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RESEARCHERS' (IN)MOBILITIES, COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES, AND THE CHANGING KNOWLEDGE GEOGRAPHIES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

Lautaro Vilches
Humboldt Universität, Berlin, Germany. DZHW, Berlin, Germany

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This qualitative study addresses how (in)mobile researchers shape and reshape their "geographic epistemic living spaces" through particular global and local, visible and invisible collaborative practices, thus altering the knowledge geographies in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH). The paper is based on the findings that emerged from the interviews conducted as part of the of the doctoral research project that studies the meaning and practices of academic collaboration in German Clusters of Excellence belonging to the SSH. It will be argued that (in)mobilities of researchers need to be conceptualised (1) in relation to the changes that may experiment knowledge when it travels and (2) that the very definition of what defines mobile researchers needs to be expanded, including the epistemic properties of research or the researchers own biography, thus acknowledging that (in)mobilities have multiple layers.

Full paper

This strongly empirically grounded paper will present findings that have emerged from the interviews conducted for the qualitative doctoral research project "In the name of excellence: how is the collaborative imperative enacted in Clusters of Excellence in the

Humanities and Social Sciences". What follows is an outline of the rationale and research questions that will guide this paper.

The Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) are undergoing important transformations as the model of collaboration that has been typically associated to the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines is expanding towards the SSH (Borlaug & Langfeldt, 2020). Thus, the "collaborative turn" (Olechnicka et al., 2019) is establishing as the new imperative for the SSH, driven by excellence and modernisation agendas (Kosmützky & Wöhlert, 2021; Papatsiba, 2013). In that relation the German Excellence Strategy has set up Clusters of Excellence (CoEs) across Germany which aim at providing funding "in internationally competitive research fields [and] create excellent training and career opportunities for early career researchers" (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, 2019).

In that context is that large collaborative CoEs in the SSH provide an unique framework to study researchers (in)mobility and its entanglement with local and global collaborative practices and how disciplinary geographies in the SSH are shaped and reshaped, especially in relation to their relation between the global and the local, centres and peripheries, and (disciplinary) languages, among other aspects, as preliminary findings suggest. In fact, while "mobility is coordinated through policy that forms national competition agendas, evaluative technologies, and competition discourse" (Cantwell, 2011, p. 411) – being CoEs a paradigmatic example for that – it is also true that, "there has been less attention to what international mobility might tell us about local variations in scientific practice" (Davies, 2020).

Against that background and leaning on Felt´s (2009) concept of epistemic living spaces, but expanding it to include disciplinary geographies, I ask: how do (in)mobile researchers reshape their geographic epistemic living spaces in Clusters of Excellence belonging to the SSH? What implications does this have for the geographies of knowledge in the SSH?

Felt´s epistemic living spaces focuses not only on the machineries of knowledge production in the epistemic sense, but also "includes the social, political, structural, temporal and institutional machineries" (Felt, 2009, p. 20). While I take these aspects into consideration, I

suggest to reshape the idea of epistemic living spaces emphasising the (re)construction of disciplinary geographies in the SSH that takes place through local and global, visible and invisible collaborative practices (Garforth, 2012), within and beyond the boundaries set up by the CoE.

The empirical part of this doctoral project started with interviews with early-career researchers, visiting researchers, and a few scientific managers and in a second stage moved to full-professors, therefore reconstructing the spatial, (inter)disciplinary and practical meanings of academic collaboration from the bottom to the top. Thus, this project although not deploying an ethnographic approach follows a praxeological orientation (Knorr Cetina, 1999; Maasen & Lieven, 2006) and takes distance from the positive normative bias of much of the research and policies on collaboration (Garforth & Stöckelová, 2012; Lave et al., 2010; Macfarlane, 2017).

Considering preliminary findings it is possible to outline two important issues that this paper shall address. First, what does tell us the (in)mobility of researchers about the ability of knowledge to travel in the SSH and converge/diverge in the epistemic spaces constructed in CoEs? In this regard, Stöckelová (2012) questions the notion of "immutable mobile" (Latour, 1987), arguing that "[STS research and policy studies] have privileged the capacity of knowledge claims to travel intact, and neglected the necessity of attending to knowledge claims that maintain strong links with their local contexts of production, and/or which undergo significant changes in the course of their travels" (Stöckelová, 2012, p. 288).

A second issue refers to the very definition of academic (in)mobility. Definitions based on nationality or the physical crossing of political borders (see for instance Kim, 2017) do not properly capture the complexity enunciated above by Stöckelová. I suggest to define (in)mobile researchers according to a set of criteria that consider the geographic epistemic properties of their research, such as global vis-á-vis local orientations alongside their own academic biography, characterising researchers´ mobility by multiple layers that include "physical" but also "epistemic" (in)mobilities.

Through an interdisciplinary approximation, this paper aims to improve our understanding of the changing meanings of academic

(in)mobility, collaborative practices and the geographies of knowledge in the SSH.

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