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Title:
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Date:
2022-08-01

Citation:
Cook, J. & Cuervo, H. (2022). Routinized performances of belonging: Everyday practices and relationships in rural and regional areas during the pandemic. Population Space and Place, 28 (6), https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2568.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/308210

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Received: 27 October 2021 | Accepted: 10 March 2022

DOI: 10.1002/psp.2568

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Routinized performances of belonging: Everyday practices and relationships in rural and regional areas during the pandemic

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Funding information
Australian Research Council, Grant/Award Numbers: DP0557902, DP1094132, DP160101611, DP210100445

Abstract

The concentration of COVID-19 cases and restrictions in metropolitan areas in 2020 resulted in a re-emergence of the concept of the 'rural idyll' in Australia, with rural and regional areas coming to be associated with a safe and uninterrupted way of life. Implicit in this notion is the assumption that those living in rural and regional areas found their routines and experiences of belonging uninterrupted. We critique this narrative by drawing on qualitative longitudinal data collected from 2006 to 2020, which allows us to examine our participants' experiences of belonging in rural and regional areas both before and during the pandemic. We find that although our participants' experiences of belonging were largely undisturbed by the pandemic, this was not because their lives were not affected more broadly, but because their sense of belonging was established through everyday routines and practices that were maintained during the pandemic.

KEYWORDS
belonging, longitudinal, regional, rural, young adulthood

1 | INTRODUCTION

In Australia, COVID-19 cases have been concentrated in major cities, which are home to over 70% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). As a result of the concentration of COVID cases and their associated risk in metropolitan areas popular commentary has positioned rural and regional areas as a safer and freer alternative to urban areas. This signifies a return to notions of the rural idyll, a nostalgic depiction of rural places as unchanged by the global forces that shape urban areas and as constitutive of a healthy and natural way of life (see Short, 2006; Shucksmith, 2018). Indeed, Australia witnessed its highest rates of internal migration from capital cities to regional areas on record in 2020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021), with media reports featuring stories about individuals relocating to escape lockdowns and other COVID restrictions (see May, 2021; Turner-Cohen, 2020). Implicit in this view of rural and regional areas is the suggestion that life remains uninterrupted in these areas, and that the pandemic is a predominantly metropolitan issue. Similarly claims are reflected in Maclaren and Philip's (2021) discussion of a 'rural safe haven', with this study forming part of an emerging body of literature on COVID-19 in rural studies. While this perspective is, in many ways, a new manifestation of an enduring rural–urban dichotomy that can be easily dispelled, it nevertheless suggests that the everyday experiences of disruption, inconvenience and dislocation from routine and place faced by those living in urban areas during the pandemic have not been experienced to the same extent by their rural and regional counterparts. The view of rural and regional areas as a rural idyll is reinforced by the fact that they are associated with a nostalgia for pre-pandemic times, and thus

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appear to function as 'other' in time, not fully temporally copresent with metropolitan parts of the country.

Against this backdrop, we examine the impact of the pandemic on those living outside of metropolitan areas, focusing particularly on experiences of belonging—a concept that has been used to understand experiences of, and attachment to, place in many rural contexts (see Butler, 2019; Edensor, 2006; Looker, 2015). Specifically, we respond to the following research question: how did the pandemic impact upon long-term experiences of belonging and place attachment for individuals living in rural and regional areas? To answer this question we turn to a longitudinal qualitative data set that allows us to compare individuals' experiences of belonging both before and during 2020. Drawing on Williams' (1973/2016) concept of 'knowable communities' and on the work of authors such as Bell (1999), Fortier (1999) and Fenster (2005), we understand belonging in rural places as, in many cases, performative in nature, arguing that it often manifests in subtle and routinized ways that can best be discerned by considering individuals' experiences longitudinally, rather than cross-sectionally. In so doing, we critique the new image of the rural idyll that has emerged alongside the pandemic in Australia to argue that participants' attachment to rural and regional places is based on intimate relationships and routinized actions and activities rather than a result of a close-knit and knowable community.

2 | RURALITY, BELONGING AND PERFORMATIVITY

Rurality is often defined in relation to urbanity. In some instances, urban places are presented as bastions of economic and social progress while rural settings are viewed as 'backwards' or struggling places (Cloke, 1997; Halfacree, 1993). Other times, rural life is presented as harmonious and its community as homogeneous, while urban places are depicted as chaotic and diverse. Indeed, classic sociological approaches to the rural–urban dichotomy can be found in Ferdinand Tönnies' (1887/1957) dichotomous theorisation of *Gemeinschaft* as community characterized by relationships based on togetherness, close social and family ties and neighbourliness, standing in opposition to *Gesellschaft* as association based on self-interest, instrumentality and impersonality. It is, however, important to note that subsequent authors have sought to think beyond this dichotomous understanding of rural and urban spaces, and a static notion of rurality, through concepts such as Woods' (2007) 'global countryside'. Nevertheless, Williams' (1973/2016) illustrates this dichotomous construction of the city and country through the notions of communities that appear 'opaque' and 'transparent', respectively. For Williams, this presupposes a view of rural places as 'knowable communities' where relationships are direct, face-to-face and substantial. For Williams, this view is an idealisation of country life—in rural communities, just as in urban places, 'there is division of labour, there is the contrast of social position and when necessarily there are alternative points of view' (Williams, 1973/2016, p. 240). The problem with this romantic view of rural life as transparent, argues Williams, is that individuals' sense of belonging is often focused within the boundaries of a specific social class because no community 'in physical or in social reality, is by any means knowable' (Williams, 1973/2016, p. 241). Nevertheless, at the core of romantic representations of rural life as 'knowable community' are strong formations of belonging aiming to make relationships transparent and understandable. It is this conception of belonging—as relationally informed (albeit along class-based lines)—that we find particularly informative in Williams' work, and which we pick up on in more recent scholarship.

Belonging has become a key concept with which to understand relationships, and to identify 'knowable communities' in an increasing complex and mobile world. In youth sociology (Harris et al., 2021, p. 1) argue that belonging has become 'an increasingly popular way to talk about young people's lives in research and policy'. What is meant by belonging, however, is not always clear. Belonging is often used in self-explanatory ways (Wright, 2015) and with a lack of conceptual and empirical clarity (Noble, 2020). Often, it has been conceptualised as feeling connected, at home and with 'a sense of security' (Habib & Ward, 2020, p. 1), or as feeling that one is 'accepted as part of a community' and has a stake in the present and future of that place or community (Anthias, 2006, p. 21). As Harris et al. (2021) point out, belonging has many registers and can be about political and social status, or subjective and affective experiences of attachment (on affect in this context see Farrugia et al., 2016; Maclaren, 2018 on youth and ageing respectively). Its ascendance in studies of youth and young adults' lives has nevertheless represented a new research 'turn' that epitomises a burgeoning interest in the 'different nuances of young people's experiences at a local level, while also accounting for the global and institutional processes and structures that shape young people's lives' (Harris et al., 2021, p. 3).

Focusing on rural youth, the tension between belonging and aspirations in postsecondary school pathways has often been discussed with reference to the phrase 'should I stay or should I go' (see Cook et al., 2021). This is due to the limited post-school education, training and employment opportunities for young people in rural places, particularly compared to urban areas, which often force them to migrate and leave behind places where they feel at home. However, studies focusing on this tension are often less clear about how young people belong in rural communities. Other studies addressing rural youth belonging have emphasised young people's imagined futures and their tension with staying in a local rural area (Ronnlund, 2019), the negotiation of belonging between traditional residents and new migrants to the community in public spaces such as schools (Butler, 2019), youth constructions of rural places as 'uncool' (Pedersen & Gram, 2017), youth narratives of rurality that are shaped by discourses of urbanism (Sorensen & Pless, 2017), and desires to merge aspects of living in both rural and urban places (De La Vega-Leinert et al., 2021). In response to this literature we seek to understand rural young people's experiences of belonging in a way that is defined less by major life-course events (such as relocating to pursue postsecondary education) and comparisons between rural and urban areas, and focuses more on everyday lived experience.

In service of the above aim, we focus on how formations and experiences of belonging can be identified through routinized acts performed in the everyday lives of young adults in rural communities. That is, we are interested in belonging as sets of everyday practices that highlight the relationship of belonging to a 'situated nature', a specific socio-historical context (Noble, 2020, p. xvii). More specifically, we focus on belonging as an everyday performance that involves ordinary and self-conscious, as well as unreflexive, practices and actions that entail performances (Bell, 1999). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler (1997), Vikki Bell (1999, p. 1) contends that understanding belonging as an everyday performance sheds light on the 'production of selves as effects'. This means that people do not ontologically, directly or simply belong to a (rural) place or a (rural) group; this sense of rurality is instead 'an effect performatively produced' (Bell, 1999, p. 3) where rurality is the effect of performance, rather than the opposite (see Halfacree, 2006 on this point). Tovi Fenster (2005) and Anne-Marie Fortier (1999) have taken up this notion of belonging as a performed effect by examining how diasporic communities or individuals living away of their home community generated an attachment to their new locale through the repetition of ordinary practices and rituals of religious activities, walking and cooking. Specifically, Fortier describes how the ritual of Catholic mass generates a feeling of belonging to group and culture for Italian migrants, while Fenster identified how the routine of cooking food and spices connected a Canadian-Indian young adult living in Jerusalem to her heritage, understanding this as an everyday practice of belonging. In both studies, belonging takes on a relational nature that constructs it as a routinely performative practice. The intense and repeated practices that tie individuals in both studies to emotions, affect, people and places signify formations of belonging that are in a state of constant making and performance rather than as a unique and constitutive act and achievement.

In this article, we focus on rural young people's everyday practices of belonging, beginning with their postschool transitions, and following them into their early 30s. Our aim is to tease out the ordinary practices that produce belonging and render visible the knowable communities of these young adults. By focusing on a life course stage (young adulthood) rather than a moment in time we adopt an approach that is indebted to life course research (see Giele & Elder, 1998). We argue that the focus on mundane, everyday forms of belonging makes transparent the type and amount of work that young adults put into creating and recreating the social space in which they live (Noble, 2020). Ultimately, we contend that routine and everyday practices can shed light on how rural youth and young adults create a sense of belonging, and can in turn help us to understand how this experience of belonging was (or was not) impacted by the pandemic.

3 | METHODS

In this article we seek to shed light on how belonging is formed in rural areas over time, and in so doing to counterbalance a new notion of the 'rural idyll' that has sprung up in Australia during the pandemic. Due to our focus on how belonging is formed and enacted over time, and our aim of showing how it has, or has not, been shaped by the pandemic, we drew on qualitative longitudinal data. Specifically, we draw on interviews and text from open-ended questions in surveys conducted with the same participants over the span of 14 years.

The data presented in this article are drawn from the Life Patterns research program, a longitudinal mixed-methods panel study of Australian young adults' transitions through the milestones that have traditionally denoted adult life. In this article, we draw on data from four participants, each of whom completed six interviews (approximately biennial) and 14 surveys (annual) between 2006 and 2020 (when they were aged 18–32) (for demographic information on the participants see Table 1 below, for further discussion of the methodology of the project see Cuervo & Cook, 2020). These data are of use to us due to the wider study's broad and holistic focus on the participants' lives, as well as its enduring focus on issues of belonging and place attachment. The annual survey questionnaires have typically included questions about education, employment, living arrangements, relationships and health and wellbeing, as well as questions about the participants' experiences of their local area. The interview schedules have been directly informed by the survey responses; they are intended to allow for further interrogation of the experiences that the survey data maps out, while also providing

TABLE 1 Demographic information on the case study participants

	Alyssa*	Claire	Jeremy	Thomas
Age**	32	32	32	32
Occupation	Occupational therapist	Primary school teacher	Shipping officer	Property valuer
Highest level of educational attainment	Bachelor degree	Bachelor degree	Bachelor degree	Bachelor degree
Relationship status	Married	Married	Married	Married
Parenthood status	3 children	2 children	0 children	2 children

*The names are pseudonyms assigned to the participants to protect their privacy.

**All of the data presented in this table are from 2020 survey and interview responses.

the researchers with a chance to delve into findings that emerge from open text sections of the survey questionnaires (which in many cases inform a subsequent focus on these issues). While taking part in the study the participants have typically received between $20 and $50 for each interview in acknowledgement of their time, and have entered a prize draw after returning each survey questionnaire.

The 2020 interviews were conducted in September–November of 2020. At this time Australia had experienced low COVID-19 case numbers relative to other countries, due in large part to its geographic isolation and closed international borders. State governments had used stay-at-home orders and closures of non-essential businesses (termed 'lockdowns') to suppress COVID transmission. Most notably, lockdowns were used in the states of Victoria and New South Wales during the 'first wave' in March–April of 2020, and then in the Greater Melbourne area and, for a lesser period of time, the state of Victoria during the 'second wave' in June–October of 2020. Regional and rural parts of each state have therefore been affected, although to a far lesser extent than their capital cities (particularly Melbourne).

Our choice to present the data as cases is informed by the use of case profiles as a central part of qualitative longitudinal data analysis (see Henderson et al., 2006). Shaping interview transcripts and other forms of data into a narrative allows for analysis of change and continuity over time, and within a single biography. While this form of analysis is typically used alongside cross-sectional and longitudinal comparative analyses to provide holistic findings from a qualitative longitudinal data set, the development of case profiles also provides a means of presenting data that invites those from outside the project team into the data in a way that is compelling and narrative-driven. The presentation of our findings as cases is also informed by Flyvjerg's (2006) work on the utility of cases within social research. Flyvjerg advocates for the use of cases not simply at the beginning of research as a means of generating hypotheses, or as part of a pilot study, but as an integral part of a more protracted course of research. We take this approach in the present article, focusing on four in-depth cases to demonstrate some of the ways in which individuals living in regional and rural areas experienced belonging over time, both before and during the pandemic. While these cases are not directly representative of the diversity of experiences reflected across our wider sample, they are reflective of the specific way in which belonging and place attachment were experienced over time by many of the participants from rural and regional areas. Once the four participants were selected as illustrative cases their interview and survey data were analysed using a data-driven form of thematic coding. Following the process articulated by Gibbs (2007), we initially used descriptive codes to identify key themes in the data, before moving to higher-level analytic codes which were used to begin interpreting our findings. The theme of belonging, which encompassed place attachment, everyday routines and practices and social connections, was reflected strongly throughout our analysis, and data pertaining to this theme are presented in narrative form in the subsequent case studies.

4 | ALYSSA

When Alyssa was first interviewed in 2008 she was in the process of moving from Port Macquarie (a regional area in the state of New South Wales) where her mother lived, to a regional area outside Sydney (the capital city of New South Wales) to live with her father. She had completed a certificate IV[1] in beauty therapy and hoped to find better opportunities in this field in her new locale.

By the time she was interviewed again in 2010 Alyssa had an almost 2-year-old son and identified her primary occupation as 'stay at home mother'. She lived in a rental property with her partner and when asked how she was getting by financially responded 'my dad helped us out a lot'. Her father was building an extension onto his house for Alyssa and her partner and son to move into. It was planned that the extension would include a small salon that Alyssa could work out of on weekends. In the meantime, Alyssa was planning to undertake a short course in IT. When asked about her choice of course she responded:

> My dad works for a company already that takes care of their employees pretty well so I just wanted to get into training and then he would get me a job.

Alyssa appeared to draw heavily on resources and connections offered by both her father and her partner's father. For instance, her partner's father found her a temporary job at a smash repair store and helped her to get a discount at a hotel owned by his friend during a recent family holiday. While discussing the role of family in her life Alyssa stated:

> Family comes first for us, it really does, like not just our … like not just my partner and my son, like our family like our parents, his parents, his brothers and sisters and my brother… We spend the majority of our time with them.

By 2012 Alyssa had another son, and her eldest son had been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. She spent much of her time driving him to appointments. She had recently split up with her partner and was living with her father. Alyssa was not working at this time, and continued to rely heavily on her father and other family members for both practical and financial support. Indeed, her understanding of belonging appeared to centre on her relationship with significant others. When asked what made someone belong she replied:

> I think there are networks, I guess. Everyone sharing common interests and things like that and just getting along.

And when asked if her local area had these characteristics she responded:

> Yes and no because it's so rural. Not everybody really knows each other… I mean there's not much in it. It's mostly just residential. Most of it's houses and farms and things like that. You've got a corner shop and that's about the extent of it.

For Alyssa, belonging appeared to focus on social connections, and these social connections were formed primarily with her family, who constituted a 'knowable community' for her which was maintained through the routinized performed practices of living together and supporting each other.

By 2017 Alyssa was studying a Bachelor of Occupational Therapy and working as a Therapy Assistant at an allied health clinic. She was with a new partner and had a third child. Her father had finished the extension on his house, and she lived in it with her partner and three children. Her father and brother also lived in the house, and while describing this arrangement Alyssa stated:

> So, it's still kind of good because we're all in that sort of position where my brother doesn't work a great deal. My Dad lost his job a few years ago. So we all sort of pitch in and can all run the house that way rather than three separate households. No one can afford to live [independently], essentially.

By 2020 Alyssa had married her partner, and they continued living with her father and brother. Alyssa discussed the impact of the pandemic on the way in which her family interacted with their local area:

> So, that's kind of changed things. And even like the little things like Halloween and stuff the kids like to do; this year we won't do that; we'll do something in our backyard instead as that's going to be safer. Yeah, so there's definitely been changes, even like swimming. Of a summer, we would normally go to a public pool and go swimming. We won't do that this year.

However, despite the impact that the pandemic had on Alyssa and her family's everyday life, it did not appear to impact on Alyssa's sense of belonging. For Alyssa, belonging was focused on the routines of and interactions within her home, rather than in her local area more generally. While Alyssa discussed her local area she stated 'it's just our family base', reinforcing this interpretation.

Indeed, when asked if anything positively or negatively affected her sense of belonging during the pandemic Alyssa replied:

> I don't think so. Not really. We're far enough away from suburban kind of living that we still have a lot of space and… Yeah, so it didn't really affect us too much. Like we weren't stuck in an apartment or stuck in a house or something like that that had no backyard. We're on five acres so we could just go outside and kick a football around or something like that. It wasn't an issue for us. And as far as belonging to the community or anything like that, we didn't feel any more included or excluded.

While some of Alyssa's routines and practices—such as swimming at a public pool and celebrating Halloween—were disrupted by the pandemic, her sense of belonging nevertheless remained unaffected. By considering Alyssa's experiences of belonging and of living in her local area across time, rather than solely in 2020, the precise nature of her sense of belonging is made evident. Specifically, her sense of belonging was mediated by her family relationships, and developed through everyday interactions and intimacies with her family, rather than through interaction with her wider community. Only some of her everyday activities constituted the routinized performances of belonging that we discussed earlier in the paper (Fenster, 2005; Fortier, 1999); specifically, those that were centred on her family. Thus, while Alyssa found her movements and routines impacted by the pandemic in a way that is not accounted for in the view of regional and rural parts of Australia as 'unaffected', the routines that underpinned her everyday performances of belonging nevertheless remained largely unchanged.

5 | CLAIRE

When she was interviewed in 2007 Claire had finished secondary school in the previous year and was taking a gap year before beginning university. She lived in Canberra with her family at this time. She planned to pursue primary teaching, and was still deciding whether she would remain in Canberra or relocate to a regional centre to attend university.

By 2008 Claire had travelled overseas and returned to Australia to begin her degree in primary teaching. While discussing what had helped her to cope with the challenge of adjusting to post-school life over the previous year she focused on friends, family and her soccer team. Discussing the latter, she stated:

> It just makes me cope better, I guess. I just like having a routine, knowing that I can go somewhere and do something rather than just not knowing what I'm doing, I guess.

When asked if she had always felt that way about soccer Claire replied:

> It's something I've always felt. I mean, I've been playing soccer a long time. I've always had soccer, that routine of soccer, so yeah, I guess just always having it there keeps me right—a bit stable. I know it's always there kind of thing.

Notably, Claire identified that soccer was particularly helpful for her while she lost the routine and structure associated with secondary school and relocated to a regional part of New South Wales to pursue her tertiary degree.

By 2012 Claire had completed her degree and returned to Canberra for a 1-year teaching contract, and was playing soccer in the Premier League. While Claire had enjoyed living in a regional centre she was happy to return to Canberra as her parents and many of her friends lived there. When asked about what belonging meant to her at this time she replied:

> I think it's how they feel where they are. I think if they've got that good—if they feel like their place is home. If they're familiar with everything that's around them. They've got that support network and probably a bit involved in the community. That would probably —yeah, I would say they'd feel, yeah, comfortable there.

Although Claire spoke in the third person while discussing what belonging meant to her, she nevertheless appeared to be speaking from her own experience. Notably, for Claire 'involvement in community' appeared to be facilitated in large part by her ongoing involvement with her soccer teams.

When she was interviewed in 2017 Claire had recently had her first child, was on maternity leave, and was planning her wedding with her partner. While she was active in both soccer and other sports before her pregnancy, she cut back during and after her pregnancy as she had a caesarean and needed to take time to heal. Much like in her 2008 interview, in 2017 Claire continued to rely heavily on routine, and based her routine around being physically active:

> I like being busy and I like knowing I've got to go do my exercise between this time and this time because that's the only time I've got to do it during the day sort of thing. It sort of forces me to do it. When I was on maternity leave before I had [my son] I was like, oh yeah, I could go for a walk any time and then get to the end of the day and oh, I haven't gone for a walk today.

She identified the desire to return to playing soccer once she had recovered from her caesarean and was able to be away from her son. When she was interviewed in 2020 Claire was on maternity leave again after having her second child and had relocated to a semi-rural[2] area outside of Canberra. When asked whether she felt that she belonged in this area Claire responded:

> We've got really lovely neighbours, so I think that's really helpful and we do… We see them, they drop us little notes in our letterbox and put wishes in our letterbox for our son which is really lovely. So I think that's a really nice community feel. I guess pre-pandemic we were going to playgroups as well, so that has been nice to be able to sort of connect with other parents.

She then went on to say:

> I guess just not being out in the community as much it was a little bit tricky, to feel that I belonged.

Claire's sense of belonging appeared to be disrupted by the shutdown of social activities such as playgrounds. However, while discussing her plans for the following year later in the interview Claire expressed the desire to join a new soccer team and begin playing soccer in her new area, identifying this as something that she was missing. While on the surface Claire's sense of belonging in her new area appeared to be disrupted by the pandemic and resulting inability to attend playgroups and be 'out in the community', reference to her experiences of belonging before the pandemic suggest that this is not the full story. For Claire, the loss of the routine of playing soccer appeared to be a significant source of disruption. While community sports have been disrupted by the pandemic, this loss of routine and the associated experience of belonging that she had previously enjoyed was, for Claire, associated more with the experience of early motherhood than it was with the pandemic. Much like for Alyssa, for Claire the routines that were associated with belonging were mediated by a specific locus of belonging. However, for Claire this was focused on an activity or practice (soccer) rather than on specific individuals. Claire's experience again shows that a disruption of routine does not necessarily equate to disruption in one's experience of belonging. Rather, it is necessary to understand the subjective meaning of routines if one is to understand their impact on belonging.

6 | JEREMY

When he was first interviewed in 2008 Jeremy was in the second year of a degree at the Australian Maritime College in Launceston, a regional centre in the island state of Tasmania. He had previously lived in Sydney before moving to Hobart (the capital city of Tasmania) in 2004 with his parents. Jeremy was focused on finding a 'good job' at the end of his studies and anticipated that he would need to relocate for this job. He stated that he did not mind relocating as finding a secure and well paid job was his primary consideration.

By 2010 Jeremy had completed his degree and was looking for a job. He struggled to find appropriate opportunities and was experiencing significant frustration as a result. However, by the time he was interviewed again in 2012 he had found a job related to his degree. As he anticipated, he had relocated for this job, moving to Port Hedland, a small town in a remote northern part of the state of Western Australia. Although Jeremy had accomplished his goal of finding a 'good job' he nevertheless found himself feeling socially isolated:

> Moving up here has been quite difficult. Yeah, because being away from friends and having to move away from your friends, move away from your family, because all my family's on the East Coast which is a considerable distance away.

When asked if he had made friends locally he replied:

> No, because I do shift work. So I'm three days, three nights and they're all 12 h shifts, so it's 6 am to 6 pm and then it's 6 pm to 6am. So yeah, and then everyone else—it's a 'shift working town', so everyone's on different rosters and stuff like that.

When he was interviewed in 2015 Jeremy continued to feel disconnected from Port Hedland, but was also grateful to have kept his job following a downturn in the mining industry. He discussed his desire to relocate away from Port Hedland, and when asked if this was due to his experiences of social isolation he replied:

> Yeah and also being away from family and it's getting harder and harder to catch up with old friends. I prefer to live on the east coast around, you know, preferably in New South Wales but I've even—I often went to Tasmania, wouldn't have minded moving back there but it's just another thing which—especially in Tasmania, it's just employment.

When he was interviewed again in 2017 Jeremy remained in Port Hedland, but had recently become engaged after meeting his fiancé while on holiday in New Zealand. His fiancé was from Brazil and she remained living in Brazil while completing her studies, after which she planned to move to Australia to live with Jeremy. While Jeremy's feelings about Port Hedland had not changed, his day-to-day experiences had changed considerably, as they were now shaped by his interactions with his fiancé. For instance, while discussing what he did on his days off he stated:

> I do have a routine. Obviously, once again, my partner is overseas, so I wake up in the morning, 7 o'clock this morning, so that's about 8 pm her time. So when I wake up in the morning I talk to her. Have my breakfast then I'll go to the gym after that. And she'll get up at about 6 pm, she'll be awake to go to university. So I base my time around that.

Jeremy's previous experiences of social isolation in Port Hedland were reframed by his relationship with and interactions with his fiancé. For instance, while discussing his leisure pursuits he remarked:

> Having a partner on the other side of the world, you know, you've got to be respectful, so it's not like I want to be saying, 'oh I've just been down to the pub for like a good couple of hours'.

Significantly, Jeremy found a sense of belonging not through making connections in his local area, but via the digital connections that he made with his fiancé, which formed the routines that punctuated his day-to-day life (on the relationship between rhythms/routines and space see Edensor, 2010).

By 2020 Jeremy had been married for a year, and his partner had moved to Australia two years prior (in 2018). He remained living in Port Hedland, while his partner was in Sydney in the process of validating her dentistry degree at the time of the interview:

> Because of COVID the exam [to validate her degree] has been pushed back indefinitely, so she's still in Sydney and I last saw her in March [7 months prior].

Jeremy was unable to visit his wife in Sydney because he would need to quarantine in a hotel for 2 weeks at his own expense upon his return to Western Australia to comply with the state's COVID-19 regulations. However, much like in 2017 Jeremy relied heavily on his wife to structure his time, with her absence affecting his social life:

> Obviously with the wife not being here, there's less social events and stuff like that you go to, so there's not that social aspect.

When asked if he felt that he belonged in Port Hedland Jeremy replied 'oh no, no at all'. Notably, while at first glance Jeremy's disconnection from Port Hedland appears to be due in part to his geographical separation from his wife and the resulting loss of her company and skill in organising social activities, his sense of dislocation predated this arrangement. The separation from his wife mapped onto wider feelings of dislocation from loved ones and general social isolation. Indeed, rather than being exacerbated by his long-distance relationship with his wife, Jeremy's feeling of isolation in Port Hedland was temporarily alleviated by his engagement in 2017 and the structure that frequent communication with his fiancé gave to him. His feeling of isolation in 2020 was thus, in some ways, a return to a previous status quo, rather than an experience of separation and isolation that was unique to the pandemic context (although the pandemic context presented a unique experience of forced immobility due to border closures). While Jeremy experienced a sense of belonging through everyday routines, these routines were not connected to place, and Jeremy did not feel connected to his local area. Jeremy's sense of belonging was, in many ways, digitally mediated. While the concept of the digital divide has been evoked in the pandemic context to discuss access to and speed of internet connections during a surge in rates of telecommuting (see Budnitz & Tranos, 2021), Jeremy's experience demonstrates the importance of such infrastructure not just for employment, but for meeting ontological needs and managing the impact of travel restrictions during the pandemic.

7 | THOMAS

When Thomas was interviewed in 2008 he was in his second year of working as a trainee property valuer and studying remotely as part of his traineeship. He lived in a regional part of Tasmania, and when asked why he decided to study remotely rather than relocating to study he replied:

> I didn't want to leave Tasmania, I really love Tassie. I couldn't live in a big city.

Some of Thomas's reasons for enjoying Tasmania were evident in his discussion of strategies that he used to cope with stress. For instance, he stated:

> I just do the things like go out and go fishing. One of the reasons why I love Tassie so much is the fact that I can do all my fishing and shooting and diving and all the rest so I'd make sure I studied hard all week to make sure that at the end of the week I could go out on the Saturday and spend the whole Saturday out doing that or you know, once I'm out doing that and I haven't got the books there and I don't have to think about it.

By 2010 Thomas had bought a house and had a child with his partner. He continued to live in the same area and continued his traineeship. When asked how he coped with stress, he again identified the importance of 'outdoorsy' pursuits:

> I am very outdoorsy, so I would go out fishing or go shooting or go do something other than study to take my mind off it, figuring that I had earned it and should enjoy myself while I have got this bit of time.

By 2015 Thomas and his partner had a second child and he had completed his traineeship and continued to work for the same employer. However, he was dissatisfied with his industry and his position. When asked how his work impacted on his life, he identified his lack of time to engage in leisure pursuits as a key consideration:

> I'm finding it has more and more of an impact the older I get. Again, having a young family changes your perspective on things. It can impact on my social life, having the energy to go out and socialise but also the free time to do it.

At this time Thomas remarked that the only thing that would make him leave his local area would be if he were unable to financially support his family while working there.

By 2017 Thomas had spent some time trying asset financing and mortgage brokering, before returning to property valuing for financial reasons. He continued to engage in his outdoor pursuits where possible. While discussing whether he felt that he belonged in his local area he evoked the tension between his enjoyment of the area and his concerns about employment opportunities that had been present throughout his more recent interviews:

> The things I enjoy about being here are what instil that sense of belonging. The only thing that ever makes you question living in Tassie is the employment thing. You know, could I be being more successful, or could I be further up the rung, or whatever else if I lived somewhere else? But, to do that, you've got to count all the negatives. And, at the moment, I mean, I can list one bad thing against, or one negative against all the positives. And obviously I'll take all those positives.

By 2020 little had changed in Thomas's circumstances. He remained living in the same house and continued working in the same position. However, the pandemic and resulting public health measures and organisational responses meant that he needed to work from home, which he identified as a source of stress:

> I have to work from home. That's where my office is now. Which is all well and good until we get to school holiday and then it gets a bit difficult to manage.

However, he also found that he had more time than usual for some of his outdoor pursuits:

> I've probably done a bit more running and stuff because you could go out and do exercise. Generally that was one of the things that was permitted. We had new bikes, we bought my wife a new bike and we bought my kids new bikes for birthdays and Christmas stuff, so we had all new bikes before the pandemic and I went out and bought an upgrade of my bike. So we found ourselves going for bike rides everyday just as a family. Because the kids would get pretty sick of us by two o'clock or one o'clock in the afternoon. I'd get sick of everyone interrupting me, my wife would get sick of all of us. We knew when we got to that point of being sick of everyone, so we'd just go jump on the bikes and go for a bike ride. That was a really good strategy. Personally going for a run, walking the dogs more, doing all those sorts of things. It was exercise that probably helped.

Indeed, while discussing his sense of belonging during 2020 Thomas identified that the restrictions placed on usual activities '[made] us appreciate where we were… appreciate living in Tasmanian more. Having access to some of the things you've got access to'.

While Thomas' experience of working from home and the stress associated with it was a key topic of conversation in is 2020 interview, his enjoyment of additional time to engage in outdoor

pursuits was significant and allowed him to maintain an attachment to and appreciation of his local area that was given additional resonance through reference to his previous interviews. Thomas's previous interviews also allowed for better understanding of his ongoing struggle with managing stress and his occasional sense of ambivalence associated with his job—something that may otherwise have appeared to be a result of the pandemic, rather than simply being exacerbated by it. Notably, Thomas' sense of attachment to place differed from that of the other participants, whose sense of belonging appeared to be predominantly rooted in interpersonal relationships. For this reason, his strong affinity with his local area evokes Scannell et al. (2021) work on parallels between interpersonal and place attachment, with his relationship with place echoing the types of sentiments that the other participants associated with significant others.

Thomas' experiences also align with the findings of recent research on so-called 'rural stayers' who remain in rural areas over time. Specifically, like many other 'rural stayers' Thomas' decision to remain in his rural areas was not made only once when he formed his post-school plans (see Stockdale et al., 2018). Instead, it is renegotiated and remade over time through an ongoing process of evaluation in which he weighed up the aspects of his local area that he enjoyed against the constraints that he felt that it placed on its career. Importantly, this ongoing process of evaluation was mediated by the attachment that Thomas felt to his local area as a result of the everyday routines of belonging that he performed within it. In contrast to Jeremy, Thomas' sense of belonging was intrinsically linked to place.

8 | DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has reanimated nostalgic views of rural places as a rural idyll and their communities as safe, transparent and knowable. The biographical stories from our participants, however, speak to a different experience of rural communities. Much like (Williams', 1973/2016, p. 240) theory of the culture of the city and the country, the regional and rural communities of our four participants are far from homogenous places in which everybody knows each other through 'face-to-face contacts' composed of the 'real substance of personal relationships'. In fact, our participants' personal communities are instead created and sustained over time through routinised experiences and intimate relationships underpinned by shared values. For example, over more than a decade of interviews and survey responses Claire and Thomas described an experience of belonging generated through routines associated with sports and outdoor activities. For Alyssa, shared family values constructed a web of solidarities, while for Jeremy, his relationship with his fiancé (and later wife) provided a space of belonging and intimacy that buffered him from his local area, rather than anchoring him to it. For all of the participants, knowable communities were not their larger rural context and community, but rather their intimate routines and relationships. In his analysis of 19th century British novels (Williams', 1973/2016, p. 240) affirms that a knowable community is 'a matter of consciousness, and of continuing as well as day-to-day experience'. For example, in Williams' analysis it is belonging to a particular social class that makes the characters recognise, and interact with each other, rather than their physical proximity to neighbours (from a different class). In a sense, for our four participants, the intimacy of experiences and relationships is what constitutes their (private) knowable community rather than their larger regional or rural town. In fact, in our interviews and survey responses we hear little about the wider community, with exceptions provided by Jeremy's feelings of isolation and Claire's caring but transient neighbours.

Importantly, the participants shared a similar experience of belonging; it was articulated through experiences of routine and repetition that were built up over time for each of them, and were shaped in relation to specific people, places and activities. While some of these performances and practices were relatively ordinary (e.g., playing soccer) they became 'sacred dimensions of belonging' for our participants (Fenster, 2005, p. 217). Like the migrants in Fortier's (1999) and Fenster's (2005) studies, our participants' constructions of belonging were a process shaped over time and through everyday routines. For Alyssa and Jeremy, belonging was mediated through specific social ties which formed for them what Williams' (1973/2016) would view as a 'knowable community', contrasting with the wider sense of ambivalence (Alyssa) and social isolation (Jeremy) that they associated with their local areas. This meant that while the pandemic and related restrictions impacted on their lives in multiple ways, it nevertheless had little effect on their experience of belonging, because it did not affect the relationships in which their sense of belonging was anchored, and through which it was routinely performed. This was particularly notable for Jeremy, who felt socially isolated in his local area in remote Western Australia and described feelings of unbelonging which are not uncommon for young people in a rural community (see Cuervo, 2016; Pedersen & Gram, 2017); but built a sense of comfort and belonging around routines of communication and connection with his wife—whether she was in Brazil in 2017, or in Sydney in 2020.

For Claire and Thomas, belonging was associated more with activities than it was with specific individuals. Following Bell (1999), both participants engaged in ordinary practices that constituted belonging through particular performances and recognition of those performances. For example, Claire's sense of belonging was mediated through playing soccer, which provided a routine that helped her to manage other changes in her life, such as finishing secondary school, taking a gap year, relocating to pursue tertiary study, and then relocating again to begin a graduate teaching job. Notably, the sense of belonging that Claire associated with soccer was not tied to a specific place, or even a specific soccer team. Instead, it was the routine 'doing' of playing soccer, and participating in the team-based practices. For Thomas, belonging was associated with 'outdoorsy' pursuits, but these practices were tied to his local area in regional Tasmania and formed a large part of his motivation for remaining in Tasmania despite feeling that he may have better job prospects

elsewhere. For all participants, the ordinary practices of socialising, dwelling and relaxing in familiar settings amounted to what Edensor (2006) has described as the construction of thick rural places, belonging and identity. For Thomas especially, this was linked to a specific experience of place attachment. Belonging of this type does not demand, as Williams' (1973/2016) would see it, a close interaction with neighbours and community members, but rather meaningful relationships with loved ones that generate formations of belonging even if one may feel isolated from their broader community.

Although when viewed at a single point in time—the 2020 interview—all of the participants' experiences of belonging appeared to be disrupted to some extent due to broader disruptions to their lives caused by the pandemic and related restrictions, viewing at their experiences longitudinally painted a different picture. This is primarily because approaching the participants' biographies in this way allowed us to consider a key way in which feelings of belonging are formed—through mundane, everyday routines that provide a feeling of comfort and connection that is maintained over time, and is felt in its absence. Indeed, for our participants belonging was performative in that it was created through actions. However, it was not enacted in overt or attention-grabbing ways. It was instead built through everyday processes of doing, and layered over time. As Fenster (2005, p. 229) puts it, 'our daily practices help us draw our "private (rural) city" and to underline the intimate allies and paths that we use in our daily practices'. Belonging was not constructed by participants as a 'sense of security' (Habib & Ward, 2020, p. 1) or feeling that one had a stake in the community they lived in (Anthias, 2006, p. 21). Rather belonging existed in spaces of routine and repetition that were enlivened by these mundane performances of belonging, and came to form key contours of their lives. We thus dispel the notion of the rural idyll that has sprung up in Australia in the wake of the pandemic, imagining rural areas as untouched by the stresses and strains of the pandemic, not on the basis that it is a reductive conception of rural areas, or that rural areas have been affected by the pandemic after all, but on the basis that this notion fundamentally misunderstands the complexities of how individuals living in rural and regional areas form a sense of belonging while living their lives in these places. While on the surface the degree of disruption or continuity experienced by the participants may appear to suggest the extent to which their everyday lives and experiences of belonging in place were affected, a deeper analysis shows that their experiences cannot be reduced to or understood through these simplistic points of distinction. Their feelings of belonging and relationships with place were instead complex and negotiated over time, and while they were not significantly affected by the pandemic, this was not because the pandemic did not impact on their lives more broadly.

While this paper joins an emerging body of literature on COVID-19 and rural places, it seeks to convey a point that extends beyond this empirical context. Specifically, by demonstrating the understanding of subjective experiences of belonging that can be achieved by focusing on everyday life and taking a longitudinal view, we advocate for greater attention to mundane and longitudinal approaches in studies of rural youth and young adults. As we have highlighted, focusing on single moments in time and on moments of change and transition risks papering over the mundane, yet subjectively rich, routines and rituals that constitute living in a specific place, and alongside specific, meaningful others. We thus draw on the findings that we have put forward in this paper to suggest a greater focus on long-term practices as a means of understanding the everyday lived experience and subjective meaning of belonging.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the Australian Research Council funded this study through the grants DP0557902, DP1094132, DP160101611 and DP210100445. We would also like to thank the participants in the Life Patterns study. Without their long-standing commitment, the study would not be possible. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the other members of the Life Patterns team, which currently includes Johanna Wyn, Helen Cahill, Dan Woodman, Jenny Chesters, Carmen Leccardi, Rachel Brooks, Eric Fu and Quentin Maire. Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Newcastle, as part of the Wiley - The University of Newcastle agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of this study, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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ENDNOTES

[1] A certificate IV is a vocational training qualification. It is generally considered to be the equivalent to 6–12 months of degree-level study and provides preparation for specialist or supervisory positions.

[2] In an Australian context the term semi-rural is often used interchangeably with 'peri-urban', and typically refers to suburbs that are situated between major cities and rural areas.

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How to cite this article: Cook, J., & Cuervo, H. (2022). Routinized performances of belonging: Everyday practices and relationships in rural and regional areas during the pandemic. *Population, Space and Place*, e2568. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2568