

Report

Mobilities Across the Life-course workshop Nov 3-4 2014, The University of Western Australia

This report summarises key themes and plans deriving from the *Mobilities and Belonging Across the Life-course* workshop organised by members of the UWA Mobilities and Belonging Research Cluster, funded by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and held at UWA on 3-4 November 2014.

The report includes:

- summary and analysis of discussed issues;
- main conclusions and next steps;
- general implications for policymaking.

For more information visit <http://mobilities-lifecourse.blogspot.com.au>

Introduction

Mobilities is an increasingly important theme in the social sciences. As with globalisation in the 1990s, the new paradigm deals with diverse issues concerned with the movement of people, things and ideas in the ‘glocal’ context. The Mobilities and Belonging Research Cluster (MoB), established in the School of Social Sciences at UWA in 2012, engages with this emerging field, bringing together scholars of migration and mobility at UWA, and linking with other centres such as CeMoRe at Lancaster University in the UK and the Hawke EU Centre for Mobilities, Migrations and Cultural Transformations at the UniSA (a collaboration initiated through the workshop).

Mobilities and Belonging Across the Lifecourse (3-4 November 2014), a workshop organised by MoB in association with the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA), provided a unique opportunity to present significant social research on mobilities in Australia. The purpose of the workshop was to generate interest in the emerging knowledge about mobilities and belonging across the life-course and extend this knowledge for policy-oriented research and development. Another aim was to position MoB within the national and international research field of mobilities. Additionally the workshop was aimed at bringing together established and early career scholars allowing opportunities for local postgraduate students to present their work and to access important mentoring and networking opportunities.

Summary

The key issues discussed in the workshop revolved around five major themes. As the leading theme of the event, *life-course* was reflected in a variety of papers ranging from studies on children and youth to research on young families and the aged. *Youth-related* issues were the most represented at the workshop. The Life-course in general, and youth studies in particular, were interwoven with four other themes that surfaced during the workshop: *paradoxes of mobilities, social justice, migration and belonging, and education*. The presenters in the workshop identified some of the ongoing issues and uncovered research and policy blind spots that may encourage more comprehensive policymaking in the future. These themes and issues are explored further in what follows.

Anthony Elliott in his opening keynote address made it clear that life at the onset of the twenty-first century has been characterised by unprecedented mobility,. In a global electronic economy people travel faster, further and more frequently. This is particularly true for countries like Australia – arguably one of the most mobile nations in the world, according to leading demographer Graeme Hugo. However, a critical look at global movement reveals a complex and somewhat paradoxical picture of mobilities, as noted by all presenters. While a growing number of individuals have the choice of moving across the boundaries of space and class, for many mobility is restricted or simply not an option. Mobility by choice was exemplified in Amie Matthews' ethnography of Australian backpackers traveling the world for new experiences while discovering their own identity. While travel is a privilege for some, in her paper Anita Harris observed that 'stuckness' was a reality for many. She referred to the experience of young Australians from lower socioeconomic backgrounds stuck in multicultural neighbourhoods and trying to negotiate their sense of belonging in their rapidly changing environment.

Migration has long been shaping the changing composition of Australian society and the study of Australia's migration is particularly suitable for observing the different shades of human mobility across the life-course. For instance, Farida Fozdar highlighted the restrictions on personal spatial and social mobility that echoed in the voices of young refugees in Australia. She identified the source of many ontological insecurities experienced by the refugees as located in between the structures of Australian life and the choices constrained by personal resources. Andrzej Gwizdalski further explored the sense of belonging among Australian children and adolescents of refugee backgrounds. He demonstrated the benefits of employing interdisciplinary (neuroscientific and socio-anthropological) research methods to designing better targeted, and more comprehensive policies for migrant integration.

If the refugee experience falls in the area of relatively restricted migrant mobility, further away from this extreme are mobilities of lifestyle settlers and work migrants. In her study, Maki Meyer explained the motivations of intercultural families settling in Australia as their country of choice. One of the main deciding factors for mixed race families was the ‘vibrant multiculturalism’ of major Australian cities, where the families are more likely to experience a sense of cultural belonging. While a sense of ‘new home’ may be more easily achieved in a vibrant multicultural metropolis, the opposite is true for smaller and more isolated places. Mitchell Low’s ethnography of Norfolk Islanders migrating circularly between the Island and mainland Australia through their life-course showed how challenging it can be to belong to the closed homogeneous group of the original Pitcairn settlers on the island. However, culturally diverse groups do not necessarily have it easier when it comes to questions of identity and belonging. Charmaine Lim highlighted this in her paper on transnationalism and diaspora amongst Filipino communities in Australia noticing the culturally complex and diverse backgrounds and visa categories of Filipino migrants as a potential challenge in their identity-construction process. The sense of identity and belonging to a place and people were presented as central issues when discussing mobilities and migration. This applies to both permanent settlers and temporary work migrants. Donella Caspersz examined how temporary work migrants (457 visa holders) have been conceptualised in the last twenty years of Australia’s flexible labour market driven by the booming resource economy. The more recent and somewhat negative perception of these workers as ‘temporary gap fillers’ has a series of negative implications for their wellbeing and for broader employment relations in Australia. At the same time the highly precarious and mobile work of those migrants who do fly-in fly-out jobs in the resource industry constitutes the other extreme of the spectrum, a state of hyper-mobility, as proposed in Mark Schmidlin’s presentation exploring the lives of archaeologists working in the remote north of western Australia which expanded on Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of ‘liquid modernity’.

Education, and particularly young people’s mobility as related to tertiary education, emerged as another strong theme during the workshop. In her paper Johanna Wyn addressed the questions of youth transition and belonging from the perspective of young people in rural Australia and their investment in post-secondary education, which involves geographical mobility. Wyn’s longitudinal studies showed how the concept of belonging to a place and the formation of a collective identity are affected by one’s capacity to be mobile. The concept of youth transition was also explored by Martin Forsey, who focused on the dilemma faced by young adults in the remote resource boomtown Karratha, Western Australia; namely, the choice between financially attractive work and further (tertiary) education. Jane Kenway’s presentation addressed the globalised consumption of elite schools and universities in Melbourne by the growing wealthy Chinese diaspora - in many ways the opposite of issues for rural Australia. Applying the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Ong, she critically reviewed the concept of cultural accumulation as a strategy when examining the practices of social advancement by the new rich. Danau Tanu also explored the educational choices of internationally mobile families focussing on the children’s perspective and the complex implications of these choices for young people living in transnational

families. Global mobility in the education sector has important implications for teaching and learning practice. Some of these issues were explored in Monty King's paper on the opportunities of Massive Open Online Courses for students in developing countries like Timor-Leste and in Katharina Bense's examination of a migrant teacher network program that eases the professional socialisation of migrant teachers.

The 'mobility turn' has resulted in an increased amount of social research concerned with movement but, as shown in several presentations, blind spots remain. Sarah Prout highlighted the surprising absence of literature focusing on indigenous mobile communities, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in the context of modern nation states. As such, a complex debate on questions of cultural identity, multiculturalism and policy implications is still missing. Deficiencies also exist in the infrastructure and policies regulating sustainable transportation favouring bicycles to cars in the carbon-polluted hyper-mobile cities of Australia, as shown in Oliver Laing's paper. Loretta Baldassar drew attention to shortcomings in policies regulating crisis distant care. In her study examining aging, illness and death among transnational families, Baldassar focused on the experience of Australia-based migrants who are trying to care for acutely unwell family members overseas.

The major issues and blind spots identified during the workshop opened new grounds for further research on mobilities and the design of more comprehensive policies.

Conclusions and next steps

The workshop met its main objectives by generating interest in the study of mobilities and belonging across the life-course among Australian scholars. The life-course as the leading theme of the workshop proved to be a useful model to understand diverse aspects of mobility, although speakers were careful not to interpret life-course in too rigid or deterministic ways. Youth was the most widely researched group across all stages of the life-course and among all four major themes (paradoxes of mobilities; social justice; migration and belonging; and education) emerged through our discussions.

Paradoxically in times of the unprecedented hypermobility, the movement of many across the boundaries of space and class is still significantly restricted or absent altogether. It is also evident that questions of identity and belonging are central issues for all migrants (internal or international) but those more resourceful, for whom migration is a matter of free choice, are able to facilitate the acquisition of new cultural identities more easily than forced migrants and temporary migrants. While the choice to engage in higher education is a significant factor motivating and determining people's mobility in space and society, the ability to be mobile is an important factor influencing and determining access to tertiary education. These observations lead to the conclusion that Australia at large might not be as mobile and prosperous as it seems when examined through the framework of social justice.

The small-scale format of the workshop provided an ideal environment for fostering research collaborations and plans for publishing some of the presented research as a special issue and/or edited volume. A proposal for a special issue on mobilities across the lifecourse in general will be submitted to the Journal of Sociology when the call for submissions is released in the second half of 2015. We will also submit a proposal for an edited volume to Routledge book series: *Youth, Young Adulthood and Society*, edited by Andy Furlong <http://www.routledge.com/books/series/YYAS/>. The theme of the edited volume will revolve around youth studies within the context of the life-course.

A proposal for an international symposium on a similar theme was developed and submitted to the World Universities Network (WUN) Research Development Fund 2014, with collaborative interest (and financial support pledged) from 8 universities internationally. Though it was very highly ranked, it was unsuccessful, this time round. A similar proposal will be resubmitted next year.

General implications for policymaking

The central theme of mobility across the life-course calls for a dynamic and flexible approach to dealing with important social issues and responding to these with policies grounded in interdisciplinary research. The key issues and blind spots in research and policy discussed during the workshop offer some general suggestions for designing more comprehensive, wiser policy development and implementation.

For example, a greater awareness of specific issues experienced by young migrants of refugee and other backgrounds resulting from both cognitive developmental and social factors could lead to a wiser allocation of resources to meet the specific needs of a particular age group (for example, providing additional resources for learning English as a second language to migrant youth).

In regard to education and mobile youth, improved policies could take into account the diversity of transition pathways taken by young people, spatially and temporally, through formal and informal education and in labour markets. Ongoing concerns regarding the significance of appropriate educational opportunities in rural and remote towns especially in an era where adequate, fulfilling employment is increasingly tied to greater levels of formal education.

The workshop presentations highlighted the need for a more relational policy framework that moves beyond the rather narrow and linear focus of 'youth transitions' towards those that focus on belonging and connection. For example, speakers noted a diversity of data on youth transitions against the markers of school attendance, completion and academic performance, but a dearth of information about how and where young people are connected, who is responsible for them and where they belong at different points in time. This suggests that both, research and policy design

should shift more decisively towards relational framework that addresses questions of mobility and belonging.

Other issues relevant to policy included mobility of indigenous cultures in the context of the modern nation state, cultural adaptation in parenting, sustainable green transportation solutions and issues around distant care and aging populations. We are planning to further develop research interest and comprehensive policy suggestions around these questions during our next workshop/symposium in 2015.

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