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Road Infrastructure for Community Organization

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David Butz is professor in the Department of Geography and interdisciplinary graduate programs in Social Justice and Equity Studies and Popular Culture at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. He sits on the Faculty Steering Committee of Brock's transdisciplinary Social Justice Research Institute, and serves as co-editor of *Studies in Social Justice* and *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*. David has been conducting ethnographic research in mountainous Northern Pakistan since 1988.

Nancy Cook is associate professor in Brock University's Department of Sociology and MA program in Social Justice and Equity Studies, and director of the MA Program in Critical Sociology. Nancy's ethnographic research has focused on transcultural interactions between development workers from the global north and local populations in Pakistan.

Nancy Cook and David Butz are currently collaborating on two mobility-related research projects in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of northern Pakistan: the first is an analysis of the differential mobility implications of a recently constructed jeep road linking Shimshal village to the Karakoram Highway, the region's arterial roadway. The second focuses on experiences of demobilization in the aftermath of a massive 2010 landslide that destroyed over 20 kilometres of the Karakoram Highway, leaving 20,000 people in several dozen villages without vehicular access to market towns or lowland areas.

What does mobilities mean to you?

NC: We've been using mobilities literature in an experimental way to try to investigate the implications of road infrastructure for community organization in the rural Global South, in northern Pakistan. Mobilities, for us, has been a concept that would allow us to understand shifts in people's abilities to move around, but also their accessibility to

goods and services, and how this is affecting a broad array of aspects related to social organization in what used to be subsistence agricultural communities.

DB: I would add that we're also interested in how this new mobility regime or new mobility platform influences people's identities, or understandings of themselves, in relation to their environment and other parts of the world. And also, how the introduction of a new mobility platform changes spatiality within people's everyday lives.

When did you first become involved with mobilities research?

NC: David and I got a research grant to begin this particular project in around 2009, but David has been working in the community since 1988 and has a very long relationship with the community. The construction of a road to Shimshal has been in the background of his research for all of these years. As we started gathering empirical information on the social and environmental implications of the road's completion, and hearing people's concerns, we were looking around for theoretical framings to understand what was going on, and we've been trying out the mobilities literature. Our first exposure to this framework was at the second Pan American Mobilities Conference in Philadelphia and we have subsequently been reading this literature to see whether it helps us explain the particular phenomenon that we're studying.

DB: My interest in mobility is retrospective in a way. As Nancy was saying, we first became interested in mobilities as a particular framing for our work with this road research. But prior to that, in the '90s, I was doing research in the community on portering and the portering economy, because this is a mountain community where a lot

of people earn some money from carrying luggage for tourists or mountain climbers – historically for explorers. So I'm sort of realizing retrospectively that my interest in the portering economy and the relationships between foreigners and locals, a particular labour relationship framed around portering, was actually a mobilities oriented relationship as well. Retrospectively I realize that I've been working on mobility related issues since at least the mid-90s, but not framing them in relation to this paradigm or in relation to this concept of mobility until much more recently.

How do you use mobilities in your research?

NC: I would say we've been using a mobilities framing in two main ways: methodologically and theoretically. As David has been saying, we are trying to use what we would call broad programmatic themes and areas of research that mobility scholars have outlined to understand a range of mobility practices, spaces, identities, artifacts in the community. But also thinking about the ways in which we study mobilities. So, we've been reading quite a lot about mobile methods and how we actually study and investigate the ways in which different mobility platforms change the ways in which people's lives are affected by, in this case, enhanced mobilities.

DB: To follow on from what Nancy is saying, this particular project is about a road construction endeavor and, the implications of this road construction for people's movement, for accessibility, but also for a whole bunch of other things. One of the ways that we are using this concept of mobility is to introduce more social and cultural themes into what might historically have been understood as a transportation issue or purely an

accessibility issue, or the movement of things from one point to another. Because I'm a cultural geographer and Nancy's a sociologist, we're also really interested in how identities are reshaped, how people's understandings of their environments are reshaped, how social relationships are reshaped. So, this new mobilities research introduces more social and cultural themes into what had been a technocratic discipline, at least in geography, when people were focusing on transportation specifically. Also, much of the literature on rural roads in the Global South is literature on road impacts: this notion that we build a road and then economic transformation will occur, or some sort of developmental transformation will occur. So it's a sort of, *build it and then there's impact*, or *build it and certain things will happen* mentality. That seemed to be an impoverished understanding of how people interact with changing mobility circumstances. And this mobilities literature is one place that we've been going in an effort to develop a subtler conceptualization of how people's lives are transformed when mobility contexts shift.

NC: We've found that mobilities conferences and mobility scholars are an appropriate and welcoming audience for our ideas. In sociology, at least in the department that I'm in, these are not issues that really resonate with people when I talk. A little bit more when we go to geography conferences, but transport geographers are often a little bit weary of, I think, what they may understand as a mobilities paradigm emerging that in some ways encroaches on territory that they've understood as theirs.