THE LIMITS TO PUBLIC SERVICE: RURAL COMMUNITIES, PROFESSIONAL FAMILIES AND WORK MOBILITY

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Abstract
Australia faces an ongoing challenge recruiting professionals to staff essential human services in rural and remote communities. This paper identifies the limits to the implicit service contract between professions and their client populations. These become evident in how private solutions to competing priorities within professional families create their selective mobility and thus the public problem for such communities. The paper reports on a survey of doctors, nurses, teachers and police with responsibility for school-aged children in Queensland that plumbed the strength of neoliberal values in their educational strategy and their commitment to the public good in their careers. The quantitative analysis suggested that neoliberal values need not necessarily undermine a commitment to the public good. However, the qualitative analysis of responses to hypothetical career opportunities in rural and remote communities drew out the multiple and intertwined spatial and temporal limits to such public service, and highlighted the priority given to educational concerns in these families’ considerations. This private nexus of concerns poses a wicked policy problem on multiple institutional fronts.

Key Words: professionals, rural/remote communities, family, schooling, mobility, neoliberalism

Introduction: The problem with professional families and rural communities
High levels of human capital in the form of educational qualifications... are likely to make little difference to community sustainability if those skills are not used to achieve some common good, or if they cause those who possess them to move away and seek new opportunities elsewhere. (Cocklin & Alston, 2003, p. 14)

Australia faces an ongoing challenge recruiting and retaining professionals such as doctors, nurses, and teachers to staff essential human services in rural and remote communities (Haslam McKenzie, 2007). Workforce reports around the issue point to family factors such as spouse employment and children’s educational opportunities as secondary considerations that matter-of-factly speak for themselves:

Usually, the employment options for the ‘trailing spouse’ in remote communities are very limited: an important consideration given the shift to dual career families. The higher quality education resources in the larger population centres are another major reason why families often prefer to live in these centres. This is a particularly important consideration once children reach secondary school age. (Haslam McKenzie, 2010, p. 366)

There is little further probing of how such family priorities interact with professionals’ career decisions over time and space, and how amenable these interactions are to policy interventions. This paper draws on the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) to explore how private solutions to competing priorities within such professional families create the public problem for these communities. This sociological focus on mobility offers ‘a different way of thinking through the character of
economic, social and political relationships’ (Urry, 2008, p. 479) and how the autonomous capacity of some to decide when and where they move becomes a form of social advantage that impinges on others. Here, we are particularly interested in whether neoliberal educational policy encouraging more active school choice has exacerbated the selective mobility of professional families, and helped to undermine the implicit public service contract between professions and their client populations. In other words, we are interested in whether a policy ‘solution’ in one sector has created policy problems elsewhere.

Rural sociology often foregrounds stability in rural populations, and perhaps the steady flow of young people out of such localities (for example, Carr & Kafalas, 2009). This framing renders invisible the necessary inwards flow of mobile professionals with trailing families that constitute an essential part of viable communities if those communities cannot produce their own such professionals. In contrast, this same professional fraction of the middle class has become increasingly visible in the sociology of education, given the role of educational credentials in their own life opportunities and their intense investment in the school choice market to promote similar educational advantage for their children (Ball, 2003; Campbell, Proctor, & Sherington, 2009). Connell (2003) summarises the marked class differences in Australian ‘family projects’ (p.239) around children’s education:

There are differences in the know-how with which parents approach schooling issues, and in the definition of the main problem they have to face. Engaged middle-class parents are likely to be focused on the post-school pathways that their children will be launched into. This concern moves strategic choice of subjects, and maximising marks, to the centre of attention. Engaged working-class parents are more likely to be focused on simply keeping their children in school to the [matriculation credential]. This concern moves interest and discipline to the centre of attention. (p.240)

Campbell et al.’s (2009) study documented the Australian middle class’s growing aspirations and anxieties around school choice, and how ‘the pressures are shifting downward’ (p.8) with more families choosing to place their sons and daughters in private schooling well before secondary schooling. Laureau’s (2003) work in the US similarly highlights the marked difference between the ‘concerted cultivation’ of the middle class child, and the ‘natural accomplishment’ of the working class child. Such research would suggest that for professional families more so than others, education should be understood as an all-consuming primary concern about intergenerational status reproduction, not a mere secondary consideration. To date, the literature around middle class strategy in school choice has focussed its enquiries on metropolitan centres with deep educational markets. The missing link between rural sociology and the sociology of educational markets lies in understanding how professional families view and engage with the more limited educational choices available in smaller communities.

We understand the social institution of family to be the relational nexus where contradictory demands of institutions that govern public domains such as education and work have to be negotiated through normative assumptions around gender, sexuality, reproduction, care and emotion that govern the private domain (Berger, 2002; Sherif-Trask, 2010). Social conventions around families have been shown to be both responsive and resilient in the face of social change, but we would highlight the analytic constant of families’ dense and formative intersubjectivity as their distinguishing feature. Crossley (1996) explains the concept of intersubjectivity through the metaphor of fabric as in the expression ‘social fabric’:

It is what holds us all together in an identifiable group or unit. Secondly, 'fabric' conjures up an image of multiple overlappings and intertwinnings, organised and arranged in different ways, sometimes becoming disorganised. It connotes a sense of unity and strength which is achieved by way of this overlapping. No thread is either strong or
significant on its own but the intertwining gives it strength and form.

Our focus here is on family units with responsibility for school-aged children. A family, however constituted, will be more than the sum of its individuals. Through its constitution, new properties emerge that serve to overwrite or decentralise the individual:

plans are not necessarily the properties of individuals. They can be formed between individuals, as an irreducible property of a couple ... In these situations it is not I who decide what to do, nor you. It is we who decide. ... a complex interactive situation, which cannot have been planned as such by either side, but within which a plan is formulated. (Crossley, 1996, p. 81)

Following Pocock (2003) we understand the domains of work and family to be entangled, ‘part of a seamless, messy whole: a conglomerate’ (p.16). In this paper, we seek to keep this complexity in play, rather than attend to strands as separate domains because that is not how they are ultimately lived. In the mobility literature, Bonnet, Collet and Maurines (2008) develop the concept of the ‘family career’ to account for ‘how family and conjugal events have an impact on each partner's occupation’ and capture ‘the necessary adjustments between individual itineraries and founding a family, or differently worded, between the “I” and the “we”’ (p.142). In other words, any explanation of families' mobility decisions must attend to intersubjective negotiations and efforts to reconcile, harmonise or dovetail individual's projects within the larger collective's project of being together over time.

Following Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2004), we are also alert to the loosening of social scripts and the growing play of reflexive deliberation and improvisation in how families work. There are fewer reliable templates or guarantees on how family relations are to be done. These social transformations have been described as the politically engineered ‘individualisation’ (Beck, 1992) of the social fabric:

Central institutions of the Western world ... are now addressed to the individual, not to the collective or to groups. The education system, labor-market trends, job careers, indeed markets in general are individualizing structures, individualizing institutions, hence 'engines' of individualization. (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2004, p. 504)

This individualised design of public sector services is the result of decades of neoliberal metapolicy, being ‘the notion of the market as an analogy for all other areas of life ... Where classical liberalism sought to govern through society, neo-liberalism seeks to govern by administering society as if it were a market’ (King & Kendall, 2004, p. 215). Pusey's (2003) large interview study of middle Australia explored how the march of neoliberal economic reform has pushed citizens to reluctantly become ‘risk managers of their own lives’ (p. 2), producing uncertainty, anxiety and stress: ‘we soon discover that middle Australia worries about jobs, jobs, jobs. ... As work presses every more deeply into the fine grain of life itself, it is no surprise to find our middle Australians, the working women especially, worrying about the impacts of work on their families’ (p.2). Pusey concludes that while corporations are the winners under such economic reform, ‘families are the big losers’ (p.107), highlighting a pressing need to enquire into how families are absorbing, mitigating or processing the social changes around them. Some families however will be better placed and resourced to navigate the risks of marketised society than others.

For our purposes, professionals are understood to be workers whose licensing via educational credentials and/or registration processes grants them membership in a closed, self-managing occupation with associated rewards and status (Collins, 1990). Given the broad uptake of a discourse of ‘professionalism’ in many occupations, there is ongoing debate over whether professionals are merely a sub-group of the expert occupations in the middle class, or serve a distinct social/political function. Sciulli (2009) summarises the sociology of professions as having its origins in Parsons functionalism that celebrated the professions’ ameliorative contribution to civil society, being 'oriented...
normatively by altruism, a service orientation’ (p.44) in contrast to more commercial motives. The field then underwent critique and revision by others who highlighted the professions’ unwarranted monopolies, self-interested socioeconomic advantage, their place in ‘the structure of privilege’ (Collins, 1990, p. 13) and their contribution to social control. Where the former approach would highlight the social benefits that accrue to the collective from a system of professions, these latter more critical perspectives would highlight the positional benefits that accrue to the individual from his/her professional status.

Saks (1995) similarly highlighted the altruistic commitment to the public good and ethical codes that have served to distinguish professions from other occupations in the past and justified public subsidy of their extended preparation. Saks however questions the strength of any commitment to the public service ethic in contemporary, marketised societies: ‘do these elite occupational groups in fact embody a special moral standard based on the ideal of service? Or should such claims, which are often used in defence of professional privilege, be viewed with rather more cynicism?’ (p. 6). Sculli’s structural analysis sought to reassert that ‘norm-based, extra-economic behaviour’, that is, the altruistic service orientation, is as ‘constitutive of any ongoing professionalism project as is providing expert services’ (2009, p. 295), and that the professions are an important intermediary institution for civil society, regardless of whether individual professionals themselves are motivated by self-interest. In other words, society can rightfully expect a service orientation from the profession, if not from the individual occupying that position. These treatments, though varied, converge on the question of whether the public service ethic is under stress. For this reason, the tension between professionals’ public duty and private interests playing out in underserviced rural and remote communities has broad policy and educational implications. Is professional socialisation managing to sustain an ethic of public service in the face of broader social individualisation? Can communities expect to call on the implicit contract underpinning public investment in professionals’ lengthy education?

To synthesise the points above, policy discussions about the recruitment and retention of professionals to staff rural and remote services could benefit from considering the intrusion of market logic and dynamics into public institutions, private realms, and professional sensibilities. These conditions are likely to promote proactive, risk-managing strategy by those in a position to do so, in order to protect current and future life opportunities for family members. The professional fraction of the middle class are of pivotal importance, given the tension between their public role in maintaining viable communities and their private family projects heavily invested in educational choice for their children. The risks, opportunities, and contradictions within the policy landscape are left for family units to resolve in their intersubjective ‘family careers’ over time and place. Given their chronic mal-distribution across the communities that have subsidised their credentials, there is a growing concern about professionals’ ongoing commitment to the public good, and its potential erosion under neoliberal individualisation. The common policy ‘solution’ of incentive schemes to attract professionals, particularly doctors, to rural and remote locations could be seen to be equally contributing to the erosion of the public service ethic, by endorsing and institutionalising motives attached to private interests.

To explore these tensions, this paper reports on aspects of a mixed methods study that explored how families of selected professionals reconcile work and educational strategies in their decisions to relocate, and how they engage with opportunities in rural and remote Queensland. The paper proceeds in four sections. The first section outlines the methodological design and sample. The second reports on an analysis of survey responses to test whether the pursuit of school choice encouraged by neoliberal policies interacts with or impacts on professionals’ commitment to public service in their career decisions. The third section presents an analysis of more qualitative survey responses to hypothetical scenarios where respondents explain how work, family and community considerations intersect when contemplating household moves. The final section reflects on the findings, policy implications, and what it
means for Australia when services in rural and remote communities are considered to be of insufficient quality to attract the professionals needed to staff them.

Methods
This mixed methods study\(^1\) was conducted in two phases. The first involved semi-structured interviews with 27 ‘professionals’ and 5 ‘non-professional’ workers with school-aged children living in six Queensland rural communities ranging from a sizeable regional centre with a deep educational market, to a remote ‘outback’ town offering minimal educational choice (see Doherty, Rissman, & Browning, 2013). Our interview sample included 4 doctors, 10 teachers, 4 nurses, and 9 police. These professions were targeted to provide a graduated cline of ‘professional’ status, from the high status of doctors with their long professional preparation, through teachers and nurses as university credentialled and registered professionals, to the restricted and regulated occupation of policing which relies less on academic credentials and more on in-house training. Representatives of these groups who had school-aged children in their households volunteered in response to invitations issued through their unions or employers\(^2\). We also interviewed five other workers working in non-professional roles, by which we mean occupations that were neither closed nor regulated by educational credentials. The hour long interviews with the professional parent elicited each family’s history of household mobility, and their narratives of considerations and concerns around each relocation.

This qualitative phase informed the development of the second more quantitative phase, an online survey of the same professional groups across Queensland in 2011. This paper reports on the survey data — both quantitative and qualitative. Our survey attracted two hundred and seventy eight respondents, consisting of 27 doctors, 134 nurses, 45 policemen, and 72 teachers. In general there were more female respondents (217) than male (60) across categories (one respondent not reporting gender), with more females within the doctor, nurse, and teacher groups, while more males amongst police respondents. The number of children in the sampled family households varied between one and eight, with an overall mean of 2.21. Basic demographic features of our sample are reported in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Min</td>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.21</td>
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In addition to demographic and mobility questions, the survey included attitudinal items to plumb respondents’ responses on the following constructs:

- ‘neoliberalism’, being their level of endorsement of neoliberal market ideology in the education sector;
- ‘public good’ being the importance given to the public good in the professional’s career decisions

\(^{1}\) Mixed methods study

\(^{2}\) Non-professional workers, by which we mean occupations that were neither closed nor regulated by educational credentials.
‘private interest’ being the importance given to personal advantage in the professional’s career decisions.

Another set of questions invited open responses to hypothetical career opportunities in three specific locations – a coastal regional town, an interior regional town, and a more remote township. The next section presents an analysis of how the professionals’ neoliberal attitudes correlated with their degree of commitment to the public good or private interests. The following section elaborates on how respondents constructed and combined family, work, education and community rationales in their qualitative responses to the hypothetical opportunities.

**Does neo-liberalism impinge on professionals’ commitment to ‘public good’?**

We validated a set of attitudinal items using Structural Equation Modelling to develop single-factor measurement models for the constructs of ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘public good’. Both constructs were specified as latent variables with four reflective indicators, and the data fitted the model well. Item sets mapping the two constructs are detailed in Table 2.

A proportionally weighted index was developed for each construct. This was then computed as a continuous variable for each respondent. A test of the relationship between neoliberalism and public good was conducted using Pearson’s correlation ($r = -.004$, one-tailed $p = .476$) but did not offer enough evidence to support the negative relationship between neoliberalism and public good that we expected. This finding is at odds with the literature’s concern about the gradual erosion of professionals’ commitment to the public good and our speculation that this would be hastened by growing adherence to neoliberal attitudes.

**Table 2. Item sets and their corresponding constructs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Item code</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neo-liberalism</td>
<td>Neolib3</td>
<td>We strongly believe non-government schools offer a better education than government schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neolib4</td>
<td>We choose where to live because of the quality of the schools in the area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neolib5</td>
<td>We think it’s good if schools compete with each other in a market of choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neolib6</td>
<td>The My School$^\text{iii}$ website plays an important role in informing our choice of school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public good</td>
<td>Pub2</td>
<td>I feel a strong obligation to give back to society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pub3</td>
<td>I think governments have the right to expect professionals to work in underserviced communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pub5</td>
<td>I think as a professional I have a duty to serve in disadvantaged communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pub7</td>
<td>As a professional, I feel a strong commitment to ensure that all communities are well serviced.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To further unpack our data, comparative ANOVA tests with post hoc tests were conducted to gauge the mean differences in the level of the constructs neoliberalism and public good between each professional group. Overall, there was a significant effect of profession on levels of the construct public good, with a small to medium effect ($F (3, 274) = 4.986, p = .002, \omega = .20$). There was a gradual decline in the mean level of the construct public good from doctors, through teachers and police, to nurses. Between groups, the level of public good of doctors and teachers was significantly higher than that of nurses, with a small to medium effect (doctors compared to nurses: $t (159) = 2.837, p = .005, r = .22$; teachers compared to nurses: $t (204) = 3.289, p = .001, r = .22$).

Overall, there was also a significant effect of profession on levels of neoliberalism, with a small to medium effect ($F (3, 274) = 13.448, p < .001, \omega = .20$). There was a gradual decline in the mean level of the construct neoliberalism from police,
through doctors and nurses, to teachers. Between groups, the level of the construct neoliberalism for the police group was significantly higher than that of nurses and teachers, with a small to medium effect ($t(177) = 3.383, p = .001, r = .25$) and a large effect ($t(115) = 6.303, p < .001, r = .51$) respectively. The level of the construct neoliberalism among the doctor and nurse groups was significantly higher than that of teachers, with a medium to large effect ($t(177) = 3.383, p = .001, r = .25$) and a large effect ($t(115) = 6.303, p < .001, r = .51$) respectively. Of particular interest here, the doctors reported both relatively high scores on the neoliberalism construct and public good construct. This patterning suggests a departure in this sample from Sak’s thesis of eroding commitment to the public good in the traditional high status professions.

This finding of independent value sets suggests that the family units will be seeking to reconcile and satisfy a number of priorities at the same time. In other words, it is not a case of pursing one at the expense of the other, but more a case of how can both value sets be addressed in a career path. This led us to look more closely at how the pool of professional parents expressed their priorities and meshed considerations in their qualitative comments.

**If families can hold both neoliberal and public good values, how do they reconcile these value sets?**

In the survey, respondents were given the hypothetical scenario of being offered ‘very attractive positions’ in three locations, and invited to share their reaction and the considerations ‘that would guide your decision’. The three locations were Bowen on the tropical coast, inland regional hub Roma, and more remote and socio-economically disadvantaged Cunnamulla. As an indication of the difficulty these communities have had attracting professionals, the Queensland Department of Health offers medical officers an ‘inaccessibility incentive’ allowance of $41,400 for a year’s service in Cunnamulla, and $20,700 per annum in Roma and Bowen (http://www.health.qld.gov.au/rural/docs/remot_ALLOWANCE.pdf, accessed 1 July 2013). With this purposeful range, we sought to explore how professionals with school-aged families related to the rural and remote communities that need them, and on what terms. This question received 275 responses from a few words to a paragraph in length.

A thematic analysis of the responses would point to repeated mentions of considerations such as: lifestyle attributes of the locations; school quality; access to medical services; proximity to extended family; remuneration and incentives; disruption to children’s education; opportunities for spouse employment; career prospects. These concerns are well documented in the literature around rural workforce and regional sustainability (for example, Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2008; Cameron, 1998; Humphreys, Jones, Jones, & Mara, 2002; Miles, Marcheall, Rolfe, & Noonan, 2006; OECD, 2005; Owen, Kos, & McKenzie, 2008) . However, we were more interested in how the responses assembled and combined these predictable concerns, that is, what hierarchy or relations were evident in the conjunction or logic between elements that help us understand how families reconcile such concerns? How did these professionals weigh and balance the competing demands and opportunities of community, work, and family? We drew our analytic approach from the theoretical resources of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Our intention here is not to perform sophisticated linguistic analysis, but rather to craft a way to characterise the intersubjective mesh of conditions through which professionals view regional and remote locations.

Conjunction refers to the variety of ways a text creates articulations and relations between its messages. With this focus our analysis attended to the nature of the logico-semantic links between the considerations raised in the responses. There are a number of possible relations between considerations. In a ‘paratactic’ relationship elements are accorded equal and status, such as in ‘a and b’ or a list, ‘a, b, c’. An example of paratactic links between considerations would be: ‘I would look into medical facilities and schooling, also job opportunity for my husband’ (#52). In contrast
the relationship of ‘if a, then b’, or ‘b depends on a’ constructs a ranked ‘hypotactic’ relationship, with one element hierarchically more important than another (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.374). An example of a hypotactic link would be: ‘I would have no hesitation in living in those towns if it best suited my family at that particular time’ (#6). In this case, suiting the family is the top ranked condition and deciding priority. Another way to express such priority is in the strength of modulation pertaining to the conditions imposed. A bald ‘must’, or its semantic equivalent, marks a condition more strongly as necessary in comparison to the more mitigated statement of a condition as desirable. Examples of unmitigated, non-negotiable conditions would be: ‘significant financial incentives would be required’ (#24), and similarly ‘...would love to go provided financial incentives were there’ (#9).

These contrast with the more mitigated desirable condition: ‘Would maybe need boarding school’ (#35). A further possible relationship between ideas is where one trumps or cancels out the other – ‘a but b’. For example, ‘No thank you. I have family in Cunnamulla but not sufficient resources schools etc for children’s education’ (#18); ‘My family comes before my profession...so would stay put at this stage’ (#238). Finally, responses often embedded a causal link (a because b) justifying their expressed position, for example: ‘Wouldn’t go because kids are in a good school’ (#142); ‘... realistically would be unlikely to move because we like where we live and are in the catchment for one of the best high schools in the state’ (#25). Respondents frequently employed a mixture of these relations, for example: ‘Would have to be a promotion to commissioned rank and only if partner agreed’ (#10), building layers of conditional complexity. Different logical relations between considerations could be expressed through a variety of wording choices, not just the summary formulations above. We are more interested in typifying the meaning, clustering and ranking created by the links between considerations, not the linguistic detail of their realisation.

There were only seven unconditional positive responses indicating that the respondent would entertain any location offered: ‘If I was transferred I’d go. I joined a Statewide organisation, not a South East Queensland organisation’ (#19); ‘would move to all three, rural nursing is my passion’ (#83). There were also ten unconditional rejections of the idea: ‘no, not going’ (#64); ‘have no interest in changing work locations. Am not interested in uprooting myself and the family’ (#124).

In between these two poles, the vast majority of respondents outlined multifaceted decisions that integrated a number of work, family and community considerations or conditions. The paratactic clusters of conditions displayed the variety of conditions and considerations that came into play across a number of institutional fronts, and that needed to align to make such a move thinkable:

I am happy to try a move and living in a rural/remote location given consideration to the following: Minimal or no impact on husband’s career opportunities. Opportunity to excel in given career. Opportunity to increase family’s financial position. Opportunity to school kids in an excellent learning environment including curricula, sports, social and cultural opportunities. (#239)

Opportunities for family, education, role and functions being undertaken in position, distances to elderly extended family and commitments to them, financial incentives, costs of living in areas given all locations are associated with mining, availability of affordable housing. (#198)

These lists of contingencies in effect point to the multiplicity of risks involved in moving for a family unit, and how any relocation decision must manage risk on a number of fronts. Conditions over which a prospective employer has some influence are only one facet in this multifaceted complex.

Where respondents stipulated a necessary condition, they featured one dominant factor, but which factor this was differed across respondents: ‘If our religious beliefs were strong in that area’, (#16), ‘If a location does not have good health facilities and schools, I would not consider moving’(#12); ‘would have to be
significant career and financial reward to get me to move’ (#34); ‘we would not be prepared to go because of the educational choices for our children would not be there and we would not like to send them to a boarding school’ (#217). More subtly, some responses engaged with the hypothetical locations assuming the condition that they as professionals would travel in and out, leaving the family home and its associated spouse employment and schooling projects in place: ‘Would only consider if fly in fly out on a 4 week on, 1 week off at the employer’s expense’ (#256); ‘Depending on payrise and work conditions, flexibility of holidays to go back and visit family 8+ weeks of paid leave, having a set roster to allow for family to visit me ...’ (#216). For other respondents, the necessary condition would be placing their children in boarding school thus assuming the need to transcend the local educational market in these localities: ‘I would not be unhappy with the move. A move would be dependent on which school my child would want to attend as a boarder (be it boarding school in Townsville or Brisbane)’ (#228); ‘I would consider Roma as a possibility as it is only 4 hour drive away – my daughter could board at her current school’ (#172). These responses that considered de-aggregating family units to maintain individual projects give some indication of the middle class family’s intense focus on children’s education. Some responses indicated that although the professional opportunity appealed, other family circumstances inarguably trumped any such consideration: ‘my partner would not be able to work in these places’ (#58); ‘love to work there but my partner would have very little work opportunities’ (#36); ‘Fantastic, but I cannot move there because my children need the stability of attending the same school’ (#219); ‘My husband is in his “perfect job” ... and the kids love their schools and social life. I personally love rural and remote nursing but cannot do it until a later time’ (#227). In families with chronic health needs, or special educational needs, these factors trumped career prospects: ‘Would resign from job - husband unable to get medical treatment in Roma or Cunnamulla’ (#280). These responses demonstrate the intersubjective web that constitutes family units and de-centre the individual’s career project. Hence, financial incentives addressed to the individual worker can often fall short of satisfying family considerations, as one respondent explained: ‘Kids very stable at current school main reason not to leave. I earn enough. Not greedy and financial reasons not enough incentive to move’ (#21); Money is not so important, we are doing well enough financially to not need to pursue money at all costs’ (#286).

The responses brought to the empirical surface the constraining circumstances of more complex and extended family forms and how intersubjective interdependencies trump public service or career opportunity. As a stark example, family units negotiating shared custody arrangements had other more pressing accountabilities to meet which decided any response:

I would refuse due to family reasons. I have already indicated to the department that I will not be able to do 'country service' until my current school-aged children have finished school and no longer require custodial access to their father. (#189)

I would have to decline as my ex-partner will seek to get a court order stating his boys need to be in the same town/city as he resides ... this, at the moment, affects most of my future career options.’ (#281)

Other respondents in single parent families reported deferring or resisting mobility because of their need to be close to extended family to benefit from their support: Would not be able to do it without family support as my parents and sisters help care for my child when I am working different shifts (#91). While the extended family contributed care in this case, in many other cases, the extended family required care, which made mobility equally unthinkable: ‘I would not be prepared to move at present as I need to remain in my current location to care for aging parents’ (#205). In this way access to extended family for both giving and receiving care imposed spatial limits on the mobility range that would be entertained.

Proximity to extended family more generally featured as a key consideration in many responses, as they weighed up the three
hypothetical options. Towns were considered more or less appealing to respondents given the presence of, or distance from, extended family. For example, two respondents assessed Roma differently on the same criteria: ‘... my first choice would be to Roma due to the fact that it is closer to our extended family in south east corner of Queensland’ (#39) as opposed to ‘Roma would be a bit of a shock ... due to its remote location and having no family close by’ (#41). In contrast, one respondent ruled out a town ‘because I have family there’ (#89).

This relative or subjective sense of space and place sat alongside consideration of more fixed attributes of locations (such as their climate, environment) and their social affordances (such as air connections, medical services, cultural activities, recreational opportunities, access to universities). Respondents were frank in their assessments of these considerations, for example: ‘would not live out west as too isolated and no ocean’ (#152); ‘I could not cope with hot climate’ (#162). Across the data set, Bowen as a choice benefited from its coastal setting, while Cunnamulla, more so than Roma, suffered from its remoteness: ‘A dry and distant town like Cunnamulla holds zero attraction for me. I would move back to Scotland before teaching even a term there’ (#304). More problematically, Cunnamulla as an option suffered from a reputation for being ‘racist’ (#191) and unsafe: ‘doesn’t give me a sense of safety being a single mum’ (#56, also 258, #284); ‘I do not want to work in Cunnamulla due to both the distance and the challenges of living in that community’ (#308). Whether or not these charges are defensible, such stigmatised reputations circulate and serve prospective residents in the absence of better information. Where respondents had previously worked in these locations, the attitudes were differently framed and more personalised: ‘Roma is a nice small country town that my husband has worked in previously’ (#262); ‘I’ve visited Bowen and Roma for extended stays. It seems too hard to find people with compatible interests or the conveniences and choice of living offered by a metropolitan area’ (#304); ‘I grew up in the South West so Roma and Cunnamulla would not worry me personally’ (#291).

How did any professional sense of public service feature in the responses? Twelve responses explicitly mentioned past remote/rural service. Nine of these invoked past service in rural/remote or disadvantaged communities as the reason why they wouldn’t, or shouldn’t have to, consider the locations suggested: ‘have done western service’ (#295); ‘Disappointed as I feel I have served various communities for extended periods of time’ (#66). In other words, past service was proffered as evidence of having satisfied any claim such public duty could make on them as professionals, and hence their right to legitimately prioritise other needs. One respondent was very clear about how public service and family priorities had been purposefully staged sequentially: ‘... I have done 6 years in a rural location – I chose to do this before having my children so I could give them a stable home environment surrounded by extended family’ (#305). Such a temporal solution to competing demands solves the private problem for families, but exacerbates the public problem for rural/remote communities, which will serve as nurseries with rotating doors for early career professionals. Commitment to a public service ethic thus impinged on these professionals’ decision making to some degree, but within temporal limits as well as spatial boundaries: ‘I have already done my country service and worked in [disadvantaged community], it is my turn to work in an ‘easier’ location!’ (#308).

Two respondents indicated that they had already worked in remote/rural settings and had not ruled out further, but now faced additional considerations given family responsibilities: ‘Working remote locations is not a fear I have as my partner and I have done this before. Current considerations would include ease of travel back to Brisbane if necessary for family or health reasons, medical and school options for my dependents’ (#49). The remaining response in those that mentioned past country service was unique in being able to reconcile service, family and professional considerations in favour of opportunities in such locations:

I would take any position available in any of these areas. I think it is very important for my children to experience both city
and country locations and also that nursing in these areas provide more specific and wider based skills in a smaller, close knit environment. Money is also a factor but having already experienced this as a new graduate the experience and the money was very worthwhile in order to come back to Brisbane and work as an agency nurse in any environment with extended skills to use in all areas of nursing. (#136)

Beyond this group, two more responses alluded to professional service but in terms of rejecting or deferring the idea. One of these was from a child of country doctors, whose public service shaped her eventual stance as a parent: ‘I am the daughter of country GPs who went to boarding school, so have seen firsthand the impact of the sacrifices required. My parents served their community well and I have put my children before my patients as a deliberate life choice’ (#74). The other (#189) could not consider it given shared custody arrangements curtailing her mobility. There was another group of four responses that espoused a sense of responsibility to go where sent, that is, to serve as needed. These included the unmitigated commitment: ‘If I was transferred I’d go’ (#19); to a more fatalistic compliance: ‘But ... if I would really have to move, of course. You make the best of what you’re given’ (#245).

In addition to imposing temporal limits around a service chapter in professional careers, there were two other temporal logics at play across responses. A second such logic was to contemplate relocation only if it was a short term assignment, for example: ‘I would be worried about their schooling, I would consider it if it was temporary’ (#215); ‘probably would not consider permanent move to these places’ (#232); ‘short term only’ (#76). A third temporal logic was evident across the data set, in which respondents reported that they would consider such locations and mobility more generally only when children had finished schooling, for example: ‘If child still at school I would turn the opportunity down. If children left school I would consider it’ (#31); ‘In four years my daughter will have completed Yr 12 and I would be happy to go’ (#51). These non-negotiable temporal limits were evident across numerous responses, showing the strong normative preference to maintain stability in children’s education that has been reported elsewhere (Holdsworth, 2013). Stability was often presented as the non-negotiable priority in other ways: ‘We would not accept any positions outside of the metro area at this time as our children are settled within their schools’ (#13); ‘none of these are an option at any level whilst I have a child in grade 12’ (#70); ‘I am reluctant to disturb schooling’ (#75). Protecting the stability of schooling was a distinct concern in itself, additional to issues around school quality in the rural/remote locations, with their combination heavily biased against the rural/remote location: ‘As I have a daughter, my priority is her and her chosen education and school. Not so keen to move at this stage’ (#186).

This section has analysed qualitative responses to a survey question regarding hypothetical professional opportunities in three purposefully selected rural/remote locations, to understand how the multiple considerations of work, family and community interacted and logically cohered. Considerations of distance, proximity and climate created spatial limits to the professionals’ mobility. Across their responses temporal limits were also invoked in a number of senses.

**Conclusion**

This paper has reframed Australia’s ongoing problem in recruiting and retaining professionals to service remote and rural communities through firstly the intersubjectivity of families, and secondly the multifaceted risks in family mobility, to understand the conditions under which professionals and their families are prepared to move to these locations. Communities that can’t produce their own doctors, nurses, teachers and police inherently rely on the mobility of such professionals for their viability, while the mobility of such professionals inherently implicates their families.

Professionals were identified as a distinct and pivotal group of workers, given their membership in closed, self-regulated occupations which entail implicit contracts of altruistic service with the public that underwrite their preparation and/or employment. The literature reviewed suggested that this service ethic could be eroding given more neoliberal marketised times that foster self-
interest and risk-management. The same professionals were further identified as a distinct group of parents with vested interests in their children’s education in order to protect the inter-generational reproduction of advantage. The same neoliberal, market logic of the times was understood to be fuelling this group’s typical concern with school choice and quality. The crux lies in the lack of choice in educational provision in smaller rural/remote localities. This paper has investigated how professional parents reconciled any commitment to the public good through rural/remote service with their commitment to their children’s education.

The quantitative analysis tested the strength of respondent’s commitment to neoliberal strategy in education and to the public good in their career choices, and the possibility of some correlation between the two value sets. No statistically significant correlation was demonstrated, although there was some difference in the mean scores on these constructs for the different occupations sampled, with respondents in the high status profession of doctor showing both relatively high means for neoliberalism and commitment to public good. From this we understand that neoliberal educational strategy need not erode professional’s public service ethic, that is, it is not an either/or binary. This led us to enquire how the two value sets compete or cohere in family mobility decisions. From our analysis of the qualitative responses to the survey’s hypothetical scenarios, we would highlight how the professionals imposed both spatial limits and temporal limits on their service ethic to contain its claim on their career.

Participants outlined their spatial limits in a number ways: as absolute space, making remote locations problematic because of their distance from other centres; as social space, making communities with poor services or lifestyle unattractive; and as relative space, favouring proximity to extended family. The problem of absolute space is not amenable to policy, except perhaps by more frequent and more affordable transport links. The problem of social space presents a chicken and egg conundrum when the medical and educational services in small communities are not perceived to be of sufficient quality to attract the professionals needed to staff them, or the community is considered too unsafe for the families of the police needed to keep the peace. The problem of relative space refers to how the presence of, or proximity to, extended family for care-giving or care-receiving limits the range of thinkable locations. This preference could possibly be harnessed to increase recruitment and retention of professionals in rural/remote communities by targeting students from rural and remote communities and facilitating their access to professional training. It could also be addressed by locating medical, health and education programs in regional universities, a strategy that is currently being explored in multiple localities.

The temporal limits that respondents described similarly played out in a number of ways. Some respondents felt that they had done their time in a country service chapter in their past, excusing them from further such claims. This chapter was typically an early career phase, staged to avoid conflict with schooling choices later. For others, work in rural or remote communities would only be considered after completing what was considered the crucial schooling phase. The strong preference for stability over this phase was reinforced by misgivings about the quality of schooling options in rural/remote communities, revealing the high expectations of this fraction of the middle class. Another temporal limit invoked was moving under the condition that it be a short term or mobile posting, thus not displacing ‘home’ or schooling choices for the family. There were thus windows of opportunity where rural/remote service became thinkable, but children’s schooling repeatedly dictated such timing.

The policy implications of these temporal limits are complex – the rural/remote settings appeals for the early career professional prior to the crucial high stakes schooling phase in their family circumstances, however, the spatial limits above suggest that the young family are drawn to extended family to receive care, and later retained near extended family to give care. Some medical programs have shifted to postgraduate courses, effectively reducing the ‘pre-family’ chapter that was conducive to rural/remote service. Likewise, the aging of the population will
extend the care-giving chapter, and may reduce the likelihood of an eventual post-schooling mobility phase. Overall, the qualitative responses did not project a strong expression of a public service ethic as the more prompted quantitative responses would have suggested – few professionals embraced it unconditionally in their open responses. There is perhaps room to better foreground this aspect of professionalism in their preparation. However, their responses were equally not driven simply by career ambition or financial gain, as the common policy response of financial incentives would suggest. The family unit repeatedly emerged as the mitigating social unit that absorbed professionals’ sense of duty and intersubjective accommodations.

This paper has probed the relationship between the work and family considerations of professionals and their chronic shortage in rural and remote communities. The interplay between family, educational strategy, career opportunities and locality poses a ‘wicked problem’ (Head, 2008) for policy makers, one that implicates multiple institutions, and is not confined to a single government department’s influence nor amenable to simple policy levers. Workforce policy solutions to promote rural recruitment and retention of professionals often pursue an individualised ‘carrot’ approach of additional remuneration or incentive schemes (Health Workforce Australia, 2012), thus gloss over the complex family interface in mobility decisions. Other solutions, such as bond schemes attached to university places in medicine, forced postings for teachers in government sectors, minimum service periods for police promotion, and visa/registration restrictions for overseas trained doctors, resort to more forceful ‘stick’ tactics. Neither approach fosters or dignifies the ethical commitment to altruistic public service that notionally underpins professions.

By virtue of the public’s ongoing demand for their services and the closed nature of their registration systems, professionals have been largely protected from the changes in the nature of work and the workplace of recent times (Billett, 2006). But with no such guarantees for the next generation, these professional parents will exercise their relative advantage in risk management strategies prioritising their children’s educational chances. Metropolitan centres with denser populations and deeper educational and labour markets offer these families the capacity to address the private trouble of reconciling their cluster of career and educational priorities. However, this private solution creates the public issue of underserviced rural and remote communities. The problem is not static but will spiral and accumulate over time - as a community’s services erode, local housing prices fall then attract a welfare-dependent population with higher service needs. These communities will now need not just viable services, but services of sufficient quality to attract and retain the professionals needed to staff them. ‘Good enough’ is no longer good enough for these discriminating educational consumers.

References


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1 This study was funded by the Australian Research Council.
ii We would like to acknowledge the support and assistance of the Queensland Teachers Union, The Queensland Nurses Union, the Queensland Police Service and the Australian Medical Association Queensland.
iii The My School website is an initiative of the Labor Commonwealth Government for ‘sharing information about the resources and performance of schools with...
The Australian public (see http://www.myschool.edu.au/). It lists every registered school in Australia, profiling its demographic background, and cohort performance in standardised tests.

iv The full wording was: ‘In this question, we ask you to consider different places as hypothetical locations for you and your current family household. Imagine you are offered very attractive positions at the following locations: Roma, Bowen, and Cunnamulla. What would be your reaction to such options, and what considerations would guide your decision?’

Cunnamulla was the subject of a controversial documentary, “Cunnamulla”, directed by Dennis O’Rourke (2000), which presented a depressing picture of the town and its residents, and has inevitably coloured public perception.