

Comfort zone: how medical and allied health students perceive their connection with place

Helen Tolhurst, Gaynor Heading, University of Newcastle

FACILITATOR: Moving straight on to the background, I'm just going to set the scene for you and then I'm going to hand over to Helen. I've worked with Helen on this research as a sociologist in a small department of general practice and so we've been working with staff and she'll present the results. So in terms of the background, I'm sure you all know that many people end up in rural practice who don't have a rural practice background. So in terms of their location, we're most interested in the link between origin and where they end up in terms of practice. So I won't bother with this detail.

Pretty much we're interested in exploring the issues surrounding choice, so we've interviewed lots of students surrounding the choices and the complexity that interplay regarding their final choice of practice. So it's a qualitative piece of research. It's part of Helen's post-doctoral research, and this data's been collected over three years. 80-odd focus groups have been held with a variety of students, and recently there was an opportunity to collect some Canadian data when Helen had a placement there. Also, lots of interviews with Italian medical students, and the qualitative methods used were standard methods.

For example, a topic guide was used for the focus groups, and semi-structured interviews for that data for the interviews. The coding was done using the program N6, and we went beyond a traditional thematic analysis, we actually have based this research on a grounded theory approach. I don't know whether you're familiar with grounded theory, but the analysis is built into the data collection. The most important difference between grounded theory and thematic analysis is that we ended up doing theoretical sampling, whereas part of the development of the conceptual framework involved going out and testing how rigorous that framework was by collecting more data and testing it.

And these are some of the techniques used in grounded theory. So that's my rapid introduction. I'm handing over to Helen, because we're just going to focus on the yellow part today. There's a lot of other research that seemed unrelated to this, but mostly we're talking about the relationship between place and self.

HELEN TOLHURST: So just very briefly, what we're talking about today is this yellow part, and that's part of a much larger conceptual framework. And we're looking at the relationship between the person and place. But it's really important that in their decision to enter rural practice, people really consider the other issues which is significant others. In fact, I've found that's the most important thing to most people. Leisure or – I'm still trying to find exactly the right word for that little bubble, and their own work. But we're only focusing on the relationship with place. So, from the data, I've analysed what the meaning of place is, and I've broken it down into physical environment, social environment, cultural environment and accessibility.

With the physical environment we've considered climate, landscape, urban structures and infrastructure, like roads and that sort of thing. With physical environment there's a really interesting thing that the students that are interested in rural practice, whether they come from a rural or an urban background, talk a lot about a connection with the physical environment. So these are a few quotes from the students. I really like the one where the student says, "The

sky at night, I absolutely loved the fact that you could see the stars, the air is much clearer, and you can smell the earth and the air”.

So that came through really strongly from the students interested in a rural practice, whereas the ones interested in urban practice didn't talk about any connection with the physical environment much at all. Whereas they tended to talk very much more about convenience, you know, and the fact that things were open at night and, you know, that you could go and see a movie or go to a restaurant. They also talked about having a lot of the sort of peace and quiet of the country as opposed to the noise in the city. This first student, “We are so used to having the background noise and hustle and bustle of the people in the streets, 5 o'clock”, in the inner city suburb he lives, “we find it dead quiet”.

He'd come from a very busy Asian city, and he really contrasts with the next student, who's talking about that she was a rural background student and she very much didn't like the noise and the hustle and bustle in the city.

In the social environment, we broke that down into community, as in traditional community based on space, relationships within the community and relationships between the person and the community. I don't know how many times I've heard from students, when they're talking about rural towns, that they say 'everyone knows everyone'. I've heard that from so many different students.

And the other thing that they talk about is being able to walk down the street and seeing someone you know. They just say it again and again. And that's the thing that they either like or don't like about the rural environment. The ones that want to go to a rural area are very keen on the fact that you walk down the street and see someone you know. These are students who didn't want to go to a rural area. This is a Canadian medical student, “You go to Pincher Creek, you go to the local bar or restaurant, everything stops and they all look at you”. So, you know, or “you do anything wrong, anything silly, everyone knows straight away”.

So they preferred the anonymity of a larger city.

And then there was the formality versus informality. I really love this one, this was a rural background student, “You can just pop around. In the city you've almost got to make appointments with your friends to catch up and have coffee and stuff with them”. And, you know, so again there was that preference for the informality, you could just drop around anywhere. And then there was the fast versus slow, and the people who preferred the rural environment very much didn't like the traffic and the road rage and the busyness of the city, and that people are so stressed and in so much of a hurry.

We then looked also at – one of the other things that came out of this study was cultural environment, the values and norms of the community, and shared ways of seeing, believing and behaving. And I thought this was beautiful, where one of the students talked about 'meat and potatoes'. The medium sized country town where she came from is not at all multicultural, it's one of the most rednecked places I've ever come across for such a large town. It's still very, very meat and potatoes kind of little town'. So, you know, that came through, that there were some rural areas that the students thought were particularly conservative.

Some of the students had experienced racism in country towns. This is a student saying that, “My wife's Sri Lankan, we've been to the country to visit my family and she gets some very strange looks, but when I was with her I thought, 'These people are treating us like we were some sort of alien or something'”. And then there's another anecdote from an Aboriginal medical student who also experienced racism in a country town. There were also gender issues. There was a gay – this is a gay medical student, gay male medical student, “I can't see myself

living” – he was actually a rural background student, “I can’t see myself living in a rural community as a gay man. In the city, people’s attitudes are more accepting than they are here”, in the rural town he was. And another nursing student was talking about, she’d been in remote communities and she thought that being a female was a little bit hard because it’s ‘a very male dominated community’.

Then the issue of accessibility. “There’s a radius where I’d feel comfortable, and then where I would start to feel cut off”, so some of the students almost described the radius in which they’d feel comfortable. And they were talking about access to family and friends, artistic and sporting events, and on the side of access, not wanting to be in the city was affordable housing.

A lot of them talked about housing being more affordable in a rural area than in the city.

They talked about accessibility in terms of distance, travelling time and cost, for example, and when they were talking about accessibility, family, friends and recreational activities, you know, for example, that they’d really want to – they’re used to going to movie theatres and cafes. And one of the students, this dietetic student, talked about when she was in a country town, how limited what she could do was. And it wasn’t just distance that they talked about accessibility, it was time and money.

So that one of the students who’d been out to Broken Hill said, “From Broken Hill it was at least a grand to get home in a hurry, and two days’ drive as opposed to a day, and driving hours across the middle of nowhere”. So it was the time and money as well.

Now, one of the concepts that we thought emerged was the concept of comfort zone, that the students had places where they would feel comfortable and for which they had an affinity. And this comfort zone could encompass all these dimensions of space, of place, but some dimensions of place were more important to some people than others. You know, there was a bit of an individual thing about what dimensions were really important.

The geographical aspects of comfort zone were the size of the town or the city, the area, and the distance from various places. Size of the town or the city, there were students, for example, this one, “I never want to go to Sydney, I never want to go to any sort of capital, I would just not survive. I’d get munched up and spat out at the other end in some ugly form”. And then there were students that, for example, the one down the bottom, “The thing I get scared about is if I really went to a really small town I’d be scared I’d run out of things to do because the further you go inland the less population there is”. So there were students at both extremes of where they’d feel comfortable.

I thought it was interesting that some felt their comfort zone encompassed a State, particularly the Queenslanders. I didn’t interview any Western Australians, I’d be interested to see whether they felt the same way, but the Queenslanders particularly, it didn’t matter how far away it was from Brisbane, say where they came from, but it was being in Queensland that really mattered to them. And I thought that was interesting.

Then there was the issue of distance, and some of them wanted to be a certain distance away from particular things. It might be like their family, their parents, or it might have been like – this girl had been a professional musician and she said, “It’s going to be quite important to still be involved in the music scene, I’ve always done it, and I can’t imagine being in a place where I couldn’t go and listen to someone play”.

Now, how did the students develop their comfort zone? It was basically on the basis of experience. And this could be at a huge range of different ages, either childhood, adolescence, adulthood, they could have had short term or long term experience, and sometimes it was even second-hand experience, what they’d heard from people. It wasn’t that they’d been there, but

they thought they'd feel good in this place because they'd heard about it. Some people had a very narrow comfort zone and would only consider, for example, being in a city. There was one lass who would only consider being in a town under 5000 people, so that there was sort of quite a range of what was comfort zone for them.

Some of them had a very strong relationship with place. This is a student who'd come from a rural area, she was in her 40s, and I said to her, "Is there anything might change your mind about where you're going to go?" And she said, "Not a bloke, not going to make me stay in the city, I can tell you right now. If he's not interested in moving to the country then, well, see you later, I think I'll be right. I cannot live in the city, partner or no partner. I can't live down in the city". So she was sort of an extreme case, she had a very strong relationship with place. And most people, I don't think had that sort of strong relationship with place.

This other – the second one there, I think is another very interesting student. She's an Aboriginal student, has come from a very small town, and she said, "When I go back home that will have to be the last place I'm planning to move because I'll never be able to sever the ties, the emotional ties again, and move away". But they were rather unusual. Most people did not have that strength of connection with a particular place.

Now, the interesting thing about comfort zone is that it's dynamic and can be changed by new experience, it can be flexible or fixed, and some students, especially the younger ones, actually seek experience outside their comfort zone.

Now, some of them talk about themselves, like this dietetic student, as being "from the city and not a country girl". And one of the reasons why I looked a dietetic students is that overall with dietetics there's an excess of dietitians in Australia and it's hard for them to find jobs. But this girl was saying, even if there was a job in the country she wouldn't move there.

Now, how can comfort zone be changed? It can broaden or it can narrow. And experience, including student placements, visits such as holidays, and even the move to a regional university had changed some of the students' comfort zone. And these are examples of students whose comfort zone had been changed by, you know, moving to a – or spending time in a rural area.

So how can we – this is a really beautiful one. I love this one. This was an Asian – a young Asian man, "Having come from the city, despite having gone to a large" – this particular large country town before, "I thought they would all be wearing flannies, and you know, the main street has two Macca's, it's got Coles, it has all the amenities, so there'll be a definite shift in my thinking about what the country" – he'd gone to this rural town to do his internship.

So how can we use this concept of comfort zone in developing rural workforce recruitment strategy? Going back to the original diagram, I've only talked about comfort zone in relation to the students, but we also need to remember that there's significant others, their partners have comfort zone too, and that's going to have a huge influence on what the students actually do.

So we need to just remember that this is, you know, a really good way of thinking about it, but it's in the context of a bigger conceptual framework. So the rural recruitment strategies relating to the concept of place and comfort zone, we're already doing things to recruit students who have a strong relationship with country place. Maybe we need to think about recruiting students, and I don't know quite how you'd go about this, but I mean, I've found that some students have a flexible comfort zone and others don't. You know, maybe we need to think a bit more about that, whose comfort zone is flexible.

We need to provide positive experience to change comfort zone, which we're already doing, but in fact, I think it's important that one of the things I found that negative experience was

worse than no experience at all, and you could narrow someone's comfort zone by them having a negative experience. I also think it's important that the students have a variety of rural experiences because they, you know, their comfort zone might shift in different ways according to what they're exposed to. And it may be possible to make changes in place so that maybe they get more welcome and support from the community so that they're going to feel more comfortable in that community. And that's all.

PRESENTERS

Helen Tolhurst was awarded the first Rural NHMRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in Australia in 2002 and works as Research Fellow at the University of Newcastle and in part-time general practice at Maitland. She has conducted several projects, including research on emergency services in rural areas, violence against GPs and women in rural practice. The paper to be presented at this conference discusses research undertaken as part of her NHMRC postdoctoral fellowship research.

Gaynor Heading is a medical sociologist and Research Academic, Faculty of Health, the University of Newcastle. Gaynor was awarded a PhD in Medicine in the mid 1990s. She has more than 10 years' experience working in the general practice primary health care environment, including work with Divisions of General Practice and rural workforce agencies. Gaynor has undertaken research and evaluation consultancies in a number of areas, including heart failure, health service delivery and cultural planning. She is currently directing the PHCRED Program and is undertaking research on postnatal depression and hormone replacement therapy.