



Governmentalities of mobility: The role of housing in the governance of Australian rural mobilities



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ABSTRACT

While mobility has long been recognised to be a core dynamic affecting the consumption of rural housing very little is known about the politics that exist around the connections between mobility and rural housing. To investigate how mobility informs policy approaches to rural housing in Australia this paper brings together the concepts of the politics of mobility and governmentality. Through a case study examining housing policy discourses relating to rural and regional Australia from 1985 to 2000, this paper analyses the way in which various governmentalities of mobility have infused Australian rural housing policy. The paper finds that, during this period, mobility was an important governmental rationality informing Australian regional development and rural housing policies. This study contributes to the critical engagement with the mobility turn in contemporary rural studies by showing that a particular dimension of the mobility turn – the politics of mobility – can be augmented through the application of governmentality theory. Such an analytical approach enables a critical assessment of how such governmentalities of mobility contribute to constructions of the rural as problematic and the implications of such representations for rural regions and communities.

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1. Introduction

Housing connects into multiple dimensions of rural life from issues of demographic change, like rural depopulation or counter-urbanisation, to concerns around economic development and social, cultural and environmental sustainability. While this area of rural studies was described several years ago to be marginal at best and neglected at worst (Milbourne, 2006), the last few years have seen a number of important critical contributions to our understandings of rural housing. More recently, analyses have concentrated on issues such as accessibility and the changing role of social housing (Milbourne, 1998; Barcus, 2002; Gallent et al., 2003b; Hoggart and Henderson, 2005; Marcouiller et al., 2011); processes and challenges of planning rural housing, problems of social exclusion and new forms of consuming rural housing (Gallent et al., 2003a, 2005; Satsangi and Dunmore, 2003; Hall and Müller, 2004; Gallent, 2007, 2013; Gkartzios and Scott, 2009; Satsangi et al., 2010; Sturzaker, 2010; Gallent and Robinson, 2011; Marcouiller et al., 2011; Rye, 2011; Gallent and Robinson, 2012); the role of rural housing and its relationship to poverty and

homelessness (Cloke et al., 2000a, b; 2001a, 2001b; 2002, 2003; Milbourne, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Argent and Rolley, 2006); and the unique features of and cultural influences on rural housing markets (Cho et al., 2005; Scott and Murray, 2009; Vepsäläinen and Pitkanen, 2010; Beer and Tually, 2012). However, despite the rapid expansion of a critical literature on rural housing, two areas remain underdeveloped: a) the governmental role of rural housing and b) how we understand the role of mobility in relation to rural housing governmentalities.

The research presented in this paper bridges this gap. It does so by bringing together two theoretically rich seams of research in rural studies: Foucaultian approaches to governance and the 'politics of mobility' concept in the mobility turn. The paper argues that the politics of mobility approached can be extended and improved through the introduction of the concept of governmentality. This argument is pursued through a critical discourse analysis of policy documents relating to the provision of rural housing assistance in Australia drawn from a fifteen-year period (1985–2000). The discourse analysis of these policy documents are presented around three themes: a) the problematisations of rural mobilities in Australia, b) the links established between these and the problematisations of Australian rural social housing, and c) the new types of mobile expectations in contemporary forms of housing assistance and the implications of this policy shift for rural

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Australia. Through this analysis the paper shows how introducing a governmentality approach to the politics of mobility concept allows rural researchers to examine how mobility is used to construct deficiencies as well as solutions to the 'problems' understood to be afflicting rural areas and communities.

2. Rural housing and the politics of mobility

2.1. *The governance of rural housing*

Traditionally, the rural housing literature has tended to analyse the political and policy dimensions of rural housing from an institutional perspective. That is, studies have predominantly been concerned with the formal actors and processes that influence how rural housing policy is developed and deployed. Early examples of this analysis in the rural housing literature include the work of Hall (1974) and Newby (1979). Newby (1979) for instance found that rural landowners tended to dominate local councils and, in doing so, were able to limit the construction of social housing in rural England during the inter-war and post-war periods. Contemporary analyses include the work of Yarwood (2002) and Hoggart and Henderson (2005) on the way in which local interest groups have been able to hinder the development of 'exceptions' housing in rural England. Writing from a North American perspective, Morton et al. (2004, 464) also found that a rural region's local civic structure was an 'important influence on the quality of housing stock found in rural places'. Such analyses are essential to understanding how rural housing policy has changed over time, as well as providing insight into how various institutional actors, processes and planning structures reinterpret and apply contemporary policies designed to address rural housing problems. Indeed these analyses are foundational aspects to the concept of 'rural governance', however, as Milbourne (2006, 441) points out, they have had little to say about the 'political representations of rural housing'.

More recently the institutional approach has begun to be supplemented by a number of studies that have adopted a discursive approach to the politics of rural housing. These analyses have sought to deconstruct how policy and community discourses around rural housing tap into wider ideologies of what and who the 'rural' is for. For instance, in a review of housing and rural planning systems, particularly the development of additional affordable rural housing, Sibley (1995) found that planning in the UK had developed to protect middle-class constructions of the countryside. In a similar vein, Tewdwr-Jones et al. (2003), Satsangi et al. (2010), Sturzaker (2010) and Sturzaker and Shucksmith (2011) also found that the way in which understandings of the rural had been constructed in relation to the urban had been used to define and shape rural housing policy in the United Kingdom and Europe. This was the case regarding how planning objectives – developed around the need to protect the natural and built heritage of rural landscapes – have been used as a means of constraining the development of housing in rural areas. A last example is the innovative work of Gallent (2007). Employing the Heideggerian concept of dwelling, Gallent (2007) showed how normative understandings of what it means to 'dwell' in a rural community have been used to attack second home ownership in current rural housing and planning policies.

Despite this discursive turn, the literature examining the political dimensions of rural housing has remained disconnected from the developments around theories of governance that have emerged since the 1990s in both rural and housing studies (Goodwin, 1998; Little, 2001; Herbert-Cheshire, 2003; Woods and Goodwin, 2003; Flint, 2004a, b; Dodson, 2006; Cheshire et al., 2007; Dodson, 2007; McIntyre and McKee, 2008; McKee, 2008, 2011; Argent, 2011b). At the centre of more recent approaches to

both rural and housing governance is the expansion from solely examining *government* by an institutional authority such as 'the state' to also analysing other forms of *governance* performed by a range of state and non-state actors (Woods, 2005; Cheshire et al., 2007; Beer, 2014). This paper draws specifically on poststructuralist-influenced understandings of governance, especially the concept of governmentality. Governmentality provides a 'way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government' (Gordon, 1991, 3). Government is not confined to its 'institutional' or 'state'-based sense, but is broadly understood to be the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1982; Gordon, 1991, 2). While a governmentality approach views governance as entailing 'any attempt to shape with some degree of deliberation aspects of our behaviour according to particular sets of norms and for a variety of ends' (Dean, 1999, 10), it differs in a key way from structuralist approaches to governance by eschewing the idea that processes of governance are necessarily negative or repressive. Rather, a governmentality framework positions all actors in such relationships of power as being always 'free' to respond, resist, renegotiate and/or reimagine processes of governance (Rose, 1999). A governmentality approach therefore crucially provides a means of understanding both how macro processes (a particular focus of this paper), such as wider shifts from liberal to advanced liberal forms of governance, occur, to analyses of the micro aspects of how the creators, experts, and subjects of these governmentalities respond to the actual exercise of such governmental strategies.

In rural studies' literatures poststructuralist contributions are extensive and range from analyses of how rural governance is reimagined from the centre to produce new problematisations of rural communities and places (Murdoch, 1997; Murdoch and Ward, 1997; Higgins, 2001; Argent, 2005), to how traditional roles and relationships of governing authorities have changed (Woods, 1998; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Thompson, 2005; Cheshire, 2010; Pemberton and Goodwin, 2010; Cheshire et al., 2011; Dibden et al., 2011; Beer, 2014; Cheshire et al., 2014), to what this means for local communities in terms of how new governing rationalities seek to responsabilise them (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004) or how rural populations have contested and resisted governmental change (Gibson et al., 2008; Argent, 2011a). The rural governance literature has brought into focus important critical understandings of how governmental processes relating to and occurring within rural communities and spaces have changed over the last forty years. The lack of engagement by rural housing studies with these developments in rural governance is a significant gap. As this paper will show, housing plays an important role in wider governmental processes occurring in rural places. This is particularly the case when examining the governmental relationship between housing and mobility.

2.2. *Mobility and rural housing*

Like housing studies more broadly (Dufty-Jones, 2012; Wiesel, 2014), studies on rural housing have had an ongoing concern with how mobility affects the provision and consumption of housing resources in rural locations (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010, 2013). Indeed, as rural areas and communities have changed over the latter decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, mobility has become an increasingly dominant theme in the rural housing literature (Smith, 2007; Satsangi et al., 2010). As Smith (2007, 275) argues,

Many rural places have witnessed unprecedented reconfigurations of housing and land markets ... A key factor is the increasing tempo and extended scale of the spatial mobilities ... [which] has led to a dramatic reconstitution of rural

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