Reconceptualising mobility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

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Contents

Abstract

From first engagement between European settlers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the mobility patterns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been viewed as problematic, as random and unproductive. Subsequent policies to 'civilise' and 'assimilate' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into Western society aimed to sedentarise them. To this day such temporary mobility continues to be seen as inconsistent with mainstream models of service delivery and economic and social advancement. This paper argues that, from a policy perspective, temporary mobility should be considered in the context of its contribution to wellbeing and challenges the prism through which mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is viewed as being problematic.

Key words: Mobility, Wellbeing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, Australia

1. Introduction

From the arrival of the First Fleet at what is now known as Sydney in January 1788, cultural misunderstandings have pervaded the history of engagement between the European settlers and Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and much of the subsequent government policy relating to them. One of the key areas of such miscomprehension relates to patterns of mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Perhaps the most profound example of this was the colonists' failure to recognise the laws and customs that connected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to their country, instead assuming the land to be uninhabited since the tribes near the new settlement were not settled farmers. This assumption of *terra nullius* persisted until it was overthrown by the High Court decision in *Mabo v Queensland No. 2 (1992)*, which established the existence of Native Title in Australia, consistent with the principle already long held within English law that inhabitants of a territory prior to colonisation retained possession of that territory (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 2000; Gammage 2011; Kildea 1998; Ranzijn et al. 2009).

Early colonists saw the patterns of movement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as random and purposeless, a reflection of idleness. Their 'wandering lifestyle' was seen as one of the key traits that set the 'natives' apart from civilised society, and an obstacle to participation in a social and economic system predicated upon a permanent settlement (Young 1990; Young and Doohan 1989). Many of the policies to follow had the express intent to sedentarise these populations, including the removal of people from their traditional lands to be placed on reserves and missions, permit systems limiting movements, and the removal of children from their natural families (Ranzijn et al. 2009). Young and Doohan (1989, p. 1) cite as an example Governor Macquarie's proclamation of 1816:

> The natives (are exhorted) to relinquish their wandering, idle and predatory habits of life and to become industrious and useful members of a community where they will find protection and encouragement.

To this day Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are considered to be highly mobile, and that mobility is perceived as creating challenges for the delivery of services and the provision of infrastructure and as barriers to those peoples' participation in education and the labour market (see, for example, Biddle and Markham 2013; Habibis et al. 2010, 2011; Morphy 2010; Office of the Coordinator General for Remote Services 2012; Prout 2008a, 2008b, 2011).

Mobility is a phenomenon that can be measured and considered from a variety of perspectives and disciplines depending upon the motivation of the analyst. In reviewing a range of different approaches to explaining mobility, including a specific consideration of the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is argued that these differing perspectives can be usefully subsumed under a simple approach relating mobility to wellbeing. Further, it is shown that the higher rates of mobility among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be readily accounted for within this framework in terms of the different cultural values that they hold, most obviously their attachment to the land. This then poses the question: In what sense can the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be seen as problematic? After exploring this question, it is argued that the failure to acknowledge or accept the legitimacy of differences in the relationship between mobility and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians can lead to both policy failure and an institutionalised view of mobility as problematic.

2. Theoretical models of mobility

Before discussing the drivers of mobility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, it is useful to set out the wider context with a brief review of some more general models of mobility. Dockery and Colquhoun (2012, pp. 3–4) identify models from various disciplines designed to explain and quantify mobility, as follows:

Neo-classical economics – early models of migration drawing upon the neo-classical paradigm of rational, utility maximising individuals included Lewis' (1954) seminal 'dual sector' model of rural to urban migration during a country's economic development, and Harris and Todaro's (1970) model that sought to explain the continuation of such a rural to urban drift despite high rates of urban unemployment. Harris and Todaro (1970) model the decision on whether or not to migrate by assuming individuals act to maximise their expected income. In urban areas expected income is the product of the urban wage rate and the probability of being employed. Hence the expected wage in urban areas is a decreasing function of the local unemployment rate. Workers would move from rural to urban areas so long as the expected income in the cities exceeded their marginal productivity (income) in the agricultural sector (plus costs of migration). Thus the differential between the urban wage rate and marginal productivity in the agricultural sector could account for continued rural-urban migration, despite significant pools of urban unemployment. A broader theory of 'compensating differentials' has since emerged in labour economics to account for differences in equilibrium wages across regions through differences in other attributes affecting utility (see Rosen 1986). For example, firms may be able to pay lower wages in cities with lower housing costs or a better climate, with worker migration equating expected utility across regions.

Gravity models – like stars and planets in space, gravity models suggest that the strength of attraction (probability of movement) between locations is dependent on the mass (population) of those locations and inversely related to the 'distance' between them. Distance, however, need not be interpreted spatially, but refers to anything that bears upon the cost of migration, be that a financial or psychological cost. For migration decisions, these distances may be measured as differences in languages or culture between the source and destination regions. Gravity models have been used extensively in explaining trade flows, with the general finding that the volume of trade is greater between countries that have larger economies, are in closer proximity, and are similar in culture and per capita income (see, for example, Porojan 2001). Biddle and Hunter (2006) draw on both the neo-classical approach and the gravity model in discussing how the costs of moving might differ between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non–Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Resource variability – McAllister et al. (2009) develop a model specifically related to arid environments. Given the distribution of resources in such environments is typically highly variable, they consider how the resources necessary for survival are accessed. Just as portfolio theory demonstrates that financial risk can be managed through diversification, variability in resources in arid environments may also be managed by diversifying resource access across time and space. Of the different responses animal and plant species have developed to survive in the desert, McAllister et al. (2009) identify two strategies relevant to humans. These are nomadism, moving across space in search of resources, and 'exploiters', moving into regions only in resource-rich times; and such strategies may be embedded in culture and social organisation. Nomadism involves costs in the form of time, energy and information gathering, however, there is a trade-off between these and the cost of storing resources.

2.1 Mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

A distinction can be made between the traditional drivers and patterns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility that existed prior to or unaffected by colonisation, and mobility patterns as they have since been shaped through engagement with colonising forces. Beyond Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians themselves, there is very limited understanding of either of these categories of mobility. In seeking to generate or to account for population estimates, the earlier anthropological perspectives emphasised the importance of the availability of resources – notably water and food and changes in these with climatic variations – as shaping population density, social structures, Aboriginal law, spirituality and mobility (Meehan and White 1990; Young and Doohan 1989).[1] This is consistent with the model by McAllister et al. (2009) of resource variability and availability as a driver of mobility in desert environments and Prout's (2008a, p. vi) observation that people in the more resource abundant, tropical areas of northern Australia appeared to have lower mobility than most nomadic peoples. Toyne and Vachon imply a role of resource scarcity in shaping cultural practices of mobility: 'a map of the Dreaming provides a kind of ecological map for the efficient and secure exploitation of resources' (1985, cited in Young and Doohan 1989, p. 27).

More recent review papers include Dockery and Colquhoun (2012), Habibis et al. (2010), Prout (2008a) and Memmott et al. (2004). Dockery and Colquhoun (2012, p. 19) acknowledge the existence of a sizeable volume of works on the topic, but suggest this literature 'rests upon just a handful of studies that are based on methodologies and data well suited to the analysis of Aboriginal temporary mobility'. While evidence from detailed case studies is gradually accumulating, these findings cannot be generalised as there is considerable diversity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across different regions and language groups, and notably between those living in urban areas and those in regional and remote Australia. A key limitation for contemporary research is that almost all statistically representative analyses rely on data from the Census of Population and Housing conducted every five years by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The Census data are most suited to measuring migration or permanent relocations based upon changes in a person's 'place of usual residence', but are largely unable to capture the more temporary forms of movement that characterise the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see, for example, Foster et al. 2005; Morphy 2006, 2007; Taylor 2006). Not so long ago, Taylor observed 'policy makers who contemplate the effects of temporary mobility on the spatial pattern of demand for services do so in an information vacuum' (2006, p. 26).

A further critical limitation of the Census data is the absence of any information on why people have moved. Clearly understanding the reasons for mobility is essential for enacting policy relating to mobility, and particularly if policy is to embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations and preferences. However, two key findings emerge from the existing literature that warrant emphasising here. First, contemporary mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cannot be seen in isolation from the past policies that have shaped it. Undoubtedly, growing integration into the mainstream economy means that factors such as the location of services and infrastructure, including roads and housing, are increasingly taking precedence over traditional drivers of mobility. Moreover, past policies and actions that displaced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from their families and homelands contribute to present day mobility as people seek to re-establish their past and their identity. Contemporary mobility needs to be seen as an evolving combination of those traditional practices and the impact of past and current policies that have largely been imposed upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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[1] There is even great uncertainty over the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population at the time of European settlement, with estimates varying from a few hundred thousand to over one million persons (Davidson 1990).

Second, despite the ongoing integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into the mainstream economy, the traditional drivers of mobility have proven to be extremely resilient. Case study–based research conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Young and Doohan 1989) and as recently as the 2000s (Habibis et al. 2011; Memmott et al. 2006) emphasises the maintenance of kinship networks as one of the key factors shaping mobility. Based on studies of the social networks of the Yolngu people of Northern Australia, Morphy (2010) proposes a three-layered model capturing sacred geography and associated settlements, nodal individuals and kin networks to explain mobility patterns. Sacred geography and nodal individuals are interrelated, and in turn kinship networks are built around these individuals. Such a model, argues Morphy, is far more appropriate to capturing the essence of Yolngu patterns of mobility than the 'bounded container' models underpinning standard demographic categories (2010, p. 366).

Other traditional drivers featuring in recent studies include country, ceremony and cultural obligations relating to marriages, funerals and sorry business, while housing availability and accessing health services feature among the non-traditional drivers of mobility (see Dockery and Colquhoun 2012, pp. 11–12, Table 2 for a summary). Two quotes serve to attest to the remarkable persistence of kinship, culture and country as key drivers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility:

> Even after 200 years of colonisation … involving radical dispossession of Aboriginal groups and … severe curtailment of their freedom to move around their country, nearly 70% … recognised a homeland or traditional country. (Morphy 2010, p. 376)

> Attachment to place and community prevail, irrespective of a history of changing government policies. There appears no reason to expect that these attachments will change in the foreseeable future. (Memmott et al. 2006, p. 5)

The challenges facing policy makers and service providers that need to take account of the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are therefore manifold. The models typically used to understand mobility have theoretical formulations that are unlikely to capture the key drivers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility. The data available to them are inadequate for the purposes of portraying the pattern and extent of that mobility. And past experience suggests that attempts to directly shape mobility patterns will be met with limited success and, quite likely, to have unintended consequences.

3. Reconceptualising mobility – a wellbeing approach

To critically appraise the way in which the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is perceived from the perspective of policymakers and service providers operating from within mainstream society, I propose the following simple and general conceptualisation of human mobility:

> *Mobility is a simply a means to accessing those things that contribute to wellbeing and avoiding things that contribute to illbeing.*

The term 'conceptualisation' is used deliberately to avoid suggesting this as a formal model of mobility. Contributors to wellbeing include physical resources, social capital, relationships and other forms of human interaction, knowledge, experiences and networks. A full model would, ideally, specify these constituents by appealing to a specific wellbeing theory or framework. Potential frameworks may include, for example, Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, Sen's (1999) capabilities approach, or Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2000). It would need to situate the individual within social, cultural

and technological environments and acknowledge the scope and role of substitutes to physical mobility as means for accessing things that contribute to wellbeing. Information technology and telecommunications are, of course, important among these substitutes. In this day of telecommunications, people barely need to leave home. They can telecommute (work or study from home); order goods and services online to be delivered; access entertainment through radio, television and downloading music and movies; stay in touch with other people by phone and any multitude of internet forums. However, people may also derive wellbeing from the experience of mobility, from the journey itself.

Rather than specify a full and sophisticated model, the intention here is only to argue that seeing mobility in terms of its contribution to wellbeing is a valuable approach. Note, firstly, that this wellbeing approach potentially encompasses all of the theories reviewed above. The neoclassical economics, gravity and resource variability models and Morphy's model of sacred geography, nodal individuals and kinship relating specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are all consistent with, and can be considered specific formulations of, the underlying conceptualisation of mobility as a means to achieve wellbeing. Such generality is clearly important when mobility needs to be considered across different cultural contexts. The wellbeing approach is closest to that of neo-classical economics, which is built around the underlying assumption of a utility function. The important departure is the emphasis that neo-classical economics places on factors that can be measured in market prices and the assumption that income is a good proxy for wellbeing (see Frey and Stutzer 2002). The wellbeing approach is also consistent with the medical and gerontological literature, which has tended to focus on the impact of physical limitations to mobility on wellbeing, which operate through effects upon functional health, independence, reciprocity, self-esteem and self-identity (Bourret et al. 2002; Schwanen and Ziegler 2011). Bourret et al. (2002, p. 339) note that mobility has been identified as the most significant factor shaping elderly people's perceptions of their health and wellbeing.

Secondly, and more importantly, seeing mobility as a means to wellbeing aligns the conceptualisation of mobility with the objectives of policies and programs. The objective of policy *should* be to maximise wellbeing. While this may sound like an obvious point, for policies relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and Indigenous peoples of other countries, the objectives relating to their wellbeing are too often overlooked for the convenience of using mainstream indictors of outcomes (see Dockery and Milsom 2007; Pickering 2000).

3.1 Mobility and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture

Accepting that mobility is undertaken to access things that contribute to wellbeing, there are readily apparent grounds to expect that contemporary mobility patterns will differ between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non–Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Differences across individuals in what contributes to their wellbeing and in preferences for how these things are accessed will generate differences in levels and patterns of mobility and, as noted, there are alternatives to physical mobility. Many such differences are likely to be rooted in culture. Characteristics identified as distinguishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture from Western cultures include:

- The importance of connections to the land in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' sense of identity and of their past. Terms such as country, homelands, sacred sites, songlines and the Dreamtime all reflect how this important relationship is deeply embedded within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. There is evidence that connection to country and maintenance of traditional 'caring for country' activities has positive effects on health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Campbell et al. 2011).

- The emphasis placed on relationships within families, extended kin and other members of the community. These relationships have special meanings, and recognition of them as an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture seems pervasive across different groups and contrasts with the emphasis placed on the nuclear family within Western culture (see, for example, Berry et al. 2001; Christie 1985; Greer and Patel 2000; Long et al. 2007; Thompson et al. 2000).
- Less verbal and less direct communication styles, with greater emphasis on 'yarning', body language and other non-verbal cues (Ranzijn et al. 2009).
- Low emphasis on individual ownership of possessions relative to obligations and contributions to the other members of the family and community (Thompson et al. 2000).

Each of these, most obviously the importance of connection to the land, could be expected to generate a higher level of mobility and stronger preferences for mobility and for person-to-person contact. A close, spiritual connection to country and high quality relationships with an extended kinship network featuring reciprocity and non-verbal communication cannot be obtained online. As noted, a key message from the existing literature is the remarkable persistence of kinship, culture and country as primary drivers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility despite concerted efforts to suppress such movements and to sever those connections. The inescapable conclusion is that these relationships must be extremely important to the wellbeing of these peoples.

4. In what sense is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility 'problematic'?

As set out in the Introduction, the early colonists saw the nomadic wandering of the 'natives' as random and unproductive, characteristic of a primitive and 'backwards' society. Those views were formed in ignorance of the cultural and kinship drivers of mobility and of the sophisticated relationship Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people shared with the land. Even the labelling of the pre-contact way of life as 'nomadic' is now being challenged, since each language group occupied and used a well-defined area (Ranzijn et al. 2009, p. 60). Gammage suggests that mobility was also part of a sophisticated system of land management involving burning and other practices that:

> … civilised all the land, without fences, making farm and wilderness one. In the Great Sandy Desert women replanted yam tops and scattered millet on soft sand, then watched the seasons: millet crops a year after its first rain. This is farming, but not being a farmer. Doing more would have driven them out of the desert. Mobility let them stay. It imposed a strict and rigid society, but it was an immense gain. It gave people abundant food and leisure, and let them live in every climate and terrain. (Gammage 2011, p. 304)

The contemporary policy discourse in Australia continues to reflect a view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as highly mobile and of that mobility as unstructured and unproductive, reflected in the commonly used term 'walkabout' (Prout 2011, p. 409). I hope that the previous section has persuaded the reader that a wellbeing perspective is a powerful and useful way of understanding mobility, and through this view it is perfectly logical and legitimate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to have stronger preferences for mobility. If mobility is undertaken simply as a means to achieving wellbeing, or avoiding illbeing, then in what possible sense can it be considered problematic?

Census data do show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were more likely to be away from their place of 'usual residence' on the night of the Census, and the most recent (2011) data also indicate

that they were more likely to have changed their place of usual residence over the past one and five years. However, it is important to note that in contexts other than service provision to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, mobility is generally considered to be a good thing. Migration in line with regional differences in prices signals is seen in the positive light of 'flexibility' and 'structural adjustment', such as movement of workers to areas of higher employment opportunity and higher wages. The growing use of fly-in/fly-out workforces in regional Australia offers another example of mobility in response to labour market needs. In the terms of reference for the Productivity Commission's enquiry into labour mobility, the Commission was asked to 'identify the major impediments to geographic mobility to support economic adjustment, employment and productivity outcomes' (Productivity Commission 2013).

In these contexts, mobility itself is not problematic; it is a *lack* of mobility that is seen as the problem. Biddle & Hunter (2006) present evidence that the relatively lower responsiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility to labour market incentives is seen as a problem. Yet they note that this appears perfectly rational given that discrimination and other barriers mean they can expect far lower gains from moving to areas of higher employment opportunity when compared to other Australians, a finding confirmed in Biddle (2010). Rather it is a certain form of mobility – temporary mobility – that is seen as problematic. Also referred to as 'beats' and as line, chain and circular mobility, temporary mobility relates to trips of anything between a day to several weeks or even months in duration. It does not involve a change in the place or places one usually has access to for accommodation, only absences from those places (Dockery and Colquhoun 2012; Habibis et al. 2010; Memmott et al. 2004; Prout 2008a).

If the same principle holds for temporary mobility – and surely it must – that it is undertaken to access things that promote wellbeing or to avoid things that detract from wellbeing, viewing it as problematic remains counter-intuitive. Seeing this mobility as problematic implies that the choices made or the difference in preferences held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are somehow illegitimate. To a large degree, I believe the extent of temporary mobility and the air of illegitimacy around it can be attributed to the way mainstream society classifies and measures both mobility and socio-economic outcomes.

In the opening chapter of *Seeing like a State*, Scott (1998) discusses how the extraction of revenue from forested land and the development of scientific forestry shaped the way the early modern European State viewed and measured forests. The rich biodiversity of the forest, replete with many varieties of trees, plants, birds, animals, insects, underbrush and fodder was 'resolved through its [the state's] fiscal lens into a single number: the revenue yield of the timber that might be extracted annually' (1998, p. 12). Vocabularies changed to represent this fiscal view of the world. High yielding species of trees became 'timber', while competing species of trees became 'trash' trees or 'underbrush', plants became 'weeds', and insects and birds living off trees or crops became 'pests' (1998, p. 13).

Scott goes on to detail how a range of facets of society – including urban planning, map boundaries, which languages survived and even the development of surnames – can be traced to the state's need to monitor, regulate and tax its people. In fact, Scott was motivated to write *Seeing like a State* by his observation that 'people who move around', such as gypsies, nomads, hunter-gatherers and serfs, seemed always to be enemies of the state:

> The more I examined these efforts at sedentarization, the more I come to see them as a state's attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion. (Scott 1998, p. 2)

In a similar vein, many of the constructs used to measure and understand mobility serve to misrepresent or obscure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander temporary mobility and its motivation. Most commonly this is acknowledged with respect to the methods used in the Census, the data source for the bulk of empirical analyses of population movements in Australia. Examples of culturally inappropriate classifications used in the Census include:[2]

- Place of usual residence – the Census identifies individuals' usual place of residence and classifies them as being either in their place of usual residence or their place of enumeration (where they were on the Census night). These data, and data on place of usual residence one year earlier and five years earlier, are the key indicators of mobility used in much empirical research. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, however, have a number of places where they would regularly stay overnight.

- Nuclear families – the Census household form is largely predicated around the idea of a nuclear family and hence the relationship grid uses terms (e.g. husband, wife, de facto, son, daughter, granddaughter, etc.) which do not translate to kinship relationships recognised by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Morphy 2006).

- Visitor – persons within a household that is not their usual place of residence are classified as visitors. Just as the 'usual resident' construct is less clear cut for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, so too is the concept of visitor.

- Geographical boundaries – people are mapped to geographical areas based on both their place of residence and place of enumeration. State and Local Government Areas are used extensively as many government programs and funding allocations are made at these levels. Such boundaries are often of very limited relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Using boundaries based on language groups would likely paint a very different picture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility.[3]

Examples extend beyond the Census collections. The preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for open spaces can be interpreted as homelessness, vagrancy or civil disorder. Traditional economic activities such as hunting and gathering have never been classified as employment under the ABS labour force survey, despite the proposal in the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy of 1987 that such activities be recognised as legitimate employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living on their original lands (Dockery and Milsom 2007, pp. 25–29).

It is only through these prisms that the pursuit of wellbeing by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples could be seen as problematic: the misunderstandings of connection to the land, of governments' need to impose simplifying classifications to carry out the functions of statehood, and of many different cultural values and assumptions. These lenses make the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples mysterious and irrational:

> For people who cannot think outside their own meta-metaphorical square, the bounded container appears as the only possible model for coherent sociality. The apparent capturing of Aboriginal sociality within the bounded container model of census data

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[2] Taylor (2006), Morphy (2006, 2007), Foster et al. (2005) and others have expanded on the limitations of the Census and other data collections for the purposes of analysing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility, and temporary mobility in particular.
[3] The ABS does map the Census data to an 'Indigenous Geography' in which the country is divided into a number of Indigenous locations, areas and regions, but since the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, these have not been the basis upon which program funding is allocated regionally.

> provides a basis for believing that Aboriginal people are just not very good at being
> contained: their households are too big and they move around too much; and it is
> government's job to formulate policies that help them to become better contained
> citizens. (Morphy 2007, pp. 178–179)

5. Implications and conclusion

The main existing models of human mobility can be subsumed under a conceptualisation of mobility as a means to accessing those things that contribute to wellbeing, and avoiding things that contribute to illbeing. The importance of this insight lies in its implications for policy formulation and evaluation in cross-cultural settings. This paper has concentrated on the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but the key message applies to mobility in other cross-cultural contexts and for other First Nation peoples in particular.

The temporary mobility practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders continue to be seen as 'problematic' in Australian policy circles and as frustrating the attempts to 'Close the Gap' in statistical inequality between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. None of what precedes is intended to deny that delivering services and infrastructure to a population is often more difficult when that population is more dispersed and more mobile. To the extent this is true, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples inevitably face trade-offs between mobility and some aspects of what Western society considers as reflecting a higher standard of living or 'progress'. But how are policymakers to know what weight to put on competing desires if mobility is seen only as a problem and not in terms of its contribution to wellbeing? The danger is that culture-based differences in preferences are seen as illegitimate choices:

> The concept of Indigenous temporary mobility has come into prominence as a way of
> capturing an aspect of indigenous culture critical to the explanation for the disadvantage
> experienced by Australia's Indigenous peoples, including adverse housing outcomes.
> (Habibis et al. 2011, p. 3)

Viewing cultures themselves as the source of disadvantage leads to hidden pressures for assimilation pervading policy thinking (Pickering 2000). Large cities create problems such as pollution and congestion, and the use of fly-in/fly-out work forces in the Australian mining industry has given rise to a range of negative social impacts, but these challenges are not described in terms of problems of Western sedentary culture. If policy is going to reflect Aboriginal values and aspirations then mobility must be seen in light of its importance in maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity, rather than dismissing it as illegitimate because of cultural differences and prejudices. For this, policymakers need much more detailed and current information about the reasons for temporary mobility, how it contributes to wellbeing and how mobility can be accommodated within models of service delivery.[4] What is clear is that mobility provides things that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians value very highly: to borrow from Sen (1999), things that they have cause to value and have the right to value.

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[4] Addressing this information gap is one of the main objectives of the Population Mobility and Labour Markets research project current being undertaken by the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation.

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