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Friends Disconnected: How Mobile Work Transforms Friendships Through Absence and Presence

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Abstract: In this paper, we focus on friendship as a significant interpersonal relationship that has not prominently figured in geographic discussions of mobile work. Taking friendship as our object of analysis we explore how wellbeing becomes compromised for mobile workers and their friends. Responding to concerns outlined by our research participants during semi-structured skype interviews we acknowledge mobile working practices transform friendships that exist outside sites of paid labour. To consider the complexity of these transformations we address how spatial relations of proximity and distance demarcate physical and metaphorical
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issues of absence and presence. These issues can lead mobile workers to become reclusive and focused on self-directed activities. This oscillating absence and presence transforms friendships and highlights the relational interplay of mobility and immobility in mobile work.

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INTRODUCTION

‘The first couple of years he really didn’t do much to organise meeting up with his friends [when at home], and I started to worry a bit about him being a bit secluded from his own friends because when he came back [from working away] he’d say, ‘I just want to spend the time with you and Owen.’ But yeah, I worry about his social life.’

In this opening interview extract, Paula outlines a key concern regarding her fiancé Jason’s working practice and his wellbeing. Jason is a diamond driller who is employed at a remote mine site in Western Australia for two weeks before returning home to Paula and their son Owen for one week in Perth. As such, Jason undertakes what we term ‘mobile work’. This is an employment practice requiring people to repeatedly travel to work and live over 100 kilometres from their primary residence for anywhere between one week to several months. In this paper, we explore Paula’s suggestion that such absence can affect friendships.

To date, geographers exploring the experiential dimension of mobile work have prioritised research on the effects of absence for relations between intimate partners (Pini & Mayes, 2012; Kwon, 2015; Straughan et al., 2020a) and family (Pratt, 2012; Straughan et al., 2020b). While

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important, we argue that this focus has undermined acknowledgment of other highly significant interpersonal relationships creating the unintentional effect of implying they are weaker or less important. Our paper therefore focuses on friendship as an interpersonal relationship that has not yet figured in discussions of mobile work.

This omission is concerning as research outside of geography has demonstrated that friendship is an important consideration for understanding the conditions within which work takes place, as 'social interaction is regarded as a central concept in relation to both individual wellbeing and organisational effectiveness' (Milner et al., 2010). In short, friendship is important for both employees and employers as these relationships facilitate work motivation, job satisfaction, stress reduction, employee management and organisational commitment (for example, see Milner et al., 2010). More importantly, beyond productivist concerns, Bunnell et al. recognise that friendships are 'important expressions of being human, in terms of individual emotional and social and cultural wellbeing' (2012, p. 491). As such, friendships are now understood to 'provide a sense of ontological security as our lives unfold' (Cronin, 2015, p. 672).

Our specific concern are friendships in *relation* to mobile work. Rather than unpack friendships *at* sites of work, we explore how the absences and presences that mobile work dictates have implications for friendships that stretch *beyond* sites of paid labour. This focus responds to the emphasis our research participants placed on these non-work friendships within interviews, which in turn highlight how mobile work is predicated on the relational contingencies of mobility and immobility (Bissell 2007). That is, we attend to processes which render mobile workers immobile and isolated. This can occur when workers are at remote work sites, but also when they are at home due to a focus 'on family, and more self-directed activities' (McKenzie & Hoath, 2014, pp. 50-51) which can create reclusiveness. We argue the relations between mobility and immobility that play out in mobile work can transform friendships through mundane and insipid processes that affect wellbeing.

This paper considers the spatial relations of proximity and distance through the experiences of two resource sector mobile workers who labour at materially and geographically different Australian sites. This sector is global, which means that the findings in our paper resonate with

experiences beyond Australia where physical and virtual absences and presences from work sites, primary homes and communities are experienced. These absences and presences are set by company rosters which dictate when and for how long a mobile worker will be at home or work. Taking seriously Cronin's argument that, 'context is not a neutral backdrop or location; it is an active part of the intersubjective space of friendship' (Cronin, 2014, p. 77), we narrate our research participants' complex geographies through vignettes. Before addressing these contexts, we first introduce literature on friendship and situate our discussion in relation to geographic scholarship on absence and presence.

FRIENDSHIP IN REVIEW

Friendship is an understudied form of relationship within the social sciences. In sociology, this neglect stems from a belief by some that friendships are a personal choice and therefore not connected to public matters worthy of scrutiny (Holmes & Greco, 2011). However, as perceived divides between public and private, self and other have been interrogated, other sociologists have recognised that friendship is vital for social reproduction and wellbeing (Allen, 1998; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Recognising friendships as 'social bonds in process' (Cronin, 2015, p. 682; 2014), Cronin for example, has highlighted the relational and intersubjective qualities of friendship enabling her to demonstrate how friendship can 'contribute to shaping shifting norms and wider social patterns of interpersonal connection' (Cronin, 2015, p. 683).

Developing this work in sociology, geographers have also begun to consider this relationship type by attending to the importance of everyday spaces to friendships (Conradson & Latham, 2005), demonstrating that friendships can have empowering potential for marginalised groups (Skelton, 2000; Morris-Roberts, 2004) and offer networks through which to challenge and transform unequal power structures (Sangtin et al., 2006; Featherstone, 2008). Furthermore, geographers have considered the role of friendship in facilitating social capital (Katz, 2004) and enabling social possibilities at the same time as reinforcing existing systems of dominance (Dyson, 2010). Meanwhile, others have unpacked friendships' potential for transformative impacts on normative understandings of masculinity (Gorman-Murray, 2013) and considered how friendships challenge heteronormative and idealised conceptions of home (Wilkinson,

2014). We build onto this work to consider spatial issues of mobility and immobility in relation to friendship. Acknowledging that friendship is 'influenced by wider social changes [including] paid work' (Bowlby, 2011, p. 605), we consider the significant implications that relate to how mobile work induces absence and presence in relation to distance and proximity from friends.

Social scientists with an interest in mobility have considered the impacts of distance and proximity on friendships in the context of long-term, national and transnational relocations. For example, looking at the experiences of British expatriates in Dubai, Walsh (2007) has explored the reproduction and reconfiguration of relations between family, couples *and* friends. Meanwhile, Cronin (2015) has considered the performativity of friendships conducted at a distance owing to relocations within the UK. In this paper, we highlight that oscillations of proximity and distance in relation to friendships demarcate issues of absence and presence that can lead to multiple tensions. Indeed, though Bunnell et al argue 'friendship is a means through which people across the world maintain intimate social relations both proximate and at a distance' (2012, p. 490), Walsh highlights how 'distances and absences that occur because of international migration put friendships under strain' (Walsh, 2007, p. 439). Building onto these claims, we argue these absences are not only tied to the body. We consider the 'strange spatialities' (Maclaren, 2014) of mobile worker friendships complicated by proximities and distances that relate to 'social and emotional navigation of geographic modes of closeness and distance' (Holmes & Wilding, 2019, p. 1). As such, we also consider absences and presences that are social and emotional: we consider the metaphorical as well as the physical.

As Jones et al (2016) point out, geographic work on absence and presence has traditionally focused on the scopic, and how these categories have been used as methods of social control to denote who or what is considered 'in' or 'out' of place (Cresswell, 1996). In this context absence and presence have been positioned in binary opposition, such that '[a]bsence is often reduced to not being present, and presence to not being absent' (Jones et al., 2016, p. 2). As geographies of haunting (e.g. Wylie, 2007), work on queer presence and absence (Taylor & Addison, 2013) and Jones et al.'s edited collection highlight, however, 'absence and presence are intricately woven rather than existing as binaries' (2016, p. 2). Accounting for the

interweaving of absence and presence in the friendships of mobile workers, we acknowledge the 'need to understand processes that ... make absences present and presences absent' (Jones et al., 2016, p. 6): processes that stem from the relations between mobility and immobility in mobile work.

MOBILE WORKERS AND THEIR FRIENDSHIPS

The empirical material presented here is drawn from a research project on the experience of mobile work for both workers and their partners. This research was initiated by a social media screening survey of mobile workers and partners which attracted 192 respondents. 60 of these respondents were recruited to take part in a 45-minute semi-structured Skype interview with authors Bissell and Gorman-Murray. In these interviews research participants cited tensions this lifestyle placed on their romantic relationships. On reflection, we felt these tensions required greater consideration.

Another screening survey of mobile workers and partners was initiated asking potential participants to consider the following: *'Has working away from home pushed your relationship to the limit?* The survey garnered a collection of 51 responses, 5 of which were recruited to take part in 45-minute semi-structured Skype interview with Straughan. Setting no restrictions on our participant's interpretation of 'relationship' we were surprised that a preoccupation with *friendship* emerged within this second set of interviews. Further, it was those friendships which existed outside work sites that dominated participant's reflections. This paper responds to this preoccupation which was particularly poignant for mobile workers, both male and female.

We focus on the experiences of two mobile workers employed in the resource sector whose friendships have been complicated by geographical distance and the duration of physical absence from their primary home and communities as well as the materiality of their work environments. These two participants were particularly reflexive on the effects that mobile work has had upon their ability to maintain friendships. Further, they resonate strongly with comments that appear across our interviews. Our first participant - Marian - highlights issues around embodied absence and presence. She speaks to common descriptions of mobile

workers across our data set identifying them as 'time poor', such that they become "disconnected from friends" (Brian, mobile worker). Our second participant - Daniel - highlights issues around virtual absence and presence. He speaks to mobile worker reliance on digital devices as tools of communication. Together they enable a deep dive into two different contexts (Cronin, 2014) in which friendships can transform in response to physical and metaphorical issues of absence and presence induced by mobile work. To explore these contexts, the following sections commence with vignettes which are then discussed to consider how such transformation occurs.

Marian in context: reclusiveness and the presence of absence

Before she started working as a nurse on an offshore oil rig accessed only by helicopter, Marian used to 'love going to netball'. She explains, after a game the team 'would all go and have a coffee at a café and talk about how great we played or how shit we were'. These netball girlfriends and 'those little sociable outings that you might have with them outside of the netball games' were once an important part of Marian's life. However, since starting a two week on, two week off roster that takes Marian from her home in Wellington, New Zealand, to off-shore Queensland, Australia, these friendships have dissolved. Reflecting on this dissolution, Marian explains 'you become unreliable in their view because you can't commit whereas what they don't see is it's not about being unreliable, it's about availability and my availability is limited'. Marian's lack of availability is not only created by the geographical distance of her work site. It also emerges from her positionality as a mother, wife, daughter and sister. These relationships 'saturate' her time when home for two weeks a month, curtailing her ability to be present for friends. Such absence results from the time squeeze of home and family commitments, making Marian appear reclusive. The result, she explains, is that 'it almost looks to other people that you've become quite selfish'.

Marian's constant absence over time has meant that a close friendship with an old-school friend, Sarah, has become fractured. She explains that Sarah 'was having difficulties, she was getting re-married and there were problems with her ex-husband'. As an important person in Sarah's life, Marian was going to the wedding but 'was held back' on the oil rig, because her

colleague who was flying in for the next roster became ill with appendicitis. This meant Marian missed the wedding. She explains, 'I felt terrible that I wasn't able to go like I really wanted to go home, but I had no access to get off the rig because they had no one coming in'. Unfortunately, for Marian, Sarah's understanding of the situation was 'it's not your problem that the person's sick coming in'. Someone else's health, however, becomes Marian's problem if it means 'the helicopter's not coming' leaving her stranded at sea.

The tension Marian's absence from the wedding caused has been enduring such that she is unsure what to do next, explaining 'I feel that I've done all that I can to explain that it wasn't a choice.' But she is also aware that Sarah is 'feeling very hurt because she is my very good friend and she's never let me down, always been there.' Marian has had to 'take a step back' as the misunderstanding got too overwhelming. Intensifying her absence by reducing communication felt like the safest course of action, enabling her to protect their longstanding friendship by preventing the disagreement from 'flaring into something that's greater than it needs to be.'

Marian's experience indicates several friendship 'disconnections'. It resonates with Larsen et al.'s argument that weak or newly formed ties are not likely to survive the effects of distance but also challenges their assertion that 'old and rooted ties have more foundation to exist at-a-distance' (2006, p. 270). Marian's story offers an opportunity to consider why people who work at a distance from home communities become disconnected from new and old friends despite periods of presence in their home locality.

The length of time and emotive language used in describing the fracture that has emerged within her longstanding friendship with Sarah suggests that this friendship disconnection has been particularly painful. This is not surprising given Cronin's recognition that '[f]riends play a key role in our lives and in relationally orienting our sense of self as a biographical entity' (2015, p. 682). While the duration of this friendship is key to the entanglement of both friends' sense of self, it is challenged by Marian's new work situation which undermines her ability to adhere to social norms within which friendships are understood to exist. One such social norm is 'provision of support' (Cronin, 2015, p. 669), another is reciprocity (Holmes & Greco, 2011). As Marian intimates, theirs has been a very caring friendship indicated in her description of Sarah

as a 'very good friend' who has 'never let her down'. This is however, where we suggest a tension arises. As Bowlby (2011) explains:

'caring between friends involves both giving and receiving and the expectation of some sort of reciprocation. Such reciprocation does not need to be immediate, however, nor of the same form, nor involve a precisely calculated scale of obligation. Nevertheless, persistent inequalities in the exchange of care between friends may lead to the loss of the friendship' (Bowlby, 2011, p. 608).

The lack of 'availability' which Marian discloses has emerged because of her mobile work and squeezed time for family relations and home commitments suggests a creeping and persistent absence of care reciprocation. As such, the physical distance and time demands that render mobile workers absent, threaten such friendships by hindering the enactment of social norms.

However, both Cronin (2015) and Bowlby (2011) point out friendship also involves emotional connections created through the performance of meeting. Indeed, Marian's near constant absence halts the 'vivid sensations and emotional connections' through which past and present fold together as an 'affective bond' in the physical process of meeting with friends (Cronin, 2015, p. 678). While a reduction in meetings is perhaps clearer for friends to grasp when physical absence is continuous, such as after permanent relocation or migration, Marian reflects that her rhythmic presence at home every two weeks and her continued absence from meetings with friends due to family commitments, complicates this understanding, leading friends to find her 'selfish'.

The hurt expressed to Marian by Sarah suggests that the absence of support, reciprocity and a disintegrating affective bond has led to a felt disconnection that became significantly palpable at the latter's wedding. We suggest Marian's absence at the wedding was a keenly felt presence on the day, a presence that has endured and changed the contours of their friendship. The strength of feeling that characterises the presence of Marian's absence, or felt disconnection, is entangled with the qualities of friendship relations. That is, Rawlins argues, 'when we choose our friends, we are not only selecting co-actors in the stories of our lives, we are selecting co-

authors and co-tellers' (Rawlins, 2008, p. 47). Marian's physical absence eats away at the co-presence of their friendship, creating a hole in Sarah's story of herself.

Daniel in context: self-directed activity and absence in presence

When he first started as a mobile worker in remote towns of Western Australia, Daniel—a control room panel technician currently employed at a liquid gas plant—and his girlfriend at the time broke up. Two years later and in a new relationship, Daniel explains that his response was to go traveling whenever he was rostered off work. As a result, he explains 'I've got like a few friends from overseas that I've met that I keep in contact with'. Given that he works night as well as day shifts, these friendships mean that Daniel can utilise the time difference enabling him to have 'chats to people during the night.' Social media is very important in facilitating Daniel's 'chats'. 'I get like pretty dependent on Snapchat and stuff when I'm away' he says, 'because it keeps me involved with like friends and stuff at home.'

His dependence stems from the control room environment in which he works. It is housed in a building that resembles a 'cyclone [or] bomb shelter' because if there was 'an incident on the gas plant [the building] needs to withstand a big bomb'. Stuck in this workspace for 12 hours at a time over a 9-day period, often alone, Daniel is motivated to work hard at maintaining the friendships he made when he was single so that day or night, in Australia or abroad, a friend is available to keep him company.

This social contact continues when he returns home. He explains, 'you get used to being on your phone all the time, you've got certain friends you keep in contact with, if you don't, [you're] not using social media platforms, you get so, sort of, disconnected'. Maintaining his online presence at home as well as work has led to some tensions within his new relationship. Daniel continues, 'sometimes the girlfriend will get pissed off because I'll be like on my phone, but it's sort of like bit of an addition'. The importance of Daniel's continuous online 'chats' with his friends has recently been highlighted by changes in workplace policy that has seen the 'WiFi switched off' for 'security purposes'. Given the building's dense form, Daniel is unable to access social media through his phone's internet signal and as such now finds himself virtually as well

as physically isolated leading him to 'feel pretty low'.

Daniel paints a clear picture of the need to maintain his friendships using the mobile information and communication technology (ICT) of his smartphone as a tool for self-care. He explains the ability to expand the range of his space-time communication by accessing distant friends through social media is key to stopping his mood from getting 'pretty low'. In keeping with Vallor's claim that 'new social media are being heavily used for friendship maintenance' (2012, p. 198), Daniel demonstrates 'relationships no longer require physical presence ... to be emotionally and socially significant (Holmes & Wilding, 2019, p. 1).

For Daniel, mental or mediated presence (Thulin et al., 2019) is vital to maintaining not only his friendships but also his emotional state. This prompts him to work hard at keeping in touch with physically distant friends across various time zones, reflecting Cronin's argument that for friendships to withstand geographical distance 'active efforts to stay in touch are required' (2015, p. 675). As such, his drive to access social media resonates with claims that on-line presence is 'motivated by specific intentions or goals: we go online to get something...[i]ncluding companionship' (Miller, 2012, p. 272).

However, the body is still present in online life as the internet is connected to the 'real' world (Kitchen, 1998; Longhurst, 2013). That is, constant co-presence of physically absent friends accessed by ICTs 'introduces new bindings, requirements, and constraints in everyday life' (Thulin et al., 2019, p. 6) as 'connectivity to distant places trumps corporeal proximity' (ibid, 13). This is because the 'streaming background' of online social life can intrude onto the 'foreground activities' of the material present affecting attentiveness through required 'cognitive effort and commitment' (Thulin et al., 2019, p. 7). Indeed, responses to Daniel's online presence suggests a mental and emotional absence from the physical environment around him. This is highlighted when he reflects upon his girlfriend's reaction to his phone use in their Adelaide home. Recognising she gets 'pissed off' because of his absence from the 'real' world, Daniel points out that his continual use of social media to keep in touch with friends is necessary to make sure he is still connected when back in the control room, alone. As such, his smartphone, has become an object to which his body and emotions are tied (Longhurst, 2013).

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The removal of WiFi from the control room suggests this 'co-located absence' during physical presence has been registered by Daniel's employers who have engaged in an act of 'local anchoring' (Thulin et al., 2019). This constrains Daniel's agency and self-directed activity, leading to nine day periods of twelve hour shifts in which he feels 'isolated' and 'pretty low', highlighting a tension between workplace safety considerations and worker wellbeing. Such tensions demonstrate 'the influence of new technologies on people's lives is rarely clear cut but mutually constitutive, complex and divergent' (Thulin et al., 2019, p. 12). Daniel's experience highlights, that the absent presences of 'digital enmeshment' (Holmes & Wilding, 2019) can be pervasive for some mobile workers.

CONCLUSION

Working through the physical and metaphorical absences and presences that emerge in response to mobile work, we have outlined how the friendships of two resource sector employees are transformed by mobile working practices. For Marian, transformation occurs due to the inaccessibility of the remote ocean oil rig she works on and family commitments which make her a time-poor, absent friend. For Daniel, a palpable isolation emerges because of the remote location and dense concrete building he works in alone, compounded by a change in company policy that challenges his agency and makes him absent on social media. In both cases the transformation of friendships unfold over time as social norms of care and reciprocity, the emotional performativity of meetings and friendship maintenance are hindered by reclusiveness and isolation.

Focusing on the experience of two mobile workers has enabled us consider common themes of friendship disconnection and reliance on digital devices for communication which appear across our data set. It also enables us to flesh out two contexts (Cronin, 2014) and processes (Jones et al., 2016) through which relations of absence and presence affect mobile worker friendships and, in turn, wellbeing. Daniel's experience demonstrates how the spatial and material qualities of worksites can lead to physical and metaphorical absence from friend and other relationships which lowers his mood. Meanwhile Marian's experience highlights how absence challenges the co-constitutive social norms of friendship, demonstrating that ontological insecurity (Cronin,

2015) brought about by friendship disconnection is a shared challenge to wellbeing which stretches beyond sites of paid labour.

Responding to a dearth of work on friendship and mobility, our paper has highlighted how contemporary mobile work arrangements can transform friendships. As such, it resonates with previous scholarship that considers challenges faced by intimate and family relations in the context of mobile work (e.g. Pini and Mayes, 2012; Pratt, 2012). Taken together, this research suggests that all types of relationships are 'loosened' by this mode of employment, though the social bonds that develop in mobile work environments themselves have yet to be properly considered. Our paper indicates the challenges and transformations faced by mobile workers and their social networks are mundane but insipid, resulting in a loosening of social bonds outside of work sites which occurs slowly over time. This loosening is as much a product of the immobility and ensuing isolation produced by mobile work, as it is a product of mobility.

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