

Reframing immobility: young women aspiring to ‘good enough’ local futures

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Abstract

Mobility is high on the agenda in both policy and research and being mobile is a positive descriptor, not least for young people. The downside of the focus and value placed on mobility as the path to success is that ‘immobility’ has clear, negative associations: being immobile equals being ‘stuck’, a ‘failure’ and not being aspirational. In this paper I seek to problematise dominant representations of decisions to stay in regional and rural locations as ‘immobility’ that indicates a lack of aspiration or agency. More specifically, by exploring how the participants in this study negotiate belonging and aspiration in ways that are both classed and gendered, the paper contributes to more nuanced representations of the lives of young people living outside of urban spaces. The paper is based on a qualitative study of the everyday lives and imagined futures of young women with interrupted formal education, focusing on a disadvantaged location in regional Victoria, Australia.

Keywords: mobility, place, gender, aspiration, belonging

Introduction

This paper responds to calls to spatialise youth sociology (Farrugia, 2014; Farrugia & Wood, 2017) by exploring the imagined spatial futures of young women with interrupted formal education living in a disadvantaged region of Victoria, Australia. Through an analysis of the negotiations of belonging and aspirations I demonstrate the complex ways in which the women account for their decisions to stay in the region. The paper contributes to more nuanced representations of the lives of young people living outside of urban spaces (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017). In particular, I seek to problematise dominant representations of decisions to stay in regional and rural locations as ‘immobility’ or as indicating a lack of aspiration or agency.

Mobility is high on the agenda in both policy and research and being mobile is a positive descriptor, not least for young people. In policy, geographical mobility is often linked to, or depicted as a driver for, social mobility and in that sense as a way of being aspirational (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Pedersen & Gram, 2018). Young people outside larger cities are often viewed as mobile subjects who can, and should – and would want to – move for opportunities in the form of education, jobs and attractive, youthful lifestyles (Farrugia, 2016). In youth studies, a large body of research has explored how mobility from non-urban to urban areas, as well as internationally, plays out in and shapes the lives of young people, whether in the form of actual mobility experiences (see e.g., Farrugia, 2019; Waters & Brooks, 2011; Yoon, 2014) or imagined future mobility (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016; Evans, 2016; Pedersen & Gram, 2018). The downside of the focus and value placed on mobility as the path to success is that ‘immobility’ has clear, negative associations: being immobile equals being ‘stuck’ in place (Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018), living a ‘sedentary’ life (Hjälml, 2014), and by extension not being aspirational (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013). ‘Stayers’ are depicted as ‘failures’ (Looker & Naylor, 2009) or as disempowered subjects who are ‘left behind’ against their will (Forsberg, 2019). The ‘mobility bias’ (Schewel, 2020) means that with a few exceptions, relatively little is known about young people who despite these negative signifiers stay in non-urban places and their reasons for staying (Morse & Mudgett, 2018; Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018). One of the exceptions here is McDonald’s (1991) study of young people’s sense of belonging in two rural towns on the East Coast of England, while

another is Jamieson's (2000) study of youth on the Scottish borders. These studies both explored community ties and the complex negotiations of future aspirations, belonging and mobility. These themes have been picked up more recently, as a growing body of research explores the place-making practices and experiences of young people who live outside the metropolis, demonstrating the significance of the local in their identity-making processes (Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Evans, 2016; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2014; Pedersen & Gram, 2018; Rönnlund, 2020; Sørensen & Pless, 2017; Tolonen, 2005; Waite, 2018; Wenham, 2020). Importantly, 'the rural' is not a homogenous entity and there is a spectrum of localities that are non-urban to varying degrees (suburban, metropolitan fringe, peri-urban, rural, remote etc.) (Thomson & Taylor, 2005). Further, it is important not to reproduce the association between disadvantage and locations beyond the metropolis as different locations are positioned differently in both global flows of capital (Farrugia, 2014) and in local and national policy and regulation initiatives. These differences are reflected in young people's varying sense of place and imagined spatial futures which I return to below.

Recently, attention has started to turn to the notion of immobility itself. To move away from negative descriptors, Schewel suggests understanding immobility as 'spatial continuity' to describe "an individual's center of gravity over a period of time" (Schewel, 2020, p. 329). Forsberg (2019) explored mobility aspirations amongst young people growing up in the Northern-most part of Sweden and argued for a 'right to immobility' as a form of resistance to the 'mobility imperative' (Farrugia 2016), and not necessarily as an indication of a lack of capacity to move. In this paper I contribute to this strand of research, adding a gendered lens on the ways in which belonging and aspirations are negotiated. Young women are often described as dominating out-migration from rural areas due to the relative lack of 'feminine' jobs in these areas (Johansson, 2016) but also to pursue middle-class futures appropriate to 'empowered', young 'can do' women (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2008). However, not all young women fit this image. In this paper I focus on the imagined spatial futures of young women with interrupted formal education in a disadvantaged, regional location in Victoria, Australia¹. On paper, these women correspond to the 'at risk' girl described by Harris (2004): they have interrupted schooling pathways, they are predominantly from lower socio-economic backgrounds or have for other reasons experienced disadvantage growing up, and some have small children. In other words, they look like typical 'stayers' who are

depicted as lacking aspirations (cf. Allen & Hollingworth, 2013). However, rather than dismissing their decisions to stay local as 'lacking aspiration', this paper sheds light on the broader set of aspirations that these women formulate as they negotiate futures in place.

Place, belonging and aspirations

In this paper I understand space as socially produced, dynamic and imbued with power (Massey, 2005). In this way, "the effect of place is more than geography" (Pedersen & Gram, 2018, p. 622), meaning that events in place and symbolic representations of specific places are as important for shaping the identity of a place as the physical and material environment. These conceptual points are important for the analysis in this paper, where I explore how the participants relate to their local place; a disadvantaged area with a negative reputation, as I pick up on work by other scholars on this topic. For instance, Waite (2018) found that the young people in her study often refuted the negative media representations of their local area and sought to provide more nuance on this, while Farrugia (2019) demonstrated how his participants were both actively denigrating their towns and their residents while at the same time emphasising specific positive aspects that were integral to how they envisioned futures there.

Young people's relations to place are often explored through a focus on belonging. As Cuervo & Wyn (2014) emphasise, belonging should be seen as a metaphor and can be helpful for going beyond individualised actions and instead shed light on relations - with 'people, places and time' (2014, p. 907). In the analysis that follows I am focusing on the spatial dimension of belonging in particular, but as will be clear, these dimensions are intertwined, and social relations become key to understanding the young women's way of relating to place more generally. Previous studies have demonstrated how people's place relations differ according to their social class and biography (Benson & Jackson, 2013), more specifically how the middle-classes engage in forms of elective (Savage, 2008) or selective belonging (Watt, 2009), while more community-oriented forms of belonging have been found in working class communities (Matthews, 2015). Furthermore, the subjectivities performed through discursive place-making practices is key to understanding how the participants carve out a legitimate social position for themselves vis-à-vis other local

residents through the micro-level symbolic boundary work that takes place in the interview context (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Scholars have argued that (educational) policy discourse often depicts a strong sense of spatial belonging as working against aspiration as if it is this “attachment to place which hinders their success” (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013, p. 499), or in other words, “to get on you get out’ (Jamieson, 2000, p. 205). This reflects how, in contemporary, neoliberal societies, being aspirational is a virtue (Carling & Collins, 2018). However, as Roberts & Evans argue, aspiration is a politicised term as “[h]igh’ or ‘appropriate’ aspirations are those recognised and defined as legitimate by the dominant parts of society that have the power to do so” (2013, p. 71). That is, not all types of future aspirations are seen as legitimate, and ‘ideal’ aspirations are modelled over middle-class patterns. A number of studies have also demonstrated how future aspirations are shaped by place, in terms of both structural opportunities or the lack thereof as well as local histories of place that produce a sense of ‘what people from here do’ (see e.g., Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston, 2015; Thomson & Taylor, 2005; Wenham, 2020 for recent examples and MacDonald, 1991; Jamieson, 2000 for older examples). While young people in economically thriving rural areas do not necessarily idolise or wish to move to urban areas (Haukanes, 2013), these patterns are often more complex, especially in disadvantaged areas. A range of studies from different national contexts have shown how students with higher education aspirations seek to move to urban areas while those who imagine vocational pathways or future in local industries may not; a pattern that often follows existing class divisions (see e.g., Evans, 2016; Farrugia, 2019; Forsberg, 2019; Jamieson, 2000; Pedersen & Gram, 2018; Tolonen, 2005). In the analysis that follows I explore how the participants in this study negotiate belonging and aspiration in ways that are both classed and gendered, as they imagine their spatial futures. First, I introduce the empirical foundation of the paper.

Methods and data

The paper is based on data from a qualitative, longitudinal study conducted in Victoria, Australia, from 2017-2021. The project investigated the everyday lives and imagined futures of young women with interrupted formal education. In this paper I focus on a specific subset of the study, which I describe below. The overall study had a longitudinal design with five

waves of data collection over two years. Participants were predominantly recruited through service providers targeting young people seeking to reengage with education or work. To supplement the sample I posted a targeted ad on Facebook which led to the recruitment of five participants who were not in touch with any service providers, in some cases because they were parenting young children. While some participants have taken part in all of the five planned interviews, some have left the study earlier. Hence, while the first wave had 31 participants, the second had 20 and the third had 18. Some fourth wave interviews took place as phone interviews during the long COVID-19 lockdown in Victoria which might explain the attrition. Hence, 14 participated in Wave 4 and 13 in Wave 5. At the time of the first interview, the participants' age ranged from 15-24 years of age. 25 out of 31 women had left school before completing upper secondary education. Their socio-economic backgrounds varied, but apart from a few participants whose parents held jobs that require university degrees, the parents predominantly worked in unskilled or low-skill jobs (e.g., bus/truck drivers, retail, cleaning) or were unemployed.

The interviews were conducted in meeting rooms in local libraries or other local facilities, and in some cases in participants' homes. The first interview covered the following themes: everyday life and current situation, a life chart exercise focusing on the participant's life history, family and friendship relations and support and lastly, hopes and dreams for the future. Subsequent interviews asked into what had happened across these domains since we last met, and also had different additional themes, such as place and belonging (interview 2) or everyday life (interview 4). In general, the longitudinal design added greater depth to the relation between researcher and participants and it also meant that the dynamic nature of for instance future plans became very visible. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research follows conventional social science ethical guidelines, including seeking informed and processual consent. Participants received a \$30 voucher as an acknowledgment of their time for each interview. Names and other identifying characteristics are changed to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The research is approved by XX University Human Research Ethics Committee.

The research includes three locations, two on the Melbourne urban fringe and one regional location around 2.5h/200km from Melbourne. The locations were chosen as they are all

undergoing socio-economic change and labour market restructuring and all suffer a negative reputation in public discourse. Further, all are placed in the first or second quintile of the SEIFA 2016 Index of Relative Economic Disadvantage (IRSD). They have above average unemployment rates, lower than average incomes, and a lower proportion of the population that has completed upper secondary education. In this paper I focus on the regional area to explore the role of mobility and belonging in the women's imagined futures. While the two locations on the urban fringe do not require moving away to be within reach of the educational, work-related and cultural opportunities of Melbourne as a metropolitan city, this is not the case for the regional location. This local government area (LGA) covers a number of smaller towns and a regional city centre. While the area hosts one tertiary institution that offers both vocational courses and university programmes, the local labour market and economy has been impacted by the 2017 closure of a large, industrial facility. As will be clear in the analysis, this structural and symbolic production of place is visible in the participants' imagined spatial futures.

11 of the overall 31 participants are from this region and they have participated in 33 interviews altogether, some just in one interview and others in all five interviews. Apart from one, they have all lived in the region for a number of years, some moved there with their parents when very young, some were born there and some had families who had lived there for generations. 5 of the 11 participants had at least one child at the time of the first interview. While childbearing rates for 15-19-year-olds have declined significantly in Australia over the past 40 years (currently the age group with the lowest fertility rate), these rates are higher in regional and remote areas, and in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (Hoffman & Vidal 2017) like the ones selected for this research.² In the analysis below I explore the women's imagined spatial futures, which as mentioned were in focus in the second wave of interviews. This means I mainly draw on interviews from this wave, although I have coded all interview transcripts thematically for passages about their local area, educational aspirations, and other formulations of aspirations and imagined spatial futures. I identified two different types of negotiations: one concerning belonging and one concerning aspirations. Both were closely related to the perceived disadvantage and stigma that pertains to the place. The analysis below is structured according to these two dimensions. As Benson & Jackson note, belonging is performative and notions of belonging

should be analysed as such (2013). I do this by considering the symbolic boundary work (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) that the women engage in as they negotiate belonging and aspiration, that is, the moral boundaries that are drawn as participants position themselves as respectable and morally 'right'.

Analysis

Most participants had quite negative perceptions of their local community. While the young women lived in different towns within the same regional area, the ways in which they spoke about the area were strikingly similar, with Samantha (18) as the exception. She had moved to the regional centre from Melbourne a year prior to being interviewed and found it "so calm" in comparison to the city. The other participants used descriptors such as "a shithole" (April), "depression-inducing" (Zoe) and "a little bit scary" (Julia) or slightly less dramatic terms such as "going downhill" (Felicity) and "not ideal" (Matilda) when I asked them to describe the area. They were acutely aware of the negative reputation of the region, and they by and large shared this perception. However, this did not mean that they were eager to move elsewhere; on the contrary, only two of the 11 participants described a clear wish to move to Melbourne: Belinda (aged 16) was attracted to the anonymity of a larger city and imaged moving there first, and then to a farm in the countryside later on in her life. Zoe (17) was the only one who spoke of the city as the place of opportunities and was hopeful she would be there in the future as she described the city as her "happy place". Below I focus on the participants who imagined they would be staying locally to shed light on how they imagine futures in a stigmatised location that is seen to hold limited opportunities.

Negotiating belonging in spite of stigma

I first focus on how the participants redefine their neighbourhood as a place in which they can belong despite the overall, negative characteristics of the place. The quote below, from the second interview with Sandra (18, lives with parents, works in retail), illustrates how local, spatial hierarchies were perceived:

Sandra: It [hometown] is the better town around here, the surrounding areas aren't great at all.

Interviewer: What do you mean by better, and not so great?

Sandra: [...] Um, so there's a lot of drugs in [town A] and in [town B]. This town is the upcoming city, I guess you could say. We're getting all these new stores and all that kind of stuff. And that's great [...] But you've got your good parts and your bad parts, so up West, if you live up West you're fine. If you live down East, you're automatically considered a feral. I live down East. I'm not a feral. I live in the better part of East, but they've divvied it up that way.

Describing the social geography of both the region and her town, Sandra emphasises how her town is not only “the better town” compared to other nearby towns but also how her particular neighbourhood is “the better part of East”. This is important in order to distance herself from the ‘ferals’ who are seen as characteristic of the East end. This highly laden, classed term basically compares humans to ‘wild’ animals and describes “the moralisation of unemployment and its association with drug use and individualised moral failure” (Farrugia 2020, p. 241). Later on in the interview, Sandra describes being careful not to mention a specific street name when people ask where she lives as to not give the wrong kind of associations. Emphasising these micro-geographical distinctions is not only a discursive or performative strategy but also seems important for her actual sense of belonging: that she lives in a place that has positive features such as “new stores and all that kind of stuff”.

The micro-geographical focus is also clear in the interview with April (24, lives alone with her three young children, on maternity leave):

Interviewer: So how would you describe this neighbourhood to people who had never been here?

April: Don't come here (laughs).

Interviewer: (Laughs) Why is that?

April: Like, this particular street, it's like all nice, but just around the corner, there's this one house, and they constantly come through our street, and they're screaming and swearing and punching and throwing cans everywhere. And they've been breaking into all of the houses here, and they're just stupid. And like, the house on the corner, they actually grow and sell drugs [...] So, yeah,

no. There's just a lot of like really shitty people in a compact area. Particularly this end of [town] is worse [...]

Interviewer: So, is that like, does that make you feel unsafe, or-

April: Not really. I think you're less likely to get robbed towards the Eastern end, because if you live towards the East, they're gonna think that you're poor, so they're not going to think that you have good shit to take. So, (laughs), the closer you get, the less likely you are to get robbed I think [...] the ferals annoy me, but I feel safer living towards the shittier people.

Like Sandra, April is careful to point out how her own street is “nice” and that the problems start “just around the corner”, thereby using the physical distance to mark a social distance from the ‘problem part’. Also similar to Sandra, April uses the derogatory term ‘ferals’ to refer to the ‘troublemakers’. The young women’s use of this term illustrates a broader point in the data, that is, the negative perceptions of the local communities were overwhelmingly related to specific people, who came to represent all that is wrong with the town. In fact, only Zoe spoke about material aspects such as pollution (“even the air is unhealthy”), even though this is a significant part of the broader public narrative about the region. For most participants then, social problems were at the forefront of what they saw as the causes of the negative reputation. For instance, Sandra (quoted above) said “We have the potential to be such a great town [...] Everything you need [is] here, but we just don’t have the best people around” while Matilda stated that “it (the town) definitely needs some work, but that’s more like the sort of socio-economic side of things. Like the people are sort of like drug addicts and alcoholics”. As Small, Harding & Lamont note, symbolic boundary work creates categories that are not just different, but establish a “hierarchy of moral worth” (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010, p. 171). Hence, by distancing themselves, physically and socially, from the ‘shitty people’ the women are not only marking themselves as different from them, but essentially also as better (see also Shildrick & MacDonald 2013). It is important for them not to be mistaken as belonging to the category of ‘ferals’. Importantly, this happens despite, and perhaps even because, they themselves inhabit somewhat stigmatised subject positions as ‘early school leavers’ and, in April’s case, a ‘young mother’.

Returning to April's quote above, it was clear that despite the problems with crime and burglaries close to her, she did not feel unsafe where she lives; on the contrary. Hence, while at a symbolic level it is imperative for her to mark a distance to the 'ferals', the association with the "shitty people" end of town has some practical benefits that help to create a basic sense of security and belonging. It is implied, though, that not everyone would feel safe in this environment, as April explicitly 'advised' newcomers to stay away. As Cuervo & Cook (2018) argue, belonging in place is often described in terms of familiarity with an area. In April's case she is familiar with the social problems around the corner to an extent where this is not unsettling, merely annoying. This aspect becomes even clearer in the quote below where Julia (20, lives with partner, studying a short, vocational programme) distinguishes between the "nicer" streets and "not so nice ones" in her town:

Julia: You sort of get the idea of which ones are the houses to avoid because you can just tell by looking outside them they look really growly and run down and there's always trash out the front, like that sort of stuff.

Interviewer: Yeah. But it's not something that makes you feel... like you still feel at home, where you feel-

Julia: I do, yeah, because this is where I live. I'm used to it, I guess. But like, I think those kinds of houses, you'd find them anywhere. So not just here [...] I just know about them here 'cause I've always lived here.

Similar to April, Julia tells how she is "used to it" and therefore not troubled by the "houses to avoid" in her neighbourhood; she feels at home there "because this is where I live" (see also MacDonald et al, 2005). In another interview, Matilda described her sense of belonging despite visible social problems in similar terms: "I feel really comfortable because I've lived around here my entire life. But, I guess for someone who's never been there, I probably wouldn't recommend it". What also becomes clear in the quote above is another strategy for creating belonging, namely downplaying the extent of the perceived problems or what can be described as a 'technique of neutralisation' (Sykes & Matza, 1957). That is, admitting that the place has problems but that these exist everywhere means that these problems should not be a reason to dislike the place. This is echoed by other participants. For instance, Babette (19, lives with partner and one small child) who feels that her town is a

typical Australian town and states that “you’re gonna see that kind of stuff, no matter what town you’re in, unfortunately”. These neutralisations are part of creating a selective sense of belonging for the participants while at the same time they also performatively serve to counter the broader stigma of the place in the context of the interview. As Julia states elsewhere in the interview, “there's still decent people too”.

Negotiating aspirations

In the interviews, the participants were asked about their future plans and dreams. Most participants (in this subsample as well as the overall study) had plans to return to the educational system at some stage, either through vocational pathway or higher education, and some of them were already enrolled in various programmes. Julia, quoted above, described how her vocational education (online programme) should enable her to find work “in any town”, and that she is somewhat flexible in terms of her spatial future, but does not plan to move:

Julia: If the situation calls for moving to another town, then I'd do it. If the situation doesn't call for it, and it's just this, then it's just this. I mean there's not too many jobs down here, but there's still jobs.

While she indicates a willingness to be mobile should “the situation”, that is, the work situation of herself but also that of her partner, call for it, she also makes it clear that ‘another town’ is a neighbouring town, not a location outside of the region, to be able to stay close to her parents and grandparents.

For some of the participants, however, their educational aspirations were flexible and depending on other life events such as having children. For instance, in the quote below Babette describes her priorities:

Interviewer: Do you think you’ll stay around here, if you looked like five years or ten years, even, ahead?

Babette: I think we’ll still be around this area. Purely because this is where my parents and my siblings and most of [partner’s] family are. They all grew up just

outside of [town] [...] It also comes down to this one [nods at daughter in the pram]. My thing was, I didn't wanna live in [region] anymore, I wanted to move.

Interviewer: Okay. Why's that?

Babette: I don't know, it's just, I've grown up here, you know. I've seen some shit happen (laughs). Or I'd been through some shit and just wanted to, you know, get away from that. But now it's like, I don't wanna take [my daughter] away from her family. Because obviously me growing up without knowing who mum's mum was-, I wanna give her [daughter] the opportunity to know all of her family, and I don't wanna, like, take that away from her. You know? [...] I feel like I would've moved away and then gone, "Oh, but I really do miss this", and probably moved back eventually [...] It was just something I wanted to do, but now it's ... I'm fine here. There are people ... there are some really good friends. I have supportive family. I'm good.

Rather than considering job opportunities, infrastructure or lifestyle opportunities, Babette puts family and social relations at the top of her list of priorities when considering her spatial future. In doing this she emphasises both her own and her partner's families' ties to the place as something that makes staying here a meaningful choice. These are aspects that support belonging in place (see also Cuervo & Cook, 2019; Cuervo & Wyn, 2017; Rönnlund, 2020) and are mentioned by other participants too, for instance Shanthi (20, lives with partner and two children, pregnant with third child), who simply motivates her decision to stay locally with "I grew up here and all my family, my partner's family is here [...] it's my home town" (see also Jamieson, 2000). Reflecting on how her younger self had hoped to "get away" from the area, Babette now views this as both a somewhat silly and hasty decision that she would have regretted anyway, but also as an individualistic aspiration that no longer carries the same weight. In this way, she redefines 'aspirations' to be social and familial rather than individualistic, and she states that she is "fine" staying as she has both family and friends there. This is the case in other interviews as well. For instance, April (quoted above) is planning to stay locally despite her negative perception of the area and declares that "everything's here [...] kinder, school, family, friends". For her, too, there is no consideration of opportunities relating to her own future plans, but instead an emphasis on social relations and on her children's needs. Importantly, this is not because the women do

not hold educational aspirations for their own futures; in fact, they both have plans that involve university level studies (with a mix of online components and locally available training components and face-to-face sessions). Whether the women have chosen those specific programmes *because* they are available locally – in that sense adapting their own futures to what is possible in the location – is not clear from the data. What is clear is that they reject individualist notions of aspiration and instead present aspirations that are social, relational and holistic.

Somewhat in contrast to this is the following quote from Felicity (19, lives with partner and young child, on maternity leave), who is considering how the economic future of her town and the broader region will play into her own future:

Felicity: I don't know. You know, 5 years... [...] it's a lot of "I don't know" to be honest. I don't know whether I'll be still in [the region]. I don't know. I might be. I half wanna leave and I half don't (laughs).

Interviewer: Oh, why is that?

Felicity: I feel like there's – I don't know. Maybe in the career that I'm going to go in [community services], there's gonna be plenty of jobs around here, but I don't feel like there's a lot of opportunity around here -

Interviewer: Right. What kind of opportunity do you mean?

Felicity: I don't know (laughs). It just seems like job wise, lately, it doesn't affect me as much, but I know a lot of the blokes who are in, you know, we just lost the [large industrial facility] and all that stuff. And I don't keep up with it too much but I'm pretty sure there was a timber mill in [town] or something that just got shut down. There's just lots of places getting, you know, shut down. I don't know all that much but it just sort of feels like it's slowly going downhill [...] I really do hope that [the region] does get better, but honestly, a lot of me doesn't think it's going to (laughs). I feel like it is going to turn to shit.

Interviewer: because of the- because those jobs are just disappearing?

Felicity: Yeah. I just, I don't know. Jobs are disappearing which means, I suppose, people will be leaving and stuff.

In the quote here Felicity seems to still be making up her mind in terms of whether she will stay local or move somewhere else. While emphasising that she is no expert on the local economy, she describes multiple industry closures in the region and how these for her indicate that the place is “going downhill”. As Pimlott-Wilson writes (2017, p. 293), “the local is affected by global economic restructuring, employer decisions as well as government policy, yet the consequences are felt, negotiated and lived through by individuals rooted in place”. While the closures are not directly affecting her own future prospects in a narrow sense – she foresees “plenty” of jobs in mental health services in the current climate – they affect “the blokes”. In this way, the gendered dimensions of both the job losses on the one hand and the service economy and welfare sector jobs that are left on the other are clear to Felicity. However, in a country that in many respects still relies on men/fathers as breadwinners and women/mothers as carers and only part-time workers, this type of downturn is problematic for families such as Felicity’s and creates anxiety. Her partner used to work as a labourer but was looking for work at the time of both interview 1 and 2, meaning that she has first-hand experience with the difficulties in the local labour market. Hence, when Felicity speaks of the place “going to turn to shit” and sensing a lack of opportunities this is about opportunities for her family and the community, not just herself. Whether this will make her move somewhere else, though, is still uncertain. While she indicates that she might like to live closer to the Melbourne, she also describes herself as “a country girl” and speaks about moving from the small town where she currently lives with her partner, and back to the larger town (10km away) where she grew up as “there is more there”. She plans to go back to her job in the local hardware store after her maternity leave – working alongside her father and sister – and enrol in vocational training; something she had indeed done at the time of the second interview. This suggests that despite the somewhat negative prospects for the place she is imagining a future that is possible in the particular location.

The broader economic situation and future of the region are also issues that weigh on Matilda’s (quoted above) mind. In the first interview I asked about how she imagines her life will look five years on and whether she will stay locally:

Matilda: This place isn't ... isn't ideal. Like, it has issues. There isn't much of an economy here anymore. I know it sounds ... like they shut down the [large industrial facility]. There's more and more druggies popping up all over the place, there really is. You move down the street and you can see four of them within 50 meters [...] And there's not many opportunities here. I know that, but unless, you know, I just come into money or there was something somewhere else – but I wouldn't go anywhere else. I'm worried about education for my daughter here. But that's something I have to look into. But yeah, that's pretty much it. I probably would never leave because everything is here. All my friends, and the few family members I have.

Like Felicity, Matilda is also sceptical about the future “opportunities” in the region. With Benson & Jackson's demonstration of how ‘place-making’ is also ‘people-making’ in mind (Benson & Jackson, 2013), we can understand this as not just a worry about making a living, but about which life is possible, and what attractive future self is possible in a place that is in decline. One of the main problems for her are the visible street level drug use and related crime; problems that become more pronounced in the second interview six months later where she had just had her second child. Matilda does not want to gamble with her children's future prospects in terms of not just quality education but also the risk of getting involved in crime. While she mentions “coming into money” as something that would enable her to move, this seems more like a hypothetical situation, and not something she actually sees as realistic. This is also picked up in the second interview where Matilda describes how rent elsewhere is too expensive so moving away does not feel like an option. Instead, in both interviews she makes it clear that despite the issues she is most likely to stay, describing that “I feel like it's a good enough place to live. You can, I guess if you work hard, you can succeed anywhere”. While this neoliberal and meritocratic trope may ring hollow (Mendick, Allen, & Harvey, 2015), it demonstrates Matilda's (necessitated) faith in her own capacity to not only find work despite the dismal labour market but also succeed in keeping her children from going “stray”. In this sense, Matilda's spatial future aspiration for a ‘good enough’ place to live is the outcome of negotiations between a desire for a safe and thriving location, the value she places on social ties and the reality of financial limitations.

Discussion

In the analysis, a number of insights into the participants' imagined spatial futures emerged. What became clear was that the trope of the city as 'the place to be', both in terms of opportunities and attractive lifestyles, is almost entirely absent in the data. For the majority of the participants, Melbourne, the closest capital city, was not on their 'spatial horizon' (Rönnlund, 2020) as a place to live, only as a place to visit for a day. This is in itself a significant finding given the stigmatised identity of their region, which was recognised and also reinforced in the interviews. To understand this, we need to consider the double set of negotiations taking place in the data, that is, to consider the young women's sense of belonging alongside and as intertwined with their future aspirations. First, in terms of belonging, we saw how the stigmatised character of the place made it difficult for the women to voice a sense of belonging in place as this puts them at risk of being aligned with this negative place identity. To avoid this association, their negotiations of belonging involved both symbolic boundary work, distancing themselves from the 'ferals' to preserve their own moral worth, and more generally an emphasis on the micro-geographies of the local environment. However, we also saw attempts at neutralising the stigma of the town or area, working towards the same objective of preserving moral identities.

Second, imagined spatial futures involved a negotiation of aspirations in a broad sense of the term. Here the analysis showed how decisions to stay in the area were not reflective of a 'lack' of aspirations, as this is sometimes depicted by policy discourse (cf. Allen & Hollingworth 2013). Indeed, the participants voiced a range of future aspirations, but these plans took into account multiple factors rather than simply the participants' own, individual future dreams. What becomes apparent here is a relational and social concept of aspirations. First of all, while all participants had clear plans for either returning to education or work, these plans were flexible and had to be fitted in with other life events such as having children. Second, the participants placed a strong emphasis on family relations and social ties. Reasons not to move away can in that sense be seen as an aspiration for close-knit, intergenerational family life and giving priority to social relations more generally, in line with what other studies have found (e.g., Jamieson 2000). Third, featuring strongly in the future aspirations of those who were mothers were the future of their children, reflecting both an ambition for intergenerational 'improvement' but also a

willingness to 'make compromises' as they balanced their own aspirations and dreams with aspirations on behalf of their children, such as in Babette's case. Importantly, this type of negotiation does not have to result in decisions to stay. As Matilda's considerations demonstrated, wanting 'the best' for her children might be impossible in a place with considerable social problems.

These negotiations can be seen as coming together in the notion of 'good enough' futures – future lives that strike a balance between belonging, local opportunity structures and being aspirational on behalf of oneself as well as one's family and children. This mirrors Jamieson's (2000) study of young people in a rural Scottish area, where some participants with strong place attachments settled for 'good enough' futures. However, while Jamieson's study focused on employment and career aspirations, the notion of 'good enough' in this study is wider and includes the lifestyles and identities that are possible in the location. These 'good enough' futures are both classed and gendered. They signal the 'affective aspects of class' (Reay, 2005, p. 913) as an internalised feeling of inferiority; as a matter of knowing one's place and moderating one's aspirations accordingly. This also involves an awareness of what is possible; financially and geographically. At the same time these aspirations are profoundly gendered in their traditional focus on family and children. While there was a significant number of mothers in the present sample, the focus on social relations was not restricted to these participants. Lastly, realising these 'good enough' futures, locally or elsewhere, was very much seen as their own individual responsibilities (cf. Cairns, 2013; Lamberg 2020), most pronounced by Matilda but also implied by other participants.

It is widely acknowledged that mobility is "a social resource that is unequally distributed" (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013, p. 502; see also Forsberg, 2019) and may be seen as a specific form of capital (Moret 2020), meaning that not all young people are equally able to be or imagine themselves as mobile subjects. Imagined mobility is also seen as a potential proxy for a sense of agency (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016). Without questioning these important perspectives, it is worth asking, however, whether immobility is then necessarily indicating a lack of agency? While the present analysis is limited to one particular location, and as a qualitative study does not aim to generalise its findings, the insights found here do suggest that this is a problematic assumption that dismisses the attachments, dreams and decisions

of young people who experience a strong sense of belonging in place, even if this is 'against the odds' as in the disadvantaged location in focus in the present study. To reframe 'immobility', then, requires a balance between a social justice lens that acknowledges the unequal access to mobility as a resource, alongside an actual appreciation for place attachment and aspirations that are usually positioned as inferior, 'low' or simply lacking. If youth is the the key to the future of their local areas (Coffey et al., 2018), 'immobility' or rather 'spatial continuity' (Schewel, 2020) can be reframed as a matter of community and an aspiration for sustainable, local futures. To ensure that these futures are not just 'good enough', institutional and policy support is necessary.

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¹ I use the term ‘region/regional’ as this is the commonly used terminology in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics use a 5-tiered ‘remoteness structure’ to classify geographical areas in terms of their distance to services. The five groups include major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote Australia. I ‘collapse’ inner and outer regional into the category ‘regional’ to preserve anonymity.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/remoteness+structure>

² Australia’s teenage fertility rate is comparable to the UK, US and Canada, while significantly higher than European countries (Hoffman & Vidal, 2017).