



Mobile work, multilocal dwelling and spaces of wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Mobile work is increasingly common. For our purposes, mobile work entails long-distance commuting arrangements with periods living away from the primary domestic residence that may be considered 'home'. Mobile work reconfigures the relational fabric of 'home', introducing multilocal mooring points into worker's lives, and thus reshaping the spatial and temporal patterns and meanings of dwelling. Geography and cognate disciplines have begun to investigate the spatialities and temporalities of mobile work and multilocal dwelling, including the complexities of space-time management, but as yet little attention has been given to implications and impacts on the wellbeing of workers and their families – this is despite growing concern for worker and family wellbeing in some mobile work sectors, such as FIFO mining. Wellbeing is also a complex and multivalent concept, taking in objective and subjective dimensions, including health indicators and quality of life. In this context, this paper reviews recent literature on mobile work and multilocal dwelling and geographies of wellbeing to identify productive intersections for conceptual and empirical development. We suggest that provocations about space-times of wellbeing (Fleuret and Prugneau, 2015) and wellbeing as a relational, situated assemblage (Atkinson, 2013) are productive for analysing wellbeing in a context of mobility and multilocality.

1. Introduction

In a recent editorial on the geographies of mobility, Kwan and Schwanen (2016, 251) cited “future research on the relationships between mobility and health and wellbeing” as a critical area for development. They suggested several vital avenues of inquiry, which include accounting for “the effects of people's mobility on their health and wellbeing” (p. 251), attending “to the multiple ways in which wellbeing and its linkages to mobility are ... shaped by the particularities of time and place” (p. 251, citing Nordbakke and Schwanen 2014, 104), and understanding “the discursive constitution of certain forms of mobility as healthy or unhealthy and the effects that such constitution has on mobility practices and experiences in different places” (p. 251). This positioning paper responds to these provocations by focusing on a particular mode of geographical mobility: mobile work practices which stretch workers' dwelling patterns across multiple locations.

The objective of this paper is to begin to develop a better dialogue between research on mobile work and resultant multilocal dwelling ('mobility and multilocality'), on the one hand, and geographical

approaches to wellbeing on the other. The aim of this conversation is to identify productive intersections for conceptual and empirical development of research into wellbeing in mobility and multilocality. This is important because while challenges to wellbeing have been identified as an issue for certain long-distance commuting populations, such as FIFO¹ resource sector workers and their families (Barclay et al., 2014),² the problem has been largely approached through the disciplinary lens of psychology, focusing on wellbeing as an internal or intrapersonal achievement (Pini and Mayes, 2012). These insights are valuable, but we argue that the palpably geographical dimensions of mobile work – its spatio-temporal rhythms and multilocal connections – call for the application of geographical approaches that recognise wellbeing as contextual, place-responsive, transpersonal and processual (Atkinson, 2013).

There is a further empirical snag with extant research on experiences of wellbeing in relation to mobility and multilocality: the overwhelming focus on the FIFO resource sector, and especially mine workers therein, but with little consideration of the full range of industries, workers and families enmeshed in these geographical patterns of working and living (Haslam McKenzie, 2016a). In

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¹ Fly-in/fly-out; long-distance commuting (LDC) with overnight multilocal living arrangements is salient in this mobile work pattern, which also includes variants such as drive-in/drive-out (DIDO) and bus-in/bus-out (BIBO). Here, FIFO is used as shorthand that denotes the various transport modes of LDC in the resource sector.

² Significant literature can be cited here – see further below. Wellbeing may be compromised for commuters generally – see White and Dolan (2009).

Australia, for instance, while FIFO workers comprise just 20% of long-distance commuters (KPMG, 2013), the bulk of research concentrates on mine workers in this sector, who have also garnered significant policy and media attention. Little has been said, however, about mobile workers outside this sector, or about ancillary workers within the resource sector (e.g. construction, catering and health). The reason we invoke this example is because the geographical reference point for our conceptual thinking in this positioning paper is impelled by a larger empirical project we have initiated, which examines the impact of mobile work on household transformations in the Australian context.

We begin by explicitly defining our use of ‘mobile work’ and ‘multilocal dwelling’, and the challenges mobility and multilocality are assumed to pose for wellbeing. We then provide a systematisation of the extant scholarship on mobile work and multilocal dwelling in order to describe the various models offered in research – including those beyond FIFO – to offer some more capacious and nuanced ways to consider this way of working and living. We then turn to geographical approaches to wellbeing, not as a comprehensive review, but rather to highlight certain frameworks that we believe are fruitful for developing a better understanding of wellbeing in mobility and multilocality. We suggest their fitness for purpose by connecting them to examples from extant work on mobile work and multilocal dwelling and proposing possible conceptual and empirical advancements.

2. What is ‘mobile work’ and ‘multilocal dwelling’?

Mobile work entails long-distance commuting (LDC) with journeys of more than 100 km and periods living away from the worker’s ‘primary’ domestic residence (KPMG, 2013). It is important to note that the assumption across policy, media and academic discussions seems to be that the primary residence houses a worker’s partner and/or family. In turn, such households have been the focus of much research, which posits a tension between LDC and ‘the family home’ for workers. In Australia and other ‘resource regions’, LDC is often conflated in policy and popular understanding with FIFO resource sector work (Haslam McKenzie, 2016a; Skilton, 2015). We prefer ‘mobile work’ to LDC (and ‘non-resident work’) for two reasons. First, it can encompass the diversity of work patterns across sectors and occupations. Second, it emphasises mobility and mobile spaces as vital parts of these working arrangements, not only emplacement at points like ‘work’ or ‘home’. As a measure of social and economic significance, the number of mobile workers in Australia increased by 37% over 2006–2011, comprising c. 2% of the workforce (De Silva et al., 2011; KPMG, 2013). Similar trends have been documented in Europe and North America (Cresswell et al., 2016; Reuschke, 2010a). The number of people impacted increases when workers’ families are included (Haslam McKenzie, 2016b).

Mobile work reconfigures workers’ residential arrangements; it introduces multilocal mooring points into workers’ lives, with their lifeworlds sculpted through cyclical movement and extensive spatio-temporal patterns of temporary emplacement. Various terms have been used to describe this, including ‘multilocational living arrangements’ and ‘multilocational households’ (Reuschke, 2012). We prefer ‘multilocal dwelling’ to describe the practice of living and working *diffusely* across specific sites (homes, residences, even work camps) that at the same time encompass, and are connected by and through, *spaces* of mobility (Eilmsteiner-Saxinger, 2010). Multilocal dwelling enables an understanding of dwelling-*in*-mobility, with residences potentially imagined as mooring points in a mobile lifeworld rather than immutably fixed sites that are configured as *the* sources of wellbeing and intrapersonal meaning (more on what wellbeing entails later) (Nowicka, 2007).

Indeed, this is a problematic approach underpinning extant psychological work on wellbeing in FIFO – an approach that takes worker mobility (and lack of fixity) as a problem. For instance, working within a psychosocial tradition but against its trend, Sibbel (2010, 66) argues

that most Australian and international studies are premised on the idea that the wellbeing of workers and their families is at risk because of the strain resulting from work-related absence from ‘home’, which is perceived as “abnormal”. These studies mainly focus on negative impacts of mobile work on wellbeing due to *absence* from a ‘normal home’ (for workers) or *disruptions* to a ‘normal home’ (for families), where this ‘normal home’ is understood as the singular residential site of a cohabiting couple, with children, who perform traditional (breadwinner/homemaker) gender roles. In other words, a “normal home” supportive of wellbeing is assumed to be the conventional hetero-nuclear family home (Sibbel, 2010, 44).

This assumption resonates with Kwan and Schwanen (2016), who caution about the implications of discursively constructing certain mobility patterns and experiences of place as healthy or unhealthy. While we acknowledge that the wellbeing derived from this model of dwelling is salient for some workers and families, we also argue that its normalcy is contested by Foucauldian notions of discursive regimes and governmental technologies of the self, which expose its self-regulation based on social power (Pini and Mayes, 2012). For instance, Haslam McKenzie (2016b, 20) points out that while “[m]edia and community commentators have suggested that the families of LDC workers are negatively impacted by the work arrangement”, the results of extant research are not definitive. Instead, taking up prompts from wider literature on both mobility and multilocality, and geographies of wellbeing, we seek to suggest more capacious understandings of dwelling and wellbeing in mobile working lives.

3. Scholarship on mobile work and multilocal dwelling

Our review of extant literature on mobile work and multilocal dwelling suggests it can be systematised into three main bodies of work, with particular geographical foci, as well as some transnational extensions to this schema. These are: FIFO lifestyles in resource regions in the Global North, involving urban-to-rural mobilities; LDC and ‘living-apart-together’ (LAT) in professional urban markets in advanced economies in the Global North, involving urban-to-urban mobilities; and cyclical or seasonal labour migration in the Global South, involving rural-to-urban mobilities. This schema is set out in Table 1, with examples from the literature.

Since the focus of our own catalysing project is intranational flows in Australia, the first two bodies of work are particularly relevant for our conceptualisations. Comparative work has noted key differences in mobile work in the Global North and Global South – for example, the relative balance of structural constraints and agency in decision-making (more constrained in the Global South); economic survival (Global South) versus career development/advancement (Global North); and the duration of migration cycles (days/weeks in the Global North, seasonal in the Global South) (see summary in Dick and Reuschke, 2012). However, it is also important to indicate that further work has noted nuanced convergence in both global regions, for instance, around structure/agency considerations, whereby structural labour market constraints can be rigid in the Global North while some mobile workers in the Global South do evince agential capacity (Dick and Duchêne-Lacroix, 2016).

The literature on urban labour markets in Europe is particularly suggestive for emerging models of multilocal dwelling in a context of mobile working and living. Much of this scholarship, like the research on FIFO in the Global North, has centred the practices, effects and meanings of mobile work for coupled and family households. Both bodies of work even use the language ‘living-apart-together’ to describe resultant multilocal dwelling (e.g. Pini and Mayes, 2012; Reuschke, 2010a). Given the similar foci and language, there is some possibility of transferring concepts of living and working between these bodies of work, while acknowledging the different exigencies of the resource sector and urban labour markets, notably urban-to-rural versus urban-to-urban flows. The literature on European urban labour markets offers

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