Spatial mobility and social networks on the periphery of Astana

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Introduction

This project aims to examine interplay between social networks and mobility practices of the adolescent students at one particular school in Astana. Drawing on notions of social and mobility capital (Bourdieu, 2011; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 1995; Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2005; Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004) it is questioned how social and mobile capitals co-evolute, and how network positions and mobile practices affect each other. Marshrutkaas here play roles both of means of displacement connecting meaningful places; and of meaningful places per se contributing to the sense-making and identity construction (Jensen, 2009). Hereby, I would like to understand how marshrutkaas are incorporated in the daily course of adolescent life, with special interest on subtle and non-reflexive effects on and from social networks.

It should be mentioned, that with the growth of Astana, marshrutkaas as a unit in public transport system, have been perpetually decreasing presence in urban landscapes. Now they serve only three routes linking what may be called outskirts, almost without passing through the city central business districts.

One of these 'outskirts' is placed at the North-West nearby the railway. It is mostly a residential place with predominance of one-story single family houses of relatively low prices. There are a few bus terminals in the vicinity and four (two in every direction) of them are on the marshrutkaas routes. The whole set-up makes neighbourhood to some extend disconnected from the conventional city center. Commute from here to, say, the city's shopping mall cluster would consume a big deal of time.

This allows to consider residents of such neighbourhood as lacking the motility (mobile capital or capacity for being mobile) (Kaufmann et al.,

2004) as their interactions with the rest of the city (and resources allocated in the city) require more efforts compared with, for example, residents living about public transport hubs. In other words, the city less shrunk and accessible for them. They are more dependent on cars, which, in turn, at the level of households creates specific patterns of access and shared usage of a car, as well as power relations and negotiation of social statuses and roles. For example, car ownership may entail obligations to deliver other household members to school or work in order depending on their statuses.
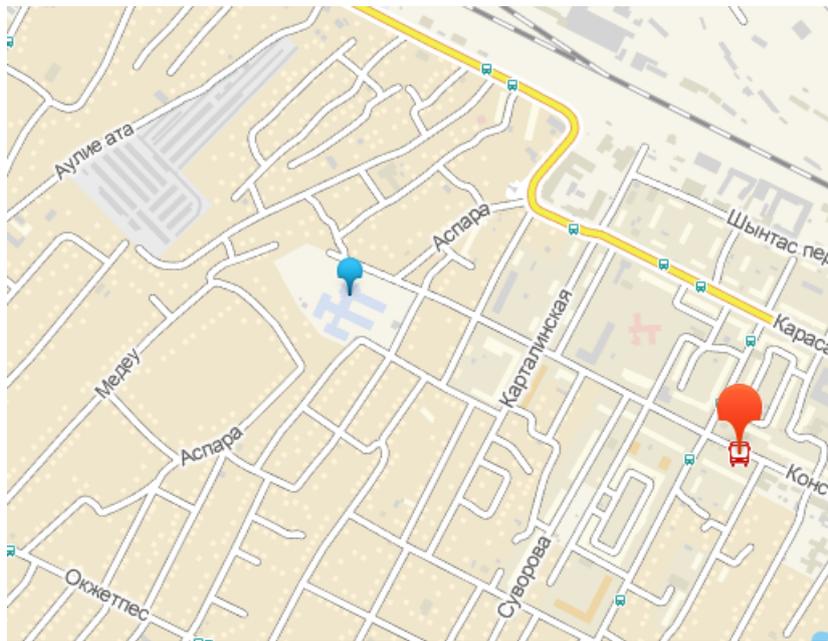

Figure 1: Bus terminals are no less than 500 meters away from the school (blue pin)

As it was said, in this project I am going to focus on the experiences of high schools students of the neighbourhood as assume their reliance on public transport. There are several additional reasons to justify it. First, at this time adolescents usually increase their motility. They can attend an event, visit a friend, or just walk through the neighbourhood without informing parents or relatives.

Second, with maturation students accumulate social ties obliging for co-presences, and displacements. Some of the social ties, such as romantic one's, demand specific settings and locations (e.g. cinema). Access to and skills for public transport, thus, can acquire additional value, as the neighbourhood arguably is far away from cinemas and places suitable for leisure activities.

In a broader sense, public transport routes provide opportunity to explore the city and limit one's experience of the city simultaneously. Displacement involves dealing with social issues of norms, power, identity and culture formation (Jensen, 2009), but a sample space of these entities is at least constrained by deliberately constructed transport systems (including marshutkaas routes). As a consequence, experience of travelling through the city can, firstly, be building material for identity construction, and secondly, negotiated to obtain popularity and social ties (social capital).

Hereby, I consider interplay between motility, city experience (knowledge of the city), and social capital. I do not define specific causal paths, as suppose influence in every direction. For example, motility could affect social capital directly making someone suitable for shared visit to a cinema or a sport club, as well as indirectly through knowledge of places to hang out. Moreover, the reverse order is possible, since social ties to someone who posses knowledge and mobile are likely to increase one's knowledge and mobility in turn.

The goal, hence, is not only in considering mobile capital as a prerequisite for dominant positions in social networks, but in examining how social networks influence motility and experience of the city as well. Given the disconnectedness of the neighbourhood, and the local school in particular, I am going to narrow investigation of such interplay down to the school settings, supposing that mutual effects should be more articulated and visible in this enclosed environment.

By this, I consider the school as a sort of exchange point where adolescents negotiate motility, knowledge and social capital. However, in this terminology, the school is not a unique place to acquire social ties, as other formal and informal settings (e.g. sport clubs or street gangs) can foster them. Hence, while focusing on the school, I will account for social capital outside, which again brings the idea of motility as a possible contributor to existence of such ties.

Research plan overview

Phase 1: Ethnographic data collection (May-June, 2016; September-October, 2016).
I am going to get a job as a part-time teacher in the school at the aforementioned neighborhood. At first, I will get to know the students and the staff of the school and will get their permission to conduct this research. Then, I will start participant observation of the students. I will compliment participant observation with at least to ten in-depth interviews with students. At the

end of the period, I will create a survey based on interviews, which will be a tool for network data collecting. Next I will conduct surveys every two month during the academic year of 2016-2017.

Population of interest will comprise of students between eighth and eleventh grades.

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