

A Rural PhD Candidate and the Grace of Community

Jillian Marchant & Pauline Taylor

James Cook University

This paper is an autoethnographic analysis of my experiences as a PhD candidate resident in a rural area of South Australia: a circumstance that is not unique but certainly rare. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), research that uses an autoethnographic approach describes and analyses personal experiences in order to understand cultural experiences. My circumstance as a highly-educated beneficiary of government subsistence presents a unique research opportunity: namely, to document social policies as both a recipient and an educated investigator. The aim of this paper is to expose the robust challenges that arise when individuals, who are reliant on a meagre income, engage with academic pursuits (Brook & Michell, 2012) in the hope of speaking back some truth to power (Said, 1993). It is hoped that the autoethnographic research undertaken here provides insights into the real personal and detrimental cultural impact of existing neoliberal policy as it relates to rural residents trying to break out of welfare dependency.

Personal narratives are a form of autoethnography in which the author writes about observations of themselves and their experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). Personal narrative therefore, utilises the tenets of autobiography by selectively and retroactively documenting previous occurrence. The recollections may be recalled in hindsight as moments since perceived by the author as significantly influential in their life course. Narratives such as this are controversial, especially if unaccompanied by an analysis and reflections in terms of current literature. Without this analysis, the narrative may present as the excessive focus on self, emphasis on narration at the expense of analysis and interpretation and, exclusive reliance on personal memory as a source of data (Chang, 2008). The intention here is to overcome the difficulties associated with narrative through a reflexive approach that will establish the wider cultural, social and political implications of the story. Establishing the character, the plot and the setting of the story begins with my entry into the world.

I was born in a rural South Australian community and grew up in a farmhouse that was built by my grandfather in 1930. Due to the experiences of rural living in my formative years, I remain at ease when surrounded by the space and inhabitants traditionally associated with rural places. Many familial generations before me likewise had an affinity with the land and my parents embraced an agricultural lifestyle: possibly, because this location lends itself to inherent self-sufficiency and greater autonomy from authoritarian process. Historically, generations of farmers have been familiar with a sense of independence, facilitated by their position on the land. In the past, agrarians from different parts of the globe have presented outright rebellion against oppressive

states. In more recent times, some farming communities' continue to exercise a sense of self-determination and independence from the state through exercising resolute non-participation in government programs (Shortall, 2004). Shortall (2004) investigated rural communities in Europe and found that community members will determinedly abstain from state introduced activities if they are identified as superfluous to their needs. Perhaps my own background in a rural area may in part explain my current resolute action to better myself and my community, rather than simply becoming an outcome of government policy.

Government policy and our present day culture may be focussed on the self-development of the individual; however, my grandparents and parents lived through the challenge of fulfilling survival needs. My parents espoused that "life wasn't meant to be easy" and that our farming existence and the work that guaranteed our survival often meant suffering if we were to continue. To overcome local hardships, white colonisers such as my family, survived farming marginalised land through a combination of manual labour and highly co-operative social relationships with like-minded others. When eking out a living in sparsely populated areas, local relationships are vital to human existence. The people that surrounded me had strong beliefs therefore, about the significance of local social involvement to overcome their difficulties. White settlers in our area maintained a substantial sense of social connection to each other as equitable community members, built on the premise of individual parity simply through being residents of the same area. Members of the community insisted that collaborative efforts should continue, especially "come hell or high-water", or during an occasion that was particularly challenging. Circumstances in rural communities have led to the rise of an opinion about insiders and outsiders to the area: specifically, that the locals battle on and the rest of the State is quite happy to let them do so (Faull, 1988). Faull (1988) explores the stories of white settlers on the Far West Coast and documents the residents present sense of community and thoughts about metropolitan areas revealing strong local bonds despite the population being quite isolated. Examples of present day social connection in this community are often witnessed by the amount of time that people set aside to communicate with one another. Long discussions and storytelling are entered into with pleasure and it appeared that no one ever considers the possibility that they may be too busy to talk - despite many assertions about "the amount I have to get done before harvest starts". Research finds that this type of empathetic communication through social connections in small isolated populations assists with the challenges of everyday living and often strengthen social bonds to the point of excluding outsiders (Onyx, Edwards, & Bullen, 2007). Any outsiders who may want to engage with rural communities are often reminded through interactions that whilst small isolated populations value individuals, it is difficult to be swiftly included with the same depth as those whose social associations have been forged through years of face-to-face exchanges. As a PhD researcher in a rural area, my research outcomes are reliant on a sense of connection to my research contributors.

My association with participants is often founded on a sense of similarity in living circumstances that overcomes perceived differences ascribed by my tertiary endeavours.

Despite community held notions that both social connection and hard work are a personal and public good, this notion does not necessarily extend to the institution of education. The amount of formal learning required to be a satisfactory community member in my birth community was rudimentary and extra educational endeavours would be viewed as a frivolous personal venture that wasted precious resources rather than generating a public good. My parents were somewhat indifferent to schooling outcomes: possibly, because they viewed education as benefitting someone else far more than the students did in attendance, or as superfluous to the purposes of the community as a whole. In rural areas, this has a certain element of truth, as education and its institutions often practise community engagement as a conduit to co-opt the talents of the best and brightest individuals into city living: with little return benefit for the community of origin. Bruning, McGrew, and Cooper (2006) in their study of “town-gown” relationships and the engagement between community and academic members found that both institutions may benefit from an explicit invitation for communities to utilise the resources of academic organisations. This offer would extend the nature of community engagement in rural areas.

Despite her own lack of schooling opportunities, my mother has an affinity for language and writing and a belief handed down from her father that “if you can read, you can teach yourself anything”. It was her instruction that ultimately taught me to read in my early primary years. My father is an innovative thinker whose capacity for problem solving with an inspired approach honed by many years of invention to fulfil the complex needs arising from farm management. In their own way, my parents have left indelible marks on my thoughts about the value of learning and “taking the initiative” or using ingenuity to overcome obstacles: skills that are somewhat prized in academic settings. My own years on the farm were rather uneventful aside from various bouts of chronic illness that still plague me to this day. When I was too unwell to engage with any other activity, I had time to develop burgeoning intellectual pursuits in the form of reading an extensive collection of Reader’s Digests. My pursuit of reading would be considered leisure, but not in the sense of Plato who viewed leisure or “schole” as a time outside of work when citizens fulfilled their obligation to understand their culture (Hunnicut, 1990). Rather, the idea of leisure is now associated with rest – something that is not work. It is through this understanding that academic pursuits such as reading and writing may be construed as more leisurely than other forms of labour (Hunnicut, 1990). The possibility that I could pursue scholarly activities as an occupation did not enter my mind until much later. As I grew older, my reluctance to choose a particular occupation became a concern: I did not know what I wanted to do or “what I was going to be when I grew up”. Given my present satisfaction as a PhD candidate, it is unsurprising that I could not find a reference

point in my community for my future endeavours. The scarcity of formal academics that inhabit rural areas, the seemingly endless regulation of agricultural practice through metrocentric justifications from political and academic institutions, and the idea that city people are concerned with irrelevant notions removed from human survival, cements an adverse rural view of metropolitan and university based lifestyles. Along with a sense of pride that comes from “feeding the nation”, there may also be an opinion held by primary producers that the development espoused by academics is not related to the real world of people in rural areas – academics and their ideas are not practical. Despite this view, there were many opportunities as a child on a farm to see displays of what would be termed “learning” as individuals applied themselves to understanding metrocentric regulations, or came together to learn and transfer their knowledge to overcome the challenges of daily farming dilemmas.

When I reached the age of 15 in the third year of high school, I was legally eligible to obtain paid work. Due to my family’s established social connections in the community, I was in the privileged position of being an immediate recipient of paid work. Employment within small communities (and perhaps large communities) is not what you know, or even who you know, but who knows (and likes) you or your family. In the opinion of the community, my entering the workforce dictated that my formal education had fulfilled its purpose. I was no longer obligated to attend school to maintain my “only just pass” efforts. I duly left school and after approximately 18 months of paid work as a kitchen hand, could not see a great or secure future ahead of me. Along with the lesson about social connections and employment opportunities, I then learnt a lesson about education. I knew that if I wanted to broaden my employment opportunities to include a working future, or a lifelong career to support myself, I would need an education. It was at that time that I returned to school. It was a fortunate circumstance that I was allowed to enrol in a final year. I had a very average performance history, and had not completed many weeks of formal education that would prepare me for the rigours of study. However, I was fortunate in that my mother had social connections that included the school principal. Due to the principal’s perception that I would be an excellent candidate to complete and promote year 12 music, I was admitted to my final school year. I found the year challenging but rewarding with academic difficulties being compounded by my ongoing health issues. However, I was a dedicated student, most likely because of my experiences in paid work that allowed me to understand the importance of my education to provide a working future. My educators often extolled during my final year that “knowledge is no weight to carry around” a mantra that has remained with me to this present day. I remain grateful to the dedicated educators who were so generous in delivering rural education and for the supportive manner in which they assisted my aspiration.

Through combined efforts, I was closer to finding a career and the promise of a secure working future. Whilst reviewing my results, my music teacher was adamant that I attend university, however my understanding of work and leisure pursuits at that time designated that music may be a suitable enough pastime, but was not suitable as a fulltime occupation. Due to my success at school, my parents offered me the opportunity to undertake a business administration course to transition to a career. As is the expectation for individuals in rural areas who have such aspirations, I relocated to the metropolitan area where I was welcomed into the home of a previous resident from our community. Through this family friend, I became known to a former manager of one of the most prestigious offices in the metropolitan area. This social connection and a high demand for former rural residents in city-based employment ensured that I was immediately hired into an office offering great privileges and benefits. It did not seem unusual to secure employment through social connection in a metropolitan area, and to this day, this method has remained my primary mode of employment. Due to the other social connections I made in the office, I was also offered and accepted a second job as a kitchen hand. As I progressed with my new career for several years, the office tedium led me to reconsider re-engaging with education. University study had an instinctive fascination for me and particular courses were subsidized by the office: as I contemplated the limited options that my office would sponsor, I found one topic that held some appeal. Unfortunately, my marks were slightly low for my choice and my application was not accepted. There was however, another chance for a successful application through mature age entry. This path into a university course required that at the age of 21, I would sit an exam and the results would drive my university application. A few months before I was able to complete such a test, the economic situation of the early 1990s hit our office and many of us were made redundant. Redundancy offered a chance for me to widen my perspective on university courses. Knowing that I wanted to study, but being uncertain about my forte, I secured work in another office to fund professional vocational testing to assist with a career choice. This course of action was of great aid, providing me with a set of recommendations according to my intellect, aptitude and interests. In order to give myself the best chance of entering university I attended a course conducted by Workers Education Australia on how to succeed in the mature age entry exam for university. After sitting the exam with good results, I sided with the recommendations of the vocational test and began my university career in my chosen field. Despite academia being far removed from any known experience in my upbringing, from the moment that I stepped onto campus I immediately felt at home. Unknowingly, I had found what Ken Robinson would term “my element” a situation where aptitude and passion meet (Robinson, 2009). According to Robinson (2009), when an individual finds their element, it leads to their most fulfilling and finest work and enables their greatest possible societal bestowment. Fortunately, during our mature orientation class we were instructed by a woman who was completing her PhD and I immediately knew from her description of that journey I also wanted to complete a PhD. I believe that the feeling of familiarity I

experienced from my first day at campus, the inspiration I continue to feel when visiting any university and my modest academic progress are strong indicators that I have found my element. However, whilst I am in my element with academic circumstances, I also feel that my home is within rural communities.

Throughout my undergraduate years, I worked as a kitchen hand at nights in the employment that I had secured through connections in my former office. My life as a university student was only marred by continued ill health that seemingly waxed and waned without notice or reason. Despite health obstacles, I was fortunate to be offered a position in an impressive university in my final year. My honours year was as difficult as they are reported to be; perhaps more so as I contended with a high-risk pregnancy whilst engaged in both casual work and providing live-in care for a teenager. I completed my honours degree and within the month, successfully but with great struggle, became a parent for the first time. Wanting the social advantages from a rural community for my child, I returned to a rural area with my new baby. My care responsibilities as a parent meant my employment options became very limited and it was difficult to make social connections that would offer me employment. Australian research shows that our sense of community has moved to the workplace, a shift that is often reported as socially detrimental for the community and for individuals who are not in paid work (Pocock & Masterman-Smith, 2008). Pocock and Masterman-Smith (2008) exploration of the influence of low paid work summarises the poor social outcomes for individuals and communities as a consequence of the expanding precarious work conditions in Australia. Despite the passage of time, and now with many local, national and international connections through my academic pursuits, underemployment persists in my life, primarily due to my prioritisation of caring responsibilities. Underemployment and underrealisation of career goals is not something peculiar to my own circumstances but remains a reported challenge in the life of many other parents (Alexander, 2005; Baxter, 2013; Carney, 2009; Millar & Ridge, 2008).

I was fortunate initially, that as a parent I was able to find employment through my social connections from university. The work was labour intensive, but despite the physical demands of my work, I remained ambitious to re-engage with a career and negotiated with an employer and relocated to another rural area to fulfil a position in my chosen field. Unfortunately, after my relocation, my potential supervisor decided not to remain in a rural area and thus my position was no longer available. My observation is that it remains difficult to institute and retain professionals in rural Australia and that likewise a hospitable space for professionals is largely absent in these areas. In answer to this dilemma, imaginative and inspired individuals located in overseas rural areas have created environments that offer local inhabitants the chance to become qualified professionals rather than attempting to motivate qualified individuals to relocate. The benefits of

such programs are reviewed by; the University Collaborations in Regional Development Spaces (2012) citing the ongoing success of tertiary courses being delivered in the sparsely populated areas of Norway; Amudavi et al. (2010) who explore the benefits of an agricultural PhD program delivered in a rural community and; Vaughan (1985) who investigated the outcomes for rural areas from the establishment of a community college. These types of initiative are yet to be fully explored as an option in the future of Australian rural communities and I anticipate that my current research may be a beginning in endeavours to generate options for greater engagement with tertiary learning.

Whilst fulfilling my caring responsibilities, the extent of my tertiary qualifications became known to some members of the community and I was fortunate to receive an invitation to volunteer with a local organisation. After witnessing the benefit of my knowledge within a local establishment, I identified significant knowledge gaps in communities that arises from low educational attainments that are a hallmark in many rural areas (Welch, Helme, & Lamb, 2007). In this study Welch et al. (2007) found that a major challenge is to expand provision of education in communities where families lack a history and experience with the highest levels of learning. I knew that furthering my education would be of significant community benefit and believe that to engage with such an undertaking would be pointless if others in my social network could not be advantaged by my knowledge. I decided to complete one of the few master's degrees that were available off campus. During my volunteering and master's degree I became somewhat of a translator of city-based notions into rural communities, interpreting various documents generated by government departments anticipated to govern aspects of our community. The translation of city-based regulations and the work of qualified professionals in rural areas working to metropolitan benchmarks are often onerous at best (Mellow, 2005). One difficulty for workers in rural communities is to convey the assurance that privacy and confidentiality will be upheld despite the high visibility of community members and the dense social interactions that quickly transmit information about the activities of others. Due to research traditionally relying on metropolitan individuals and contexts, many research opportunities are overlooked that would include understanding the complicated intermeshed personal and professional relationships in sparsely populated areas. Such research would be backed by social policy that recognises the multifaceted influence of rural contexts.

The monotony and lack of intellectual challenge associated with paid manual labour that is abundant in our community allowed me to spend time deep in thought about my community and refine ideas for essays and assignments. However, this cannot substitute for the act of writing that forces me to think at a more profound level than thinking alone. Despite my qualifications, I was unsuccessful with applications for local work, and eventually became aware of an explanation for

my endless lack of success when an employer known to me queried the absence of my application, and found that it was “lost” by the new state instituted employment service provider. I became aware that my applications were not be received by employers after a chance encounter with this local employer who queried why I had not applied for the position advertised as she stated that I would be a likely candidate. Employment service providers would not forward my applications, as they would not receive an income from a successful employment outcome for me as a non-client of their services. Unsurprisingly many employers in our local community now avoid such providers and their unemployed clients.

Juggling the balance between the roles of parent, student, worker and community member for a decade without respite is not without significant cost. The health problems that had plagued me on and off for most of my life revealed themselves as a full blown chronic illness grounded in a rather faulty set of genes. With great respect for others that struggle with their own health challenges, I do not seek to elevate my chronic illness above the suffering of others. I simply hope that it be understood in terms of managing the broad difficulties that all individuals in this situation experience including; fatigue, pain and the fragile mental health that is part of coping with these ongoing symptoms. My doctor steadfastly recommended that I resign from work; however, I remained in my employment duties for another 18 months. At that time, the contract for one job was given to another business, and after many months of speculation, my other workplace was sold. After my loss of employment, I was delighted to witness my children’s heightened educational and community achievements. Despite my underemployment and debilitated condition they suddenly both began to flourish; a circumstance that was facilitated by both by my unemployment and a community that supported their endeavours. I can speculate that this was a paradoxical response to overcompensate for our dire circumstances, but believe it may be more likely that the children’s anxieties about the risk associated with my employment were considerably relieved, thus enhancing their wellbeing (Ridge, 2007). Research investigating the wellbeing of children with mothers in precarious employment demonstrates that risky and unstable work is detrimental to children as they understand and are influenced by the strain it causes the caregiver (Ridge, 2007). Reflecting on my unemployed state led me to again consider my education. I had recently completed my master’s degree, which facilitated benefits to my community through volunteer work. I had experienced that knowledge from one individual can often be quickly disseminated in areas that have a high amount of social interactions among local individuals and facilitate rapid community learning. This was certainly the case in my community as I relayed the learning to local professionals who then discussed the ideas at a regional level. In the same manner, I hoped that a PhD would offer my community and me a chance to improve local circumstances and start to meet the challenges of our uncertain futures. Some rural communities are just beginning to experience a knowledge economy that includes resident researchers who may

bolster their flagging primary production. With this in mind, I began the literature search, which would frame my research proposal. In framing the proposal, I had taken the advice of an educated friend who recommended to me that I write about what I know. With this in mind, I sought to undertake a thesis that would enlist the contributions of, and offer reasonable hope, to people in similar situations to myself. I also thought it best to undertake a research methods course to update my skills. To my great fortune, a response was forthcoming from a Director of Research: an individual who I have come to know as both an exceptional human being and experienced academic. The Director enquired about my previous achievements and requested to see my proposal, which I duly submitted. As even greater fortune would have it, the Director perused my proposal and informed me that I was a suitable candidate to enrol in a PhD under their advisement. I am still in awe that this great privilege is bestowed upon me and do not want to appear dismissive of the opportunity that I have been afforded. Unbeknown to me, this chance to belong to such a learned community would keep me from despairing about the many difficulties that have since arisen in my circumstances.

An inkling of what was to come appeared when my government subsistence was abruptly suspended. On enquiry, it was established that due to an administrative error by Centrelink, an onus was now placed on me to make amends for a scenario that imaginatively considered me as audaciously non-compliant. To ensure that my subsistence would continue I was deemed “eligible” to undertake a work for the dole program to offer recompense to society for my supposed lack of enthusiasm for work. It is a difficult tension in work for the dole programs to be purported as both offering opportunities to, and coercing compliance from the recipients. The “choice” was to continue my PhD without an income or report for duty. I considered the wellbeing of my dependents and decided that I would comply as directed in order to secure subsistence and retain our housing. My resume was reviewed by a nationally contracted work for the dole co-ordinator. The co-ordinator became hostile and dismissive of my PhD study, accusing me of “avoiding work”. I am certain that anyone undertaking, or is in the position of holding a PhD would be able to testify as to how much “work” is entailed in securing completion. The reaction of the government-contracted work for the dole co-ordinator to my candidature provides insight into what the state defines as “work”. Co-ordinators, whilst not held accountable in the same way as public servants, are none-the-less obligated, by contract, to realise employment outcomes in line with the principles of state objectives. Employment agency objectives secured by employees are ultimately backed by a state that prescribes their directives and funds them accordingly. My academic ambitions meant that it was unlikely that the agency would be paid for an employment outcome and thus the co-ordinator would not receive a \$1000 bonus. My work for the dole program was specifically chosen by the government contractor to involve intensive manual labour. When one potential “host organisation” stated that they had administrative work available for me to enrich and extend my

academic qualifications, the co-ordinator contacted another organisation specifically to secure a program that solely consisted of manual labouring. Such action is justified as diversifying my skills. However, it may also indicate that the “opportunity” of these programs is in fact a chance for co-ordinators to penalise individuals for engaging with academic labour.

After exhausting all avenues of recourse, I commenced the program, shovelling for almost 6 months until I was inevitably injured. The employment services contractor was finally paid for a successful outcome of my “case” as my injured medical state has omitted me from the statistical number of “work shy”. Despite reassurance before I began the program, medical expenses related to work for the dole activities are not automatically covered by any type of insurance and, due to my income levels, my injury remains untreated. It would appear that the only accountability practised by such services is that for which they receive financial reward and, in my experience, the most lucrative path as an employment service provider is to place “clients” in either paid or unpaid manual work. Three months after incurring the injury, my medical certificates were overlooked in the system and I was mandated to return to the government contractor so that they may “get me back to work”. This example demonstrates how outsourcing of government employment services to private contractors diminishes the obligations and accountability of the state to its citizens. Clearly, my identity as a PhD candidate resists the consensus of the state about what constitutes “work”, which clearly does not entail academic labour, also demonstrating that academic pursuits are understood by policymakers and co-ordinators to reflect a life of “non-work” rather than one of legitimate labour. Academic work is clearly not seen as a valid occupation. This statement is reinforced by my experience of government policy to this very day, which does not acknowledge my PhD as a suitable activity to secure employment. My case continues to be monitored as if my PhD and the activities it involves do not exist or, worse, are a deliberately employed tactic of work avoidance on my part. A primary concern of the nationally appointed employment consultant trying to return me to work was that “my master’s degree will expire while I am taking so long to do my ‘diploma’ ”. This perceived lack of application has resulted in forced attendance at a vocational development workshop: a 12-hour duty to explore my options for employment.

My position is not dissimilar to other underemployed Australian individuals who were recently queried about their ideas of what constituted work reported that the concept is significantly varied (Ferguson, 2013). Furthermore, many individuals reported that government interventions, such as funding employment service providers to assist individuals with finding work and work for the dole programs are often unhelpful (Ferguson, 2013). It may be suggested that the motivations for employment programs are to soothe media frenzies about “dole bludgers”, as they conveniently commodify the miserable circumstances of individuals so that public moneys are returned to the pockets of privileged contractors. In order to explore this interpretation, it would be interesting to

research the administrating of employment services in terms of the beneficial consequences for contractors and their employees in comparison to the outcomes for the wellbeing of “clients”. Instead of this assessment, nebulous performance indicators continue to allow agencies to homogenise, control, constrain and manipulate the lives and aspirations of welfare recipients for financial gain. The contractor’s concerns about their key performance indicators that assist their funding, and the perception that a PhD is not a suitable employment activity, indicate that in the near future it is an expectation, as recipient of government subsistence, that I undertake another fulltime work for the dole program. My participation in this work for the dole program is recommended by a locally situated government representative as a better way to become employed in lieu of the “choice” to continue with the last year of my candidature and receive scholarship payments. Interestingly, this is despite research that indicates that work for the dole programs disadvantage job seekers in gaining employment (Borland & Tseng, 2004; Ziguras, 2004). Borland and Tseng (2004) and Ziguras (2004) investigations cite stigma and time poor scenarios for the recipients of work for the dole programs that interfere with their successful job seeking.

Given the state’s impetus that the employment of individuals is a national priority, it is curious that in my many years of manual labour, the state did not interfere and coerce me, as a mature worker, to move into a more intellectual realm as a more long-term sustainable employment option. If this practice were to come to fruition it would emphasise academic or even non-manual labour in the same manner as manual labour and may have included mandated programs to explore my intellectual capacity and “knowledge career” rather than the existing emphasis on the shorter work life that consists of manual labour. In contrast, my experiences demonstrate that existing employment and education policy and practice constrain education opportunities for rural residents in their own communities. One way of viewing this experience is that the lack of strategy for older workers engaged in manual labour in rural areas is overlooked by state intervention because their work is viewed as a public good. In contrast, my experience indicates that a tertiary education is viewed more as a personal good that requires redirection to more socially beneficial “work”. This view resonates with the current government’s position and emphasis regarding funding of higher education and student contributions (Neighbour, 2014), which demonstrably sees a tertiary education as solely for individual benefit. This stance sits in opposition to international literature that documents the social benefits emerging from academic institutions and knowledge work in rural communities (Amudavi et al., 2010; University Collaborations in Regional Development Spaces, 2012; Vaughan, 1985). The social advantages of educational knowledge may be arguably augmented in rural communities as the characteristic dense social interactions among individuals broadly and expediently disseminates novel information.

Within Australia, both government agencies and employment service providers seem to view the role of education purely in terms of definitive and perhaps low-level vocational outcomes and not as something that could and should be encouraged in rural communities. Further, should rural residents demonstrate a capacity and inclination or aspire to knowledge work this is to be actively discouraged. This approach contributes to the social deterioration of rural communities as a lack of local community members without broad knowledge reinforces their marginalised position. This is in contrast to inhabitants securing a developed position as local knowledge holders that can offer a range of skills to assist their futures. Without this development, a situation is created in which outside “experts” are still relied upon to provide “knowledge” and answers to local dilemmas: a circumstance that often generates greater problems through a reliance on solutions based on ill-fitting metrocentric understandings of rural areas. It is disturbing, in the face of these challenges that state institutions purport that manual labour remains the highest possible public good that can be offered by a low-income welfare recipient, resident in a rural area. Further, my personal account suggests that rural residents who are welfare recipients are regarded as a homogenous group of unproductive citizens by government-commissioned authorities, and that any attempt at individualism or agency is seen as something to be controlled or, in my case, punished.

This autoethnographic account of my experiences as a PhD candidate reflects poorly on existing social policies for individuals reliant on welfare payments from government agencies, and calls up key questions in the realm of social policy and interventions, particularly as they relate to the concept of “work”. My difference as an aspiring knowledge worker in a rural community seems to confront the administrators of a system that expects low-income individuals residing in rural areas to be and remain as manual workers. Due to my present circumstances, I am in a position to articulate these experiences and present these questions to a wider audience so that the personal and social implications may be reflected upon. It is worthwhile to note that this avenue to voice existing concerns is not something that is necessarily available to my low-income peers. Exploring my account as a resident in a rural context allows me to demonstrate my employment and education history and show how both activities have shaped my life. This narrative also tells of my experiences and the personal and social consequences of engaging with the “unemployment industry” and the notions of “work” constructed under neoliberal social policy. It shows some contrast in the historical flexibility and current rigidity of policy as it continues to impact on my experiences and aspirations. It also furthers knowledge on how the same policies may constrain the ambitions of many rural inhabitants to the ultimate detriment of their communities. Whilst my future and the future of my community under existing state social policies is uncertain, I am delighted to report that I remain privileged to have the graceful backing of both my rural and academic communities who support my combined identity as a member who happens to be a PhD Candidate. Unlike the neoliberal “unemployment industry”, my geographic and spiritual

communities appreciate and contribute, as well as benefit from, the personal and social significance of my academic labours.

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