

Exploring Mobility: An Analysis Within the 'Structure and Agency' Framework

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Abstract: This study explores mobility, power, and politics through the framework of structure and agency theory. Mobility refers to the ability of individuals or groups to move within spatial, social, and economic structures. It includes both physical mobility—such as migration or geographic relocation—and social mobility, which involves shifts in social status or economic standing. However, mobility is often constrained by structure, which typically includes political institutions, economic systems, social norms, and other factors that limit an individual's ability to move or migrate, creating dilemmas such as involuntary immobility. Faced with these limitations, individuals rely on agency—their capacity to act independently and make choices either within or against these structural constraints. This research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing case studies of individuals navigating mobility restrictions in various socio-political contexts. This analysis underscores the conflict between systemic limitations and personal autonomy. The results indicate that, although structural factors considerably hinder mobility, individual agency is essential in contesting and reshaping these obstacles.

Keywords: Mobility, Immobility, Structure, Agency

1. Introduction

In recent years, research on mobility has predominantly concentrated on the limitations that societal frameworks place on personal mobility. Factors such as social class, education, race, and gender have been widely recognized as barriers that limit mobility opportunities for certain groups, often resulting in adverse effects on social mobility. While these studies emphasize structural limitations, growing attention is being given to the dynamic interplay between structure and agency. Some scholars argue that individuals, through the exercise of agency, can challenge and transcend these structural barriers to achieve upward social mobility. Previous studies have highlighted the role of agency in challenging structure. Building on this foundation, this paper further explores how individuals exercise agency within structural constraints and 'stuckness,' and whether such constraints and challenges might paradoxically serve as catalysts for personal development.

This study specifically investigates the potential for adversity and structural constraints to cultivate beneficial traits or abilities in individuals. Employing a qualitative research approach that encompasses case study analysis and a comprehensive review of pertinent literature, it scrutinizes real-world instances of individuals maneuvering through structural limitations while demonstrating agency in surmounting these challenges.

By examining these dynamics, this study aims to contribute new perspectives to mobility studies, highlighting the complex interaction between structure and agency. The findings of this research will contribute to the development of future social policies and individual growth practices, as well as provide insights for further research in related fields.

2. The Role of Structural Constraints in Limiting Mobility

Structural factors are powerful forces that can limit the mobility of individuals and groups. On the societal level, structural constraints such as the household registration system and the education system profoundly shape social immobility, affecting the distribution of resources and opportunities, and thus exacerbating class stratification in inter generational transmission. At the individual level, factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender create substantial obstacles to social mobility, hindering individuals' ability to attain upward class movement.

2.1. Geographic Segregation

Structural factors intertwine to create complex mobility barriers. Geographic segregation is one key factor, referring to the unequal distribution of resources such as education, employment, healthcare, and housing across different regions. This not only limits individual mobility but also creates widespread social immobility. In modern China, the urban-rural divide means that urban residents typically enjoy more and higher-quality resources, while rural residents face severe resource shortages and have more limited access to education and employment opportunities.

In recent years, the per capita disposable income of residents nationwide, in urban areas, and in rural areas has shown a continuous and steady increase. Nonetheless, it is still apparent that a substantial income disparity persists between urban and rural populations.[1]. Furthermore, the household registration system exacerbates these inequalities by restricting rural-to-urban migration and limiting access to urban public services for rural migrants . Due to this barrier, rural residents in modern China often struggle to migrate between rural and urban areas or break through their existing socioeconomic status.

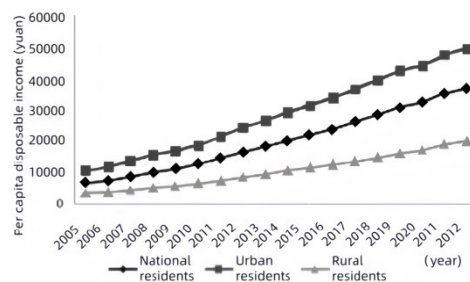


Figure 1: Comparison of Per Capita Disposable Income of Residents (Yuan) [1]

The roots of this urban-rural divide in modern China trace back to ancient China. During the Qin and Han dynasties, household registration and taxation systems tied lower class population to the land, restricting their mobility. The long-term agricultural work made it difficult for rural populations to engage in other economic activities, thus preventing them from changing their social and economic status. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the tax system no longer relied on population but on land area, and the household registration system began to relax. This led to some improvement in physical mobility and more diverse career choices, with fewer rigid class barriers. Many farmers transitioned into handicrafts and commerce, achieving upward social mobility. Nevertheless, in the present day, the absence of essential reforms has allowed the household registration system to persist as an identity

framework that categorizes individuals with specific identities, thereby influencing their social standing. [2]. It remains one of the major factors influencing social mobility. Additionally, this structural barrier also perpetuates intergenerational poverty. Many rural children inherit their parents' economic and social status due to limited access to quality education and healthcare, further entrenching class immobility.

2.2. The Intersection of Class and Race

Class and race are intertwined structural factors that profoundly limit individual and group mobility. When these two forces intersect, the barriers to mobility becomes even more complex. The case of Soweto illustrates how these structures limit individuals' physical mobility, thereby restricting their fate. In South Africa, especially in Soweto, the obstacles to mobility were not only geographic distance but also the oppressive system of apartheid. Policies such as the Pass Laws and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act confined Black people to specific areas. This spatial segregation not only affected their daily lives but also severely limited their potential to cross class boundaries. For example, Black residents were prohibited from freely entering the White areas of the city center, and their movements were monitored and restricted. Furthermore, Jensen emphasizes that the educational framework established during apartheid, specifically the Bantu Education Act, not only denied Black individuals access to educational resources but also systematically perpetuated racial and class disparities, thereby constraining their social mobility [3]. This historical educational oppression led to a deep dual cycle of immobility in both education and social recognition in Black communities. These elements together have resulted in significant employment obstacles for Black individuals in South Africa, persisting even after the conclusion of apartheid. Within the labor market, job reservation policies and biased practices continue to potentially bar Black individuals from obtaining skilled or semi-skilled positions. [4]. The intersection of class and race traps many people, including Black communities, in immobility.

2.3. Existential Immobility

Life is not static; it is a dynamic process of development. In this process, structural inequality and exclusion may lead individuals to experience a stuck crisis and existential immobility, which refers to the inability to move forward with one's life due to a lack of agency and control. This not only presents a significant risk to personal mental health but also endangers psychosocial welfare.[5] Long-term psychological stagnation may lead to frustration, depression, or emotional disorders, and may even cause individuals to gradually abandon their willingness to change their situation when they have choices. Furthermore, because individuals find it difficult to effectively establish emotional connections with others, this existential immobility makes it more likely that they will experience social isolation and marginalization. Ultimately, they become "mere dangles"—people who cannot truly control their own fate and can only float passively in adversity.

3. Agency and Mobility

Agency often leads to greater mobility. The pursuit of mobility, whether by individuals or groups, can sometimes even lead to changes in the structure itself.

3.1. Agency and Humanism

Agency can be understood as a manifestation of humanism, which emphasizes individual freedom, rationality, and personal value. Historically, humanism has played a critical role in enhancing social mobility.

In medieval Europe, the feudal system created a rigid stratified social structure. Under the control of feudal lords, lower classes found it difficult to escape poverty. The Church reinforced this immobility through spiritual control, forcing people to accept predetermined social statuses as divinely ordained and suppressing dissent. These structural forces undoubtedly severely limited mobility. However, the Renaissance acted as a pivotal shift. Humanism emerged as a transformative ideology, emphasizing the limitless potential of human beings and the importance of individual agency. This philosophical enlightenment inspired individuals to question repressive societal frameworks and strive for advancement. The community recognized the potential in asserting their autonomy and commenced leveraging their influence to achieve upward mobility. For example, the rise of the bourgeoisie during the Commercial Revolution, fueled by economic expansion and urbanization, exemplified the exercise of agency against structural constraints. The bourgeoisie, through acquiring economic and political power, continually challenged the status of the nobility, eventually causing cracks in the feudal system. Ultimately, this revolution, focused on reconstructing agency, promoted the processes of urbanization and local autonomy, shaping a more mobile society.

In the historical trajectory of society, reform frequently serves a crucial function in dismantling structural impediments. Nevertheless, in addition to facilitating structural transformation, reform itself emerges as a significant factor that invigorates individual agency, occasionally nurturing concepts that are more favorable to personal advancement.

3.2. Agency in the Feminist Movement

Sweden's feminist movement is an example of women using agency to gain greater mobility. Swedish women began fighting for the right to vote in the early 20th century, and after years of effort, Sweden granted women the right to participate in elections in 1909. This progress not only marked the political empowerment of women but also gave them a larger voice and greater influence. The enfranchisement of women facilitated greater mobility: their societal constraints were diminished, and their familial connections underwent transformation. Consequently, women experienced an increase in opportunities for personal development. By the mid-20th century, Sweden had introduced a series of reforms beneficial to women, including the implementation of equal pay laws and increased female participation in the workforce. These reforms significantly enhanced women's economic independence, enabling them to occupy more equal roles in the workplace with men. Many fields, once dominated by men, saw a surge in female participation, particularly in politics, education, and technology, as women's employment rates rose. Additionally, Sweden implemented parental leave and family welfare policies that encouraged parents to share family responsibilities. These policies aimed to break down traditional gender stereotypes, promoting greater equality between men and women in the home and offering women more opportunities to balance family and career.

The feminist movement's momentum was not limited to Sweden. Globally, the 20th century has witnessed significant advancements in women's education and income levels, further reflecting the power of agency. As illustrated in Table 1, by 2011 in the United States, women exhibited higher average educational attainment and a greater likelihood of possessing advanced degrees compared to men. Although men had a marginally higher prevalence of holding a bachelor's degree, women were more frequently found to have achieved at least a bachelor's degree. [6]. Furthermore, the disparity in income between genders has persistently diminished. As indicated by the most recent report from the World Economic Forum (WEF), the global gender income gap has contracted to approximately 16%, signifying that women's earnings constitute around 84% of those earned by men. [7].

3.3. Heroism in Adversity

However, individuals in a state of struggle may not have the immediate ability to choose or change social structures in a short period of time. Heroism in adversity provides us with a completely new perspective. At this point, agency might not directly lead to mobility, but it can prevent individuals from falling further into immobility. In the midst of struggle, not becoming a mere victim and an object in circumstances or refusing to go with the flow is, in fact, a defense of agency within adversity. This defended agency will, once the struggle ends, allow the individual to regain mobility.

Numerous esteemed poets from the classical pastoral poetry tradition in China exemplified heroism in the face of adversity. Throughout different eras of ancient China, the prevalence of political oppression, bureaucratic corruption, and the failure of scholars and intellectuals to rectify societal issues, along with their reluctance to align with corrupt officials, ultimately compelled them to withdraw to rural areas, embracing the role of pastoral poets. In political difficulties, choosing to retreat and renounce secular power was a profound spiritual struggle. This act of renouncement, as an agency, represents a steadfastness to ideals and beliefs, and is an extraordinary form of perseverance. This perseverance is a form of waiting. 'Waiting out' is a specific form of waiting where one is not waiting for something but rather waiting for something undesirable that has come, like a spell of cold weather or a disliked guest, to end or to go. This positioned itself ambivalently alongside an ongoing aspiration for existential progression, indicating that the individual envisions a resurgence of mobility once the period of waiting concludes. [8].

A certain nobility of spirit and an assertion of one's 'freedom as a human' oozes out of the very notion of 'endurance.' From this perspective, heroism in adversity, although unable to directly achieve physical or social mobility in the short term, provides people with a sense of existential mobility. As Hage articulates, individuals most profoundly encounter this sense of significance and intentionality when they possess a feeling of progression or direction.' [9]. Similarly, when a person in adversity becomes a complete object and loses the sense of "going somewhere," they are trapped in nihilism and a sense of meaninglessness. Heroism in adversity, which rejects going with the flow, is a form of guarding hope, and one of the methods for achieving existential mobility within adversity.

As the Eastern Jin Dynasty poet Tao Yuanming mentioned in his poetry, "Accidentally trapped in the dust net, I have gone for thirty years." He compared the officialdom to a net that bound him. Although he had no power to change the bureaucracy, his voluntary immersion in nature and his retreat to the mountains were ways in which he upheld his principles and bottom lines. It is this perseverance that gave him a sense of existential mobility within nature, just as he expressed at the end of his poem: "Long trapped in a cage, I return to nature." Giving up the agency represented by officialdom brought him a sense of liberation in the struggle, and this spiritual freedom and frankness is the manifestation of agency in heroism in adversity, enhancing mobility.

4. Structural Backlash and Agency

Structure can sometimes have a counterproductive effect on mobility. When people realize that structure limits their mobility, this may actually promote the use of their agency to achieve higher mobility. As Hage said, Migratory physical mobility is only contemplated when people experience a crisis in their sense of existential mobility. When individuals perceive that they are existentially progressing at a sluggish pace or feel as though they are stagnant, akin to being ensnared on the 'highway of life,' they often start to reflect on the imperative of embarking on a physical journey to a different location.[9]

Just as the sea promoted the trade and navigation activities of the ancient Greeks, the complex geography and limited agricultural resources here further facilitated the development of city-state cultures and the highly intensive agricultural model. Greece's relatively poor geographical

environment continuously shaped the agency of ancient Greeks, which in turn played a role in the prosperity of Greek civilization.

Furthermore, structure can often stimulate human resilience. In the field of human development, individual resilience is characterized as a "dynamic process through which individuals exhibit positive adaptation in the face of considerable adversity or trauma." [10]. This constructive modification and restructuring are more likely to facilitate the favorable reorganization of systems, resulting in adaptive functioning that surpasses previous levels. [11, 12].

5. Conclusion

This research investigates the dynamic interplay between structural limitations and individual autonomy within the framework of mobility. The findings indicate that social frameworks, including economic, political, and educational elements, frequently impose considerable restrictions on individuals' mobility, potentially leading to situations of "stagnation" or "predicament" under specific conditions. However, individuals also possess a degree of agency, and through exercising this agency, they may find ways to overcome these structural constraints, even though such breakthroughs may require time or manifest through collective societal changes. In some cases, individual agency may not fully transcend all structural limitations, yet to some extent, personal effort and action can challenge or alleviate these barriers, thus fostering social mobility or personal growth. Therefore, the relationship between structure and agency is not merely one of opposition but is characterized by mutual interaction and influence. Understanding this interaction helps us better recognize how, within an unequal social environment, one can find possibilities for adaptation and progress. The findings of this research offer a novel viewpoint on mobility, social equity, and personal growth. They emphasize the necessity of not only recognizing the presence of systemic barriers but also appreciating the critical role of individual initiative in confronting these challenges. This insight fosters a more profound contemplation on how personal agency can significantly contribute to surmounting the constraints established by societal frameworks.

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