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From "Immobility" to "Constrained Mobility": The Social Support System and Mobility Justice for People with Disabilities in the United States—A Case Study of Domestic Labor Scenes in the Film Child of Deaf Adults

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Abstract. Although the U.S. social support system for people with disabilities has made progress in terms of legislation, it often fails to translate into substantive justice in action, perpetuating a systemic state of "immobility" in many cases. This study employs a critical case analysis of domestic labor scenes in the film Child of Deaf Adults (2021) to explore the mechanisms for transitioning from "immobility" to "constrained mobility." Using textual analysis and theoretical application, it examines the roots of immobility found in the interaction between policy implementation gaps, economic structural barriers, and dependent family roles. The findings indicate that micro-level practices, such as family "letting go" and the pursuit of individual "constrained mobility," are crucial for breaking dependency cycles. It is concluded that public policy must shift from a model that compensates for individual deficiencies to one that eliminates structural barriers, particularly through enhancing information accessibility, targeted economic support, and family empowerment. This study contributes to the refinement of policies in this field by applying a mobility justice perspective to the understudied realm of domestic labor.

Keywords: mobility justice, disability studies, social support systems

1. Introduction

Mobility justice, a concept pioneered by Mimi Sheller, originates from the integration of the "new mobilities paradigm" and theories of justice [1]. It moves beyond the "sedentary" limitations of traditional spatial and transportation justice, conceptualizing mobility as a dynamic medium of power and inequality. This framework scrutinizes the disparities different groups face in physical movement, social participation, and resource access, emphasizing multi-scalar dynamics ranging from bodily practices to the global distribution of energy [1]. The U.S. social support system for disabled citizens, cornerstoneed by the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), legally mandates anti-discrimination, public accessibility, and health subsidies. However, a persistent gap exists between legislative intent and practical implementation. For instance, despite relevant laws supporting employment for people with disabilities, their unemployment rate remains high, and

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wage levels are lower than those of non-disabled people, highlighting the reality of constrained mobility [2]. The film CODA (2021), which tells the story of a hearing girl in a deaf family, serves as an ideal case study. It vividly encapsulates the "immobility" caused by structural barriers and the "constrained mobility" achieved through family negotiation and individual agency. This paper selects CODA for its nuanced depiction of how micro-level domestic labor practices reflect macro-level structural constraints, particularly the role and consequences of the "interpretation hub." The study aims to dissect the roots of mobility immobility within the U.S. context, explore pathways towards greater mobility justice, provide theoretical extension to the field, and offer practical policy implications for strengthening support systems.

2. The U.S. social support system for people with disabilities and the roots of "immobility"

2.1. Policy framework: legislative progress and practical lag

The institutional roots of "immobility" lie in the implementation gap within U.S. disability policy. Legislation such as the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) together construct a multi-layered system designed to guarantee rights. However, the theoretical declarations of this framework are constrained in practical application due to a lack of coordination at the implementation level [3].

Firstly, the ambiguity of the "reasonable accommodation" principle creates dilemmas in practice. This profoundly reflects the inherent contradiction between the educational system's "support logic" (aimed at providing compensatory resources) and the labor market's "performance logic" (demanding economic efficiency and output), with the latter often prevailing in competition [4]. Secondly, there are frequent blind spots in accessibility compliance. The deaf community faces significant communication barriers in accessing services; shortages of qualified sign language interpreters, variations between sign languages, and issues of "language deprivation" due to lack of early education all hinder effective access to critical information, creating a "second layer of exclusion" [5].

Thirdly, the fragmentation and dispersal of the support system pose significant obstacles. People with disabilities must navigate a complex system composed of multiple independent agencies (e.g., education, rehabilitation, social security, housing). This lack of inter-institutional coordination results in high transaction costs [5]. This predicament illustrates a common issue in welfare states: those unable to engage in paid labor due to personal physical impairments face an even higher risk of poverty due to complicated aid application procedures [6].

Ultimately, the gap between legislative vision and lived reality embodies a fundamental conflict between rights-based approaches and the capitalist market logic that prioritizes cost-cutting and economic efficiency [4]. This conflict leads to systemic compromise.

2.2. Economic structure: industrial barriers and the "solidification of living space"

The U.S. economic structure creates and reinforces the "immobility" of people with disabilities through mechanisms of industrial segregation and capital concentration. The labor market is characterized by a persistent hierarchy that categorizes individuals based on perceived productivity, often channeling people with disabilities into low-wage, low-mobility sectors. They face a dual system of barriers: "access barriers" and "advancement barriers." High-mobility, knowledge-based industries (e.g., technology, finance, professional services) erect access barriers through credentialism and cultural biases that favor oral communication and rapid networking—traits unfairly associated with non-disability [4]. Even where technical accommodations like remote work

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are possible, cultural resistance persists; this resistance is rooted in narrow definitions of "who is a competent worker," systematically excluding those who rely on different communication modes. Furthermore, advancement barriers manifest as a "glass ceiling" within occupations; even when employed, people with disabilities are often steered into dead-end positions with limited leadership prospects. Employer stereotypes about the capabilities of people with disabilities, such as assumptions about their inability to manage teams, directly restrict career advancement, confining them to lower-tier jobs.

This occupational segregation is exacerbated by capital monopoly, which weakens the bargaining power of all workers but disproportionately affects those already marginalized. The price suppression faced by the Rossi family's fishing business is not merely individual exploitation but a structural outcome. Hearing fishermen might organize through associations to counter this power, but isolated deaf fishermen, due to communication barriers, lack this collective agency, making them vulnerable to monopolistic practices. Consequently, their "living space" becomes solidified within precarious, low-income sectors. This economic immobility is further entrenched spatially through geographical segregation, as people with disabilities are disproportionately concentrated in impoverished communities with underfunded public services, creating a feedback loop that limits access to education, healthcare, and economic development opportunities [4].

2.3. Family roles: the formation of the "interpretation hub" and the suppression of individual mobility

Under the dual pressures of an absent support system and economic exclusion, many families are compelled to construct internal "interpretation hubs," often with hearing family members acting as bridges for sign language communication and interaction with the outside world. This role is both an adaptive response to systemic exclusion and a mechanism that inadvertently solidifies and reproduces "immobility" within the private sphere.

The formation of these intra-family roles is widespread. Research indicates that over half of deaf adults rely on hearing relatives to assist with communication for public matters such as healthcare, legal issues, and education [7]. While necessary for survival, this dependency traps families in a structural dilemma: on one hand, the "interpretation hub" becomes pivotal for maintaining family functioning; on the other, it constructs a co-dependent relationship that inhibits individual development.

Hearing children—particularly females—often shoulder this role, paying a significant "mobility cost." Ruby's struggle between her labor in the family fishing business and her personal musical aspirations vividly illustrates how care responsibilities can constrain individual development. Empirical studies show that in similar families, many healthy members have postponed or abandoned educational and career opportunities due to care responsibilities [8].

Simultaneously, deaf parents can become caught in a cycle of "passive immobility." Long-term reliance on children as communication intermediaries can not only diminish their motivation to develop alternative communication strategies (such as writing, visual signals, or expanding social networks) but may also reinforce their social isolation. For instance, Frank had the potential to learn non-verbal communication methods with the Coast Guard but did not develop this capacity due to Ruby's intervention. Furthermore, a protective mindset—like Jackie's wish that Ruby were also deaf—though stemming from emotional bonds and anxiety about losing their "communication bridge," can inadvertently limit the social participation and skill development of deaf adults. In resource-constrained contexts, less aware deaf parents in communication-limited environments can impact the

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internal drive for autonomous communication and also limit their children's related skill development, further reinforcing the barriers between the family and mainstream society [9].

3. Individual choice within structural constraints and policy implications

3.1. Family "letting go": agency in breaking dependency inertia

Within strict structural constraints, "letting go" represents a significant act of agency, embodying the family's active effort to break internal cycles of dependency. This process is not a single event but a difficult restructuring of internal family capacities, roles, and trust relationships.

Firstly, "letting go" relies on "capacity rebuilding," meaning the family actively seeks resources and skills to enhance autonomy. In deaf families, this often manifests as participating in programs like sign language training to enhance the family's overall communication capacity. Families able to access such support are more likely to establish communication patterns that do not rely on a single hearing member. For example, Frank's attempt in CODA to perceive music through vibration, though unsuccessful, symbolizes the willingness of deaf members to interact with the world on their own terms.

A more crucial step is "trust rebuilding"—where deaf parents confront and overcome their internal doubts about their children's ability to navigate the world independently. Jackie's ultimate support for Ruby's audition represents a leap of faith: she accepted the short-term risk of losing translation support for her daughter's future development. This may relate to previous research exploring the connection between greater autonomous decision-making for disabled members within families and the social participation and psychological well-being of their members [7].

However, this path is fraught with "emotional resistance" and "practical risks." Parents worry about their ability to manage after their child leaves, and the lack of a communication mediator in emergencies could have serious consequences. Research finds that "letting go" without external support may increase family anxiety and insecurity [8]. This indicates that community services and support policies are crucial in providing alternative communication resources and psychological security, helping to mitigate the short-term risks and emotional costs families bear in pursuing autonomy.

3.2. Ruby's "constrained mobility": the micro-practice of mobility justice

Ruby Rossi's mobility trajectory presents a key paradox within mobility justice research: in a non-inclusive social environment, mobility often exists in a "constrained" form, but this does not equate to an absence of justice. Instead, her experience demonstrates how mobility justice can be achieved through everyday micro-practices within structural limits. As the communication link between her deaf family and the hearing world, Ruby's mobility practices constantly negotiate between her personal development desires and family responsibilities, challenging the ableist binary of "complete autonomy" versus "total dependency."

Her mobility practice has a dual dimension: Spatially, her move to attend Berklee College of Music remains linked to her responsibility for family interpretation, creating a pattern of "flexible commuting." This pattern challenges the traditional notion that "mobility" simply equals "complete detachment," instead showcasing a form of mobility justice based on responsibility and emotional connection. Socially, her choice of the music field is strategically significant—the creative industries, being more oriented towards skill and artistic performance, relatively weaken the absolute dominance of oral communication, providing her with structural opportunities and

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developmental space to circumvent the communication barriers associated with her deaf family background [10].

The deeper theoretical significance of Ruby's "constrained mobility" lies in revealing the mechanism for achieving mobility justice: it does not require waiting for a fully accessible social environment but involves expanding possibilities for action through creative practices within existing constraints. These micro-practices resonate deeply with Hu Ying's discussion of "subversive body politics"—where disabled subjects redefine their relationship with society through daily practices, carving out their own space for action within structural limitations [11].

More revealingly, Ruby's individual mobility practice produces significant collective effects. Her success not only broadens her family's imagination of possibilities but also prompts them to reimagine their own social positions. As the film suggests, Frank might combine traditional fishing practices with Deaf culture, exploring innovative forms like a "Deaf Fishing Culture Festival," thereby transforming disability identity from a social burden into cultural capital [11]. This transformation process embodies another important dimension of mobility justice: the mutual reinforcement of cultural recognition and economic participation.

Ruby's case suggests that achieving mobility justice is a gradual process accumulated through micro-practices. In these practices, individuals explore possibilities within structural constraints through everyday actions, whose effects diffuse through family networks, ultimately creating conditions for enhanced collective mobility. This bottom-up path to justice offers a new framework for understanding and acting upon mobility practices within non-inclusive social environments.

3.3. Public policy optimization directions

The mobility justice framework demands that public policy shift from a reactive "medical model" to a proactive "social model," eliminating the structural roots of immobility. Optimization requires a three-pronged approach targeting information, economics, and the family unit:

Information Accessibility as Foundation: Policy must mandate "multi-modal accessibility" as a universal design standard for all public and private services. This goes beyond physical access to ensure cognitive and communicative access. Legally requiring government information, public broadcasts, and commercial services to be simultaneously available in text, sign language (where appropriate), and caption formats is crucial. Beyond mandates, funding for innovation is essential; public grants for developing low-cost real-time translation applications could democratize access for small businesses and individuals, directly addressing needs like those of the Rossi family.

Economic Support Focused on Structural Empowerment: Policy must create incentives for inclusion and build countervailing power for disabled workers. Tax credit systems should be refined to directly reward companies for tangible "accessibility investments," offering higher credits for providing accommodations like sign language interpreters. More importantly, policy should facilitate the establishment of trade associations or cooperatives for people with disabilities (e.g., a Deaf Fishers' Alliance). These bodies, potentially supported with public funds for professional interpreters for negotiations, could engage in collective bargaining, setting fair prices and standards, directly countering the exploitative monopsony power depicted in CODA. Furthermore, incorporating a "family caregiver allowance" into systems like SSDI would formally recognize and mitigate the economic burden on hearing relatives, granting them greater economic mobility.

Family Empowerment as Key Supplement: Recognizing the family as a core unit of support, policy should provide resources for "capacity building." Community centers could offer free courses in sign language, disability rights navigation, and emergency handling, enhancing the internal resilience of families and reducing dependence on any single member. Additionally, establishing

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counseling services is vital to help families like the Rossis navigate the emotional challenges of "letting go," overcoming anxiety and loneliness, and fostering healthier, more autonomous dynamics [8]. Finally, fostering peer support networks would allow families to learn from others who have successfully undergone similar transitions, thereby lowering the perceived risk of change.

4. Conclusion

This study uses domestic labor scenes in CODA as a critical lens to examine the transition from "immobility" to "constrained mobility" for people with disabilities in the U.S., within the framework of mobility justice theory. The roots of immobility were found to intertwine policy implementation gaps, economic structural barriers, and dependent family roles. Micro-practices of family "letting go" and individuals pursuing "constrained mobility" are crucial for breaking these dependency cycles. The core conclusions are threefold: First, mobility justice reveals that current support systems systematically deprive people with disabilities of the "right to mobility"; second, the domestic labor scene is a key site where private dependency exacerbates public exclusion; third, "constrained mobility" is a viable pathway, and policies must be optimized around information accessibility, economic support, and family empowerment to support it. A primary limitation of this study lies in its focused case study on a deaf family in the fishing industry, which may not fully capture the experiences of individuals with other types of disabilities. Future research should conduct comparative studies across disability types and investigate the role of digital technologies (e.g., AI translation, remote work) in facilitating or hindering mobility justice.

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