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Abstract

Geographic labour mobility is necessary for increasing productivity in Australia. Long-distance commuting has been found to be especially significant. However, important considerations are being excluded from policy discussions within the Productivity Commission on this topic. This commentary covers these important omissions. They are, namely, the problematic conflation of the terminologies of 'fly-in, fly-out' and 'long-distance commuting' with mining, and a lack of qualitative research investigating the material impacts of these labour practices on people's lives. This commentary puts forward a new terminology, 'distance labour', to better include those industries on the margins of distance commuting. By accounting for the social worlds of workers engaged in distance labour, the Productivity Commission could increase the validity of its datasets, and provide more egalitarian policy recommendations.

Keywords

labour, mobility, re, distance, imagining, geographic

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Re-imagining Geographic Labour Mobility through *Distance Labour*

Keywords: Distance Labour; Long-Distance Commuting; Mining; Mobility; Productivity

Abstract:

Geographic labour mobility is necessary for increasing productivity in Australia. Long-distance commuting has been found to be especially significant. However, important considerations are being excluded from policy discussions within the Productivity Commission on this topic. This commentary covers these important omissions. They are, namely, the problematic conflation of the terminologies of ‘fly-in, fly-out’ and ‘long-distance commuting’ with mining, and a lack of qualitative research investigating the material impacts of these labour practices on people’s lives. This commentary puts forward a new terminology, *distance labour*, to better include those industries on the margins of distance commuting. By accounting for the social worlds of workers engaged in distance labour, the Productivity Commission could increase the validity of its datasets, and provide more egalitarian policy recommendations.

Introduction

Recently, I was invited to attend a roundtable discussion held in Canberra by the Australian Productivity Commission (PC) to solicit feedback on their recent draft report into geographic labour mobility. I was the only geographer in the room, despite the long standing contribution geography has made to the subjects of mobility (Larsen et al. 2006; Cresswell 2010; 2011; Cresswell and Merriman 2011; Dufty-Jones 2012) and labour (Harvey 1982; Herod 2002; Gibson-Graham 2006; Hall et al. 2013). My particular area of interest in the report was the section on long-distance commuting (LDC) (Productivity Commission 2013: 114). Sitting in a room filled with Commissioners, economists and bureaucrats discussing the discrepancies of the report, I was struck by the reliance on and importance placed upon statistics to inform policy. Despite draft recommendations about the centrality of LDC to labour flexibility, the topic was not discussed. These draft recommendations were substantially unchanged in the final report, and empirical emphasis was placed on demographic data. The primary source of *geographic* research in the report on LDC came from Hoath and Haslam McKenzie (2013), and is still characteristically demographic in nature. Qualitative research was notably absent in the final report.

Human geographers often take for granted the need for, and value of, qualitative research to the point where we sometimes forget to qualify why, exactly, it is important. It is important precisely because it qualifies “the plurality of coexisting and divergent social worlds in all of their affective intensity and complexity”, where numbers fail to tell a complete story (Gregory et al. 2009: 603). The lack of dedicated qualitative researchers within the PC, and its heavy reliance on statistical data and submissions from bureaucrats and business, paints only half the picture of geographic labour mobility. This commentary would like to argue two points. Firstly, that more qualitative research is necessary within the Productivity

Commission. Secondly, that LDC should be redefined as *distance labour* to accommodate the full spectrum of social worlds that this labour practice envelopes.

Qualifying ‘productivity’

The PC is “the Australian Government's independent research and advisory body on a range of economic, social and environmental issues affecting the welfare of Australians ... [helping to] make better policies in the long term interest of the Australian community” (Productivity Commission n.d.). Its mandate is to conduct research aimed at increasing (primarily) economic productivity. Broadly speaking, productivity is the efficiency of production, measured by its inputs and outputs. Its importance in contemporary economics is summed up by the statement (Krugman 1997: 11 emphasis added):

Productivity isn’t everything, but in the long run it is almost everything. A country’s ability to improve its standard of living over time depends almost entirely on its ability to raise its output *per worker*.

Emphasis has been added to demonstrate that Krugman sees people as the backbone of increased productivity, which is echoed as our “most important resource” in the recent Australian White Paper into the Asian century. The White Paper states a need to (Australia in the Asian Century Implementation Task Force 2012: 162 emphasis added):

[lift] our productivity and participation by investing in our *most important resource, our people*. Improving the capabilities of all Australians will raise our productivity and enable all Australians to participate successfully, helping Australia seize the opportunities on offer in the Asian century.

It becomes a difficult supposition to conceive of raising worker output without interrogating the social circumstances underpinning the workers themselves. This “most important resource, our people” are people with private lives, ambitions, connections to place, relationships and networks. While some aspects of human labour can be quantified, such as hours worked, time in transit and distance travelled, this ignores the fact that people are complex creatures whose lives are irreducible to a simple numbers game. Research into human beings, particularly when aimed at increasing their productive output, must incorporate needs and desires, and as such, must be qualified. The significance of an organisation composed of economists, commissioned to increase the productivity of geographic labour mobility based around the movement of humans, cannot therefore be overstated. This is particularly striking when the PC ‘Geographic Labour Mobility Draft Report’ states (Draft Finding 8.1): “The main impediments to geographic labour mobility relate to *personal factors*, and in particular family circumstance” (Productivity Commission 2013: 27 emphasis added), and yet these personal factors bear no investigative research?

In total, 56 submissions on geographic labour mobility were made to the Commission from the academic, business and government sectors. Draft Recommendation 10.1 acknowledged that it would be beneficial to have a longitudinal study of retrenched Ford workers after the closure of its Geelong plant, demonstrating they are aware of the human equation. However, this recommendation has not been replicated at this time with respect to LDC. This comes despite one of the key findings of the report (Draft Finding 11.1) emphasising the importance of LDC to productivity growth (Productivity Commission 2013: 27), and despite acknowledging its “growth ... [and] a need to better understand the profile of this workforce and the long-term impacts ...” (Productivity Commission 2013: 24). Although it is not the remit of this commentary to investigate the material impacts of LDC, the discursive impacts can be investigated and challenged.

The need for ‘distance labour’

LDC comprises a fraction of the Australian workforce, measuring 2.1% at the time of the 2011 Census according to auditing firm KPMG (KPMG for the Minerals Council of Australia 2013: 10). The PC avoids defining LDC, and accepts the definition proposed by KPMG as commutes of “100 km or greater” (Productivity Commission 2014: 126). Using this definition, inter-city commuters travelling from Newcastle or the Southern Highlands to Sydney, or Coolangatta to Brisbane would fall under LDC. It is difficult to conceive that circumstantially these commuters would have much in common with people who fly to their places of employment and spend significant periods of time away from their main place of residence. This begins to raise interesting questions about the effectiveness of this terminology if used to discuss productivity and policy formation, and must be considered a significant data flaw.

Looking at Figure 1, under KPMG’s definition of LDC used by the PC, it shows that mining comprises just 20% of the LDC workforce (ignoring for a minute who may be excluded from this definition). Yet, mining occupies by far the most significant proportion of the attention devoted to LDC. It is unclear whether this is due to the visibility of miners (both physically as a high-visibility presence in airport terminals, or emotively through the constant media exposure of high profile mining executives Clive Palmer and Gina Rineheart), or because of the perception of mining as the driver of the Australian economy. This in enacting a form of “discursive violence” against other industries (Gibson-Graham 2006: xiii). Under these circumstances, it becomes necessary then to imagine a new terminology that positions mining as an equal industry among many. The expanded conceptualisation I propose is *distance labour*.

Figure 1: The LDC workforce in 2011 in Australia (modified from KPMG for the Minerals Council of Australia 2013: 21)

The use of distance labour as a new terminology can encompass the existing definitions of LDC and fly-in, fly out (FIFO) and the narrow view of labour they represent (mining), whilst being inclusive of other types of labour that are currently potentially excluded, but also require a significant temporal and spatial dislocation. The new terminology must also be more succinct, so that it is less inclusive of commuters simply travelling long distances to and from home each day (such as from Newcastle to Sydney).

Distance labour can therefore be defined as¹:

- 1) Travelling greater than 250km each way to their workplace.
- 2) Spending at least one night away from home in the course of their work.
- 3) Spending at least 4 nights per month away from home.

These conditions are not meant to be prescriptive, since there is a lack of precision and clarity about exactly how deep these practices extend into the labour force. They remain as an opening for a new conversation around geographic labour mobility practices. Nevertheless,

some embryonic conditions are required to bring together labourers that experience similar challenges to work/life balance in long working hours, temporary accommodation, separation from family, and significant travel time. Under this definition, some of the industries that could variously fall under the category of distance labour are: offshore oil-riggers, military personnel, truck drivers, circuit judges, police, academics, seasonal workers, miners, nannies, remote sex workers, remote health care professionals and more. It is possible that some of these labourers have been deliberately excluded from policy discussions around geographic labour mobility. As we will see in the following section however, deliberate or inadvertent, the representation and practice of geographic labour mobility is always a political act (Cresswell 2010: 20).

The politics of representation

The popular definitions of LDC and FIFO have become conflated with the mining industry in serious policy circles (see Hoath and Haslam McKenzie 2013; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia 2013; Productivity Commission 2013). For example, in Hoath and Haslam-McKenzie (2013: viii), the authors argue that the “LDC workforce is diverse and is not limited to the resource industry”, but later go on to use LDC as the “encompassing term for the range of non-residential workforce arrangements currently in use in the resource sector” (2013: 1), essentially endowing the term with a resource industry-focused specificity. Conflation of this type is problematic, since it comes at the expense of other, but no less significant, industries. The House of Representatives ‘Cancer of the Bush’ report is a glaring example, where despite submissions from FIFO sex workers whose work should have fallen under the remit of the study into FIFO work practices, their contribution registered as two (negatively worded) lines in the final report (House of

Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia 2013). The marginalisation of other industries through the overexposure of mining-as-FIFO bears similarities to Kosofsky's 'Christmas effect'. This manifests as (Detamore 2010: 172):

the depressing set of circumstances which brings the multiple voices such as the Church, State, markets, media, and so on into a monolithic voice aiming towards the expectation of a similar predictable outcome – in this case Christmas.

The 'Christmas effect' can easily be conferred here to LDC and FIFO. When multiple various official reports, the media, and a simple internet search for 'FIFO', all fuse FIFO with mining, then these terms form a monolithic voice that inadvertently forms the 'predictable outcome' of equating the two. The equation of FIFO or LDC = mining participates in the relationship with mobility and "the production of power and relations of domination" (Cresswell 2010: 20). As other distance labour types are marginalised by this equation, their ability to advocate for themselves, to influence policy, and to attract research is diminished. Although FIFO has become synonymous with mining, health care professionals are increasingly asserting their claim on the terminology, demonstrating that it is possible to make an attempt to recolonise particular terminologies (see Hart et al. 2013; Weeramanthri and Jancey 2013). However, health care has a disciplinary research culture able to advocate for itself unlike, say, truck driving. Distance labour terminology is therefore required to resituate this labour practice within the broad spectrum of participating industries.

When we interrogate the questions "How is mobility discursively constituted ... [and w]hat narratives have been constructed about mobility?", we see that mobility-as-LDC or FIFO has constructed a discursive environment that is inclusive for the resource sector, and exclusive for all others (Cresswell 2010: 21). Representing distance labour as a more inclusive form of geographic labour mobility can address the underlying social questions that the PC should be

concerned with, such as “who is moving and why (questions of motility) and the nature of the power relations in play in their socio-spatial transformations” (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014: 6). These questions can be addressed through qualitative research methods such as interviews and ethnography. Qualitative research can be seen not just as documentation, but as theorising social worlds, in this case, the social worlds of the distance labourer. We need to account for “the stories or narratives” woven into those social worlds, and “the practices ... and meanings associated with them” (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014: 7). It is the stories and embodied nature of mobility that matter, since these are the stories that people draw upon, enact, and perform when making decisions about their lives. Understanding the needs and wants implicit in these stories will be a key marker for increasing productivity.

Conclusions

Geographic labour mobility in Australia is on this rise, and will clearly play a role in economic flexibility and growth in the future. However, this phenomenon may evolve tangentially depending on the policy environment, with implications for productivity. A strict emphasis on statistics and Census data may lead to policies of exclusion. Accounting for the stories and narratives woven by the social worlds of the people who participate in, and experience this type of labour firsthand, will tell a more complete picture. Using the well-known but narrow terminologies of LDC and FIFO in the discursive policy environment is already participating in politics of exclusion (as witnessed in the case of sex workers in the ‘Cancer of the Bush’ report).

A new terminology, *distance labour*, carries no expectations, and no prior connection to the resources sector. Incorporating a diverse spectrum of participating industries may provide positive outcomes for a more egalitarian policy outlook in the following ways. Firstly, where

not already included in conventional accounting on LDC or FIFO, incorporation of these labourers into broader distance labour metadata may not only increase productivity, but increase the rigour of datasets. Secondly, it can open up the research agenda to allow researchers to draw comparisons and triangulate conclusions between otherwise seemingly disparate professions, and contribute to a knowledge base that may be beneficial to many. Answering lingering questions, such as those confronting the impacts of geographic labour mobility on “individuals and their families” (Productivity Commission 2013: 4, 58, 207), is something the discipline of human geography and its emphasis on qualitative research is ideally suited to investigate.

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ⁱ Although this commentary privileges standard Australian/Western perspectives of labour time and mobility, space should also be made for including customary indigenous and/or non-Western understandings of what might constitute distance labour.