, taking a mobilities perspective.

The youth mobility literature examining education and employment has focused on a number of key concerns. The first relates to the motivations for and expectations of imagined mobility — the innumerable reasons why youth choose (or feel compelled) to move or stay. These reasons can be economically driven, or shaped by family members and community as active agents influencing the identity and actions of the youth. Their motivations and expectations might also be shaped by institutions, such as universities that represent potential opportunities (Brannen & Nilsen, 2007; Carling & Collins, 2018; Caviezel et al., 2018; Cuzzocrea, 2018; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Kellerman, 2012). Or, the youth might be influenced by place-based attachments that can mediate their mobility practices (Jones, 1999; Ni Laoire, 2001; Norman & Power, 2015).

Studies of motivations and expectations can focus either on the outmigration or the immigration of mobile youth — where youth are leaving from or where they are moving to. For rural youth scholars, primarily in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Nordic countries, outmigration has been a main focus (e.g., Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Drozdowski, 2008), often examining the relationship between the rural community and youth outmigration. Youth mobility studies focusing on immigration are interested in youth's motivations and expectations in moving to a destination place — perhaps to attend an international university or to work at a tourist site

(e.g., Cairns, 2010; Hall & Williams, 2010; O'Reilly et al., 2019; Sheller & Urry, 2004). Such research examines the representation of these places and the imagined experiences of moving to, living in, and studying or working in them. Whether studying outmigration or immigration, youth mobility studies are concerned with questions about the roles of family (e.g., Baldassar & Sala, 2017; Holdsworth, 2013), community, and place (e.g., Prince, 2014) in shaping the varied motives for and expectations of moving for educational and employment purposes.

The second key concern involves the lived experiences that youth have in their mobility practices. Imagined expectations of mobility can be quite different from the lived experience, causing tensions that are best examined through three approaches to mobility experiences (van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018). The first approach uses the “mobility paradigm”, which recognizes that the study of mobility allows for understanding the daily lived experiences that shape identity, belonging, and a sense of place (Faist, 2013; Sheller & Urry, 2006; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018). It is through mobility that complexities and sometimes conflicts of social and material realities are negotiated. The mobility paradigm in youth studies focuses on how mobilities affect the realities of youth on the move, shaping their experiences and thus their self-development and sense of self-identity (Ball & Moselle, 2016; Cairns, 2014; Robertson, Cheng, et al., 2018).

The second approach within this second key concern of understanding the tension in the lived experience of mobility recognizes the multistranded relationships between the traveller's place of origin and place or places of destination, drawing on the transnational approach to mobility (De Jong & Dannecker, 2018; Glick Schiller et al., 1995; Levitt, 2009; Yoon, 2014). These relationships cut across social, economic, political, and cultural domains in various ways. Travellers maintain ties between where they are coming from (origin or home) and where they are going (destination). This kind of translocal experience of mobility is navigated across different domains and across different social spaces (Appadurai, 1995; Brickell & Datta, 2011; Freitag & von Oppen, 2010; Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Hannerz, 1998). This approach questions how the translocal experience affects the agency, identity, and self-development of mobile youth, as well as their interactions and relationships. Both the mobility paradigm and the transnational and translocal approach observe the “transcultural capital” of mobile youth, which is concerned with the value and social relationships derived from mobility (Calzada & Gavanias, 2018; Glick Schiller & Meinhof, 2011; Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006).

The third approach within this second key concern of studying the tension in the lived experience of mobility recognizes the experiential dimension of time in mobility, including non-linear time, rhythms of mobility, and different cultural understandings of time (Cwerner, 2001; Griffiths et al., 2013; Marcu, 2017). The temporally informed approach to mobility examines how time interconnects with aspects of geographic mobility, such as what relationships are formed and in what ways; how time considerations shape the patterns of mobility; and how time impacts the sense of self, and self-development, agency, and identity. This approach appreciates that it is better to understand the complex mobility of youth as a process rather than as an event.

Thus, while there is clearly agency in the real lived experiences of youth mobility, these experiences are often fraught with challenges, tensions, insecurity, fragility, and precarity. Butler (2004, 2010) and others (e.g., Carbonella & Kasmir, 2014; Kasmir, 2018; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Standing, 2011) have explained precarity as the social marginalization of global forms of exploitation that shape the infrastructure and ideology of employment and education, and, we would add, even shape the concept of youth itself. Precarity, therefore, is fundamentally political. It is not surprising then that the third key concern in youth mobility has to do with policy issues and policy recommendations (Coles, 2005; Hahn-Bleibtreu & Molgat, 2012; Molgat & Taylor, 2012).

The articles in this special issue highlight these key issues and approaches in a collection of case studies using qualitative and quantitative methods and applying both inter- and cross-disciplinary approaches from anthropology, sociology, education, communication, and rural development. They originate from collaboration through the On the Move Partnership<sup>1</sup>, an ongoing 8-year interdisciplinary research initiative that examines contexts, patterns, processes, and consequences of employment-related geographical mobility on workplaces, workers and their families, and communities in Canada (Dorow et al., 2017). Young people's employment- and education-related geographical mobilities have been a key focus for On the Move. The case studies presented in this issue focus on youth mobility prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In “How Important is a School? Examining the Impact of Remoteness from a School on Canadian Communities’ Attraction and Retention of School-Age Children”, Karen Foster, Hannah Main, and Ray Bollman examine the outmigration of youth from rural communities. They focus on the distance to public schools as a key determinant and motivation for the mobility of youth and their families. They focus on the impacts that school closures have on the community and community services. In doing so, they present two standpoints that connect schools discursively with mobilities. The first standpoint argues for keeping underattended schools open in order to avoid more families choosing to leave the community. The second standpoint concedes that school closures are a reasonable result of past population decline. Studying the population change of school-age children in Canadian census subdivisions indexed by distance to the nearest school, the authors examine the correlation between the school-age population in a community and proximity to a school in that community. A community school and place attachments are key mobility motivations for choosing to stay or to leave.

In “Beating Broke by Getting Out? Examining the Relationship Between Personal Debt and Community Outmigration”, Alyssa Gerhardt and Karen Foster also look at motivations and expectations of mobility as they examine the role of personal debt in young peoples’ decisions to stay in or leave their current communities. Scholarship on young people’s geographical mobilities tells us that young adults move away from their childhood communities for a complex mix of motivations: economic “push–pull” reasons, relationships, aspirations, attachments to place,

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<sup>1</sup>[www.onthemovepartnership.ca](http://www.onthemovepartnership.ca)

identity, and belonging. Yet, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to an issue that is a vital concern for many young adults today: personal debt. The authors hypothesize that being young and in debt increase a person's likelihood of moving away from peripheral regions and test this hypothesis using data from a 2019 survey of Atlantic Canadians. Their findings suggest that there is good reason to examine in greater detail the role of debt in youth mobilities.

In “The Complex Mobilities of Rural Versus Urban Youth: Mobility Into and Out of the Parental Home and One's Community”, E. Dianne Looker examines the options facing rural versus urban youth as they negotiate complex mobilities while moving into adulthood. Specifically, Looker looks at the links between geographic mobility in and out of one's home community, and mobility in and out of the parental home. Leaving the parental home is clearly a process rather than an event, and for many it is subjective and ambiguous. Many youth return to the parental home for varying lengths of time, with more rural than urban youth following this pattern, which reflects the often limited educational and work options in rural areas. Having the option to return gives youth an additional way of dealing with the challenges of these complex mobilities. This complex process of leaving and returning highlights the experiential dimension of time in mobility and emphasizes the multifaceted relationships between mobile youth's places of origin and destination.

Unlike the other articles, “Precarity, Agency and Unsustainability: The Mobility of Young Adult Tourism Workers in Banff National Park, Canada”, explores effects of immigration rather than outmigration. Angèle Smith focuses on young adults who travel to, work, and live in the Rocky Mountain resort destination of Banff National Park in western Canada. This work-related mobility often marks the first, or at least an early, work experience for the young person. It is an experience impacted by two primary factors. The first factor is that the jobs are in the tourism industry, and are therefore precarious. The second factor focuses specifically on the place and community of Banff and how National Park regulations, and circumstances and attitudes in the Town of Banff, shape the particular conditions of precarity and workers' degree of agency within the tourism industry there. While the motives and agency vary amongst young adult tourism workers, these two factors influence the precarity and instability of their mobility and work experiences. This can shape their work experience knowledge both negatively and positively. This highlights the importance of using the mobility paradigm to explore the experiences and realities of youth on the move and their sense of self-identity and agency amidst precarity.

In ““(Im)mobile Precarity”<sup>2</sup> Among Young People in Newfoundland and Labrador”, Nicole Power also examines the relationship between work-related mobilities and precarity, focusing on the experiences and subjectivities of poor and working-class youth living in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. In a context of broader regimes of mobility associated with resource extraction and labour market volatility, young people without formal qualifications move

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<sup>2</sup>(Im)mobile precarity is a term that Martin et al. (2019) use to describe the relationship between mobility and precarity.



around for work and education, and, as they do so, incur debt, experience housing insecurity, and live precarious lives. As a result, youth expressed a disorientation or uncertainty regarding decisions about work, education, and mobility, and developed a pragmatic approach to work as a way to make a living rather than a pathway to a meaningful life. The paper argues that the structure of local labour markets, and of education and training, cheapen youth labour, which has implications for their capacity to live independent lives.

These papers speak to the challenges, tensions, insecurity, fragility, and precarity that impact the motivations and expectations surrounding, and the lived experiences of, youth mobility. As such, not only do they contribute to the growing literature on youth mobility and mobile transitions to education and employment, but they may also serve to inform a variety of policy issues in this area. The discussions of the economic, social, and political motivations affecting mobility (personal debt, availability of local community schools, and so on), the process and rhythm of leaving and returning, and the tensions between the imagined experience of youth mobility and the lived reality that mobile youth actually encounter could all be of value to policymakers concerned with youth outmigration and immigration as they transition to education and work. In the context of the current global pandemic that has severely curtailed mobility, for some more than others, and has had a profound impact on young people (Statistics Canada, 2020), the insights in these articles offer direction to decision-makers interested in addressing the disproportionate employment and educational impacts on young people.

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