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A child's education: the hidden challenge for mobile families

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How does mobility affect the urban/rural divide and what are the factors that influence a family's decision to be more or less mobile? Catherine Doherty, an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology, discusses two recent studies that shed new light on both these issues.

What can mobility researchers learn from studies of families that move too much or too little in Australia? Australia's vast spaces and low population density might suggest that there's little in common with the dense, connected urban settings of Europe that have driven the new mobilities paradigm. However, I'd like to suggest that there are a couple of useful points to take, that I'll develop over this talk.

I'm a sociologist of education in Queensland, Australia and I'd like to walk you briefly through two research projects that I've conducted with colleagues Wendy Patton and Paul Shield that helped my thinking along these lines. The social problems that generated the two research projects were, firstly, the hyper-mobile military family; these children experienced multiple relocations at short notice without choosing where they go. This involves new schools in different jurisdictions and the children accumulate problems that aren't necessarily of their own making. So their stories were often of high motility families accruing private troubles in their children's education, across a series of moves that eroded their motility over time. The second project I worked on was concerned with the relatively immobile middle-class professional families and their absence in rural and remote communities.

The family as a unit of study

The nature of these two social problems made us shift the research focus from the individual worker with the military career or the middle-class professional with the qualification to taking the family as the unit of study. I'll talk to the first theme, which is the focus on the family as a unit of study if we're going to understand worker mobility. Families, though the concept is getting harder to define, are formed by the unique relationships distinguished by their inter-subjectivity and their need to mutually accommodate each other's projects. When this accommodation of each other's projects or this inter-subjectivity fails, the family breaks down. This kind of thinking was informed by Margaret Archer's work on reflexive projects and led us to the idea of the inter-subjective bargains over time and space that are negotiated within family units and how they have to deliberate to prioritize whose project takes precedence at this time or in this place. And over time, they have to renegotiate and review the decisions they have made and strike new bargains. We were interested in how these bargains typically reached a tipping point, where the priorities had to change. This was often around the time when the children reached the

crucial higher, secondary education – and particularly the later years. When you think about family mobility, there's a strong normative default around keeping children stable and not moving children to protect their progress at school; so there's this widespread reluctance to move school-age children. That default makes the fact that when families do move that's a very interesting empirical moment and a very telling moment - both about mobility and about families. These moments when families do decide to move – we call it 'moving on to get ahead' – reveal and bring to the surface the family's conscious work of reconciling these career opportunities and the educational strategy in any decision to relocate. Unlike the workplace reports that deal with educational opportunities as an afterthought, our process highlights how thinking about children's opportunities and education is actually a very important precondition to any mobility. We also drew on Ulrich Beck's work on the individualised society and the risk society – and to highlight how there are no social templates, there are no guarantees in moving on. Families have to make and manage their own risks. In more practical terms, corporate strategies or government policies that are interested in workforce mobility have to start to engage with the family as a unit and not just the individualised worker.

This also moved us on from the more familiar concept of the work-life balance and we shifted it to work-life education articulations to acknowledge the importance of educational projects. Educational achievement and credentialing is becoming an increasingly important aspect of the knowledge society, and for individuals' labour market success. All of us are really on the constant treadmill of gaining and maintaining our educational credentials. So, with this focus, we had to account for the marketisation of education sectors under the neo-liberal meta-policy – and that made us start thinking about educational markets as texturing the space and the place.

Local social institutions: structural conditions of mobility

That takes me to my second theme, which is that we need to consider the nature and the stuff of social institutions through which mobile workers and their families move, live and interact. The hyper-mobile military families typically had to move at short notice every two years. This triggered for them an intense period of researching of schools in the new locality, gathering whatever local knowledge they could through their personal networks, and then negotiating with the chosen school to achieve the placement at the correct level and the right curriculum for their child. Those families couldn't aspire to the stability that most other families would aim for, so they were aiming for continuity – and they worked very hard to make things as continuous as possible for their children.

However, the narratives they shared with us in interviews describe multiple issues which, in Beck's terms, could be considered 'institutional contradictions' to which they had to find biographical solutions. Across Australia, each state has its educational jurisdiction – and that can mean different handwriting styles, different pedagogic and assessment styles, different age cut-offs for entry into particular grade levels and - this one broke my heart - if you had a child with a disability, the child had to be reassessed in each state to access the right level of support. As a result, when children move from one state to another with military families, they often experienced either a gap or a repetition in their schooling and then had to carry this historical experience with them into their next setting. In that way, they accumulated private troubles across these institutional contradictions. More generally, all families engage with a number of institutional fronts, for example, schools, child care, employers, welfare agencies, housing markets sports organisations – so there's a lot of work to what we call 're-place' lives when a family moves. Each local institution that a family has to negotiate with to re-place their lives can make it more or less difficult for these families to move into and out of their services. So these stories pushed us theoretically to better understand and conceptualise the nature of local social institutions, their practices and their rules, and how these could enable or constrain the mobility trajectories of the families.

Viscosity: a companion concept to motility in the mobility equation

We had been using Kaufmann and others' concept of motility, which we found very useful to explain the dispositions, resources and learning that enabled moving. But as we used it over time, we felt that the concept was being stretched and was trying to explain too much; and we felt that if we could keep the idea of motility focused on the agency side, it gave us more analytical clarity. So we kept motility to look at what the agents bring to the realisation of mobility, in terms of skills, resources, affordances, dispositions and aspirations. Then we formulated a companion concept of viscosity; to conceptualize – the conditions of possibility that the structural context contributed and created, which either enabled or constrained the movement of the agent through their services. In some ways, (John) Urry's idea of mobility systems occupies a similar space, in trying to explain the structural contribution, but we would argue that we feel that viscosity allows us to talk about different degrees of resistance or enablement that are inherent in the social infrastructures through which life is lived. It allowed us to talk about high viscosity or low viscosity, it allowed us to talk about degrees of resistance or enablement. Low viscosity structures both facilitate and legitimate movement - they think that movement's normal, and they have routines and practices to enable it. High viscosity structures make movement more difficult or more onerous for the populations moving through their services. In other sciences, such as physics and biology, the twin concepts of motility and viscosity are used to explain the preconditions for any realisation of mobility. We would suggest that the metaphor of viscosity would also help mobility researchers analytically account for the assistance or hindrance that institutions give to mobile projects. Here we think about waiting periods, residential requirements, whether you have to deal with the institution face to face, or whether you can deal with them online, that kind of thing. These practices indicate how normal - or aberrant - mobility is considered to be in that institution's practices and routines. Schools have always had populations pass through them, but they continue to focus on the stable majority – those who enter and leave the institution's services at the regular, expected points. So schools' treatment of mobile populations often fixes on fitting the child into the existing templates – and the templates exist for stable populations. An institution presumes that a child coming in will stay, rather than be thinking that they will have to move on in due course. In this way, schools can be quite impervious or ignorant of the problems that their treatments create when the families move on to another setting. With an analytical distinction between motility and viscosity, we can then ask how motility and viscosity interact. So if a series of past moves are easy or difficult, they will contribute to the learning of the family and that will contribute to their future motility.

High viscosity experiences over time can erode the agents' motility. For example, bad experiences wear out the desire to move on because it was too problematic last time, while good experiences in low-viscosity settings can actually build confidence in the family and build their motility and confidence about moving on again. So our argument about viscosity is not that high viscosity is necessarily bad. Sometimes we want things to go slower, we want conditions to be stickier. The common bundling of recruitment and retention, or Urry's metaphor of game-keeping, are in essence about engineering a sequence of firstly, lowering viscosity that makes movement more likely, and then raising viscosity, creating conditions that deter mobility and keep people in place. So having the two concepts helps us pull those two dimensions apart analytically.

Family decisions construct and sustain the urban/rural divide

The third theme that we feel we could offer mobility researchers from these projects is to think about how the decisions behind family mobilities and immobilities construct and sustain the rural/urban divide. So turning to our project about the selective mobility of professional families, this project allowed us to think about how mobilities and immobilities construct and exacerbate the rural/urban divide. Rural communities are often imagined as stable communities with strong links to a fixed locale, but this rural scene overlooks the necessary flow of qualified professionals needed to staff essential human services such as education, health and policing.

The credentialed professional is educational capital that, at least in Australia, is typically produced in the big urban, metropolitan centres. Smaller communities basically rely on the mobility of the professional middle class, if they are ever to attract them – and smaller communities have to compete to attract them out there. In Australia, we've experienced a slow but ongoing decline in our rural centres.

What were once vibrant community hubs have suffered a middle-class drift away, with a loss of services. This residualisation has, in turn, lowered house prices – and in turn attracted a higher-need, higher welfare-dependent population. So what we have is a community with more needs, but less professionals to service those needs. While those communities depend on the mobility of the professional, we found that the mobility of the professional depended on the family opportunities – and that these families will be very selective about where they are prepared to move and when they're prepared to move.

The reluctance of professionals to relocate their families into these kind of 'limited service, high-need' communities has spawned in Australia a mode of worker mobility called 'fly-in, fly-out' or 'drive in, drive out', where basically the family home is set up in a larger centre and typically the father does long-term commuting in these smaller communities - and comes home every second week or something like that. So these larger communities are actually winning at the expense of the smaller communities. In this way, the private solutions to maximise family opportunities in professional families and their selective mobility produce the public problem of under-serviced, high-needs rural and remote communities. Mobilities and immobilities bring this spatial competition and relationality to the surface.

The educational markets fix mobilities within urban space

The fourth point we want to offer to mobilities studies is to understand how educational markets work and how they texture space and place, and serve to fix mobilities within urban space. The global education sector has been exposed to neo-liberal marketisation policy for over 20 years now and it's amazingly uniform across countries. Under these policies, parents have been carefully coached in their responsibility to choose a school from different alternatives – rather than to choose the local school. So we've eroded trust in the local school as the default, and now parents have to actively choose. In urban centres, the schooling market that is accessible within a daily commuting distance is typically deep and offers plenty of choice. However, out in your smaller rural or remote community, you would be lucky to get one little public school and perhaps a small Catholic parish school. And those are the only choices as such. This contrast creates very differently textured places for families to consider moving to. The reputations of schools and the depth of educational markets have become important criteria that colour and rank townships when families make their mobility decisions. All research about parents' engagement with school choice has highlighted the particular anxiety displayed by middle-class professional parents, and their intense engagement with educational markets in search of educational advantage for their children. Professionals' relatively advantaged position in the world rests on their educational achievements and qualifications. But they can't pass those on to their children like you might a business or a farm. This creates a particular drive in the middle-class professional family to protect and optimise their children's educational opportunities and progress. This, in turns, explains their reluctance to leave the deep, varied markets of the urban centre. We did interview some early-career professional parents in rural and remote areas, and they could describe amazingly detailed plans for their eventual return to the urban centre. They had made multiple bookings with large fees attached and they had very clear plans about where they were going back to – and it was because of the nature of the educational market that those towns offered. The few professionals that we did meet out in these places were only there on a very carefully limited circuit – limited by space and time.

The hurdles of access to education for mobile families

Another aspect of educational markets is that the competition has created sticky or viscous market practices such as waiting lists, booking fees and catchment zones. All these practices are highly viscous, by that concept we developed, in that they privilege and reward spatial fixity. Knowing where the family will be long-term becomes a distinct advantage and an invisible privilege. This makes it difficult for mobile families to enter and to compete in these markets. Families attempting to re-enter urban markets with a number of children face innumerable hurdles to achieve their school of choice for all of their children. Anticipating such issues – thinking about 'well, if we go to these places, how do we come back?' – can act as a deterrent to choosing a move. So, not moving becomes a compelling risk

management strategy. In this way, we argue that educational markets create a magnetic pull, drawing and keeping the middle-class professional families attached and spatially fixed, or at least hobbled.

Credentialism: the social infrastructure as a mobility system

The last point we'd like to offer mobility studies in general is the idea that credentialism should be treated as a mobility system. Mobility studies have attended to the infrastructure of airports, logistic network, ports, train networks as mobility systems but there are other, less material, elements in the social infrastructure that also equip and facilitate mobility. Our work with the professional families highlighted how credentialism, mechanisms for professional registration and systems for the international recognition of credentials allow expertise and status to move unproblematically across space – within and beyond the nation. The educational capital of a credential dis-embeds knowledge and learning from the lived experience, and allows it as a rarified object to move without jeopardising any relevance or value. The challenge then is to achieve an equitable distribution of such educational capital across space.

To close, I'll just reiterate what I think our research has contributed to broaden mobility studies. Firstly, a more complex social lens that takes the family as the unit of study to understand worker mobility. Secondly, a variable of viscosity to distinguish structural conditions of possibility from what the motile agent brings to the realisation of mobility. Thirdly, a grip on the mobilities and immobilities that construct and sustain the rural/urban divide. Fourthly, a sense of how viscose educational markets are organising life for families and the middle-class in particular. And fifthly, an example of credentialism as a mobility system that operates in the social infrastructure and not on the ground as such.

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Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Mobilities paradigm

The mobilities paradigm is a way of seeing the world that is sensitive to the role of movement in ordering social relations. It serves to legitimize questions about the practical, discursive, technological, and organizational ways in which societies deal with distance and the appropriate methods for their study.

En savoir plus x

Motility

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Living environments
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Inequalities

Theories

- Concepts
-



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