



Exploring perceptions of the impacts of resource development: A Q-methodology study



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ABSTRACT

A mining boom starting in the mid 2000s has transformed the economic and social structure of many of Western Australia's remote resource-dependant towns. To date, research on these changes have tended to either involve broad cross-sectional analyses across multiple localities, or have involved narrow single town case studies focused on quite specific issues, such as housing, service provision and employment. Yet local experiences and perceptions of rapid resource-led development are likely to be diverse and multifaceted. This study uses Q-methodology to explore local residents experiences and perceptions of change in two resource-dependent towns in Western Australia's Pilbara region. It identifies quite distinctive sets of experiences both within and between each community. The findings suggest that the implications of resource development are highly nuanced, and dependent not only on individual experiences, but also local histories, cultures and values.

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1. Introduction

The volatile nature of resource extraction and the social and economic impacts of this on rural communities has long been a subject of interest amongst social scientists (e.g. Innis, 1956; Lucas, 1971; Hayter and Barnes, 2001; Wilson, 2004). Research on this topic has been particularly prominent in the United States and Canada, where resource extraction has been examined in the context of, inter alia, demographic change, economic activity, employment, social cohesion, wellbeing and environmental management (e.g. Halseth, 1999; Kotey and Rolfe, 2014; Nord and Luloff, 1993; Randall and Ironside, 1996; Ryser et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2001). In contrast to the extensive body of work in North America, relatively little research has been done in other developed country contexts. This lacuna is particularly notable in Australia, where the fortunes of many rural and remote communities have long been tied to the extraction of mineral and energy resources (Lawrie et al., 2011).

From the mid 2000s, Australian researchers started to pay increasing attention to the impacts of a 'once in a generation' resources boom (Shann, 2012), drawing attention to the range of social, economic and policy issues facing resource dependent rural and remote communities. Some of the most prominent challenges were linked to the fast pace of development, including rising

demands on housing, infrastructure and services (Ennis et al., 2013; Haslam McKenzie et al., 2009; Haslam McKenzie and Rowley, 2013), sharp increases in the cost of living (Haslam McKenzie and Rowley, 2013), social dislocation and upheaval (Cameron et al., 2014; Petkova et al., 2009), and rising social inequality (MMSD, 2002; Reeson et al., 2012). Alongside this have been the contentious implications of fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) workforce arrangements in mining, which are viewed by some as draining economic and social activity out of regional communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). However, it is also clear that resource-based communities are diverse, and that their experiences vary considerably according to location, commodity type, company structure and the underlying socio-economic structure (Chapman et al., 2015; Lawrie et al., 2011).

While there is a growing body of literature on the broader regional implications and issues associated with Australia's recent 'resources boom', much of this work tends to offer broad, cross-sectional quantitative analyses of multiple towns (e.g. Chapman et al., 2015; Hajkowicz et al., 2011; Kotey and Rolfe, 2014; Reeson et al., 2012; Tonts et al., 2012). While these provide rich insights into the overall performance of different types of resource towns, the experiences and observations of residents are rarely examined in any detail. Those studies that do try to capture these 'lived experiences' tend to focus on a single or narrow range of issues, such as service delivery, housing, crime and social cohesion (Carrington and Pereira, 2011; Haslam McKenzie and Rowley, 2013; Lockie et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2012). Rarely do these provide insights across multiple issues and concerns in an integrated way.

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Yet residents' experiences of community change in the face of rapid development (or decline) are likely to be multifaceted, cross-sectoral and complex (Franks et al., 2011; Tonts et al., 2012; Tykkyläinen and Neil, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to examine these complex and diverse perspectives by investigating local residents' experiences and perceptions of rapid resource-led development. It aims to capture insights about some of the most contentious aspects of resource-led growth, including: fly-in/fly-out mining; cost of living; social cohesion and dislocation; distributional equity; reinvestment patterns; long-term sustainability; and, environmental impacts. The paper draws on a comparative assessment of two rapidly expanding resource dependent communities in the Pilbara region in Western Australia: Onslow and Karratha. The paper adopts a mixed methods approach, combining Q-sort methodology (see Stainton Rogers, 1995) with unstructured interviews. The next section of the paper provides a review of literature relevant to the paper, before describing the research methods. A summary of the empirical results and an interpretation of the specific results for each location are then presented, followed by a general discussion and conclusion.

2. The 'Lived Experience' of the resource booms

Prior to the 1970s, the majority of research on mining communities fell into the sociological and anthropological tradition of 'community studies' (see Newby, 1986). These studies were largely ethnographic in approach and typically undertaken in a single community, focusing on the structure and dynamics of social relations, class, power, religion, and kinship networks (e.g. Dennis et al., 1956; Lantz, 1958; Lucas, 1971; Oxley, 1978). Central to this body of work was a deep understanding of the 'day-to-day' lived experiences of residents and how they coped with and adjusted to social and economic change (Newby, 1986). The resource 'boomtown' research in North America in the 1970s represented an extension of this tradition, though ushered in a more diverse set of research interests. This research emerged primarily in response to the very real policy and planning issues associated with rapid resource-led growth in the western United States and Canada as a result of the 1970s energy boom (see Brown et al., 1989). Early studies focused on the social dislocation caused by the pace of economic expansion and population growth, pointing to social conflict and difficulties in providing social services and adequate housing (e.g. Gilmore and Duff, 1975; Kohrs, 1974; Little, 1977).

While both tradition of community studies and the resource boomtown literature provided insights into how residents were experiencing and coping with change, they were not without critics (see, for example, Brown et al., 1989; Smith et al., 2001). The most consistent areas of concern included the tendency to focus on the idiosyncratic characteristics of a particular locality, an over-reliance on single-town case studies, and the often weak empirical evidence in support of claims regarding social dislocation (Brown et al., 1989; Wilkinson et al., 1982). In response, the research agenda started to move away from the uncritical acceptance of the 'social dislocation' thesis towards a broader set of interests that showed a greater appreciation for the diversity of experiences of both individuals and communities (Nord and Luloff, 1993). This includes studies across a range of issues, including socio-economic wellbeing (Freudenburg, 1992; Smith et al., 2001; Wilson, 2004), indigenous peoples (Young, 1995), local economic adjustment and labour (Barnes and Hayter, 1994; Halseth, 1999), and regional policy (Heisler and Markey, 2013; Markey et al., 2008).

In contrast to the large and diverse body of work on North American resource communities, similar research in Australia has, until very recently, been sparse. It was only with the onset of the

recent minerals and energy resources 'boom' around 2004/05 that Australian social scientists began to examine more closely the economic, social and political implications of the expansion of extractive industries in rural and remote areas. As with the North American studies, the focus has been diverse, covering issues such as population growth, labour dynamics, socio-economic wellbeing, indigenous development, and long-distance commuting (e.g. Langton, 2010; Measham et al., 2013; McKenzie et al., 2014; Storey, 2010; Tonts, 2010).

Australian studies of resource communities tend to fall into one of three broad groups. The first is a series of quantitative studies that aim to provide cross-sectional accounts of how the resource boom has affected socio-economic wellbeing and economic development (e.g. Chapman et al., 2015; Hajkowicz et al., 2011; Kotey and Rolf, 2014; Reeson et al., 2012; Tonts et al., 2012). These studies point to considerable diversity in the performance of resource towns and some of the underlying causes of this variability, including commodity type, location and other place-based characteristics. The second group of studies is focused more on the analysis of policy documents and other secondary sources, and aims to provide commentary and critical analysis. These typically cover issues related to regional development and planning, social policy, and industry development (Everingham et al., 2013; Hunter, 2009). The third is a small body of qualitative or survey-based case-study research that generally focuses on a single town or region. These include studies of housing, services, crime and social wellbeing (Carrington and Pereira, 2011; Haslam Mckenzie, 2013; Mayes, 2008; Tonts, 2010).

While these qualitative case studies have yielded valuable insights into the experiences of residents living in resource communities, they are limited by the focus on a single or narrow range of issues. Yet for the residents of these communities their experiences and perceptions of the impacts of rapid resource-led growth are likely to be multifaceted and complex (Gilmore and Duff, 1975; Tykkyläinen and Neil, 1995), spanning aspects of social and demographic change, employment, service provision, and the environment (England and Albrecht, 1984; Gilmore, 1976; Ruddell and Ortiz, 2014). There are resonances here with the behaviouralist tradition of research in human geography that aims to understand how people experience change in given spatial context (Aitken, 1991; Argent and Walmsley, 2009; Gold, 1980). Central to much of this work is understanding the ways in which individuals perceive and respond to their environment, irrespective of how closely this aligns with the 'reality' or the perceptions of others (Argent and Walmsley, 2009; Boulding, 1956; Bunting and Guelke, 1979; Taylor and Fiske, 1975). These behaviouralist insights have, to our knowledge, not been applied in understanding the experiences and perceptions of change in resource communities.

One method used to assess how individuals respond to changes in their environment is Q-methodology (through an activity called a Q-sort). First reported in the 1930s (Stephenson, 1935), it has spread beyond its initial applications in psychology and has been used in geography, planning, economics and a range of other social sciences (see, for example, Brown, 1980; McKeown and Thomas, 1988; Stainton Roger, 1995; Weber et al., 2008). In essence, the value of the approach lies in its ability to move from particular 'individual' narratives within communities to the analysis of a diversity of perspectives that are held by a group of participants (Previte et al., 2007). For a number of scholars, Q-methodology enables a 'systematic approach' to the study of human subjectivity (McKeown and Thomas, 1988; Goldman, 1999). Q-methodology involves participants ranking or 'ordering' a series of statements or objects related to the particular issue in question. The findings are analysed using a principle components analysis (PCA), which aims to identify commonly held beliefs or views shared across participants (Watts and Stenner, 2005). The focus is, therefore,

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