

# ***Daily mobility and urban sprawl: mobile ethnography in the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona (MRB)***<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

Today, mobility is becoming an increasingly common component of people's behavioural patterns, both in daily activities (working, studying, and provisioning) and in non-daily pursuits (leisure, holidays, cultural activities and the use of services). Although all over the world the territorial affiliation of a citizen is legally regulated according to their place of residence, the explanatory value of this "territorial anchoring" is very relative, because the home no longer constitutes the centre of a person's activity. Human geography has contributed a more functional category: the *space of life*, understood not only in the sense of residence but as the area where people's daily activities unfold.

This explosion of mobility occurs with the exponential development of Information and communication technologies (ICT). Instruments for recording mobility are getting better and better; GPS and mobile apps allow the general public to systematically use geolocation as a means to have more control over their movements in time, or to share their movements with others.

Our objective is to present the methodological advances gained as part of a research project focused on daily mobility in the MRB. The questions that we aim to respond to are: How can we manage the different scales that influence the mobile lives of people? How can we record and present the itineraries that define people's spaces of life in an ethnographically significant way? How can we combine the old epistemology of place with mobile ethnography? And, finally, can we suggest that greater mobility is synonymous with more social relationships or, on the contrary, does greater mobility lead to greater social isolation?

## **Key words**

Urban expansion, metropolisation, daily mobility, mobility for leisure, ICT, mobile ethnography

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After the consolidation of urban expansion, with the consequent processes of metropolisation and suburbanisation, today we have to reread the right to the city described almost half a century ago by Lefebvre (1978) as a right to *accessibility* and *mobility*. Late capitalism has used technological innovations in transport as a way to compress space-time coordinates, effectively “shortening distances”. In other words, these advances have reduced the time needed to move from place to place or transport merchandise (Harvey, 1998). Some authors have gone so far as to claim that we have entered the Era of Mobility (Salazar, 2010; Sheller, Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). Nevertheless, the impact of efficiency on transport is not homogeneously and equitably distributed amongst the population. Not everybody can access the most efficient and costly means of transport, and not all metropolitan suburbs surrounding large cities are well connected to major rail or car routes (Jirón, 2007; Le Breton, 2002; Orfeuil, 2004; Ureta, 2008).

Half a century ago, the North American economist John Kain (1968) published an influential article that initiated a debate that is still ongoing. It involves the hypothesis known as *spatial mismatch*, which highlights the mismatch between the residential location of low-income households and the location of appropriate job opportunities. This situation, studied by Kain in African-American populations of Detroit and Chicago, has been confirmed by numerous subsequent studies as a problem affecting black and Latino populations in the USA as a result of residential segregation, economic restructuring, and the increasing suburbanisation of employment (Ihlanfeldt/Sjoquist, 1989; Ihlanfeldt, 1994, 1998; Kain, 1994; Stoll et al., 2000).

Getting a job requires mobility that not all people can afford, particularly in sprawling cities with unfriendly urban planning and little or no suburban public transport. These processes have been described in cities such as Montreal (Chicoine, 1998) and Santiago de Chile (Jirón, 2007, 2008; Imilán et al., 2015; Ureta, 2008). In this ethnographically pioneering literature on mobility, we can see that, in addition to the condition of social class and purchasing power, there are clear gender and age divisions that exacerbate access difficulties and therefore limit the rights of these citizens to the city (Chicoine, 1998; Jirón, 2007).

Sociological, geodemographic and economic approaches, which are the mainstream of transport and mobility research, on the one hand deal with variables such as distance, travel time, means of transport, multimodality, self-containment rates, geographic origins and destinations, while on the other hand looking at daily mobility which serves other purposes such as provisioning, leisure activities, the use of services and the pursuit of culture (Albaladejo/Bel, 2010; Featherstone, 2004; García-López, 2012; Kaufman et al., 2015; Small/Verhoef, 2007; Urry, 2004). In some cases they also establish correlations between the choice of means of transport and the options available, according to the type of locality or territorial region, within the framework of typologies that have greater or lesser connectivity (centrality or marginality) or the level of wealth or poverty (Abramo, 2008; Cervero et al., 2002; Dávila, 2012; Dercon/Shapiro, 2007; Glaeser et al., 2008).

However, what quantitative approaches to the subject of mobility do not provide are the meanings and rationales behind the use of each mobility type in the case of individuals, families or social groups. An ethnographic approach to the subject seeks a deeper understanding of the logic that moves people in the organisation of their personal, family, work, and residential lives. In all ethnographic approaches, people have faces, they have social frames of reference that we must reveal, they have trajectories that we have to uncover, their actions are based on reasons that we wish to make explicit and which are the expression of vital aspirations. In the end, all people possess varying and relative degrees of roots and rootlessness, measured in social and territorial terms (Pujadas, 2012). Nevertheless, we wish to emphasize that our approach to the subject, although anchored basically in the tradition of urban anthropology and ethnography, is defined as a contribution that wants to dialogue and join the interdisciplinary effort to understand and document the new forms of mobility.

## 2. Daily mobility in the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona

In the empirical research that this work is based on, we studied people's daily movements in the MRB, focusing on the study of certain eccentric nuclei in the suburban framework: Camp de Tarragona (located on the coast, to the south of the MRB), and Vallès (inner central zone of the MRB)<sup>2</sup>. A full ethnographic study of metropolitan mobility in Catalonia remains to be done, and to date the study of daily mobility has been tackled exclusively by demographers and geographers, through statistical approaches (Alberich, 2010; Miralles, 2011; Módenes, 2008; Pujadas, 2009).

The research team involved in this project comprises anthropologists, supported by two geographers with extensive experience in the study of mobility. The latter have given us a fairly precise picture of the larger parameters making up the mobility map of the MRB. This is a kind of mechanical portrait which was particularly useful for defining the areas and study paths in the ethnographic environment. Daily mobility in the MRB involves a figure of 17.4 million journeys on working days. Broken down into means of transport, 45.7% of trips are on foot (short-distance, intra-urban itineraries), 1.2% are by bike, 20.2% are on public transport, and the remaining 32.9% involve travel via private vehicles. We also know that almost 8% of the journeys are multimodal, i.e., they comprise more than one stage and use more than one means of transport. Other important statistics that provide a general overview of the situation include the fact that approximately 70% of daily journeys are intra-municipal, as opposed to 30% which are inter-municipal. Nevertheless, this proportion varies according to sex-gender: while women make one inter-municipal journey for every three intra-municipal trips (i.e., 1/3), the figure for men is 1/2. This implies greater mobility and greater distances travelled by men (EMEF, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> The three districts of Camp de Tarragona that we have included in our research constitute a *de facto* extension of the MRB. These districts are, from north to south, Baix Penedès, Tarragonès, and Baix Camp.

The design of an ethnographic research project involving such a complex unit of analysis in such a broad geographical area of reference poses a considerable challenge. It is a matter of evidencing the analytical power of the ethnographic approach by establishing objectives, questions and research designs that allow us to go beyond what we have already learnt through statistical-quantitative approaches. To the questions of what to observe, how to do it, with whom, where and how, we must respond with an epistemology adequate to these new mobile realities, as networked and dynamic as they are, that redefine the relationships between person, place, space and institutions. At the same time, we need to develop new field skills and new ethnographic techniques, in addition to redefining traditional ones.

There is no doubt that we must open the door to the focus that Marcus (1995) presented 20 years ago in his proposal for *multi-sited ethnography*. We agree with him that the methodological approach to overcome in research like ours is that particular modality of ethnography which “preserves the intensely-focused-upon single site of ethnographic observation and participation, while developing by other means and methods the world system context” (Marcus, 1995: 96). It seems clear that research on mobility cannot intensively focus on a single place, a single locality. Likewise, we accept the idea that multi-sited ethnography consists, first of all, of mapping a territory without trying to holistically represent its entirety, but by identifying the boundaries of a phenomenon<sup>3</sup>, in order to establish connections and identify processes between the different locations that fall within the field of analysis (Marcus, 1995: 96-99).

Another relevant issue in Marcus’s approach is how to maintain the sense of ethnography, in its dimensions of immersion in a cultural reality, intense interaction with social actors, and a deep understanding of social reality, when multi-sited ethnography takes us away from “place” (in the singular), through a constant wandering around the borders of vast territories, locations and connections:

(...) a certain valorised conception of fieldwork and what it offers wherever it is conducted threatens to be qualified, displaced, or decentered in the conduct of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995: 100).

We agree in the detection of the problem, but Marcus’s answer is obscure and not very enlightening:

(...) the persuasiveness of the broader field that any such ethnography maps and constructs is in its capacity to make connections through translations and tracings among distinctive discourses from site to site (Marcus, 1995: 100-101).

The problem is clearly that Marcus is not thinking at all about ethnographic objects such as cities, metropolises, suburban regions, mobility, itineraries, multi-siting, and virtual social networks, to indicate only some of the central concepts of our research. He continues to think deeply about more traditional objects of ethnography, revisited from a multi-site and comparative perspective, understood as an epistemological

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<sup>3</sup> It is not necessarily about operating on a scale of “cultural formation” as Marcus indicates in his work. We work on a smaller scale, within the limits of an single cultural formation,

reorientation to face the obsolescence of the them/us perspective and the indisputable fact of a contemporaneity marked by globalisation processes.

Multi-site ethnography constitutes, therefore, a heuristic model, but there is a lack of methodological bases sufficiently in tune with Marcus's approach to allow us to conjecture about the validity of that which many are already calling *mobile ethnography*.

If polycentrism marks the daily life of people, supplanting the monolocalism that was the prevalent form of linking subject with territory in the industrialist stage, we must consequently shift the setting of ethnography from "place" to the "itineraries" that mark increasing mobility, consequently expanding the scale of our work from the local to the supralocal, as is the case of our object of study, the MRB. If social lives do not revolve around relationships marked by place, but rather multiple reticulated relationships that shape, frame and place each subject in the different domains of everyday life (family, work, and friendships), we must focus on the design of our field work, not only the physical displacement of "bodies" throughout the journey, but the role and meaning of these displacements in the *habitus* of each person, linked to reticulated social environments. We agree, then, with Urry, when he states that:

Such networks, ever wider, enormously extended through the information technology revolution, depend for their operation on intermittent meetings. These moments of physical co-presence and face-to-face conversation are crucial to the social patterns of life that occur "at a distance", whether for business, leisure, family life, politics, pleasure or friendship. Hence life is organised within a network, but it also involves specific co-presence encounters within specific times and places. (Urry, 2003)

In the design of our field research we have tried to combine traditional research techniques, including observation (participant and non-participant), informal conversations, formal non-directive interviews (recorded in audio format, or filmed in audiovisual format), and focus groups. Together with these, we have practiced *floating* observation or *flâneur* drifting, as well as the shadowing technique. In parallel, we have made a fairly extensive use of mobile devices. We have recorded mobility itineraries by means of GPS, as well as joined Whatsapp groups, analysing the messages exchanged by certain "friend groups" formed among public transport users.

### **3. Field techniques in mobile ethnography**

1. *Observation* (both participant and non-participant) is still the technique *par excellence* of any ethnography method. It is, without a doubt, the primary source of knowledge acquisition when it comes to people's behaviour. When our object of study is mobility, the ethnographer's role is to "follow the people" or to "follow the objects", to walk with them (Buscher and Urry, 2009). Non-participant mobile observation brings us closer to the classical *drifting* method. Drifting is not a technique as such, but rather a critical look at urban reality that takes us back to authors such as Benjamin and Debord. In the words of Durán:

It comes from the understanding of our cities via the everyday, the subtle, the tiny and those “other” empirical references that would not be worthy of presenting in any “official history” book. It is, therefore, a question of creatively exploiting the wealth of urban data extracted from the sociocultural life of public spaces. (Durán, 2011:138)

In our field research, *flâneur drifting* or ambulation is applied to the observation of the dynamics of everyday transient movements in train stations, bus terminals, and train carriages, identifying spaces and non-places, photographing the flow of people at rush hour. We agree with Pellicer et al. (2012: 145), when they state that “not only must we keep in mind the research question or the initial questioning, but also the characteristics and determinations of the field of study within which this is framed.”

In contrast, *participant observation* in the context of mobility consists of accompanying people in their daily journeys. Continuous and systematic monitoring of people’s daily trips brings us to the shadowing technique, which we will touch upon in greater detail later. There is, however, a less intrusive method for observing mobile participants, which combines accompanying people on their journeys, informal interviews and, subsequently, formal interviews and, in many cases, focus group technique.

If, in classical ethnography, participant observation constituted the clearest component of the observer’s ability to immerse themselves in the daily social life under analysis in a given place, in mobile ethnography immersion involves a journey, a journey shared with those who agree to participate in the research. It consists of sharing everything from the landscape observed during the journey to what the places through which the subject travels evoke. The shared trip also involves an understanding of everyday concerns related to work, family, and the daily tasks faced by each person. This “accompanying” allows us to look deeper into the logic, rationale and symbolism that are linked to the daily experience: to talk about the use assigned to the moments of transit, the advantages and disadvantages of using one mode of transport over another, and the personal aspirations and projects of each person; to the value given to time, in general, and the time of the journey in particular.

In mobile ethnography, there are moments of silence, introspection, rest and relaxation. Many people who use public transport take advantage of their journeys to sleep, listen to music, and connect with other people. Nevertheless, a lasting image of shared time “on the move” is the travellers’ constant and systematic use of mobile devices. For our project, we accumulated hundreds of photos of travellers, reading e-books, working on their laptops, and chatting, listening to music or watching videos on their mobile phones. The material, physical trip is accompanied by another form of virtual, technological trip, taken through these devices. The person in transit travels between various places, but ends up, or connects, with other places on a limitless map through the connectivity possibilities provided by a wide range of technological tools.

The experience of mobile observation shows, however, the incompleteness of this field technique compared to the transcendental role of classical ethnographies. As we have just suggested, fixed and stable community references are replaced by an infinite number of references, connections, logic and dynamics that arise from the reality that has no clear limits of activity worlds marked by an enormous number of connecting

nodes in the network. In mobile ethnography we work without local reference contexts, and we face a world of possibilities and options, of imagination and meanings (Urry, 2002). The change of scale in ethnographic analysis generates discomforts, and dangers, as well as difficulties when it comes to reading and interpreting the observed realities. Observation, in any of its modalities, continues to be an essential element, but it requires major complements.

2. *Informal conversation* is the first of these complements, and is an essential foundation for observations. In fact, conversations can only be separated from participant observation for the purpose of systematically presenting field techniques. In mobile ethnography, the role of conversation is even more important. It constitutes the “code book” needed for a thorough understanding of the accelerated sequences of mobility (the succession of landscapes, people, contexts and sensitive stimuli) in which the exchange between the observer and observed occurs.

The shared trip usually generates a sensation close to Turner’s *communitas*. The physical proximity of the travellers generates an intimacy, given to communication that may be anecdotal or confessional. It is an intersubjective relationship that is very time limited, the deeper understanding of which requires other more formal approaches (in-depth interviews) or more contrastive techniques (focus groups). However, although there are other instruments for establishing the discourse and rationalisations of travel and travellers, informal conversation and observation are the alpha and omega of ethnography, even in the case of mobile ethnography.

3. *Formal interviews* comprise the main technique for obtaining an articulated and reflective discourse, which serves as the basis for the drafting and analysis of results. Audio or video recordings can be used. In our research we chose to primarily use filming, since the results are more expressive and it allows us, in addition, to produce documentaries, which in many cases act as a letter of introduction explaining the objectives and content of the research to new informants. Nevertheless, the basic purpose behind the production of these audiovisual recordings is to familiarise our informant-collaborators with our interpretative reading of their personal experiences.

Regarding the purposes and orientation of the interviews, we have opted for what we call in-depth biographical orientation (IDBO) interviews (Pujadas, 1992). We wanted to get away from focused interviews aimed at recording people’s opinions and experiences. Our objective was to try to capture personal journeys, the processes that have led each subject to their mobile present, the widening or narrowing of their *space of life*<sup>4</sup>. In the least directive way possible, we asked each collaborator to explain, in a chronological-biographical way, their residential mobility and work history. Together with these two narrative axes, we asked the person to situate their story in terms of attitudes, tastes, options and values. The purpose was to build narratives based on events, on verifiable biographical facts, and then draw these in each embodied

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<sup>4</sup> The term *living space* (“*espace de vie*” in french) was coined by the French demographer Daniel Courgeau (1988). It is defined as that part of the territory where the daily activities of a person take place. For Mendizábal (1991) it would be the space in which the social relationships of each person unfold.

subjectivity, looking for the contexts and attitudes that refer to this crossover between chance and necessity and which outline each biography, each personal trajectory.

Does the choice of means of transport (when there is a possibility of choosing), conform to pragmatic, ideological questions, or comfort or convenience criteria?

I am from San Salvador de Guardiola and every day I travel 70 km to work in Barcelona, in my own car; 70 to get there and 70 to get home. It takes me 40 minutes. Living in a rural area makes it complicated to use public transport, and the trip would take more than two hours. (E-32, MS, man, 42 years)

When I went to live in Renau [a small town located 16 km from Tarragona] I found that there was only one bus a day that sets off really early in the morning to Tarragona and another that comes back at night. A car is the only alternative. What we did was organise a car-share scheme that we call the "car bank". This has gone on for three years so far. (E-21, PP, woman, 33 years)

Is commuting, or daily travel, a problem or an opportunity?

Ever since I started commuting, I knew I didn't want an annoying journey, because if it was a hassle it would make my life unbearable. (E-6, ChR, woman, 63 years)

The hour a day I travel is time to relax and switch off from problems at work. (E-30, RC, woman, 27 years)

The IDBO have allowed us to elicit the meaning of personal choices, to contextualise travel within professional frameworks, social networks, local roots, and family and parental interdependencies. We have been able to situate daily routines, and their variants, in meaningful frameworks, that arise from the nodes of that network within which each subject is located.

4. The *focus group* technique is a good complement to the other techniques for obtaining discourse. Its purpose is to contrast opinions on the topic to be discussed using a plurality of voices (Gutiérrez Brito, 2011). In our case we selected a sample of previously-interviewed people, looking for the most contrasting profiles possible in order to extend the range of possibilities from personal, family and professional situations, taking into account attitudes, logic and different ways of doing things. We have verified that the issue that causes the most debate is always the use of private transport compared to public services. The argument of greater efficiency, autonomy and flexibility that private vehicles provide is set against the criterion of reduced cost for users of public transport.<sup>5</sup>

5. *Network analysis* historically emerged with the earliest anthropological studies of the city, through the Manchester School. Its main early proponent was John Barnes (1954)

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<sup>5</sup> This idea that private vehicles confer autonomy appears constantly, confirming the proposal of Featherstone (2004), when he defined the neologism *automobility* as the sum of two elements: autonomy and mobility.

in his study on the social networks of the residents of Bremnes, an insular Norwegian parish. His analytical strategy consisted of identifying those personal attributes that, beyond the social insertion of the person in institutions like the family, the factory or the parish, generate personal relationships: friendships, relationships between neighbours, those with ideological affinity, and others. Also, the great American anthropologist Eric Wolf (1980) observed that beyond institutionalised relationships, personal interactions give rise to what he called *interstitial structures*. These are forms of inter-individual relationships that are neither formally nor formally regulated but nevertheless play a very significant role in the social insertion of people.

Among the many possible options in our research, we have identified and analysed one of these relationship networks: the social networks of public transport users. Users of the same means of transport every day find themselves with the same people in the same places. Attitudes change from subject to subject. Many of them briefly greet, but restrain from any attempt to approach their fellow travellers. They put up barriers to communication: they want to rest, to read, listen to music or, simply, stare at the landscape around them. Others, however, chat with the person sitting next to them, they look out for them, even saving seats, and they end up establishing camaraderie. Many of them have the phone numbers of fellow travellers and let them know of possible timetable delays on public services, maintaining cordial virtual relationships, beyond the face to face. They wish each other happy birthday, explain if they are sick, provide news of third parties, or simply send jokes and press reports via their mobile devices. These also serve to mobilise the users of rail transport with regard to the constant deficiencies of the service in Catalonia. User platforms have been set up where people constantly use their devices to communicate delays or call for protest actions<sup>6</sup>.

Throughout a seven-month period we periodically travelled from Tarragona to Barcelona-Sants on the R15 train line that leaves Tarragona at 7.00 a.m. Isabel, who catches the train 17 minutes earlier in Reus, saves seats for Mireia, Anabel and Carmen, who get on in Tarragona, and Ángel who boards the train at the next station, Altafulla, at 7.12 am. With no delays, the train arrives at its destination at 8.05 am. These five people make up a “train social network”. They have a communal Whatsapp account through which they send messages to let the others know where they are in the train, and which carriage to get on when the normal one, the first, is full. During the trip they usually chat, although all of them have their mobiles in their hands and are constantly sending and receiving messages<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of these user networks include: *Plataforma d'Usuaris de Renfe Portbou-Barcelona* (for Renfe train service users between Portbou and Barcelona) (<http://www.usuaris-renfe.com/>), Renfadats (<https://www.facebook.com/Renfadats/>), (<https://twitter.com/renfadats>), (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/renfadats>), *Plataforma Trens Dignes Terres de l'Ebre-Priorat* (for a decent train service in the Ebro and Piroat region) (<https://trens dignesebre.wordpress.com/>), Renfadats Garraf (angry train users of the Garraf area) (<https://plus.google.com/11069992994922800835>).

<sup>7</sup> There are another two travellers who occasionally accompany the group. The first is Julia, who only travels two days per week, and the other is Pillar who travels with the group only sometimes as her two regular travelling companions want a quiet, calm trip.

Isabel is the person around whom the group formed. She works for RENFE, the state railway company, in human resources. She has been making this journey daily for 14 years. Practically everybody knows her, particularly the numerous group of RENFE and Adif employees that also get the train every day. Throughout these years Isabel has always participated in trip groups like the one we have been able to record ethnographically. Over time these groups dissolve, people drop out, and others join in. This is either due to small disagreements between fellow travellers, changes in timetables, transport type, and so on, or simply because people stop travelling. Isabel is aware that she attracts a lot of people into these social relationships for instrumental reasons, due the fact that she is employed by the transport company and acts as a mediator when there are conflicts or, sometimes, gets free tickets for her peers. This is also true because she has direct sources of information, and is the one that warns her friends of any incidents in the service, strikes, malfunctions or delays in the schedules. During these months Isabel pointed out to me up to 15 people who have been members of her previous journey groups. Some she greeted warmly, others pretended not to see her.

Mireia is the centre of attention in the group. She suffers from Down's syndrome, but thanks to a good education, despite her problems, she has got a good job in the education department in the Parliament of Catalonia and accompanies the schoolchildren who visit the institution. She is regularly in the media as an unofficial spokesperson for those affected by the syndrome, as she is a good example of someone who has managed to obtain a good job, despite her limitations. She is a very caring person, totally uninhibited, a good conversationalist and a huge fan of mobile devices. Between 40% and 50% of the messages exchanged by the group are sent by her.

Anabel is a young person who lives in Tarragona and works in Barcelona looking after an elderly married couple. She is not very talkative, although she is committed to remaining an active member of the group. She usually sits next to Carmen, a young soldier from Cadiz, who serves in a battalion based in Barcelona. Finally, Ángel is a high ranking civil servant in a town hall on the outskirts of Barcelona. He has been making this railway journey for several years and maintains relationships with more than one of these social groups. Especially in the mornings, although he greets Isabel's group, he usually goes to sit separately with a group of men.

The return journey takes place, excepting some unusual occurrence at work for one of the members of the group, or because of a change in the Renfe timetable, on the 14.33 train along the same R15 line. On the trip back, the first person to get on, in Estación de Francia where the train sets off from, is Mireia, and she is in charge of saving seats as the train passes through Barcelona-Gràcia until it gets to Sants, where Isabel, Anabel, Carmen and Ángel join it. Mireia usually sends the group two to five Whatsapp messages during that short journey, letting them know of any important details: the model of train that she is on, the number of people and her exact location which, normally, is the last row of seats in the last carriage. According to the type of train, the group usually chooses to sit at the end of the carriage, where there are four seats facing each other around a small table. It is a seating arrangement that stimulates communication and dialogue.

During these months of travelling with the group we celebrated the birthdays of several of its members, in addition to observing other occasions. On the return trip from Barcelona to Tarragona, on 16 December 2015, we had a Christmas dinner on the train, a celebration that involved the five normal members of the group, two Adif employees, travellers and habitual acquaintances, plus the ethnographer and camera operator who recorded the event. This ritual meal, similar to the so called “office Christmas dinners”, shows the degree of institutionalisation the group is slowly acquiring. On 2 February they had a Carnival lunch on the train, and 1 March they celebrated Mireia's birthday. Anything is a good excuse to bring the group together.

This brief narration of our experience of mobile ethnography confirms Urry's hypothesis (2003), which draws a correspondence between bodily, physical sociability occurring during the daily commutes of these people and their connectivity via the social networks of mobile devices. Since the end of November 2015, when the members of the group added Pujadas to their Whatsapp group, they have exchanged more than 7000 messages through this media<sup>8</sup>. This is how we found out that on New Year's Eve Isabel had to be hospitalised due to respiratory failure, that on 9 February Ángel was on sick leave because of acute bronchitis, that on 10 May his first grandchild was born, and that on 16 May, Mireia's pet died. However, most messages deal with logistics, related to the punctuality of the train, the type of carriages, who is travelling and who is not each day, and who is running late. There are also many messages relating to calls for train strikes and the way these may affect journeys. Other frequent reasons for exchanging messages are to share photos, news articles and visual jokes. Current politics very infrequently enters the group's conversations, but when it does it usually involves a certain amount of friction, since the members hold widely contrasting points of view and ideologies. This is why discussions relating to current political issues are often avoided.

6. We used the *shadowing technique* on a small number of informants who, due to their professional activities, attitude and availability were well suited for this method, which is both highly intrusive and efficient, in equal measure. Put simply, this field technique consists of systematically following a person during their activities throughout entire days, including their travel. The day begins at the home of the informant-collaborator, extends throughout the day, all day at work and during any other matters that the person must address and resolve, and ends at night, when the individual goes back home to rest. This extensive time spent together allows us to see how a person moves in his or her different spheres of activity, but also how each subject, at the same time as undertaking certain activities corporally *in situ*, never stops being connected with people virtually by means of mobile devices or the internet, in both work and family environments. During the day, the relationship between observed and observer adopts different modalities, both intensely interactive and autonomous and distant, during which the researcher simply observes and writes field notes or takes photographs.

The origin of this technique is found in the field of organisational anthropology. Harry Wolcott (1973) published an extensive ethnography on headmasters, conducted from 1966-68, in which he explored the roles of that managerial position with respect to

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<sup>8</sup> We counted the messages sent between 28 November 2015 and 30 May 2016.

faculty members and the families of students. Wolcott shadowed several of them, to gain an in-depth understanding of all the activities, vicissitudes and abilities of a headmaster, which went well beyond the conventionally-known and established regulations.

One of the great advocates of this analysis technique is Barbara Czarniawska, a methodologist of Polish origin, and a researcher at the Institute of Advanced Management Studies at the University of Göteborg, Sweden. Her research centres on narratology and organisational studies. This author connects the shadowing technique with a very interesting literary precedent. A short story by Truman Capote: *A day's work* (Capote, 1997). In this story Capote narrates a day shared with Mary Sanchez, his assistant, who works "nine hours a day, for five dollars an hour, six days a week." On a rainy morning in April 1979, Capote shadows her over all the floors she has to clean, scrutinising libraries and bathrooms, along with the photos displayed in the rooms, and talks to her about everything divine and human (Czarniawska, 2014).

This technique has also been used intensively by the Chilean geographer and ethnographer Paola Jirón, who focuses her research on monitoring people living in the extremes of poorly connected areas in the suburbs of Santiago de Chile (2008), highlighting the class and gender inequalities associated with personal resources for efficient and satisfactory mobility (2007). This author has also made some magnificent contributions to the debate and epistemological reflection on the shadowing technique (2011).

The Argentine anthropologist Hugo Gaggiotti has also used the shadowing technique extensively in his prolonged study of a transnational company whose main trajectory is between Argentina and Italy, undertaking intensive fieldwork in several of the organisation's plants and working closely with expatriates, i.e., high-level business and technical managers that spend a good part of their active working lives in the company, posted to production centres and different countries. In his research, together with the technique of shadowing, he uses formal interviews to obtain discourse on the experiences and the identities of these people (Gaggiotti, 2011). One of the characteristics of his work is that it was the company itself that endorsed the author's ethnographic work. He compared the official narratives of the corporation with those of the people who collaborated with him in the research (Gaggiotti, 2010).

This analysis technique, taken to extremes, can lead to research that creates ethical problems. Unlike organisational studies, in our project on mobility we are not as interested in the set of daily activities, including work and family life, as in the journeys made, mobility strategies and the social relationships deriving from these activities. In addition to the train group, led by Isabel, we travelled with half a dozen informants on their daily trips, both going and returning, we filmed the entire mobility process, and were lucky enough to observe "special days", days that are different and which break the routine, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of the real alternatives to the transport modality, to the social and personal logic that surround the daily task. We have also been able to explore the tastes, affinities and values associated with the use of certain means of transport, social relationships established "on the move", the limits

and restrictions imposed by family budgets on travelling in a particular way and choosing a specific means of transport.

## **Conclusions**

Our approach to everyday mobility, centered on the detection and understanding of these mobile, dynamic and reticular realities typical of metropolitan life, could easily lead us to deny the active role played by the local dimension as a structuring of the personal identity and feeling of belonging. There is, without doubt, a predominant epistemology that tends to dissolve any certainty, betting on liquidity and evanescence of things, uncertainty, provisionality and dissolution of personal identity (Bauman, 2005). It is, according to Sheller and Urry (2003), a state of fluidity that makes old, public and private dichotomies, among others, vanish.

However, beyond these narratives of radical rupture with the old order, what emerges from our ethnography is the permanent search for the sense of place, articulation of multiple factors, complex and sometimes not controllable by the individual. The mobility of people, as documented by our ethnography, takes place within frames of reference where variables such as professional career, family, social networks and, also, local rooting are incardinated. We consider that mobility does not deny the sense of place, but multiplies it, puts it in contrasts, enriches it.

What emerges from the life histories we have collected are individual and family strategies to face the challenges posed by urban sprawl and the widening of living spaces. Anyway, we must not forget that not all people are mobile or, at least, they are not mobile in the same way. As Glick-Schiller and Salazar (2013) emphasize, mobility coexists with immobility, location with transnational connections, cosmopolitanism with rooting. In a similar sense, Burawoy (2001), responding to the challenge of ethnography of the global, emphasized the unequal nature of global processes in their local manifestations. The local is not dissolved, although drastically transformed, by the impact of the global. The pending task for the ethnography of mobility is to continue to deepen the understanding of the logics, practices, discourses and social frameworks and reference materials, both of mobile and immobile subjects.

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