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Author/s:

Bissell, D;Gorman-Murray, A

Title:

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Date:

2019-12-01

Citation:

Bissell, D. & Gorman-Murray, A. (2019). Disoriented geographies: Undoing relations, encountering limits. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 44 (4), pp.707-720. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12307>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/286856>

Disoriented geographies: undoing relations, encountering limits

*Associate Professor David Bissell

School of Geography

University of Melbourne

221 Bouverie St, Carlton, VIC 3053

Australia

david.bissell@unimelb.edu.au

Professor Andrew Gorman-Murray

School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Western Sydney University

Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW, 2751

Australia

A.Gorman-Murray@westernsydney.edu.au

*corresponding author

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/TRAN.12307](https://doi.org/10.1111/TRAN.12307)

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Article type : Regular Paper

Introduction

Writing about the relationship between mobility and home, Massey acknowledged that disorientation was a common reaction to intensified globalisation. In response to suggestions that increased mobility gave rise to encounters that ‘undermined a place called home and left us placeless and disoriented’ (1992, 3), she invited geographers to develop a more ‘progressive’ understanding of place that is not sedentary or bounded and therefore at risk of being undermined by intensified mobility but, rather, is constituted through its dynamic relations with other places. Since then, geographers of mobility have illuminated the diverse ways in which places and bodies are relationally constituted by their mobilities (Cresswell, 2010; Adey, 2006), and how home itself is more adequately comprehended as a dynamic process, formed through the multiple mobilities and encounters of bodies, objects and ideas (Blunt, 2005).

Our paper revisits Massey’s remarks about the disorienting bodily effects of mobility to develop this underexplored geographical concept. Traditionally, disorientation refers to the loss of locational knowledge felt most keenly in unfamiliar places (Harbin, 2016). Yet Massey’s usage indicates that disorientation is a potentially more intriguing term related to how different bodies register the differential effects of mobility. We develop the concept of disorientation by exploring how it might be a much more constitutive everyday experience, felt through bodily encounters with intimately familiar others in familiar places. Our central argument is that disorientation is a productive geographical concept for acknowledging how, at times, bodies can lose their orienting relations to other bodies, to actions, and to situations. We explore these losses through the themes of incomprehension, confusion, and disintegration, respectively. In drawing attention to bodies that are not necessarily—or at least not always—oriented by their relations, we highlight how analytical logics of

disconnection and undoing (Harrison, 2011) are potentially better suited to describing disorientation than those of connection and construction that have dominated geographical enquiry in recent times (Anderson and Harrison, 2010). Contributing to ongoing debates in geography on relationality and encounter, our paper explores how our orienting relations can become undone, and it opens up space for thinking differently about what, exactly, is being encountered in disorienting experiences.

Our paper pairs a conceptual focus on disorientation with an attempt to understand the complexity of mobile worker households in Australia, a situation where one partner works away from home for a period of time. Disorientation emerged as a significant concept through interviews with female partners of mobile workers who shared their challenges of keeping their households afloat in the periodic absence and presence of their partner. Rather than highlighting connections, these moving encounters demonstrated relations becoming undone. Based on our impressionistic presentation of three stories, we suggest that incomprehension, confusion and disintegration are themes that draw attention to the spatiality of disorientation. We diagnose this both sensorially, in terms of the felt space that opens up in disorienting experiences, and practically, in terms of the spatial practices of home that disorienting experiences catalyse. Our paper comprises five sections. Section one explains the geographical significance of disorientation. Section two outlines our methodological approach. Section three presents impressionistic portraits of three interview encounters that draw out the subtleties required to discern disorientation. Section four analyses these disorientations through the themes of incomprehension, confusion and disintegration. Section five explains the significance of our claims in terms of mobile geographies.

1 Mobilising disorientation

Disorientation is a geographical concept intimately associated with mobility. Whilst, as Hughes and Mee (2018, 2) point out, 'much of what is currently written about mobility still carries an underlying assumption that the mobility path is known or intended; that bodies know where they are going,' disoriented bodies have featured as a minor thread through a diverse set of mobile geographical literatures. Three qualities of disorientation can be discerned. First, disorientation involves embodied encounters with unfamiliar others or

experiences in unfamiliar places. With regard to the former, as our opening discussion indicates, Massey (1992) uses the term in her development of a progressive understanding of place to flag reactionary responses to the arrival of unknown others that unsettle an (illusory) sense of place as stable. With regard to the latter, disorientation has been approached as an embodied experience felt in unfamiliar places, addressed through practices such as wayfinding (Laurier and Brown, 2008). Second, disorientation is viewed pejoratively and something to be overcome. This quality is especially manifested in historical geographical research where disorientation features in accounts of imperial exploration manifested through experiences such as bewilderment (Driver, 2004). Third, disorientation is a temporally-discrete experience that subsides over time. As Tuan (1983, 13) writes, people 'learn to locate themselves' through experiences so that 'initial confusion', 'strangeness', and 'disorientation' eventually subside. This quality is demonstrated by migration geographers, where disorientation has been acknowledged as an embodied experience of arrival in an unfamiliar place for transnational migrants (Marcu, 2014), and cultural geographical research on the displaced sensation of mobility-induced jet-lag (Anderson, 2015).

We develop disorientation in a new direction by turning the spotlight to the home to reimagine disorientation as a more everyday embodied experience and a more common quality of intimate socio-spatial formations in familiar places. In this regard, we build on research that has explored how home is a site of everyday practices, material cultures and social relations that are characterised by multiple forms of mobility (Blunt, 2005). Home is particularly significant given that, for Tuan, it is where we are '*so completely oriented* that the idea of orientation does not arise' (1983, 13, original emphasis). Yet, as Harbin suggests, experiences of disorientation can feel like we are 'not at home' (2016, 2). With this tension at the fore, we explore how oscillatory mobility to and from the home in the context of mobile worker households can give rise to multiple experiences of disorientation that signal a loss of bodily capacity to know others; to know how to proceed; and to know how to hold a situation together. The geographical significance of this expanded sense of disorientation is twofold.

i. Undoing relations

First, our paper aims to enhance geographical sensitivity to how bodily relations that orient us become undone. This contrasts with a focus on relation construction that has been a hallmark of geography's 'relational turn'. To contextualise, actor-network and complexity theories (Hetherington and Law, 2000) have been influential in understanding socio-spatial formations as the 'perpetual becoming of heterogeneous networks and events' (Jones, 2009, 491). Assemblage approaches have pushed this 'constructionist' (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011, 125) trend further, emphasising how socio-spatial formations emerge from heterogeneous entities coming together. For their part, non-representational theories have developed a relational understanding of bodies themselves through a focus on the 'efficacy' of practical activity (Anderson and Harrison, 2010, 8), explaining how 'it is from the active, productive, and continual weaving of the multiplicity of bits and pieces that we emerge' (ibid). With parallels in feminist geographies that emphasise 'the ties that bind' (Valentine, 2008), bodies have increasingly become understood in terms of their 'interdependent associations or interactions' (Thrift, 2004, 126). Building on work on performativity, which stressed how orientations develop through repeated bodily practices (Nash, 2000), such relations are understood to intensify through the repetition of practices in specific milieus, creating a 'melding between subjects and their "environments"... a melding that goes far beyond a simple iterative interaction' (Thrift, 2008, 83–84).

Contrasting with this constructionist trend, our interest in undoing relations prompts us to consider how things fall apart. However, in contrast to work on infrastructural disruption (Graham, 2010), industrial ruins (Edensor, 2005), and degraded environments (Crang, 2010), we foreground the intimate, bodily dimensions of undoing relations which are less visible but no less significant. Disorientation alerts us to situations where bodies are not necessarily always oriented by their relations. We find Harrison's (2007) term 'non-relational' valuable since it emphasises this notion of relations becoming undone, rather than merely reconfigured, directing our attention to the 'gaps' that result from the loss of relations that previously oriented us. Whilst we are not denying that bodies are relationally constituted, to pursue analytical logics of connection and construction by thinking about disoriented situations as merely changed relations leaves little space for considering forms of 'distance, withdrawal, and disappearance' (Harrison, 2011, 159), and the socio-spatial (de)formations that result. Philo's idea of 'less-than-human geography' is a useful accompanying term, since

a body dis-oriented by its loss of relations shifts our attention to the incapacities that can result, signalling that which 'diminishes the human, cribs and confines it, curtails or destroys its capacities, silencing its affective grip, banishing its involvements' (2017, 258). We contribute to these debates on relationality by developing the concept of disorientation to consider the loss of orienting relations through experiences of incomprehension, confusion and disintegration.

ii. Encountering limits

Second, in developing the concept of disorientation, our paper aims to contribute to debates on mobile geographies of encounter by considering *what* is being encountered in experiences of disorientation when relations become undone. Encounter has become an important political concept to evaluate how relations are constructed and negotiated through contact. Two relevant strands of research on mobility draw attention different qualities of encounter. The first concerns propinquitous encounters. Wilson's (2011) research on enlivening and depleting encounters with unfamiliar others in spaces of transit is exemplary, building on earlier work by Laurier and Philo (2006) who explore the political possibilities of 'light touch' contact with strangers. Others have attended to unexpected encounters in the home created through the mobility of non-human others (Gillon, 2014). The second concerns encounters over distance (Conradson and McKay, 2007). Walsh (2009) highlights how intimate relations can develop with those not co-present, building on work by Huang and Yeoh (2007) who outline how emotional labour is required to sustain distanced connections. Others have shown how encounters at a distance that enable intimacy are assisted by communication technologies (Urry and Elliott 2010), grounded in earlier work on mediated connected presence (Licoppe, 2004).

These two strands of literature emphasise encounters where bodies come into contact with other bodies. Yet we suggest that what is in part being encountered in experiences of disorientation is a limit, as if hitting a wall, however briefly, that we cannot breach. To appreciate this, Harbin's work on the bodily palpability of disorientation is useful. She argues that disorientations are *impasses*, in that they are experiences of becoming 'discoordinated, unable to respond definitively' (2016, 5). They are 'experiences that make it difficult to know how to go on' (2016, 13). Disorientations are *difficult* in the sense that

‘they add strain to an individual’s life’ (2016, 18). And disorientations are *palpably felt* in bodily sensation, such that one ‘loses one’s footing and is adrift in deep, unpredictable waters’ (2016, 3). As such, in contrast to the focus on connection and contact that characterises current work on mobility and encounter, the themes of incomprehension, confusion, and disintegration compel us to consider encounters with limits themselves. Drawing succour from Harbin’s description of being ‘adrift’, we suggest that these limits can be described in terms of the felt space that opens up in experiences of disorientation, where we become distanced from others; from the onflow of action; and from being in control of situations. Rather than encounters *over* distance, incomprehension, confusion and disintegration are encounters *with* distance.

In bringing these two themes together, disorientation is attuned to a distinctive bodily immobility. Geographers have explored bodily immobility from a number of perspectives. Tracing power geometries, geographers have drawn attention to how some bodies can be physically immobilised by the mobility of others (Massey, 1994). Interrogating practices of travel, they have described how durations of immobility are often required to be mobile, through waiting and queuing (Adey, 2006). Exploring travel time, they have described how durations of physical immobility can be put to productive use (Jain and Lyons, 2008). We contribute to these debates on bodily immobility by suggesting that experiences of incomprehension, confusion and disintegration are a different form of immobility, characterised by a sense of being distanced from other people, from future actions, and from situations.

2 (Un)knowing mobile households

Substantively, our project set out to explore the variability of bodily experiences of mobile worker households. Work-related mobility (Cresswell et al., 2016) has become a prominent policy concern in Australia recently arising from the increase in fly-in fly-out (FIFO) labour used to power the resources sector, where workers travel from their homes in coastal cities to live in ‘host’ communities for days or weeks at a time. Between 2006 and 2011, the number of mobile workers in Australia increased by 37% to 213,773 (2% of the population) (KPMG, 2013). Concern is evidenced in a parliamentary inquiry into the challenges of FIFO work that stresses the under-researched impact on households (Parliament of Australia,

2013). Sheppard highlights that the impact of mobile work 'for working conditions, gender and family relations... remains unclear and under-researched' (2013, 275). We found this troubling because previous research suggested that the risks of mobile working practices are increasingly individualised to households (Carrington et al., 2011).

Mobilities and migration geographers have begun to rectify this gap concerning households by exploring the enablements and constraints experienced by family members 'left-behind' (Toyota et al., 2007), particularly children (Hoang et al., 2012). Studies that do focus on partners have drawn attention to a range of positive and negative impacts. Citing benefits, Walsh (2012) insists that households can achieve financial and familial stability through a partner working away; Markey et al. (2015) highlight how communities can be strengthened since the left-behind partner actively searches out greater community involvement; and McEvoy et al. (2012) show how left-behind women can experience greater employment and social freedom in the absence of the male partner in spite of still being constrained by gendered expectations of conduct. More negatively, while Torres and Carte (2016) explain how left-behind females experience a greater burden of care for other family members in the absence of their working partners, Markey et al. (2015) highlight relationship difficulties.

These studies showcase the diverse issues experienced by mobile worker households.

However, what is arguably less present in these studies is a sensitivity to the experiential 'messiness' for individual households. Our approach therefore differs from these studies of left-behind partners in two ways. First, in contrast to previous work that focuses on diagnosing the longer-duration effects of mobile work on households (Dillon and Walsh, 2012; Markey et al., 2015), our project develops an attunement to the shorter-duration temporal variability of the experience of home, focusing on specific encounters and embodied practices such as mobile workers' departure and return. Second, and relatedly, our approach attempts to be more attuned to the experiential ambiguities that Zhang (2018) argues need to be more strongly articulated in research on work-related mobility. She suggests that 'models of strong agency remain implicit' (2018, 199) in terms of people's capacities to make informed decisions and evaluate their situation. In response, we are inspired by feminist geographical work on transnational migrant families that is highly attuned to the experiential ambiguities of families separated by distance. For instance,

Silvey's (2006, 33) research on Indonesian migrant women working in Saudi Arabia is highly attuned to the complexities of family separation, alerting us to the difficulties of sense-making between separated partners. Similarly, Pratt's (2012) ethnography with Filipino female migrant domestic workers in Canada highlights the complex emotional entanglements experienced by these women, alerting us to the impossibilities of generating strong narratives about family separation.

We conducted Skype interviews with mobile worker households so that we could speak to a diversity of people from across Australia. Indeed, this mode of communication is familiar to mobile worker households, and it is effective for probing embodied experiences (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017). We interviewed 60 participants, a combination of mobile workers and partners, recruited through social media advertisements. We found three interview encounters with female mobile worker partners especially affecting. As well as highlighting the gendered dimensions of mobile worker households (McEvoy et al., 2012), they catalysed conceptual questions about disorientation. As we analysed their transcripts, we became cognisant of Williams's warning that 'all the known complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion, are against the terms of reduction and soon, by extension, against social analysis itself' (1977, 129-30). These encounters evidenced a complexity that we wanted to retain rather than reduce through excising key quotations. Where other geographers' fidelity to complexity has focussed on specific pinch-point moments in interviews (Bondi, 2014), we have developed impressionistic 'portraits'. The combination of quotes, re-tellings, and in-situ reactions attempts to 'story' the experiential complexity of these women's situations by foregrounding bodily dimensions of emotionally charged intensities; the intimate dynamics with their partner; and the evaluative instabilities, where things are not necessarily framed as positive or negative (Pratt, 2012). As Rose explains, stories can be understood as the *origins* of our thinking. Whilst they attempt to resonate with something, their purpose is to 'affect, move, or incite' (2016, 135).

Prior to the interviews, these three women provided background information about their situation through a survey. Claire, in her late 30s, lives in Perth, and is the partner of a mobile worker employed in the resource sector. Theresa, in her late 40s, lives in Darwin,

and is the partner of a mobile worker also employed in the resource sector. Kate, in her late 30s, lives in Brisbane, and is the partner of a mobile worker employed in the IT sector. We share this information here to give a sense of what we knew before these encounters.

3 Impressions of encounters

i. Claire

They met doing fly-in fly-out work together. Claire says that this gives her empathy for what he's going through. "I obviously have done it so I kind of know what the life is like," she says, somewhat knowingly. Her partner does a fixed eight days away, six days home roster, which works better than his previous fourteen-day away stint. "By the twelfth day you start to go loopy. You're just losing it. You just can't really keep it together," she adds. "And it wasn't just us, everyone would have that conversation." But you must keep it together, stop things from "unravelling further". She says, "After ten years we've got to the point where we can kind of pull back just before it gets just pointless. Just stupid." She says that there are times that they'll have been "sniping at each other," disagreements at a distance. "If we're both being immature," she says, "we can usually catch ourselves just before we're going to break into a big fight, trying to make sure that we do talk about the things before we get annoyed." But time apart isn't conducive to big conversations. "He's calling because he's lonely," she says, pausing briefly. "And same thing for me."

Claire says she finds "comfort in routine". Their baby needs routine too. "We have the same kind of routine every day," she says. The dog anchors this routine, circuit routes that arc out from the house. When her partner gets home this routine frays. She says, "It gets slightly more chaotic when he's around." She likes routine, but she says that she likes it broken too. It's more difficult to plan when he's back. "The routine massively goes out." She stops, as if thinking that she might have implied that she prefers him being away. "I'm definitely dying for him to come down," she adds. "The mental load. I have these kind of stupid thought processes," she says. "If I fall and then I knock myself out, and then the baby..." She pauses again but doesn't finish this thought. I sense the edge of loneliness again. She says, more jovially, "it's nice not to have to worry," and adds, "but at the same time it introduces a different kind of mental load."

Perplexing relationships bead our conversation. Claire says at the 'mums' groups', misunderstandings are easily whipped up, riding the cusps of excitable chatter. She gets the sense that these people "probably think that the person up on site is doing whatever they want and doesn't have to worry about making dinner." She smiles, adding, "The person doing the fly-in-fly-out probably thinks the person looking after the kid is having a great old time watching *The Wiggles* and chilling out." She pauses again. "It's something I guess we struggle with a bit." Social groups are meant to reduce loneliness but Claire says that they're difficult. "I don't know what to talk to these chicks about," she says. She goes every week, but finds it "quite hard and isolating," catapulting her back to long-outgrown schoolyard angst. "This place makes me feel crappy about myself," she admits. "And then I felt bad for my daughter. Maybe I didn't love her as much as the other mums did?" But she says, "a lot of the people who seemed to gravitate towards those groups are at the end of their tether." Distancing herself further, she tells me that "the people most vocal are probably the people who are the most nuts. They just want to be annoyed. I just don't want to know that this kind of person exists."

My mind goes back to the earlier part of our conversation. I can sense something of both her desire to be part of social groups but also appreciate the quiet terror of feeling out of place. We share a nice moment about the perils of introversion which momentarily cut across some of our own lines of difference. In trying to help me understand, she says "You get sick of being in the house. It's so boring." In a daft voice, she adds, "Yeah let's stack the cups again!" She looks at me and shakes her head slowly. "You know, it's not the most mentally stimulating." A little more vehemently, she adds, "I feel like I'm finished, I'm done with it now." I ask her about their future plans. She explains that her partner is looking for work in Perth "but not in a sad desperate way!" She says, "We're going to keep doing the fly-in-fly-out thing as long as it works." She shrugs and says, "it's kind of a bit up in the air at the moment as to what's going on."

ii. Theresa

Theresa met her husband-to-be whilst he was working fly-in fly-out. She should have known what she was getting into, so he said. He did hospitality but other guys on the mine site

were earning “bucket loads”, so he became a miner, seduced by the mining boom rollercoaster. The nosedive of 2008 silenced his “bragging rights” to a \$8k monthly salary, wiped to \$350 fortnight social security and “debt up to their eyeballs”. She says, “we had to hide a lot from everybody.” The shame of selling the house and renting scorched him enough to start working overseas, where the money’s twice as high. She says you replace the washing machine, fridge, “but eventually there’s not enough cash, so you’ve got to go and get a credit card, and along comes the stumbling part, here we go again.” They’re still together by a thread after fifteen years. She says, “for us, we could’ve divorced fifty-thousand times. But for some reason when it’s right on that doorstep, one pulls the other one back.” She says that “you can’t help it, you’re hating each other and then the blame game starts. And it all goes around money. You put a hiccup in there and it’s like a pack of cards falling.”

She dropped him at the airport two months ago, facing each other, a glass wall between them. “He put his hand up to wave and he crumbled. It was the first time in our whole life together we both burst into tears.” They’d just relocated interstate, and he was leaving her to reassemble their life. “He won’t ever tell you that, ‘I never cry.’ Bullshit.” She says that she always tries to prepare for the departure a day before. “You distance yourself.” Homecoming is different. He brings the mine site back, arrogance through the roof with his “ape-man, puffed-out chest”. She tells me, once, she picked him up from the airport and “he’s, just ‘me and this boy, we’re going to knock the shit out of each other’. ‘I don’t think so!’ You’ve got to treat them like a child. Shut your trap!” She tells him “You’re speaking shit. You’re at home, snap out of it, I’ll talk to you later.” Last time he came home, the dog didn’t recognise his ocker swagger, barring him like a visitor. His parents saw someone else in him too. “Tomorrow, he’ll wake up,” Theresa reassured them. “You won’t recognise him, he’ll be back to the son you know.” She says, “He completely loses perception of reality here. When they come back they think they’ve got to pick up where they left off. You’ve already moved forward two months.”

The unspeakability is palpable here. Theresa says that the wives have a code when their partners are away. “You’re not allowed to cry; you’re not allowed to say you’re not coping, so you have to do all this mental lying.” She corrects herself: “It’s outright lying.” She says

that if they fall apart, their husbands lose their focus on the job. “They start to soften up and then the other guys might recognise, or they can’t,” she adds, after a pause. When they’re home, she says “You become their counsellor, you become everything.” But there’s so much unsaid. “I call it a ‘personal sabotage’. They’re pushing it,” she says. Hard drink and verbal attacks. “They’re begging for someone to notice.” Communication with him is “pretty nil” when he’s away. “Sometimes he’ll ring in the morning. But they’re in that arsehole work mode, so I’ve just said don’t call in the morning anymore.” She speaks fondly about a couple of friends, wives of miners. “I’ve got this one,” she says, “It shits me because I know she’s falling apart, though she will never say it.”

“The boys become so detached,” she says. “Having to go to the bank and do this, think ahead, go down and get it, and they lose all of that.” Partners lose other things. A friend’s partner also works away. “My wife thinks I’m at a resort,” he says to her. Theresa tells him to Skype her around his room. “Walk her around, you’re absolutely jet black, she can see in your face that you’re exhausted, you’re tired. Show her the crappy, dirty disgusting toilet, the crappy shower and then show her how tiny your room is.” Theresa takes a deep breath and sighs. “This last six months for us has been the worst it’s ever been.” Other things happened. Cancers, deaths, a grief-struck house of cards. She says “he was a mess. He starting to talk silly stuff” when he was home. “He says, ‘you’ll get insurance, I’m done, I’m so exhausted, I can’t keep doing this, but I can’t stop doing it because we can’t keep going.’”

iii. Kate

The choice of jumping off point to begin a story can be challenging, especially when it later transpires that the threads began unravelling long ago. Kate began her story with a dramatic change in life situation. She was made redundant two years ago. And then, shortly after, her husband quit his stable city job. I find it hard to get my head around the circumstances, but she admits that they didn’t realise their financial buffer was insufficient. So, he took up a job in a remote location, working away for three weeks, and then at home for three weeks. It was good money, she says, too much to refuse. I imagine that the work is strenuous. She says, “Obviously I haven’t been there, and I don’t know what it’s like.” She says, “In the early days there weren’t too many issues.” She says that lots of things stayed the same. She continued to do most of the childcare, even though having to do all the cooking was hard.

They continued to play computer games together at a distance, talking over the voice coms. "It's almost the same," she says. "Except I couldn't get him to make me a cup of tea."

It was her story about the children's Christmas presents that really got me. Kate lost them in her house. On Christmas Eve she couldn't remember where she'd hidden them. I imagined how such a thing might crack the delicate semblance of confidence about living on her own for weeks at a time, pounding heartbeats as the same cupboard doors were thrown open again and again. But still, without him there, there were no arguments, no petty resentments to manoeuvre around. She said, "I think realising that actually a lot of the tasks were easier when I didn't have to rely on him, or I didn't have the disappointment of him not helping out, were actually quite critical in my decision to separate." There was a silence, and I find myself in the awkwardness hollowed by this unanticipated revelation. "I'm okay with it," she says emphatically. "I mean he's still in denial. But I don't have any problem talking about it," the repetition of her sentiment seemingly working to reaffirm her decision. "In all honesty, our relationship has been going downhill for about the last eight years." She says that there was a time that things were looking up. "He certainly felt that was a reinvigorating of our relationship. Unfortunately, as soon as he went away again, the behaviours came back." She confides about how the compulsions he entertained whilst away were spinning out of control, quietly normalised up there, things that she understands as being stress-relieving. "He had a bit more freedom," she says. "He had a bit more rope to hang himself with."

Less a trigger and more a catalyst, living together apart may have intensified things. Kate refers to "the whole expectation of being present" to describe the difficulty of adjusting to life back home after three weeks of being away, and "having to take somebody else's situation and emotions into consideration." She says, unequivocally, "The first few days back is always an absolute shit show." The work away is hard. But she describes it as if he is a passenger, institutionalised even. "He doesn't have all the baggage and physical detritus that you have when you have two kids, two dogs, two cats, three chickens and twenty fish." No washing, no cooking, no cleaning. She says that she feels guilty about asking him to do things at home, as he would say "I've spent the last three weeks working my fingers to the bone, and I come home, and the house is in a state, and the kids haven't even got any clean

clothes. Sort yourself out!” Her telling oscillates between present and past tense, as if her recent change of relationship status makes the situations that she’s recounting to me teeter uneasily between something that is happening now, and something that is past. “I think he struggled to adjust from a limited controlled environment to the chaos of family life.”

Kate says that he’s still working away today. “I only initiated the separation last week.” I sense the instability of the present situation anew. “Whether we can make it work or not is a different story,” she says. She tells me that with him working away, his ability to explain away his “behaviours” has just fallen away. She says that before, “If he doesn’t want to talk about it, he walks away. But if I don’t want to talk about it, he follows me.” Working away stopped these well-worn dance routines, the power games that they created dissipated. “I think that’s something that he found really hard,” she concedes. She says that a week or so ago she needed some time away. She took the children camping for the weekend. He was confused. “It must be hard for him to be trapped in that controlled environment, knowing that stuff is going on that you can’t control.”

4 Sensing disorientation

One way of making sense of these stories would be to focus on how these women cope with their difficult circumstances through the development of practical tactics. De Certeau’s (1988) notion of the ‘tactic’ has been a productive geographical device (Mould, 2014) referring to the multiplicity of everyday practices that are undertaken in response to dominant institutional oppressive ‘strategies’, which here could be interpreted as the economic regime that these mobile worker households live with. These women are clearly striving to create a life beyond their partners’ mobility, a life that deals with distance and the challenges of intimacy. However, these three encounters challenged our analytical capacities to make sense of these women’s circumstances in terms of constructive activity alone. What drew us to these transcripts initially was that they challenged the narrative conventions of testimony being a story of forward movement (Harrison, 2010). Part of our challenge was how to make sense of the gaps that Massey (2005, 107) invokes when she describes how socio-spatial formations are made and *unmade*, ‘constantly disconnected by new arrivals ... full of holes, of disconnections.’ So, rather than just focusing on the constructive work of relation-building which could dampen ‘the intricate forms of

unevenness and *confusion*' (Williams, 1977, 129) in a situation, we want to be faithful to the tenor of these three portraits by lingering on the loss of orienting relations.

We describe three dis-orientations at play: incomprehension, confusion and disintegration. Each refers to bodily experiences where a limit is encountered that cannot be transcended, however momentarily. Incomprehension is about a limit to knowing others; confusion is about a limit to knowing how to proceed; disintegration is about a limit to knowing how to hold a situation together. Where, for Harbin (2016, 18), this 'limit' aspect of disorientation is palpably felt as 'strain', we build on this by suggesting two spatial dimensions to how limits are experienced. The first spatial dimension concerns the feeling of the distance associated with the loss of orienting relations. As Harrison (2010) argues, a body whose relational threads get severed becomes distanced and inaccessible. Where Massey's (2005) vocabulary of 'holes' and 'disconnections' provides an abstract notion of this sense of space, we suggest that losing orienting relations can be palpably felt *as* space. Incomprehension refers to the felt space between us and others; confusion refers to the felt space between a present situation and our response; and disintegration refers to the felt space between us and our control of a situation. The second spatial dimension concerns bodily responses *to* these disorientations. For each theme of disorientation, we draw out the spatial practices of home that the three women develop in response to their felt disorientations.

i. Incomprehension

Each of the three women, to different extents, draw attention to the felt space between them and others that is intensified by their household's mobile working rhythms. For Claire, the opening up of a felt space between her and her partner happens whilst they are physically apart. This is discernible through the disagreements that they have at a distance, "sniping" perhaps implying a loss of mutual empathetic understanding, which seems to intensify how home is experienced as a space of loneliness. She admits that their struggle with incomprehension is mutual, although she does not elaborate. Theresa's reflections are more striking. She suggests, for instance, that her partner returns from working away a different person, unrecognisable to his visiting parents and, perhaps more poignantly, the family dog. Significant here is her allusion to how the felt space between them becomes most apparent when they are physically co-present, rather than separated, through "his loss

of perception of (her) reality.” She describes how this is felt most sharply on his return home through emotionally charged confrontations. For Kate, the felt space of incomprehension opens up in not being able to relate to each other’s hardships. On one hand, she admits to simply not knowing what her partner’s work place is like. On the other hand, she acknowledges his difficulty in understanding her own challenges of keeping a household afloat. Yet rather than this gap manifesting in a charged confrontation or loneliness, Kate signals relief she felt at not being able to be let down or to let others down, implying that home is a calmer place in her partner’s absence.

We suggest that the bodily registration of these incomprehensions catalyses spatial practices that alter the sense of home for these women in the process. Claire’s reflections on the limits of phone communication has given rise to a realisation that time apart is not conducive to weighty conversations. We surmise that her sense of loneliness might be exacerbated by this feeling of decisions being deferred, such that home in her partner’s absence becomes experienced as stagnation. Whilst Claire admits that this feeling has compelled her to search out new relations in mothers’ groups with others who find themselves in an ostensibly similar situation, rather than connection-forming, she signals another felt space between her and others, intensifying her sense of alienation. Theresa’s spatial responses to incomprehension involve quarantining her partner when he arrives home as well as engaging in the labour of reassuring others that he will change, given time. Whilst affected by this felt space, Theresa also demonstrates a highly reflexive empathy of the incomprehension that left-behind partners have for their partner’s day-to-day toils, where a dirty, intense mining site can become misunderstood by the partner as a “holiday resort” freed from the hardships of domestic life. This empathy can be discerned in the advice that she gives others to do a “show and tell” of their worksite when at home. Yet part of Theresa’s response involves the creation of further spaces through, for instance, concealing her financial situation from others. For Kate, whilst her partner’s incomprehension of their current situation has manifested in denial, it has compelled her to take control of her situation through a separation.

To evaluate the incomprehensions that these women invoke as merely reconfigured relations overlooks how part of what makes incomprehensions distinctive is that something

is lost. A space opens up between us and others. This insight offers a rejoinder to research that has emphasised the techniques that purport to reduce the felt space between us and others in the context of various forms of mobility, such as the role of communication devices (Elliott and Urry, 2010; Pini and Mayes, 2012) or the spaces of community that aim to reduce loneliness for mobile worker partners (Sibbel, 2010). Certainly, Kate's description of the continuity of playing videogames with her partner whilst he works away echoes these insights. Yet Theresa and Claire's experiences of the felt space between them and their partners growing through phone contact is an example of how such technologies of connection might, perversely, serve to catalyse incomprehension. As such, whereas incomprehension has been understood as a felt quality of *initial* strangeness between people who are not acquainted (Jackson et al., 2017), these three portraits indicate how incomprehension can be felt in even well-known and intimate settings, where the once familiar becomes strange.

ii. Confusion

Confusion refers to the felt space between a present situation and our response. Each of these women share accounts of a profound feeling of confusion about what is happening, intended, or required, which is intensified by their mobile working lives. For Claire, we discern confusion in her reflections on present experience and future plans. This interview foregrounded the depleting dimensions of home that culminate in the strong declaration "I feel like I'm finished, I'm done with it now". Yet she proceeds by suggesting that this lifestyle will continue "as long as it works". As if recognising this disjuncture, her pause and then qualification that "it's kind of a bit up in the air at the moment as to what's going on" seems to intensify this felt space between her present situation and response. For Theresa, we discern confusion about why she and her husband are still together, given their circumstances. When describing being pushed to the brink of separation, her use of the phrase "for some reason" highlights a difficulty in grasping what might be happening. Her suggestion that mobile workers lose their capacity to carry out simple everyday activities on returning home alludes to a different form of not knowing what to do. For Kate, confusion is something that is likely being experienced more intensely now by her partner, now that she has initiated separation. This is voiced through her remark on his confusion at her taking the children away for a weekend. She also refers to her partner's confusion of how he should

respond to her now, since their previous habits of interaction had become so obdurate. Yet even for Kate, her shift in tenses between past and present suggests a confusion about how to inhabit her current situation, teetering on the edge of something undetermined, or perhaps even that they might get back together, as implied by “whether we can make it work or not is a different story”.

In terms of spatial responses, we suggest that Claire’s confusion has a productive role in offering relief to suppress the frustrations of home life monotony, perhaps the sense of endlessness exacerbated by her newborn baby. Her spatial practice may therefore involve anticipation work to help her to feel this uncertainty with greater intensity whilst at home. In anticipating that there might be an end to this routine, even if she also knows that there might not be, confusion seems to operate for Claire as a temporal tactic making it easier for her to undertake domestic labour, suppressing resentment for being contained by domestic life. The confusion that Theresa’s husband demonstrates on returning home increases the burden of care for her. As implied by ‘you become their counsellor, you become everything’, his return home changes her role to one of caregiver, which likely changes Theresa’s spatial practices markedly. On one hand we sense the encumbrance that his confusion has for her but, on the other, this encumbrance seems to provide a resolution of sorts to the confusion she voices about why they remain together. Kate’s suggestion that “in all honesty, our relationship has been going downhill for about the last eight years” suggests she may have been inhabiting a space of confusion for some time, given the length of time that she has remained with her partner in spite of this feeling. We speculate that her bodily burdens of domestic labour in his absence was likely compounded by the mental burdens of her suspicions about his “behaviours” on site. The redistributing of confusion to her partner through her decision to separate suggests that in spite of the present instability, home may have become a much more empowering space for her.

To evaluate the confusions that these women invoke as merely reconfigured relations overlooks how part of what makes confusions distinctive is that something is lost. A space opens up between the present situation and a response, where one’s capacity to proceed with conviction breaks down. This observation challenges research that understands mobile worker households through the efficacy of strategic plans that mobile worker households

make (Acedera and Yeoh, 2018). Such research indicates that households are guided by firm decision-making practices aligned with economics, health or lifestyle rationales (Hardill and Green, 2003; Walsh, 2012). Whilst such logics were present in these interviews, from a more fine-grained temporality, these women's reflections indicate that not knowing what to do and being hesitant about how to proceed is an integral but overlooked quality of bodily experience for some mobile worker households. In contrast to its occasional usage in geography, where confusion has been invoked as a fieldwork risk to be minimised (Bondi, 2014), and a strategic dimension of statist thought (Woodward, 2014), we suggest that confusion is an integral quality of intimate life. These portraits indicate that rather than an initial friction to be overcome, confusion is a pervasive felt quality with differently uplifting and depleting effects.

iii. Disintegration

Disintegration concerns the opening up of a felt space between our capacities and our control of a situation. Claire, Theresa, and Kate each refer to situations of not knowing how to hold things together. For Claire, we sense two forms of disintegration at play, one mental and the other practical. She explicitly signals the challenges of "keeping it together" whilst her partner previously worked away for longer when, she says, "you start to go loopy. You're just losing it," owing to the "mental load." When her partner returns home, she describes disintegration in terms of the chaotic 'fraying' of her routine. Unlike Claire, the subject of Theresa's reflections on disintegration are largely about her partner's "self-sabotage" with alcohol and his remarks about being exhausted, talking "silly stuff." Theresa, in contrast, expresses a need to hold things together when she talks about how 'wives' cannot "fall apart" and jeopardise their partners' "focus on the job." Yet her description of "crumbling" at the airport, and the "falling pack of cards" analogy repeated throughout the interview, indicates the limits of holding things together. Kate's description of the "shit-show" of her partner's arrival home offers a more dramatic version of Claire's difficulties. Alongside this episodic account, a longer-duration disintegration can be discerned through her descriptions of her partner's "compulsions" that were "spinning out of control" that gave him "more rope to hang himself with."

In terms of spatial responses, whilst Claire's domestic routines are a source of encumbrance in terms of the boredom she alludes to, they are also her salve. The strict routines that characterise her home life provide her with comfort and, we might surmise, possibly help to hold things together in the face of the catastrophising that she says she is susceptible to when she is home alone. Furthermore, her effort to distinguish herself from people who are "more loopy" could be read as a further tactic to hold things together. Theresa's experiences of disintegration have led her to form relationships with other women in similar situations. In spite of these support networks, however, her description of the wives' strategy of "outright lying" to themselves and each other indicates how the hardships of home life become privatised. A veneer of composure is maintained for each other and for partners but performing this veneer takes its toll, especially on homecoming. Disintegration is experienced, for instance, as Theresa witnesses her husband falling apart through alcohol consumption and verbal attacks. She demonstrates care for him, yet her description of his "self-sabotage" indicates that these practices are difficult for her to accommodate, leading her to distance herself. For Kate, her realisation that she could hold domestic life together more effectively in her partner's absence as well as acknowledgement of his "behaviours" spinning out of control outside the home have, over a long duration, resulted in a tipping point of separation.

To evaluate these disintegrations as merely reconfigured relations overlooks how part of what makes disintegration distinctive is that something is lost. A space opens up between our current capacities and our ability to hold a situation together. Research on mobile worker households has described the practices that are developed by families to make their situations work, such as through the gradual development of new routines and experimenting with new modes of relating (Elliott and Urry, 2010). Certainly, we can discern from these three portraits how these households are trying to hold things together. Yet these women also reflect on the felt space between their capacities and their control of their household situation. Not knowing exactly how to hold things together, where situations are spinning out of control to varying extents, is therefore an integral experience that characterises lives of some mobile worker households, changing their sense of home. Whereas, for geography, habit is the dynamic by which new and potentially uncomfortable forms of mobility become easier to bear through repetition (Schwanen et al., 2011), what

we witness here is how the intuitive routine bodily knowledges that control a situation can disintegrate.

5. Evaluating disorientation

Our paper has explored an increasingly common living situation where employment takes one partner away from home for a period of time. Our accounts of encounters with three female partners of mobile workers suggested that their situations evidenced not just changing relations, but also lost relations, relations becoming undone. Contrasting with a narrower definition of disorientation as the loss of locational knowledge associated with unfamiliar places, we have explained how disorientation can be expanded to refer to the loss of bearings of a different kind: in terms of incapacity for knowing others, knowing how to proceed, and knowing how to hold a situation together. With a few exceptions (Harrison, 2010, 2011), geography has been slow to acknowledge the role of such bodily experiences, focusing instead on how relations are constructed. An explicit consideration of how lives fray, hit walls, and encounter impasses, both big and small, has been less well articulated. In response, this paper has sought to develop geographical thinking by highlighting the 'ordinary insecurity' (Bondi, 2014) of disorientation.

Our analysis indicates that home can be a space of disorientation for mobile worker households. Our findings therefore build on geographical critiques of romantic understandings of home as a space of familiar orientation (Tuan, 1983, 13), aligning with others who have shown how home is a more 'complex political site' (Nowicki, 2014, 788) where diverse hardships can be experienced (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Geographers have explored the dramatic destruction of home through the highly insecure circumstances of eviction through war and resettlement projects (Nowicki, 2014). However, the stories of our mobile worker partners evidence more subtle and intimate forms of 'home unbecoming' (Baxter and Brickell 2014) that can happen through the rhythms of mobile worker households where one partner works away and then returns, changing the nature of home in the process. For these households, these oscillations of presence and absence catalyse distinctive experiences of disorientation that are intensified through repetition, rather than becoming more easily accommodated over time.

Disorientation offers an alternative way of thinking about the politics of (im)mobility for mobile worker households (Cresswell, 2010). On one hand, we discern that the mobility of male workers effectively immobilises their female partners whose domestic labour responsibilities are intensified and whose employment opportunities are curtailed. In this regard, these thoroughly co-dependent power relations replicate the highly gendered politics of these women's financial dependency on their male worker partner, and the worker's emotional dependency on their partner (Uteng and Cresswell, 2008). There are clearly macropolitical forces that give rise to these household's situations such as the institutional and governmental policy regimes that have enabled FIFO to proliferate. However, the hardships experienced by the people invoked through the portraits are not necessarily just a result of encountering a constraining body or object (cf. Merriman, 2018). Although our attention was drawn to myriad uplifting and depleting encounters between bodies, in experiences of disorientation perhaps what is encountered most forcefully are the limits of our capacities to relate to people, futures, or situations. In other words, experiences of incomprehension, confusion, and disintegration open up felt spaces in terms of our disconnects with other people, our sense of what to do next, and our control of a situation. Disorientation might therefore be conceived as an immobility of a different kind to the physical immobility that has preoccupied geographers (Adey, 2006). Rather than bodies just being physically immobilised by the mobility of others, disorientation provides a way of also admitting the kinds of 'distanced' immobility that characterises experiences of incomprehension, confusion and disintegration.

Our analytical attention to disorientation has sought to provide a counterbalance to the 'constructivist' dimensions of relation building that characterises much contemporary geographical research. Yet whilst we have drawn out multiple dimensions of disorientation, our analysis suggests a delicate interplay between the destructive and constructive elements of these women's lives. These mobile worker households are not wholly undone, descending into chaos. A loss of relations does not have to be catastrophic. As Harrison suggests, it might be about acknowledging 'types of being [that] do not know, that hesitate, ... and can be uncertain and indecisive about such things' (Harrison, 2011, 159). The practices drawn out in our analysis demonstrate how, at times, the people invoked in the portraits actively respond rather than passively flail in the face of the disorientations that

they experience. Indeed, as Harbin (2016) suggests, new possibilities for action can open up in experiences of disorientation. Yet where previous research on homemaking practices has tended to emphasise the efficacy of practical action (Dowling and Mee, 2007), the spatial practices described in our analysis might be better understood as tentative responses to encountering limits, rather than indicators of a stronger sense of agency (Zhang, 2018).

In closing, we suggest that disorientation presents ethical implications. As Harbin writes, we have responsibilities 'to create social conditions hospitable to those who are disoriented' (2016, 155). Aspects of disorientation might be alleviated by mobile work employers who could provide less-punishing rosters, and even specialist counselling for FIFO households who are experiencing difficulties. However, our development of the concept has also highlighted that incomprehension, confusion and disintegration are experiences that cannot necessarily be easily alleviated. Indeed, such experiences might at times be valued as beneficial. Admitting the significance of the loss of relations that bodies rely on to orient in the world ultimately helps to generate a more fragile understanding of our bodily competencies. As Massey writes, 'those who today worry about a sense of disorientation and a loss of control must once have felt they knew exactly where they were, and that they *had* control' (1994, 165, emphasis in original). For geographers, this might involve just the simple acknowledgement of this irreducible bodily fragility in others and ourselves; to be a little more forgiving in situations that we cannot make sense of; to acknowledge the space between you and I (Harrison, 2011).

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