Residential mobility, or the movement of people within and between communities and larger geographic regions, is an important consideration for organizing, maintaining, and running communities, services, and land in remote Australia. We review the research and literature on Indigenous mobility, that is, the movement of people within and between communities and larger geographic regions, and we present three further points not raised in the literature based on observations of our own from field work in different locations. Indigenous mobility is frequently driven by family and community concerns, and the properties of this mobility are different to labour-driven mobility. We argue that small, low diversity, and dispersed communities require context-based methods and not population-based methods for developing context-based policies. This is similar to the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods in the social sciences. Overall, we suggest that the details of social residential mobility, particularly in remote Indigenous communities, are not yet well understood by service providers and policy makers, and that a lack of attention to the contexts for mobility has led both to contradictions in public discourse and to simplistic policy development.

Population and individual residential mobility are important when organizing, maintaining, and running communities, services, and land in remote Australia. We review the research and literature on Indigenous mobility, that is, the movement of people within and between communities and larger geographic regions, and we present three further points not raised in the literature based on observations of our own from field work in different locations. Indigenous mobility is frequently driven by family and community concerns, and the properties of this mobility are different to labour-driven mobility. We argue that small, low diversity, and dispersed communities require context-based methods and not population-based methods for developing context-based policies. This is similar to the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods in the social sciences. Overall, we suggest that the details of social residential mobility, particularly in remote Indigenous communities, are not yet well understood by service providers and policy makers, and that a lack of attention to the contexts for mobility has led both to contradictions in public discourse and to simplistic policy development.

Residential mobility, or the movement of people within and between communities and larger geographic regions, is an important consideration for organizing, maintaining, and running communities and services. Residential mobility is often identified through population-based measures of mobility, such as “place of residence five years earlier” taken from the Census and other databases. While such population measures of residential mobility are useful for some aspects of planning, they need to be contextualized with community and individual evidence if we are to make sense of why people move and the effects of this. Bridging these two levels (i.e., the population level and the community and individual level) has been problematic. Community psychologists need to be aware of when, how and where people move and the complexities in understanding population movement for their research and community and individual intervention.

The aim of this paper is to examine one area of residential mobility for which the community and individual contexts are vital—Indigenous communities in remote Australia—and illustrate how misinterpretations have occurred. In this paper, we refer to mobility, or residential mobility, in terms of movement of people between current communities, cities, or regions of Australia for periods that are longer than, for example, a holiday. In our consideration of mobility, we do not include ‘permanent’ residential movement such as when completely moving out of one house or community to move to another.

In the remote regions of Australia, this kind of mobility is important for several reasons in the organizing, maintaining, and running of communities and services, both traditionally and in the present (Guerin & Guerin, 2008). Providing services in remote locations is difficult without knowing the mobility patterns of residents. Developing wealth and a remote economy also relies on knowing where people are in remote locations and what resources they need.

Efforts to move people from remote regions into towns or cities for education and employment assumes that this is a solution to a range of issues, but the success is at least partially dependent on where people move...
and why they might want to move, so education and employment are available in the right places. Finally, residential mobility will always be a vital part of adapting to life in remote regions because both people and resources are scarce, dispersed, and unique (Stafford Smith, 2008). In remote communities, almost all forms of obtaining resources and sharing social relationships require this kind of residential mobility, unlike living in urban areas.

Dominant non-Indigenous discourse about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is that they are, in general, a highly mobile group. Take, for example, the popular image and discourse of Aboriginal Australians having an “essential” need to go “walkabout”. Interestingly, this same essentialised discourse is not attributed to those service providers and government officials in remote Australia who “have a high rate of turnover” (Haslam McKenzie, 2007; Lea, 2008). Two different groups and two forms of high mobility: one moving often and returning to regular spaces, and the other moving in for a year or two and then moving out, usually permanently. In the dominant non-Indigenous discourses, one is

![Figure 1. Four “seeming” contradictions in Indigenous mobility discourses: they are not really contradictions but appear so when contextual detail has been lost or ignored through generalization.](image-url)
seen as problematic and one as essential and helpful.

In this paper we first review briefly the literature on the issues of mobility in remote regions, and then present some observations of our own from field work in different locations. Overall, the details of mobility are not yet well understood by service providers and policy makers, and a lack of attention to the contexts for mobility has led both to contradictions in public discourse and to simplistic policy development. For example, while the two events in the previous paragraph are both forms of “mobility”, the contexts and discourses around each are very different. We suggest research directions and how to incorporate context in descriptions and policies surrounding mobility in remote Australia.

To do this, we review the literature around four “seeming” contradictions in the discourses (shown in Figure 1). We review evidence for these and show why they only arise because contexts are ignored, and show how they have led to simplistic policies.

The final introductory note about mobility is to point out that in a broader sense, large numbers of Indigenous Australians were forcibly removed from their Country, communities and families as part of Government policies. Many live away from their Country but have reconnected with it, bringing about more mobility due to poor policy. We address later in this paper that these peoples, and those who live away for reasons of employment and education, still need to be considered when making policies based on the ‘size’ of any community. This history of forced mobility needs to be remembered in any contextual analyses.

Mobility Findings from the Literature

While the topic of mobility in remote regions has always been important, there is only a small amount of literature directly related to the topic. Our main aim is to review this material but along the way we will show how the four contradictions of Figure 1 arise, and show that they only seem contradictions because the contexts have been left out and simplified generalisations substituted.

Warchivker, Tjapangati and Wakerman (2000) examined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enumeration from censuses and other data collection. To represent the results appropriately, they considered at least four groups—community residents, dual community residents, visitors, and absent residents—rather than a static “number of residents”. Presenting both the community population and the “potential population” was important since 35% of the community at any time was moving or travelling between communities, illustrating the extent of mobility.

Biddle and Hunter (2005) explored demographic data for mobility emphasizing that high mobility was family- rather than labour- driven (also see Kinfu, 2005; Taylor & Bell, 2004; Taylor & Biddle, 2008). That is, people were mainly moving for family reasons such as social visits, illness, births or deaths, and not for short- or long-term employment. These authors also pointed out the first of our contradictions shown in Figure 1. Some policy analysts say that to reduce disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians the former must reduce their mobility so that services can be provided at fixed and stable locations, while others say that they must increase mobility and move to where services are provided.

Long and Memmott (2007) asked Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about their travel and trips over a period in one of the only studies of this kind (cf. Musharbash, 2008; Young & Doohan, 1989). They found that there were many short-term social visits, some of which they could classify as “temporary visitations” (Prout, 2008a). Apart from the social visits, travel was used mainly for school and school holidays, ceremonies, sporting events, seasonal bush products, seasonal work, and avoidance of weather. These authors also point out the second of four contradictions in Figure 1. Despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ strong and stable attachment to their land and Country, they also move away from it frequently (aside...
from complications around displacement and whether people are living on ‘their’ country).

This “contradiction” also relates to difficulties that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have when moving away to a city for education and employment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been described as being highly resistant to moving away from their families and land (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2004; Downs, 2002; Sommerlad, 1976; Storry, 2007). At the same time, however, these same people have always been mobile and spent much time away from their families and land.

Regarding services related to mobility, Long and Memmott (2007) point out that discussions of “service provision” usually only include medical services, Centre Link services, and banking. But, they argue, if we include social and emotional support and caring associated with health, then the homelands are a rich source of service provision. They found that those services most travelled to were, in order of importance: recreation and sport, shopping and stores, employment and training, traditional country, health services, educational services, police and court, housing and accommodation services, aged care and funerals, and transport and road services. Likewise, the visits made, in order of importance for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants were: social, recreation and sport, hunting and bush resources, shopping and store, employment and training, looking after traditional country, and accessing health services. Clearly, these lists emphasise the importance of social visits and the reliance on mobility for accessing resources. Put in terms of the second “contradiction”, people do move away from Country frequently but mostly to other related Country for community events.

Peterson (2000, 2004) presented some different aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ mobility. First, he reviewed the story of the “walkabout” and showed that, far from being an inner urge to move about, there were strong social origins. In particular, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working on pastoral properties were not given leave or time off. Ceremonies, and events such as funerals and Family Business, required leaving the properties and failure to attend would adversely affect family relationships. Therefore, when workplaces do not provide the opportunities to attend to essential family commitments, people may leave work and take whatever punishment ensued, since Family Business is essential.

The main point we can learn from this is that once again, Family Business often takes precedence over employment issues (cf. Beckett, 1988). This shows the third contradiction of Figure 1, that many are distressed if they are away from Country but that they often travel away. The solution is to include the context. In some contexts, especially vital community events, people wish to be with family and community and may get distressed if they cannot. However, moving to other Country for Family Business is common and requires spending time away. When contextual details are considered, which requires different research methods (Guerin, Leugi & Thain, 2018), there is no contradiction; only different circumstances.

The second point Peterson (2000, 2004) made was to suggest that some ceremonies have now been revitalized or enlarged through the role of the 4WD (also see Fogarty, 2005). He documented some ceremonies in which those participating travelled further than probably ever before by using 4WD vehicles. His broad point was that not all modernization destroys traditional rituals and there were cases in which modernization could improve traditional ways and allow them to be more socially inclusive.

There has been some criticism and discussion about the “trucking” and 4WD issues, mainly about the lack of contextual detail (Lea, 2006; Redmond, 2006). For example, some authors have pointed out that it is not just the presence of 4WDs that have increased the scope of some ceremonies, but also the road and other infrastructures (cf. Helps et al., 2008). These came about through other means, however, related to
deals between State Governments, mining companies, the rise in the tourism industry, and pastoralism. Also, little was said about the purchasing of the 4WDs; how they were paid for and by whom, nor about the new risks of increased road travel on Indigenous communities (Helps et al., 2008). Many families have old cars barely running while some have 4WDs, and more needs to be known about the contexts for these differences. Again, more details of the contexts are needed if we are to understand this aspect of mobility and then develop effective policies.

A third point made by Peterson (2000, 2004), that will become important later in this paper, is that with all the mobility he tracked, including that with 4WD vehicles, there was little contact with the “wider society”, that is, the dominant white society. Visits were made to family groupings but little interaction or relationship building was conducted with non-family and especially non-Indigenous Australians.

Lea (2006) added several other important points about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility. Her work in Darwin showed that those who were mobile were often labelled as “itinerants” by police and others, and that there were strategic Council plans about how to keep these people moving or how to send them back to their communities. Lea suggests the term “voluntary outdoor” as more accurate and less judgemental than “itinerants”. She also raised the point we mentioned earlier about professionals and service providers moving frequently, with about 25% listed in the Census reporting not having been resident five years ago.

According to Lea (2006; and Prout, 2008b), the real issue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility is that those who are highly mobile are difficult for government service providers to code: “Modern day officials now worry about how to keep track of people who have scant regard for fixed addresses” (p. 44). The ‘problems’ of mobility are really about the problems services and organisations have of managing people and helping the rapidly changing professionals who are trying to find them:

*The nomad is not necessarily one who moves: some voyages take place in situ, are trips in intensity. Even historically, nomads are not necessarily those who move about like migrants. On the contrary, they do not move; nomads, they nevertheless stay in the same place and continually evade the codes of settled people* (Deleuze, 1985, p. 149)

This reflects a common view, therefore, that understanding mobility is mostly about providing better services in remote regions. This relates to our fourth contradiction in Figure 1: that (1) service delivery in remote areas is complex because people are entrenched in their communities and difficult to reach, but (2) that at the same time the people are rapidly moving around and cannot be reached and service providers complain that they are not there. We will show further examples of this later.

**Mobility and Context**

Through this brief review of literature one key point to arise is that just talking about “mobility” does not tell us very much, since the context and detail is all important in understanding what to do about mobility, if anything. Lea (2006) illustrates this well by outlining a paper by Brady (1999) in which one representation or generalization of mobility was replaced by another when more context was added. In the original case, the movements of people in the Ooldea/Yalata communities were tracked and interpretations made of the patterns in terms of traditional movements for Family Business. Brady (1999), however, re-examined the context and found that the patterns of movement were originally instigated through the “Aboriginal Protector” by strategically placing ration areas in specific locations. This was done in order to prevent the community moving northwards through radioactive wastelands around Maralinga. The circular pattern of movement was therefore not traditional in any sense but in fact was created. This only applies to this example, however, and we have already seen...
A review of Australian Indigenous mobility

lots of evidence that movements for Family Business are very traditional and long-standing practices.

In what we have reviewed already, therefore, the point is that “mobility”, as a raw measurement of the numbers of people moving from X to Y, does not provide us with any real understanding. It is no use talking about “mobility” in the absence of the context for particular cases. Indeed, mobility can be framed as a ‘good thing’ or a ‘bad thing’ depending upon how it is presented in context and the four “seeming” contradictions result from over-simplifications. Awareness of how this framing can be used to suit the needs and purposes of non-Indigenous institutions and services is critical, as is how over-simplifications can creep into policy when it suits the policy makers.

Three other considerations have been found to be important for the contextualisation of mobility. First, while some authors classify visits into a single form of “social” visitation or “family” visitation, the purposes and contexts of family visits for Indigenous Australians are highly varied and not usually singular. They are frequent and important but also diverse. Categorising them together without any context of this diversity leads to further problems in discourses about mobility. We can see this if we note that the discourses about an Indigenous “need to go walkabout” has in some ways been simply replaced in current academic writing and common discourses by an Indigenous “need to visit family”, which is too often now taken as an ‘essential’ given and therefore used simultaneously both as a descriptive category and as an explanation. Family visits are certainly important but this is not from an in-built drive or need but is dependent upon a lot of subtle community contexts which are essential. Understanding these complex contexts of social visits is therefore crucial to understanding mobility and building policies around mobility (e.g., the examples in Musharbash, 2008).

Second, it is also important that while short-term “visits” are frequently discussed, there is less in the literature about mobility as a longer-term “drift” to urban areas. For example, in South Australia in 1957 one in 16 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in Adelaide; in 1966 this was 1 in 4; in 1996 it was 1 in 3; and in 2001 it was about 1 in 2. While it is not clear how much the more recent figures reflect different population growth rates between urban and non-urban areas, the overall shift is dramatic regardless of social visits (Taylor & Bell, 2004). Overall, most literature relates to short-term visits in remote regions and much less on remote community visits to urban regions and longer-term “urban drift”. There is also little known about social visits to remote communities by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are primarily resident in urban areas; an area of Indigenous mobility that desperately needs more research. Finally, as mentioned earlier, much of this urban-remote mobility has arisen because of divisive government policies in the past of forcibly removing people from their families and communities and placing them in institutions or in non-Indigenous homes.

The last summary point about context and mobility is that the four “seeming” contradictions of Figure 1 arise at least partly because the word ‘mobility’ is used without specifying contextual details. In each case of a seeming contradiction raised in this paper, the use of the same word “mobility” has very different contexts, details, and associated stories, and there are essentially no contradictions. For example, what is sometimes called the “homesickness” of those boarding away from family and Country (English & Guerin, 2017), contradicts the high mobility of these groups who voluntarily spend a lot of time away from family and Country. However, the contexts for trips that lead to “homesickness” (such as to board in the city) are very different to those for other trips. The problem is that none of this is identified when generalizations are made (see more contextual details of this issue in Guerin, 2018; Pertl & Guerin, 2018).
The important point we wish to make from this is that much of our understanding of mobility has been poorly based on generalizations that have lost all their context and these have resulted in inappropriate strategies and policies. Greater focus and attention on the complex details of the contexts of mobility will advance our efforts to reduce disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, at least as these disparities relate to mobility.

**Mobility and Context in Remote Australia**

We have suggested that the specific contexts of mobility are critically important when considering mobility in remote regions. Special ways of thinking are required in these contexts, especially when developing policy (cf. Morphy, 2007).

We wish to illustrate this next through a comparison between the use of statistics and the data collected for mobility. When dealing with large numbers in statistics, assumptions (i.e., loss of contextual detail) are made about the shape of the population distribution, for example, and then an array of techniques can be carried out to make inferences (inferential statistics) within a range of probabilities. Some of these properties are shown in Figure 2. When numbers are slightly smaller, or the distributions violate the population...
distribution characteristics, other forms of inference can sometimes still be used (non-parametric statistics), sometimes with special weightings (again, loss of context). However, when samples are small, inferences cannot be made from quantitative measurements. In such cases of research, we use other methods for making inferences (often now referred to as ‘qualitative’ methods) in which more intensive, contextual detail is included. For example, interviewing, focus groups, case studies, or ethnographic methods can be used with different properties (Guerin et al., 2018). Our point from this analogy, then, is that because remote populations are small, low diversity, unique in many cases, and dispersed (Stafford Smith, 2008), we must research with more context-rich descriptive methods (Musharbash, 2008; Prout, 2008a, 2008b).

Additionally, this reasoning about statistical inferences can be applied to policy inferences around mobility. For example, considering gross “employment” figures for developing a service delivery policy is justified when using data for policies about annual mobility between Melbourne and Sydney or about trans-Tasman mobility. This depends, however, on assumptions of large numbers of diverse people and a large number of services and service providers in those places.

If, on the other hand, we were looking only at mobility between Oodnadatta and Coober Pedy, we would need much more specific and contextual information to plan accordingly, since there would, perhaps, only be a handful of people moving in any period, a small number of jobs, and a very small number of employment services. If five people were to move from Oodnadatta to Coober Pedy then we may not want to advocate opening a new government employment office but would need to consider more intense, localized, context-driven “policy” focussing on those five people. It is no use trying to infer from population-driven employment data a plan of how to get those five people into jobs. This would only produce policies of the form of: the country is short of skilled hairdressers so three of those five in Coober Pedy should be re-skilled in hairdressing. If we want to help these particular five people get jobs, then we need to work directly with them in a much more context-rich and dedicated way (qualitative or context-based policy). Our Australia-wide, population-driven employment policies are of limited use in sparse regions and will likely hinder any efforts, despite their usefulness in large urban settings.

Population-based policy is acceptable where there are large populations, high diversity and many services available, but where there are small populations, with low diversity and dispersion, and only one or a few services, then a contextual approach to research, policy and services is needed.

Other Points about Mobility from Our Research and Experience

Having focused mainly on the four seeming contradictions in this literature and in the policies produced, there are three further important points about mobility that have arisen from our research and experience in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand that have been missed in the literatures on mobility. These are the differences between family- and employment-driven mobility, the influences of racism and discrimination, and the spiritual elements of place and its influence.

Family- and employment-driven mobility differ in many ways. When context is considered, there are many details in which the properties of family visits differ significantly from labour-driven mobility, although all of the visits are typically lumped together as “mobility”. Treating the two as slight variations of each other, especially when employing population-based measurements, is very misleading.

Mobility for employment usually means a long stay, in terms of years (except for seasonal employment). Family relationships, on the other hand, wax and wane, and vary dramatically in complex ways depending upon the relationships (Guerin & Guerin, 2008; Long & Memmott, 2007; Musharbash, 2008). Family visits are sometimes for money or food resources,
sometimes for annual Family Business, but often for other reasons as well. Labour-driven mobility, on the other hand, is narrower and centres only on earning money, and often family are sometimes even left behind for labour mobility (Guerin & Guerin, 2009). Finally, family visits are varied. In a study of visits in Alice Springs town camps, Foster, Mitchell, Ulrik and Williams (2005) found that not all family visits were welcome, and they were sometimes avoided. For example, this was often when non-relatives were brought along with family visitors. Indigenous family relationships are very complex and idiosyncratic and it is beyond the scope of this paper to review all this material, but the complexities need to be known before engaging in policy making.

Policy based on populations often determines the demand or markets for employment, health, or other social services. However, the “demand” or “market” for family visits does not have the same characteristics of the labour market that drives employment-mobility—it is inelastic, for example, unlike the labour demand. Once again, the inference from these differences is that much more context is needed when talking about socially-driven mobility.

**Racism or social exclusion is rarely investigated in mobility discourses.** A second point is that racism is commonly involved in mobility, or lack of mobility, but is rarely considered in the literature. It is rarely suggested as a reason for moving, and studies rarely ask people for their reasons for not moving. In principle, one might think that increased mobility leads to increased opportunities to see, meet or interact with new people, whether for good or bad, but in the only data for this, Peterson (2000, 2004) wrote that the mobility enhanced by the use of 4WDs did not impinge on the wider society—the people kept within their families or groups of communities. If racism or discrimination is expected then this could be a major reason both for avoiding mainstream society during mobility, and for not moving around at all.

We have had many indications from our participatory research and informal discussions with Aboriginal people that there is a direct impact of racism, discrimination, and social exclusion on their mobility or lack of mobility (cf. Williams, Thorpe & Chapman, 2003). Some have described not wanting to visit Adelaide or larger towns because of the racist or discriminating treatment they have received in the past. It is not only that some people do not wish to travel to urban centres for jobs or education because they get “homesick” for their family, but also because they may receive racist treatment. One Aboriginal male explained to us that he would have liked to have done more training in his field but that he disliked sitting in rooms with non-Indigenous people because “after all these years I still can’t look the white man in the face and sit still”. He elaborated that he would be anxious and would avoid attending classes if he went to the city for further training. In this case, he avoided mobility not because he could not bear to leave his Country, but because he was likely to experience discrimination and social exclusion and not even finish these training opportunities.

The authors have also had many personal experiences where Aboriginal people have wanted to visit Adelaide but were not able to stay with family or in safe caravan parks and hostels. In these cases, they were unwilling to travel and stay in generic or mainstream accommodation, again for reasons of discrimination (see more in Guerin & Guerin, 2008).

These few examples do not prove a case for racism as a major determinant of Aboriginal mobility or lack of mobility. We do not know the particulars, or how widespread this is, even if we are convinced that racism and social exclusion are one determinant of mobility (or lack of) for many Aboriginal people. More future research needs to include questioning relating to the consequences for mobility and how mobility is thereby affected. Some literature refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people preferring to keep to themselves or to their own groups when outside their home areas, but we do not know the contexts in which this is actively wanting to be together or
actively avoiding interactions with the (predominantly non-Indigenous) strangers in the wider society (Guerin & Guerin, 2008). However, at least some reports of “missing family when away” may be hidden cases of avoiding discrimination (cf. Pertl & Guerin, 2018). More research needs to be done on this issue to tease out the different cases and contexts involved.

**Community settlement or spiritual hub?**

Finally, our research suggests that the community itself is viewed as the core of the wider group by the people in the community, at least in some remote Aboriginal communities. This means that while mobility might look to outsiders as moving away from community to visit other families, it might be viewed by participants as moving within the community. This is shown in Figure 3. The contextual distinction that is important here is between living on Country versus having strong attachment to Country but living elsewhere (Trzepacz, Guerin & Thomas, 2014).

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, our studies with Māori colleagues suggested that people from their communities (Marae) accepted that people needed to move for education and employment (e.g., Butterworth, 1991) and the people therefore spent time developing community and family strategies to deal with this (see examples in Guerin, Nikora & Rua, 2006; Nikora, Guerin, Rua & TeAwekotuku, 2004; Nikora, Rua, TeAwekotuku, Guerin &

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**Figure 3.** If extended communities are included in the context, then the same travel can be seen as less “mobile”
There was an accepted reality that mobility was necessary but this was accompanied by strategies to keep the community involved in the Marae—even if not residents.

In particular, for the present discussion, the Aotearoa/New Zealand studies found that the traditional lands were a spiritual hub for the community, even though most people lived elsewhere and were accepted to be living elsewhere (up to a point). Traditional lands were not realistically seen as a place where everyone should try and live. The real push, therefore, was to get those living away from the lands to be as involved as possible to keep the community sustainable, rather than trying to get them to live there on a permanent basis to satisfy government criteria of mobility and place. This, at the minimum, meant that everyone was expected to attend weddings, funerals, major decision-making events, sports events, and other entertainment events—whether they lived there or not. This involved a type of mobility not discussed in the Australian Indigenous mobility literature—that of community members living elsewhere who frequently travel back to their Country (spiritual hub) to attend events and Family Business.

More research is needed to explore the relationships that non-residents have with their traditional lands in Australia. In particular, as mentioned at the start of this paper, we must also recognize that many Indigenous Australians were forcibly removed from their Country, communities, and families and this means people may be living away but still connecting with their Country.

This way of thinking about mobility and remote communities and homelands (Myers & Peterson, 2016) has important implications, particularly in terms of sustainability and importance. For example, sustainability of remote homelands does not only relate to how many people live there, it also relates to the influence of all members of the community no matter where they live (Guerin & Guerin, 2010). This line of thinking opens up a range of questions that could be asked about the importance of a community and its mobility. For example, how many people participate in community events or how many people are involved in the community over longer periods, such as a year? Another important question is how many people want to be buried there or to retire there in later years?

In the Australian context, there have been calls to shut down small remote communities (Guerin & Guerin, 2010; Kennedy, 2013). Our discussion suggests that this line of thinking is problematic and potentially negatively impacts on a much larger demonstrable community who are not, however, normally resident. Census and other enumeration strategies therefore underestimate the importance of the wider community and the impacts that community changes can have on a much larger group of people. This is very different to how non-Indigenous Australians think typically about family, community, residence and mobility, but for Indigenous communities this is very real.

There are a number of implications of this line of thinking for future research and community action. For example: (1) what strategies can a community employ to involve all the relevant community whether they live there or not; (2) how can this larger community be measured more accurately; (3) how can these data be used for a range of purposes such as provision of resources or policy decisions? (4) how can we rethink “mobility” to include the typical contexts for Indigenous people moving around?

Conclusions

Overall, more context is needed in research of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility. We have suggested that the term “mobility” is essentially meaningless unless more is said about the form and the contexts of mobility. Removing the context has led to fictitious contradictions in the discourses, such as “How can they say they want to be on Country when they spend so much time moving around off Country?” These contradictions have led to contradictory solutions such as requiring that people either stay in one place for some issues (such as access to services) or
requiring them to move for others (such as education or employment).

These seeming contradictions are vacuous because they lack descriptions of any context. Enhancing the discussions with more contextual details would contribute to far better solutions and policies, and better-informed public debate and commentaries. Another consideration is that the contradictions have racist elements in and of themselves and may serve to require services and organizations to do less while the burden is placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to do more. Different sides of the contradictions can be used to sway policies in different directions, when what is really happening is that all context has been ignored.

Another issue we have raised relates to the overly simplified perception that much Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility relates solely to visiting family rather than being mobile for employment. This oversimplification also suffers from lack of context; the reality of people’s lives are much more complex and intricate than this. The “demand” for labour is nothing like the “demand” for family; family visits have multiple purposes; and family relationships are fluid and complex. This complexity needs more research and consideration when developing policies.

The two most important points for future research, however, relate to the concerns around conceptualizing mobility for policy and mobility and racism. Lea (2006) discussed how much of the concern surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility relates to difficulties that high mobility can make in terms of service provision. However, the scope of “services” is usually limited in such discussions to Western bureaucratic interventions (Long & Memmott, 2007). We have added to the discussions by Lea (2006) the importance of providing more context when discussing mobility. We suggest that with small populations, highly varied populations, and highly dispersed populations, new qualitative forms of policy evidence will be needed that obtain and retain the special contextual details of mobility, rather than basing policy on simplified patterns usually found with large populations. Such conditions are perfectly characterised in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations and remote Australia more generally, especially when high mobility is considered. If policies for these populations are to be evidence-based, then the form of evidence cannot just be population statistics—methods incorporating more local context are required.

To govern in situations that have the properties of being small, varied, and dispersed, a detailed and case-by-case approach will be needed, and policy will be more tailored because it will not be abstracted or generalisable to other groups. Innovative solutions will be required from innovative policy groups. If not, policy will continue to be developed on the basis of simplifications and generalizations based on population-level “evidence” devoid of contextual descriptions. In social science research this would not be acceptable, and qualitative methods would now be required to provide the evidence-base. This should also apply to policy development.

The second main new issue we have raised here is that future research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility needs to look more closely at the role of social exclusion in decisions to move or not move. We raised this issue from personal and research experience with several examples when it seemed that travel was carried out or was avoided on the basis of treatment typically given when in “wider society”. This factor is often overlooked in research.

Finally, while we have not explicitly addressed the point in this paper because of the need for more research, there are implications for how services might be managed (rather than “delivered”) to remote communities. Certainly, it will be obvious that treating service delivery within a population-based policy framework will not work, and contextual details are needed for individual cases. Depending upon the circumstances, there are contexts in which mobility can hinder service delivery and contexts in which mobility can facilitate service delivery. We now need to know more
about those various conditions in order to develop context-based policies.

References


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