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## **Agentive motility meets structural viscosity: Australian families relocating in educational markets.**

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## **Agentive motility meets structural viscosity: Australian families relocating in educational markets.**

### **Abstract:**

This paper will develop and illustrate a concept of institutional viscosity to balance the more agentive concept of motility with a theoretical account of structural conditions. The argument articulates with two bodies of work: Archer's (2007, 2012) broad social theory of reflexivity as negotiating agency and social structures; and Urry's (2007) sociology of mobility and mobility systems. It then illustrates the concept of viscosity as a variable (low to high viscosity) through two empirical studies conducted in the sociology of education that help demonstrate how degrees of viscosity interact with degrees of motility, and how this interaction can impact on motility over time. The first study explored how Australian Defence Force families cope with their children's disrupted education given frequent forced relocations. The other study explored how middle class professionals relate to career and educational opportunities in rural and remote Queensland. These two life conditions have produced very different institutional practices to make relocations thinkable and doable, by variously constraining or enabling mobility. In turn, the degrees of viscosity mobile individuals meet with over time can erode or elevate their motility.

## Introduction

Urry's book *Sociology beyond societies: Mobilities for the twenty-first century* (2000) inserted mobility as an object of study in sociology's agenda, and in the process, troubled the core concept of 'society'. In anthropology, Clifford's book *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century* (1997) did similar work taking 'a view of human location as constituted by displacement as much as by stasis ... (invoking) old and new maps and histories of people in transit, variously empowered and compelled' (Clifford, 1997, p. 1). In the process, Clifford troubled that discipline's core concept of 'culture'. These provocations suggest that the study of mobilities offer fertile ground on which to revisit disciplinary fundamentals.

In this vein, this paper probes family mobility decisions to explicate the interplay between agency (the capacity of individuals to act on the world) and structure (the resilient relational orders and institutions that organise social life). More particularly, it considers the nature and strength of institutional substance that serves to enable or constrain such mobility projects. A concept of 'viscosity' is developed as an additional tool for the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) to capture this variable degree of resistance or facilitation offered by structural context. Urry's (2000) manifesto for a new sociological method that could account for the social in movement across time and space sought to move beyond the agency/structure binary underpinning sociology's default assumption of fixity. Much subsequent mobilities research has attended to what is new and changing, highlighting 'mobile culture', the sociality of transportation, and overtly mobile populations (Vannini, 2010). However, Urry (2000) was equally intent on explaining the 'uneven reach' (p.18) of networks and flows, and efforts to 'regulate' mobilities (p.19). This indicates the ongoing relevance of structural efforts or effects that mitigate mobility. The concept of viscosity contributes in this regard.

The paper draws on parallel studies of differently mobile families from the sociology of education. The first study interviewed parents in families with an Australian Defence Force (ADF) member, about their history, concerns and strategies around household relocations. These hyper-mobile military families pursued ordinary lives in extraordinary circumstances, posted frequently and at short notice to locations not necessarily of their choosing. The second study conducted similar interviews with professional parents (teachers, doctors, nurses and police officers) in six rural and remote communities in Queensland, Australia. These professionals had ample choice about where to live given the widespread demand for their skills. They thus have the capacity to optimize where they live (Weiss, 2005) for the sake of both career purposes and children's education. Rural and remote localities are often reduced to 'gamekeeping' strategies (Urry, 2000) in order to attract and retain such professionals to staff vital services. The differently textured mobilities of these two groups are produced under institutional conditions that make relocations more or less thinkable and doable, and institutional strategies that seek to variously constrain or enable that mobility.

Family relocations offer a valuable empirical window on sociological processes for a number of reasons. Family units with responsibility for school-aged children are engaged in multiple life projects that cross a variety of institutional structures (for example workplaces, schools, child care services, health and welfare systems, churches, sports clubs, housing markets), and 'the impossible task of finding biographical solutions to systemic contradictions' (Beck, 2007, p. 685). Thus relocating families requires considerable reflexive work. Secondly, family relocations are intriguing given the widespread normative preference for immobility across childhood (Holdsworth, 2013), which helps explain the emergent lifestyles of living-apart-together and commuting couples (Schneider & Limmer, 2008; van der Klis & Karsten, 2009). Thirdly, the comparison between the two sampled groups is sociologically telling. While the hyper-mobile ADF families absorb private problems in the educational trajectories of their children in the

interests of public service, the professional families' selective mobility and relative absence from rural and remote communities create the public problem of underserviced communities.

To make sense of both similarities and differences underpinning these two groups' mobilities, a concept of institutional viscosity helps balance Kaufmann's more agentive concept of motility (Flamm & Kaufmann, 2006; Kaufmann, 2002; Kaufmann, et al., 2004). The concept of motility is firstly reviewed in terms of what it conceptualises, how it has developed, then what it does and doesn't help explain. Then theoretical arguments for a structural concept of viscosity are built from Archer's (2007, 2012) social theory of reflexivity as mediating structure and agency; and Urry's (2007) concept of mobility systems. The paper then illustrates viscosity as a variable (high to low viscosity) using examples from the two empirical studies that demonstrate how degrees of viscosity interact with degrees of motility over time.

## **Motility**

Kaufmann's concept of motility refers to the capacity, attitudes, resources and skills that make mobility possible. It thus summarises and gauges potential for mobility, rather than mobility events per se:

motility is comprised of all the factors that define a person's capacity to be mobile, whether this is physical aptitude, aspirations to settle down or be mobile, existing technological transport and telecommunications systems and their accessibility, space-time constraints (location of the workplace), acquired knowledge such as a driver's licence, etc. Motility is thus constituted of elements relating to access (that is, available choice in a broad sense), to skills (the competence required to make use of this access) and appropriation (evaluation of the available access). (Kaufmann, 2002, p.38)

This definition embraces both attributes of the actor (aptitude, aspirations, knowledge) and attributes of the contextual social infrastructure (transport and telecommunications systems, constraints), but, I would argue, he foregrounds the agent in the idea of ‘appropriation’ – being the volitional action taken by the agent to realise potentials inherent in both individual and system. This focus on agency, while mindful of structural context, is made more explicit later:

actors are central in the mobility process ... Only by integrating the intentions of people and the reasons which make them mobile or which, on the contrary, leave them immobile will we succeed in attaining this goal. Getting past this confusion suggests redirecting the interest of researchers towards the aspirations and plans of those involved, as well as the things that motivate them, and their possible realm of action.

(Kaufman, 2002, p.36)

Kaufman acknowledges the variable strength of structural conditions that lend themselves (or not) to mobility, ‘from the structured and confined pole to the non-structured and infinite pole.’ (2002, p. 9). Nevertheless, at this stage Kaufmann was more interested in understanding the variable degrees of motility in how people exercise the ‘degree of freedom’ (2002, p. 43) at their disposal.

A further article (Flamm & Kaufmann, 2006) sought to operationalise this agentic concept of motility along the three definition axes of access, skills and appropriation. Using grounded theory with data from a qualitative study, the axis of access was unpacked and interpreted as a ‘personal access rights portfolio’ (p. 172). The axis of skill was ‘first and foremost a question of accumulating experience’ (p.176), and the axis of appropriation involved habits, principles, and personal evaluations of options. Similarly, a study by Kesselring (2006) explored how various groups managed the ‘modern mobility imperative’ (p.269). The paper offered three ideal types of

mobility management – the centred, the de-centred and the virtual. Again, though mindful of contextual conditions, the author was most interested in the ‘individual share in mobility’ and ‘the actors’ ability to influence their movement through time and space’ (p. 270). Motility studies thus continued to privilege the agentic side in explaining social ‘fluidification’ (Kaufmann, et al., 2004, p. 747).

Other work (Kaufmann, et al., 2004) explores the interface between spatial mobility and social mobility in a more ‘systemic’ (p. 752) approach, shifting the spotlight to include structural dimensions and dynamics: ‘embedded actors are central to spatial mobility, as are specific contexts that delimit or make possible movement’ (p.749). The authors call for more consideration of ‘the interaction between actors, structures and context’ (p. 749) in mobility research. The definition of motility is extended to describe the propensity of objects (as well as people) to be mobile and implicated in both horizontal and vertical social structures. It is not however clear how the notion of ‘appropriation’, embedded in the earlier definition of motility might apply to inanimate objects. In what Archer might call ‘concept-stretching’ (2007, p. 40), the dual focus is encapsulated and reconciled in an augmented concept of ‘motility’ through a conflation of structure and agency:

we will argue that social structures and dynamics are interdependent with the actual or potential capacity to displace entities, that is goods, information or people ... (Kaufmann, et al., 2004, p. 745)

While this interdependence makes everyday sense, the conflation fails to theoretically or analytically disentangle attributes of the ‘specific contexts that delimit or make possible movement’ (Kaufmann et al. 2004, 709) from actors’ dispositions and resources.

Across the same set of articles, the concept of motility is linked to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, such that:

motility forms theoretical and empirical links with, and can be exchanged for, other types of capital. ... movement can take many forms, ... different forms of movement may be interchangeable, and ... the potentiality of movement can be expressed as a form of 'movement capital.' (Kaufmann, et al., 2004, p. 752)

This treatment of the concept of capital fails to engage with Bourdieu's other important and mutually constitutive concepts of habitus and field. Capitals only accrue value in social fields through the rules of the game and forces constituting relational positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Hence, by omitting any consideration of field, Kaufmann et al. overlook the power of the Bourdieusian theory to articulate the social structuring of relations, the forces thus generated, the nuanced differences between fields, and the rules governing the exchange of capitals in each field. Conversely, if the authors had explored the concept of habitus, they may have found a concept that helped them articulate how objective structure can be incorporated and expressed in subjective, embodied dispositions – that is, how motile dispositions subsume and process contextual conditions and structural position over time. This concept however is better at explaining social reproduction than explaining social change, which is what mobility studies has largely attended to. The next section takes another approach that highlights the importance of maintaining an analytical distinction between agency and structure to understand social change.

### **Augmenting motility with viscosity**

In her book, *Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility* (Archer, 2007), Archer outlines a comprehensive theory and empirical exploration of how human reflexivity mediates the subjective concerns and projects of the agent on one hand and the objective

constraints and enablements of their structural context on the other (see also Archer, 2012).

Archer defines reflexivity as:

the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa. Such deliberations are important since they form the basis upon which people determine their future courses of action - always fallibly and always under their own description. (2007, p.4)

She accords reflexivity a pivotal position within social theory: 'The subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action and are thus indispensable to explaining social outcomes' (p.5). In addition, she orients to the growing call on reflexivity to navigate a rapidly changing world. However she argues against theoretically collapsing agency and structure into the conflated concept of 'reflexive modernity' (for example, Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994) because of what gets lost in the analysis. She also critiques Bourdieu's concept of habitus for underestimating the causal efficacy of agents' intentionality and reflexivity. Drawing on critical realist metatheory, she explains why it is necessary to maintain analytical purchase on both agency and structure to understand any process of structure conditioning agency:

(it) necessitates the interplay of two different kinds of causal powers: those pertaining to structures and those belonging to subjects. ... how structural and cultural powers impinge upon agents, and secondly of how agents use their own personal powers to act 'so rather than otherwise' in such situations. Thus, there are two elements involved, the 'impingement upon' (which is objective) and the 'response to it' (which is subjective). (Archer, 2007, p.10)

This stance seems pertinent to the state of motility theory. 'Motility' could be a more useful concept if restricted to matters of agency, but becomes analytically diffuse and omnivorous if it claims to account for structural conditions as well. Kaufmann et al. (2004, p. 748) themselves pose exactly the question that warrants the development of a partner concept to capture the role of structure: 'which contexts condition societal fluidification and in what way?'

Within the mobility paradigm itself, Urry (2007) overlays Kaufmann's idea of movement capital with the concept of network capital 'in order to connect the mobilities paradigm to issues of socio-spatial inequalities' (p. 39). Urry's treatment differs however in that this concept dialogues with the more structural concept of 'mobility systems', being 'the enduring systems that provide what we might call the infrastructures of social life. Such systems enable the movement of people, ideas and information from place to place, person-to-person, event to event' (Urry, 2007, p. 12). The tandem concepts (network capital and mobility systems) allow a double-handled agency/structure analysis of 'life in a world that combines exceptional freedom ... and exceptional system dependence' (p.15). However not all mobility systems are equally efficient, and the concept could benefit from some comparative gauge of how effective they are in facilitating mobility. For example, horse-drawn stagecoaches (such as Australia's extensive Cobb and Co. Coach network) were an effective mobility system in their time, but train and automobile systems eventually offered faster, more efficient mobility system, which in turn are eclipsed by the airline and very fast train service.

For this reason, a metaphorically cognate concept of **viscosity** may help to refer to the degree of resistance or enabling offered by structures to mobility projects. It can analytically distinguish settings and systems that enable and support mobility (low viscosity) from those that make it difficult or impossible (high viscosity), and express relational degrees between (being more or less viscous). In physics, viscosity describes the degree of resistance fluids pose to the motion of

submerged objects. High viscosity would indicate that the mobility of the object is impeded by the heavy, resistant nature of the fluid. In biology, the motility of an organism is mitigated by the viscosity of its environment, thus the explanation of any observed mobility requires an understanding of both pre-existing dimensions. To draw on these versions of viscosity metaphorically (and to play on Bourdieu's 'fish in water' model for habitus and field), moving through a low viscosity social context could be considered to be like swimming in water – relatively effortless, meeting little resistance or impediments. Conversely, moving through a high viscosity context would be like swimming through treacle – vexed, stressful and effortful. The treatment for holders of different passports at passport gates might illustrate this neatly. For local and allied citizens, passage through is quick, efficient with little effort or stress. For those with passports deemed risky, passage through the gates takes longer with more checks and imposed conditions. Similarly, the sudden increase in viscosity at US passport gates after the attacks of September 11 2001 would suggest that one's ease of passage cannot be explained just in terms of the motility dispositions and accoutrements of the traveller, but equally implicates their contextual reception and treatment.

So what might be the institutional substance that offers resistance to the mobile agent? Social institutions will have practices and systems that manage and regulate the flow of people through their services according to the pace and mode they normalise or legitimate. According to research on schooling for mobile populations, schools are typically 'predicated on permanently resident children attending the same school' (Kenny & Danaher, 2009, p. 1) (see also Henderson, 2001, 2004). This would suggest an institutional default of high viscosity, with institutionalised entry and exit points at either end and a lack of procedures to facilitate entry and exits elsewhere in their program, such that irregular comings and goings are considered institutionally bothersome or aberrant.

The viscosity of an institution however is not a fixed quality, but rather is socially constructed and can be re-calibrated in response to the politics and priorities of the times. As another educational example, the Bologna Accord of 1999 set in motion a process of radically reducing the viscosity of higher education institutions in Europe, to allow students, academic credits and staff to flow more easily across institutions (Robertson & Keeling, 2008). More generally, many universities have pursued various strategies of internationalization to encourage the international circulation of students and staff (see for example Byram & Dervin, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1997). In Australia, the recent development of a national curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012) to replace the patchwork of eight distinct state curricula has reduced a major structural impediment to interstate family mobility, and should make the social structure of schooling more considerate and supportive of mobile families. Within the state jurisdiction, the Queensland Education Department has developed a unique identifier for each student to allow consistent tracking and record-keeping regardless of school changes. These systemic efforts could be understood as strategies to lower institutional viscosity, making mobility more thinkable, doable, normalised and supported. On the other hand, the same state government has increased controls over the flow of overseas-trained doctors into Queensland hospitals following public outcry over malpractice by a US trained surgeon (Burton, 2005). In other words, they have made the institutional setting more viscous and constraining for these mobile doctors.

In schools, the typically high viscosity may also be changing under the ‘metapolicy’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 16) of neoliberal choice (see also Connell, 2002). Parents are now encouraged to exercise choice as to which school their students attend, and to change their choice of school if warranted. To this end, the Australian Government has invested in a website (see <http://www.myschool.edu.au/>) that profiles every registered school in Australia against a range of ‘quality indicators’ to resource parents’ thinking. This institutional effort could be construed as

an attempt to create a less viscous, more competitive market environment, under the logic that this competitiveness and mobility will force under-performing schools to address quality concerns. Family mobility has emerged as a common strategy to secure the desired school choice under versions of such policy in many nations (Campbell, Proctor, & Sherington, 2009; Dougherty et al., 2009; Lubienski & Dougherty, 2009; Maloutas, 2007; Noreisch, 2007; Poupeau, Francois, & Couratier, 2007).

Distinguishing between agentic motility and institutional viscosity does not rule out their complex entanglement, but does allow a more nuanced exploration of their interaction in two ways. Firstly, it enables consideration of different scenarios in the cross tabulation of high/low motility, and high/low viscosity. Secondly, it allows the impact of their entanglement to be better understood across time. These two lines of enquiry will be illustrated following a brief introduction to the empirical studies.

### **The empirical studies**

The empirical examples below are drawn from two interview studies with different populations experiencing contrasting patterns of mobility. The first study was motivated by reports of educational complications for children in military families stemming from their high mobility. Mobility is often required for career advancement in the Australian Defence Force (ADF). Relocations within Australia and perhaps internationally can be expected every 2-4 years (Department of Defence, 2008). To this end, the ADF have developed a raft of support measures and assistance packages to support family mobility. In other words, the ADF as an institution and employer, invest considerable effort to reduce institutional viscosity. However, they are not the only institution families have to move through. Schooling as an institution has historically assumed residential stability, and mobility has been associated with detrimental effects on educational outcomes (Voight, Shinn, & Nation, 2012). The contradictory institutional

facts of ADF members' family life can present significant challenges when it comes to negotiating transitions, and achieving continuity if not stability in their children's education. In this study, parents in 34 ADF families<sup>1</sup> with school-aged children were interviewed about how they reconcile frequent relocations for ADF career advancement with educational strategy for their children. The families were sampled in three towns hosting large ADF communities across two states. The hour-long interviews were designed to elicit a detailed chronology of household moves, and narratives around school choice and transitions in each setting. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and member-checked. Both parents participated when possible, but more typically just the female partner participated, given the long absences of their ADF partners on active deployment.

These 34 families had already undertaken a total of 121 household moves with their children (an average of between three and four moves each, within a range of one to nine moves) of which 95 were interstate, 15 within state and 11 international. In addition, all families were anticipating more moves in the near future. This high frequency and spatial range of mobility distinguishes them from the larger Australian population. In comparison, a national study of housing conducted in 2007-2008 reported that 43% of the households sampled had moved in the 5 years prior to interview, of whom only 8% had moved interstate or from overseas, 45% from a different locality or suburb, and 47% within the same locality/suburb (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). It should be noted that interstate mobility in Australia can be difficult for school-aged children, given eight different jurisdictions, with different starting ages, handwriting styles, assessment regimes and pedagogical preferences.

The study was also motivated by increasing marketisation in the school sector. Where the local school used to serve as the default choice, schools are now encouraged to differentiate themselves in the market, and parents are encouraged to shop around then choose a school

according to particular needs and preferences. Ironically, under such ‘choice policy’, popular schools often resort to zoning their catchment or to waiting lists to manage the enrolment pressure stemming from their popularity. Thus when and where you live can become important determinants of whether you can enrol your children in your school of choice. Such considerations privilege local knowledge that mobile families may not have access to, or residential stability that ADF families cannot presume.

The second study was motivated by the ongoing problem Australia has attracting and retaining human service professionals to work in rural and remote communities, and the additional concern that the increasing marketisation of the school sector could exacerbate this issue. Middle class professionals, themselves reliant on educational qualifications for their livelihood and status, have been consistently shown to be highly invested and strategic about educational choices for their children (Ball, 2003; Campbell, Proctor, & Sherington, 2009). This makes school choice a high priority in these families, with the risk that educational markets in rural communities will not satisfy these active choosers. 32 parents<sup>2</sup> working in different professions/occupations (4 doctors, 4 nurses, 10 teachers, 9 police officers plus 5 working in local council positions) with school-aged children were interviewed along a transect of six communities from regional Toowoomba to remote Quilpie (see Doherty, Rissman, & Browning, 2012). These interviews followed the same lines of enquiry as the ADF study, drawing out how family moves needed to negotiate and re-embed members’ projects in a variety of institutional settings at the same time.

It should be noted that both groups were sampled by virtue of the ongoing employment status of at least one parent. This stable income would distinguish them from less fortunate families that may move in search of housing or employment, for whom the stakes and risks in moving

could be higher still (Voight et al, 2012). The next section draws on cases and narratives from both studies to further explicate how a concept of viscosity helps augment motility analyses.

### **Cross-tabulating viscosity and motility**

The concepts of motility (M) and viscosity (V) can be expressed as variables with high (+) and low (-) values. Interview narratives reporting excitement, confidence or relish within the family at the prospect of moving, good coping strategies, established routines to manage moving, and trust in the available support mechanisms, were coded as high motility (M+). Conversely, reports of doubts, misgivings, reluctance, trepidation about expected problems within a family, a lack of skills, confidence or routines to manage a move, and concern over the lack of support networks, were coded as low motility (M-). Reports of welcoming, accommodating and proactive institutional settings that enabled and facilitated a family's transition into or out of the setting would be coded as low viscosity (V-). Conversely, reports of a lack of institutional routines for dealing with mobile families, and inflexible, unhelpful or obstructive practices were coded as high viscosity (V+).

Table 1 offers a heuristic cross-tabulation to explore possible combinations of these values. The discussion following provides illustrative examples of each permutation from the military families study<sup>3</sup>.

<<INSERT TABLE 1 supplied at end of manuscript>>

**In Cell 1 (V-M-),** the combination of the low motility family moving through a low viscosity setting is a potentially helpful combination, the attributes of the institution helping the reluctantly mobile family 'cope' better by removing institutional obstacles and facilitating the necessary

processes. The presence of a child with special needs in the family was repeatedly described as a complicating factor in family relocations, associated with much trepidation and worry about the child's social and academic transition in future moves, and reports of delaying or limiting any such move, interpreted here as low motility. In the following extract, an ADF mother with a child with special needs describes her reception at a new school where staff were proactive in alerting her to assistance packages available to ADF families. Though the assistance was funded by the ADF, she highlights the expertise and action of the school in linking them to this assistance:

... he had a lot of problems being in such a small school with his behaviour and his problems that he had. That school was very good in some ways because they were very knowledgeable about the advantages that come with being in the army and knew that if you moved you were entitled to get a tutor for a certain amount of time and the army would pay for it and that sort of thing. So when we moved, the principal called me up and said 'Look, Joel would really benefit from having some extra tutoring for his reading.' (BSP2)

**Cell 2 (V-M+)**, the high motility family moving through the low viscosity setting, could be considered an optimal scenario for mobile families – they are well resourced themselves and also well supported by the institution to move in then on. An ADF mother describes this combination:

And also at this school we have a DSTA so I think the DSTA's been important in that too. And they do big group things as well and I know when [husband] went away I could speak to the DSTA ... in fact I went and spoke to all the teachers in case of any dramas.

I think because there's a big proportion of defence at this school, the school is used to having to deal with it a bit. (DSP5)

Firstly, she expresses her knowledge of, and confidence in, the support role of the Defence School Transition Aide (DSTA) that the ADF's Defence Community Organisation funds to facilitate comings and goings in schools with a high proportion of ADF families. She also describes her own proactive strategy to make contact with all her children's teachers 'in case'. She then acknowledges the more general systemic learning about mobility the school has accrued over time. Other families told of principals bending zoning rules to allow children to return to their former schools, and schools placing children in composite (multi-grade) classes so any decision around year placement did not have to be rushed. By these reports, these low viscosity schools were being proactive about facilitating successful transitions.

**Cell 3 (V+, M-)**, the low motility family who are not well disposed towards moving, in a high viscosity setting that has not developed a culture that normalises and supports mobility, is either no problem at all, or a highly problematic combination. If not forced to move, there will be no problem: the agentive and structural attributes are well matched and mutually reinforcing. This combination might describe the circumstances for many stable families in schools with low turnover. On the flipside, if required to move, the family will be worried about the move, and the high viscosity institution will fail to enable, or will hinder, their mobility. In the following interview narrative an ADF mother describes her family's concerns about being posted to the Northern Territory based on her reading of state educational systems performance on standardised tests, and her failed attempt to negotiate with the school to place her child in a higher grade in order to facilitate their future transition back to Victoria:

after comparing NT's results to every other state in Australia, it is a big concern that next posting we may be back in Victoria which will put her in a different education style. I tried to get them to look at it [advancing the child] this year and they told me no, she's exactly where she needs to be and they weren't prepared to change anything. ... (DSP10)

This narrative illustrates a family that is nervous and reluctant about moving meeting what they consider an inflexible school environment that overlooks the fact that they will eventually need to move on again, and that decisions made in one setting can impact the next. Another ADF mother, worried about her child's transition to a different state's curriculum, reported the emotional fallout from her failed attempt to negotiate some flexibility around year placement for her child:

I was made to feel that we were being difficult. ...I was made to feel that I was being a pushy parent rather than a parent trying to do the right thing for their child. And then after all that sort of carry on we then had to front up at the start of the year with me thinking, oh god, are they going to go, 'Here's Mrs So and So'? So that was also difficult because then you felt like you'd created a perception of who you were before you actually arrived. (BSP1)

**In Cell 4 (V+M+),** high motility families moving through high viscosity settings will make for critical customers who will not hesitate to move on to what they consider a better, more supportive school if warranted. They are confident in their capacity to cope such that staying becomes the problem and mobility the solution. The current marketisation policies in education actively encourage such behaviour. Despite high mobility, some ADF families reported additional school changes beyond those precipitated by forced relocations. These extra school

moves were fuelled by dissatisfaction, or the attraction of other options, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

She started Year 2 ... half way through the year we do a parent/teacher meeting and everything is fine and I'm quite surprised at that because my daughter's a completely different child and I'm very concerned and I want to know what's going on. She's sick every day and she doesn't want to go to school and what's happening? She said 'Oh no, there's nothing wrong' and two thirds of the way through the school year we have another parent/teacher meeting and she tells me that [daughter] is not keeping up. Now she's only able to do the work of a Year 1, she's not able to do the work of a Year 2 and I'm wanting to know what's going on ... now you tell me that she doesn't understand and she's not coping ... at that point I started looking for a new school. ... we had friends who had their children in the Catholic system and I had heard absolutely nothing but wonderful things from them. ... her daughter was in Year 1 and they all had a computer and they were learning to email themselves at home ... So it was at that point we just went 'That's it. Let's pull her out.' (DCP5)

By this mothers' account, the first school failed to monitor and settle the incoming child adequately, and then failed to intervene and address the child's emerging difficulties in 'keeping up' with others. This suggests school practices that were inflexible and reactive rather than proactive in dealing with the mobile child's needs.

The data examples above demonstrate the emergent outcomes from the interplay between the agentive dispositions of the actors and the degrees of facilitation or hindrance offered by the institutions they were passing through at the time. By cross tabulating high and low degrees of motility with high and low viscosity, it becomes evident that not all families and not all

institutional settings are similarly open to mobility, and that a variety of scenarios can ensue with different combinations. In short, both structure and agency contribute to any emergent lived reality, and need to be accounted for.

### **Motility and viscosity interacting over time**

This section seeks to illustrate how a history of mobility experiences that entailed agents negotiating the viscosity of relevant institutions can help explain variation in the agents' motility over time. An actor's motility can be understood to wax or wane due to the accumulation of successful or unsuccessful mobility experiences and the accumulation of consequences over time. In this way, the viscosity of the structures and institutions through which people move can be understood to be conditioning their motility.

**Waxing motility:** A history of successful moves and institutional transitions (Cell 1 or 2 experiences) can build confidence about future moves, thus accruing 'movement capital' in terms of resilience, competence, learning valuable routines, adjusting attitudes, and being proactive about coping strategies. The following quotes from some of these serial ADF movers demonstrate a sense of growing confidence accrued over time, building on success:

I'd never moved in my life. I was born in one town, went to primary school, high school, the only reason I left was for university. I'm surprising myself I must admit with how well I'm moving and making new friends and just getting on with it. (DSP1)

I think having moved so many times actually helped me just to get that more well-rounded life experience and knowing how to cope with change and setting my own timetables and goals you know. So to me, when people say 'We don't want to move

because they're in high school', I think 'Oh, come on, surely you can go somewhere and they'll be educated'. (TSP4)

I'm 41 and I've moved over 34 times ... Yes. I could be a removalist. I know how to do it. (DSP9)

In their interviews, many ADF parents could employ the habitual present tense to describe a generic attitude to moving and the routines they had acquired over time:

as soon as we move, we try to get the bedrooms done as quickly as we can. The lounge room is the most important because the TV's in there and kids' lives are surrounded by television. So yes, the television's the main thing to get done and I concentrate on the kitchen and then the next day we were doing the kids' rooms just to bring some normality to their lives. And then the next thing – swimming. (TSP3)

I try to encourage both my children to get involved in things that will get them to meet other people; only because I think it's important because we will be moving quite regularly or there is a chance that we could move so they should find it a little bit easier I guess to introduce themselves to other kids. (DSP7)

I've tried to teach all of my kids that they have to have the confidence in themselves that they're worthy; worthy to be a friend and willing to try their best ... but also I teach my kids to look for the lonely kids and go and search them out even if they're lonely. Then everything else just falls into place. (DSP9)

As a parent I think it's important that we take responsibility for things that the kids might miss out on when we're moving and actually not expect the new school to pick up on everything. ... In our case we've just decided that it's easier to come up with our own management plans and not involve the school. (TXP1)

These parents are describing lifestyles and mindsets that embrace relocation as a regular, predictable feature of life. Over time they have honed habits, attitudes, dispositions and strategies that enhance their motility. The last quote from TXP1 suggests that this highly motile family have devised their own 'workaround' solution so any effects of the institutional viscosity of schooling can be minimised. However this is not the case for all ADF families.

**Waning motility.** Despite strategies or pragmatic mindsets, encounters with viscous institutions along with other events and complicating circumstances can render moving, or just the prospect thereof, increasingly problematic over time. A history of unsuccessful, unhappy moves, or schooling transitions that have precipitated educational problems (Cell 3 or Cell 4 experiences), can accumulate troubles, erode confidence and build feelings of trepidation about future moves over time. An experience of crossing state borders and dealing with the educational fallout of incongruent educational jurisdictions drove one family to fight to restrict their locations to within the state they were in:

I'm not having this bullshit any more. This is just crazy and it just really mucks him around too much and it mucks her around and I've got another one to think of now so if it doesn't happen I am going to push for it because I know that it's just too hard on him so I will move earth to keep him in the Queensland system ... it was the most traumatic move for us ... I don't really want to move again and I don't want to have to go through all that again. This was horrible. (TSP9)

The experience of waiting for different states to re-assess their child's special needs that delayed access to specialist support became an ongoing, and cumulative problem for one family:

And moving around with a kid with special needs makes a move completely different.

Like it's tough moving without kids with special needs but when there are special needs it's hell, absolutely hell. (TSP10)

More subtly, many ADF families reported a growing sense of the cumulative impact on their children's education and happiness from the sequence of moves that made them less willing to continue with the mobile lifestyle:

The boys – they took a lot longer to transition to this school because they made good friends at the other school ... and it took them longer to settle in. They're settled in now but you could see how it's going to get harder as the years go on to extricate them. (TSP4)

I do remember not so long ago telling the kids that 'you know, you should think yourselves very lucky because you get to see more of Australia than most people in their lifetimes' ... but I don't know that it's a really big payoff in comparison to five schools, five states, five years. (DCP5)

All these families had initially opted to pursue the ADF career with its expectation of mobility, but for these families, that decision was reportedly getting harder. Together, the waxing and waning sets of quotes suggest that a history of moving through institutions can produce and accrue effects that impact and shape future motility. A difficult transition will continue to live on and colour the mindsets people take with them to the next move, and a successful transition lives on in learning accrued and coping strategies gained.

## **Institutional tactics for adjusting viscosity**

This section turns to data from the study about professionals with school-aged children and their career opportunities in rural and remote communities, to explore the systems of incentives and obligations their employing institutions design to adjust viscosity tactically over time, and make either moving or staying more likely. These occupational groups (doctors, nurses, teachers and police officers) have valuable, portable skills that every community needs. The everyday coupling of ‘recruitment and retention’ in managerial discourse masks the fact that the former is about fanning worker motility, and the latter is about dampening or repressing that motility, at least temporarily. Urry’s metaphor of ‘gamekeeping’ (2000, p. 5) offers another account of the two dimensions with the sense of nurturing conditions that serve to attract then maintain the interest of the valuable species of roaming human capital. Thus the employing institution needs a system of firstly conditions that entice and convert motility to mobility, then once on site, ‘sticky’ or more viscous conditions that reduce the potential of mobility. This is a very different institutional configuration from the ADF’s regime of forced postings with its limited room to negotiate timing or place.

To illustrate the different designs on viscosity, the following excerpts are drawn from an interview with a male police officer with a partner and three young children living in a small rural town. In the first excerpt he describes the financial incentives that attracted him to this position:

I’d worked with an officer ... and he said that it would be a good spot. So I put my résumé together and I applied ... because I enjoy community policing ... Financial reasons were the main reasons why we moved ... I was only [at the level of] 1.3 Constable. To take this, I was jumped up to 2.1. So it was like four pay points plus a flat rate of 35 per cent. So because you’re out there, you’re one officer, you’re on call all the time and you get 35 per cent on top of your wage ... Plus you get a house. (CP1)

In the second excerpt, he explains how this position was only ever intended to be a temporary placement:

... I just considered it a stepping stone. As much as I like country policing, it was a one officer station and I think my opinion is you get stale there pretty quick. That's just me. I've been chasing promotions ... honestly if I was 45 or something, and wanted to set my career I would have stayed there. It was wonderful - lovely people, lovely community. [Partner] was very happy there just with the people and the schooling, but career-wise I just knew I wasn't going to go anywhere if I didn't move on. So it was purely just to do my three years and then to leave. ... You never get promoted and in regard to relieving opportunities it was also limited as well. So no it was only always going to be short term, just to get up - I'll make the money, get my rank and then get the experience to move on.

(CP1)

His mention of doing 'my three years' refers to the Queensland Police Service stipulation that officers complete three years in their position before being eligible to apply for promotion elsewhere. This requirement, and the workplace culture built around it, structure more viscous or 'sticky' conditions to retain staff temporarily, amidst other conditions and incentives that encourage their movement at other times.

In the third excerpt, he outlines his family unit's attitude towards their future movement, and highlights the children's high schooling as a period in which they will not consider moving:

I think education's very important obviously. Because of the position that we hold and the locations we serve it's a big decision that we make in regards to where we're going, so

we have the schooling available for the kids. Like, obviously in my opinion; primary school's not that important because [partner] is a teacher which obviously I think picks up some of what's lacking. But once they get to high school we definitely want to be settled in an area where there are good education facilities for sure. (CP1)

This foreshadowing of an abrupt drop in motility to protect the stability of children's secondary schooling was a strong theme reported by many participants in both studies, suggesting that the contemporary social institution of the family has its own more and less viscous phases, where priorities shift to strongly favour immobility (see also Holdsworth, 2013). The financial incentives offered to entice the professional out to rural and remote communities may fail to compete with the attractions and pull of larger centres with what are considered to be 'good education facilities' at this stage, if not before (see Doherty et al., 2012). So family mobilities for these professional families could be better understood as the result of interactions between the manipulated viscosity of multiple institutional sites and systems in which they are engaged, as well as their own waxing and waning degrees of motility over time.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has developed and illustrated the concept of institutional viscosity as a metaphorically cognate, structural counterpart to the more agentic concept of motility in mobility studies.

From sociological foundations, it has argued that the interdependence and interaction of these variable attributes in people and systems cannot be explained by merely stretching the concept of motility, or conflating contributing aspects which should remain analytically distinct. The paper described conditions of high viscosity as 'swimming through treacle' and those of low viscosity as 'swimming through water', to give a sense of variable degrees of resistance or facilitation offered by the institutions through which people move. These polarities were cross-tabulated with high and low degrees of motility to project a set of likely scenarios brought about by their

permutations, illustrated with interview data from hyper-mobile military families describing their experiences moving through schools. The distinction between viscosity and motility also allowed an exploration of how a history of ‘swimming through water’ can enhance motility, while a history of ‘swimming through treacle’ can erode motility over time. Using an example from the very different mobility conditions structured for human service professionals, the last section considered the gamekeeping strategies devised by employing institutions to attract then retain these elusive professionals in rural and remote locations. It was suggested that their careful design of phases of differently textured viscosity was eventually trumped by other priorities emerging within the institution of the family.

The concept of viscosity is offered as a way to understand how mobilities can be enabled or constrained by social conditions. Here it has been used to analyse the attributes of institutional settings such as schools and government departments, but may well apply to other contexts to distinguish the contributions of agencies and structures in realising mobility. More practically, a dual focus on both agency and structure allows systems and services to consider how they condition agents’ mobility at any time, and over time, to better design social practices to that end.

A mobile workforce implicates the workers’ families. Family units are complexes of life projects engaged in a variety of institutions, thus relocating families requires negotiating a number of institutions and their variable viscosities, for better and for worse. Institutions such as the schools serving a large ADF population could be expected to build expertise and low viscosity systems that naturalise and legitimate mobility. However, not all mobile families will be moving through such sites in such volumes, so institutional learning about mobility will be uneven on the ground, and more isolated families will most likely be moving through less accommodating, more viscous settings. Similarly, the military families studied had a strong set of institutional supports behind them, housing and the security of ongoing work, while the professional families

had locations actively competing to attract them. Many other, less visible mobile families will not have these advantages, assurances or buffers, and will be more reliant on their own resources, in less accommodating institutions. Simplistic social policy that champions exhorts workers to move for employment opportunities need to consider the variety of social institutions families are involved in, and how well they work with or against the mobile family's needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Participants were recruited with the help of Defence School Transition Aides working in primary schools close to major ADF bases. They issued invitations to participate to ADF families with responsibility for school-aged children. At the time of interview, participants' ADF ranks varied from private to Lieutenant Colonel and Major. The number of children at home ranged from 1 to 4. Youngest child in the home ranged from 6 months to 10 years. Oldest child in the house ranged from 5 to 16. Both parents were ADF members in four families. All were nuclear families, except one 'blended' or 'step' family

<sup>2</sup> Participants were recruited with the help of the respective unions, employer organisations and professional associations, who passed on invitations to participate to members with responsibility for school-aged children in the selected towns. At the time of interview, ages ranged from 30 to 52. Family size ranged from 1 child to 5 children living at home. Of the families, most were nuclear couple families, but 2 were 'blended' or 'step' families, and 2 were single parent families. 3 families were 'living apart together' across localities.

<sup>3</sup> Participant codes are included to indicate the variety of voices.

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**Table 1***Cross-tabulating motility and viscosity*

<b>V+/-, M +/-</b>	<b>Low motility (M-)</b> dislikes moving, lacks skills or confidence to cope with demands of moving	<b>High motility (M+)</b> willing and able to move, with skills and confidence to cope with demands of moving
<b>Low viscosity (V-)</b> institutional culture facilitates and supports mobility - like swimming through water	Cell 1 : V-M- Helpful combination if family having to move	Cell 2: V-M+ Well matched and mutually supportive
<b>High viscosity (V+)</b> institutional culture hinders or ignores mobility – like swimming through treacle	Cell 3: V+M- Not a problem if not moving Highly problematic if forced to move	Cell 4: V+M+ Liable to move on if not happy