Spatial (Im-)Mobilities of Young Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic (COV-IDENTITIES project)

Extended abstract of the paper presented at the Virtual Symposium on "Disrupted Geographies or the Disruption of Geography during COVID-19", on 7 July 2020.

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Introduction

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck Austria and many other societies around the world largely unprepared. To curb the spread of the new coronavirus, the Austrian government decreed extensive containment measures and even a strict quarantine for the heavily affected state of Tyrol with its provincial capital and university town of Innsbruck. Against this backdrop, the COV-IDENTITIES project analyses how young adults enrolled at universities in Innsbruck are making their everyday spaces, practices and identities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this abstract we highlight two specific foci of the COV-IDENTITIES project by asking: How were the spatial (im-)mobilities of young adults changed during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do these altered (im-)mobilities affect young adults' everyday spaces, practices and relationalities? The data collection is ongoing and was conducted with the support of 12 student team members, who also write their final thesis as part of the project.

Theoretical-conceptual Approach: (Im-)Mobilities and Space

Conceptually we relate to the mobilities scholarship, theorisations of space and place and digital geographers' elaborations of concepts of space in the digital era. In our paper three types of mobilities are of particular relevance: spatial mobilities, digital mobilities and cognitive imaginary mobilities. As mobility scholars have emphasised, while focussing on the active, embodied and fluid, it is important not to neglect the stillnesses, moorings and fixities (Cresswell & Merriman 2010; Cresswell 2012) they involve. More than a decade ago, Adey (2006: 76, 86 cited after Merriman 2014: 178) remarked that "there is never any absolute immobility" and moorings are "indeed mobile too". We claim that this pointedly matches the state that was caused by the policy response to the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in 2020: The current pandemic is the starkest period of spatial human immobility that today's the global society has ever experienced. Simultaneously, the pandemic has produced new types and dynamics of spatial mobilities, which are the focus of this paper. In our analysis, we look into the everyday spaces of young adults building on Doreen Massey's (2005) conceptualisation of space as relational, multiple, specific, inherently power-laden, and dynamic. In the digital era, the co-construction of this space through data, codes, technologies, human and more-than-human actants and materialities needs to be taken into account (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2020).

Methodology: Collecting Data in a Pandemic

In face of the acute COVID-19 pandemic as well as with view to the demands of the specific research ethics of an approach that is sensitive to the situation of individuals in a crisis, we developed and applied a young people-centred qualitative longitudinal multi-method approach. Data collection was customized to research under social distancing conditions and thus took place completely online to protect the health of involved participants and researchers. Overall, 130 young adults in qualification stages participated. We focused on the group of emerging adults in their qualification and apprenticeship periods. For the research design, we combined written narratives with mobile smartphone methods to capture the breadth of the immediate effects of the pandemic on young adults´ everyday spaces and practices, as well as their potential variegated and flexible active responses to it. Narratives have been shown to be an effective qualitative method for exploring individual experiences with and reflections on complex processes of change (Carlsson, Wängqvist &

Frisén, 2015; McAdams, 2011). Further, COV-IDENTITIES applies mobile instant messaging interviews (MIMIs) – an approach that was developed in a pilot study by Kaufmann and Peil (2020), who used the mobile messenger app "WhatsApp" to research mobile media use in-situ together with participants. The advantage of MIMIs in the context of lockdown and social distancing is that they reach participants in their mobile digital spaces repeatedly and independently of their actual location. Three data collection stages have already been successfully completed, each consisting of a narrative writing task given to the young people and an accompanying one-day mobile data collection with individual participants in the form of MIMIs. Data collection step 1 (DC1, April 1 till 7, 2020) was initiated during the strict lockdown and quarantine measures that were implemented in the federal province of Tyrol to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2. DC2 (April 20 till 27, 2020) was realized when the strict quarantine measures in Tyrol were slightly relaxed. DC3 (June 2 till 14, 2020) was conducted in the transition phase directly following the termination of the (first) lockdown.

A Teaser to Results: Temporary Shifts of Places of Stay and Mobilities within the Home

While our study participants experienced a period of stark immobilities in DC 1 and 2 – in terms of their circulatory everyday mobilities for work, leisure, social and study activities as well as cancelled tourism trips, study terms or internships abroad – two new types of mobilities were revealed through our data, which have, so far, less been at the centre of studies on the pandemic's effects. These are the students' temporary relocations of their places of stay as a response to the measures released and their mobilities within the confined spaces of their homes during the lockdown period.

Although our study took a qualitative approach that thus does not aim at quantification, the proportion of students who had left their places of stay in Innsbruck to temporarily move back in with their families was striking. This relocation resulted in significantly changed socio-spatial embedding with direct effects for the students' well-being but also for their relations to peers. Those who had moved back in with their parents, were eventually cut off from their peers who had remained in Innsbruck, once those peers started meeting up again in physical space in the course of the pandemic. The narratives also reveal how moving back in with family often resulted in a renegotiation of (power) relationships between parents and the (adult) child or respectively between siblings which could also lead to a re-emergence of emotional bonding to family members.

The MIMIs and narratives further display striking results with regard to spatial, digital and imaginary cognitive mobilities within the spaces of the home during the pandemic. The spaces available to our participants during the pandemic were in many cases more or less limited to one room, occasionally supplemented by jointly used living rooms, kitchens, balconies, and/or gardens in shared flats or parents' homes. New circulatory mobilities emerged within these confined spaces that, on the one hand, led to a re-evaluation of mundane material and non-human aspects, such as a bed, a couch, a table or pets and plants. While bound to the home, on the other hand, new socio-material-technological (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2020) relations and an "interwoven presence" (Thulin et al. 2020: 177) emerged that completely merged the virtual, imagined with the material, embodied, as seen in the example of Lukas (20): "As I pursue everything related to the University from my living room, I will always connect the living room with the University" (Lukas, 20).

Conclusions and Outlook

While writing this piece in August 2020, the pandemic is lingering on, and COVID-19 cases are on the rise again in Austria and elsewhere. We are planning to conduct a fourth round of data collection (DC4) during the next lecture term in autumn 2020. This will allow us to follow up on students' spatial (im-) mobilities at this stage of the pandemic and the (translocally) connected relationalities and spatialities they entail. Further elaborations on students' shifts of their places of stay are currently under review (Kaufmann et al., under review). Also, we are working on a full manuscript that discusses in depth the shifts of socio-material-technological relations in students' home spaces that we were only able to hint at in this extended abstract.

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