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Geographic Labour Mobility Study
Productivity Commission
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Submission in response to the Draft Report on Geographic Labour Mobility released by the Productivity Commission in November 2013

Dear Commissioner,

I am leading a three-year Australian Research Council funded project (DE120102279) called “Stressed Mobilities” that is investigating the effects of intra-city commuting in Sydney. The project is principally concerned with the relationship between commuting and wellbeing.

This project still has a year to run. However, there are already a number of published research outputs that are of relevance to the Commission’s draft report on Geographic Labour Mobility.

Whilst I am contributing this submission as a researcher at the Australian National University, its contents should not be attributed to the organisation.

What follows is a brief overview of the aims and methods of the Stressed Mobilities project, followed by four points of relevance to the draft report.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require further details about the project or copies of the papers referenced.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to contribute to this important study.

Yours faithfully,

Dr David Bissell

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1. Project Background

The immediate background to the Stressed Mobilities project is the widely documented assertion that commuters in Sydney suffer from significant stress (see for example IBM, 2011). In response, the aim of this project is to explore: (1) how this stress emerges; (2) how it affects work and home life; and (3) how it has potentially longer-term effects. As such, this project is concerned with understanding the relationship between commuting and wellbeing in terms of the transformative effects that commuting has on those involved.

Empirically, this project involved conducting a series of 53 in-depth, semi-structured interviews during February and March 2013 with a range of commuters most of whom reside in the Greater Metropolitan Area of Sydney. Recruitment was through adverts placed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *MX* requesting participants whose experience of commuting in Sydney is causing them significant stress.

Addressing the aims of the project, the purpose of these interviews is principally to: (1) apprehend the diversity of commutes occurring in Sydney; (2) understand the complexity of the issues that are implicated in these commutes; (3) evaluate how commuters reflect on their commutes during the interviews.

The interviews are not intended to be used to produce a generalizable or quantifiable overview of issues affecting commuters in Sydney. Rather, in the context of this submission, they work to: (1) document how many of the factors touched on in the draft report on Geographic Labour Mobility play out together in complex ways; (2) demonstrate how the complexities of the relationship between commuting and wellbeing are well captured by qualitative approaches; and (3) therefore demonstrate how these complexities benefit from sustained conceptual analysis.

2. Points of Relevance to the Draft Report

2.1 The value of travel time

The draft report notes that: *“Time allocated to work could also mean a significant time spent commuting. The cost of this time — in terms of the value of the time forgone with family or other leisure activities — could be a significant determinant in people’s choice of job location arrangements”* (p.45).

- The implicit suggestion here is that the travel time involved in commuting itself is negative, understood in terms of its productive utility or value. This suggestion runs counter to the findings of the Stressed Mobilities project and previous research conducted by myself and other researchers that has shown that many commuters use their travel time in ways that it is valuable and productive (Bissell, 2010; Jain and Lyons, 2008).

- This productivity might be understood economically, in terms of how people use the time of the commute as a ‘mobile office’. But productivity might also be understood in a broader sense, through the way that travel time can afford people valuable ‘time out’ of work and home responsibilities. Research outcomes of the Stressed Mobilities project show that the travel time of the commute can give people the opportunity both to engage in enjoyable activities that they would not otherwise have the chance to do; and to rejuvenate and relax (Bissell, 2014a).
- Contrary to the assertion that commuting long distances to work reduces wellbeing (draft report, p.122), the Stressed Mobilities project found that there is no simple correlation between commuting distance and wellbeing. For some project participants, the geographical separation of home and work locations by the commute was described as a positive factor (Bissell, 2014b).
- The Stressed Mobilities project found that even commuters for whom certain aspects of their commutes caused them stress (such as the relentlessness of the routine, the impact of job pressure), there was also an appreciation that their commutes contained aspects that enhance their wellbeing and positive sense of self (Bissell, 2014a).

2.2 From sedentary to mobile ways of understanding community

The draft report identifies ‘community wellbeing’ as one of the key goals that geographic labour mobility can contribute to. Whilst not refuting this key proposition, the diverse practices of commuting themselves give rise to new ways of understanding ‘community’:

- For many commuters, their ‘community’ does not just refer to the locale in which their place of residence is located. It also includes the various times and spaces associated with the journeys themselves, as both the Stressed Mobilities project (Bissell, 2014a) and my previous research on this area has shown (Bissell, 2010). This includes places passed through or stopped at on the way.
- This is a point that is increasingly voiced by geographers who have argued that ‘community’ needs to be understood in a much more dynamic way in terms of how it is constituted by all the connections, links and journeys that make it, rather than something that is coherent and bounded (Massey, 2005).
- This more mobile understanding of community might be particularly significant for those who commute by public transport. As the Stressed Mobilities project has shown, buses, trains, trams and ferries are all distinctive mobile communities.
- Taking this more mobile definition of community, wellbeing is affected by a broader range of factors associated with these travelling spaces. These include the chance events that rise and fall in spaces of mobility (Bissell, 2014b); how comfortable they are (Bissell, 2008); how much investment they have received; and so on.

2.3 Transforming capacities

In the box that outlines “Examining wellbeing” (p.57) in the draft report, it is encouraging to see that the Commission makes brief reference to Amartya Sen’s ‘capabilities’ framework. This is significant because it goes some way to acknowledging how these mobility practices that the Geographic Labour Mobility study is concerned with, particularly those undertaken on a regular basis, are actually changing the people involved:

- Interviews with participants in the Stressed Mobilities project show that everyday practices of commuting are actively changing the capacities of what these people can do.
- These changing capacities are not necessarily concerned with how time spent commuting takes away from opportunities to do other activities. Rather, an acknowledgement of changing capacities concerns how repeated practices such as daily commuting actively shape people’s habits, dispositions and inclinations over time.
- This form of transformation is incremental and as such might not be consciously noticed. However, these forms of incremental transformation might result in key ‘tipping points’ (see Bissell, 2014a).
- Of significance to the report, what this means is that ‘major events’ (p.145) and ‘relocation decisions’ (p.37) are key tipping points that obscure the more incremental processes of transformation that are constantly ongoing.
- This line of thinking echoes current social scientific research that is looking at how practices self-transform through time (see for example Thrift, 2008).

2.4 From individuals to households

Throughout the draft report, there is much emphasis on ‘individuals’ as the unit of analysis. For example: “*Individuals will assess the costs and benefits of moving (and of different types of moves) according to a range of factors.*” (p.9). Later on the report states: “*Whether a given factor provides a benefit or a cost — and precisely how much the benefit or cost is valued — may be ambiguous and is likely to be dependent on the individual’s personal preferences and circumstances.*” (p.42).

- Whilst a focus on the ‘individual’ goes some way to acknowledging the complexities of geographical labour mobility, this unit of analysis potentially obscures the significance of how mobility decisions are arrived at collaboratively in the contexts of families or households (See Jarvis, 2005).
- In this regard, commuting decisions, both in terms of the location of residence, and other associated decisions such as mode of travel, route etc., are never wholly individual or personal, but rather are shaped at the household level (Bissell, 2014a).

References

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Dr David Bissell is Senior Lecturer and an ARC DECRA award holder in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. As a mobilities researcher, his research examines how different forms of mobility give rise to new relations between people and place. His research is published in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*; *Environment and Planning A*; *Cultural Geographies*; *Mobilities*; *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*; *Social and Cultural Geography*; *Area*; *Theory and Event*; *Geoforum*; *Geographical Research*; *Journal of Transport Geography*; *Space and Culture*; and *M/C Journal*. He is co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (2014) and *Stillness in a Mobile World* (2011). He is on the editorial boards of *Mobilities* and *Australian Humanities Review*.