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Objectivity, Subjectivity and Contextuality: Approaches to the Study of Rural Change in Western Australia and Elsewhere

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Abstract

This article explores the importance of context as an intervening variable between the subjective researcher and the objective world(s) in which they operate. It considers both the dynamic intellectual context of the shifting and colliding empiricist, positivist, humanistic and structuralist paradigms of Human Geography from the mid twentieth century to the present and the academically disturbing organisational context of a university system which has become increasingly economistic, managerialist and neoliberal over the same time period. It describes the paradigmatic shifts in the discipline, in part through the lens of the changes made to successive editions of the classic texts, *Geography and Geographers* by Ronald J. Johnston and *Political Geography* by Peter J. Taylor. A specific consideration of the neoliberalisation of academia focuses on the more subjective topic of the stress and precarity experienced by individual academics. The author then outlines how these changing contexts have impacted on his own research career, using an autobiographical approach.

Keywords: Geography, paradigm shift, neoliberal university, autobiography, rural change.

Resum: *Objectivitat, subjectivitat i contextualitat: aproximacions a l'estudi del canvi rural a Austràlia Occidental i a d'altres llocs*

Aquest article explora la importància del context com a variable que intervé entre l'investigador subjectiu i el (els) món(s) objectiu(s) en què opera. Considera tant el context intel·lectual dinàmic dels paradigmes canviants, i en conflicte, empirista, positivista, humanista i estructuralista de la Geografia humana, d'ençà mitjan segle xx fins al present, com el context organitzatiu acadèmicament pertorbador d'un sistema universitari que ha esdevingut cada vegada més economicista, gerencialista i neoliberal durant el mateix període de temps. S'hi descriuen els canvis de paradigma en la disciplina, en part a través de la lent de les modificacions introduïdes en les successives edicions dels textos clàssics

Geografia i geògrafs, de Ronald J. Johnston, i *Geografia política*, de Peter J. Taylor. Una consideració específica sobre la neoliberalització de l'acadèmica se centra en el tema més subjectiu de l'estrès i la precarietat experimentats pels acadèmics i les acadèmiques. Tot seguit, l'autor descriu com aquests contextos canviants han impactat en la seva pròpia carrera de recerca, tot utilitzant un enfocament autobiogràfic.

Paraules clau: Geografia, canvi de paradigma, universitat neoliberal, autobiografia, canvi rural.

Resumen: ***Objetividad, subjetividad y contextualidad: aproximaciones al estudio del cambio rural en Australia Occidental y en otros lugares***

Este artículo explora la importancia del contexto como variable que interviene entre el investigador subjetivo y el (los) mundo(s) objetivo(s) en el (los) que opera. Considera tanto el contexto intelectual dinámico de los paradigmas cambiantes, y en conflicto, empirista, positivista, humanista y estructuralista de la Geografía humana, desde mediados del siglo xx hasta el presente, como el contexto organizativo académicamente perturbador de un sistema universitario que se ha vuelto cada vez más economicista, gerencialista y neoliberal durante el mismo período de tiempo. Se describen los cambios de paradigma en la disciplina, en parte a través de la lente de las modificaciones introducidas en las sucesivas ediciones de los textos clásicos *Geografía y geógrafos*, de Ronald J. Johnston, y *Geografía política*, de Peter J. Taylor. Una consideración específica acerca de la neoliberalización de la academia se centra en el tema más subjetivo del estrés y la precariedad experimentados por los académicos y las académicas. A continuación, el autor describe cómo estos contextos cambiantes han impactado en su propia carrera de investigación, utilizando un enfoque autobiográfico.

Palabras clave: Geografía, cambio de paradigma, universidad neoliberal, autobiografía, cambio rural.

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1. Introduction

Hoefle (2022), as part of a wide and philosophical discussion of objectivity and subjectivity in academic enquiry, proposed a framework by which to identify and, ideally, anticipate and possibly compensate for researcher bias. Following Latour (2013), he enumerated the researcher's age, gender, class, nationality, locational and academic backgrounds, and political and religious leanings as factors which have the potential to impact upon their research endeavours. Hoefle's (2022) consideration of this issue encompassed a wide range of the social sciences and reached back to the eighteenth century works of Immanuel Kant. He then used his own studies of change in a Brazilian rural area to illustrate and interrogate the inevitable biases present in an example of his own research. This contribution is more limited in intellectual and

temporal scope. It focuses on the single (sub)discipline of Human Geography over little more than the last half century. Nevertheless, it seeks to build on Hoefle's (2022) article through further consideration of the influences of the personal, institutional, disciplinary and sociopolitical contexts within which any academic undertakes research over the course of their career. Hoefle (2022, p. 78) concedes that he "offered (him)self up as a scapegoat" by examining the biases inherent in one of his own research projects on rural change. I will scapegoat myself, perhaps to a greater extent, by considering the changing contexts within which my own research in Rural Geography has been conducted from the 1960s onwards.

My thoughts on the importance of contextuality have, in part, been prompted by a recent series of papers in *GeoJournal* (Johnston, 2022; Mamadouh, 2022; McConnell, 2022; Sidaway *et al*., 2022; Taylor, 2022). These arose from a panel session at the 2019 Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) conference. This gathering considered the publication and regular updating and republication of two of the discipline's classic texts, *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography Since 1945* (Johnston, 1979) and *Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State and Locality* (Taylor, 1985). The writers of the commentaries on these volumes and the rejoinders by the original authors explore both their own and these texts' "meandering route through the development of geographic thought" (Sidaway *et al*., 2022, p. 347) since the original publication of these volumes. The conference session, and the resultant collection of papers, was aptly titled "(t)hrough troubled times", a designation that applied both to the global disruptions wrought, over this period, by neoliberal economics, identity politics, an information technology revolution and climate change and to the impacts of all these changes on academia in general and the discipline of Human Geography in particular. As the theme issue demonstrates, these two volumes, in their various iterations, have played a large part in marking out the meandering routes of the teaching, research and thinking of many human geographers over recent decades.

Certainly, these texts, and the disciplinary outputs from which they draw their interpretations, constitute one context which has refined and redirected my own biases as a researcher over the period that they have been in print. Indeed, the various shifts in disciplinary orientation reflected therein have caused me to alter the foci, purposes and methods (and therefore the biases) of my own research over the course of my career. Hoefle (2022) also acknowledges shifts of this type. In his fig. 3 (Hoefle, 2022, p. 73), he identifies his theoretical perspective as Political Ecology, but he subsequently observes (pp. 78-79) how this perspective has changed over the decades. In noting this change, he acknowledges that, just as our aspirations to a degree of objectivity in our research are impacted by changes in the discipline and in the world(s) that we inhabit, so do our subjective perspectives change as we move through our lives and our research careers.

In Jones (2002a), I used the pre-Socratic philosophers' conundrum of whether a man [*sic*] can step into the same river twice to interrogate a return to my doctoral research site more than twenty years on. Neither the man nor the river will be the same after the passage of the intervening decades. As 'the man', my intellectual framework had been changed, in large part, by changes in my discipline. As 'the river', my study area had been changed by a range of social, economic and political forces. The research questions that I asked and the research methods that I used on my second visit had therefore to be modified accordingly. Both this experience and the reflections of Johnston (2022) and Taylor (2022) on the evolution of their enduring publications underline the fact that a valuable perspective on contextuality is provided by the role of autobiography in Geography. This issue was first raised in the International Dialogue Project (Buttimer and Hägerstrand, 1980; Buttimer, 1983, 1987) and its importance to the discipline was recently acknowledged in (another) collection of papers, in *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift* (Holt-Jensen, 2019; Johnston, 2019; van Meeteren, 2019).

In the remaining sections of this paper, I will outline some of the conceptual and methodological shifts in Human Geography over recent decades in order to identify how these external, and, to some degree, objective changes have provided a context to which recent and contemporary human geographers have felt themselves required to respond. A second external/objective context to be considered here is the similarly recent shift in the nature of university operations from an elite to a mass education model and from a collegial to a managerial and neoliberal basis of operation (Berg *et al*., 2016; Loher and Strasser, 2019). I will then consider some of the more immediate influences impacting on my own research career as a result of my disciplinary, institutional and locational contexts. In doing so, I seek to provide a personal/subjective example of how these external/objective factors constrain any academics' research activities and approaches. I will, in Hoefle's (2022) terms, scapegoat myself by providing an autobiographical account of my own research on rural change in the light of these contextual influences.

2. A Changing Discipline

Bird (1973, p. 201, emphasis in the original) contended that "the most heavily researched definition ever likely to be coined for geography is, of course Hartshorne's sixteen words: *the study that seeks to provide scientific description of the earth as the world of man.* A word that would now raise eyebrows is 'description'". Half a century on, other words from Hartshorne's (1959, p. 172) original quote that would raise contemporary eyebrows include 'scientific' and 'man'. Bird's eyebrow raising word in 1973 reflects the disciplinary disruptions that had been taking place up to the date when he was writing. The eyebrow raisers

which have occurred over the intervening half century point to the disciplinary shifts that have taken place over the period since then, a period which spans the initial production and successive revisions of Johnston's (1979) and Taylor's (1985) texts.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as "empiricist approaches declined rapidly in the face of a vigorous campaign for positivist alternatives" (Johnston, 1983, p. 5), many human geographers sought to replace what they often termed as 'mere' description of the earth with causal explanations. This paradigmatic shift, from a study of places as complex and unique entities to a study of patterns in space which could be replicated, modelled and, ideally, even predicted was, to echo Hoefle (2022), a call for a less subjective approach to the study of Human Geography, one where "(i)ts ontology is thus one of agreed evidence and its methodology is one of verifying factual statements by what is often known as 'scientific method'" (Johnston, 1983, p. 5).

Such a shift inevitably led to controversy and dispute. Haggett and Chorley (1967) observed that:

> "Today the distinction is made commonly between the 'humanities' which are primarily concerned with the unique and non-recurrent and the 'sciences' which seek to establish general statements for repeatable events and process. Contemporary geography obviously lies athwart this apparent gulf, which must either be bridged or must lead to the dismemberment of the discipline." (Haggett and Chorley, 1967, p. 21).

Perhaps the most high-profile exchange — if not quite a disciplinary dismemberment — was John Fraser Hart's presidential address to the Association of American Geographers on Regional Geography as "The Highest Form of the Geographer's *Art*" (my emphasis) (Hart, 1982) and the resulting commentary (Golledge *et al*., 1982, p. 558) which offered the spectre of "a return to the descriptive morass from which we have recently emerged". Several autobiographical accounts in the volume *Recollections of a Revolution: Geography as Spatial Science* (Billinge *et al*., 1984) provide further evidence of the challenges (but also the professional opportunities) inherent in introducing a radically new paradigm (and one which sought to supplant its predecessor) to the discipline.

In the final decades of the twentieth century, further axes of disagreement were added to this binary split within Human Geography. In part as a reaction to the scientistic, statistical and positivist nature of 'spatial science', some cultural and historical geographers proposed "a variety of humanistic methods […] focusing on decision makers and their perceived worlds and denying the existence of an objective world which can be studied by positivist methods" (Johnston and Sidaway, 2004, p. 194). Johnston (1983, p. 5) summarises humanistic approaches as "emphasiz(ing) individuality and subjectivity rather than replicability and truth."

At the same time, what Smith (2001, p. 6) referred to as the "wider social eruptions in the late 1960s and early 1970s", including anti-war, anti-imperialist, environmental and feminist movements, began to have a significant impact

on Human Geography. This was initially termed Radical and later Critical Geo- graphy. In philosophical terms, Johnston (1983) saw this shift as bringing a structuralist set of approaches to the discipline. Structuralist approaches cannot be simply located on a subjective — objective continuum since they contend that:

> "[W]hat really exists (i.e. the forces creating the world, or its structures) cannot be observed directly but only through thought, and its methodology involves the construction of theories which can account for what is observed but which cannot be tested for their veracity because direct evidence of their existence is not available." (Johnston, 1983, p. 5).

Many structuralist/radical/critical geographers, such as David Harvey and Doreen Massey, have utilised elements of Marxism to develop their theories and explanations of 'the forces creating the world'. Indeed, this perspective is now acknowledged to have become a part of mainstream Geography, even in the largely neoliberal Anglosphere.

Successive editions of *Geography and Geographers* document examples of the proponents of all of these approaches critiquing — and, not infrequently, attacking — the work of geographers from one or more of the other paradigms. In their reminiscences, Johnston (2022, p. 386) recalls a "three-cornered fight (regional geography vs quantitative geography vs radical geography)" at the London School of Economics in 1973, while Taylor (2022, p. 383) notes that "'spatial science' was assailed from radical geography (bringing in politics) and behavioural geography (bringing back place)". However, most contributors to the special issue of *GeoJournal* agree that such conflict is largely a thing of the past and that there is now a changing academic context in which "conflicting academic paradigms (have) evolved towards autarkic silos" (Mamadouh, 2022, p. 362). Johnston (2022) saw this as a reflection, or at least an indication, of how the university system overall was changing from the 1980s onwards. What was happening was that:

> "Departmental wholes broke into separate parts — research groups […] were, to a greater or lesser extent, internally coherent with little cross-group interaction. […] Conflict was replaced by tolerant co-existence: there was jockeying for position and resources, but little public debate about what (human) geography should and shouldn't be." (Johnston, 2022, p. 387).

This is therefore a suitable juncture at which to move from a consideration of paradigmatic flux within the discipline and the shifting roles of objectivity and subjectivity therein, to a different objective context, namely that of the academic institutions within which the discipline of Human Geography exists. In this context, individual human geographers, and indeed all academics, have certainly become subjects and, it can be argued, they are increasingly being treated as objects.

3. The Changing Academy

Read (2009, p. 27) contends that "Neoliberalism, according to Foucault, extends the process of making economic activity a general matrix of social and political relations, but it takes as its focus not exchange but competition". He sees this as a fundamental shift away from the classical liberalism embodied in "what Adam Smith called mankind's tendency to 'barter, truck and exchange'" (Read, 2009, p. 27). Nevertheless, beginning with Pinochet's dictatorial experiments in Chile in the 1970s and continuing with the policy initiatives of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1980s, neoliberalism has had "pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world" (Harvey, 2005, p. 3).

As part of this wider ideological shift, it is therefore unsurprising that academia has come to be interpreted and understood in this economistic way by many of those in both government and university senior management. It may be an oversimplification to equate classical liberalism's exchange values with the traditional collegiate ideal of the university, in which the exchange of ideas was held to be paramount, and neoliberalism's competition values with the reality of the modern managerial university where the economistic end is a profitable bottom line and the means to this end is the encouragement of competition for resources between the university's faculty members. Nevertheless, Johnston (2022, p. 387), a former university vice chancellor himself, at least hints at this progression in his quote above.

Berg *et al.* (2016) develop a critique of the neoliberal university, commencing with a consideration of an open letter to the United Kingdom government by 126 senior academics which was published in *The Guardian* online:

> "Government regulations and managerial micro-management are escalating pressures on academics, insisting that they function as 'small businesses' covering their own costs or generating profits. Highly paid university managers (and even more highly paid 'management consultants') are driving these processes, with little regard for, or understanding of, the teaching and research process in higher education." (Lesnick-Oberstein *et al*., 2015).

Berg *et al.* (2016) go on to identify three interrelated changes within academia which were also alluded to in this open letter. The shift from exchange to competition has brought about the rise of what they term as a new "administrative class" of university senior managers for whom profit is a key performance indicator and who have limited understanding of or sympathy with the ideals and aspirations of the academics they are supervising. As Read (2009, p. 35) argues, citing Negri (1989, p. 99), this is "a form of governing through isolation and dispersion".

A second issue, "the rise of systems of audit and assessment as political technologies of governmentality" (Berg *et al*., 2016, p. 169) has brought about

a shift from equality to inequality which is evident both between and within universities. These assessment systems are most visible in the form of the national audits of university research activity, such as the REF (Research Excellence Framework) in the United Kingdom and the RQF (Research Quality Framework) in Australia (Johnston, 2006) which governments use to distribute research funding to individual universities. Systems of audit and assessment are also used, by the new administrative class, to distribute these and other funds within the universities to schools, departments, research groups and even individual researchers in unequal ways. This, too, is government by isolation and dispersion and, thereby, through individualistic competition.

Both of these shifts are objectively evident in universities worldwide (Berg *et al*., 2016; Loher and Strasser, 2019). However, they also have severe subjective impacts on individual academics. This results from a third, and depersonalising, shift within academia and more widely, that from labour to human capital. This devaluation and depersonalisation of university employees is producing "unprecedented levels of anxiety and stress among both academic and academic-related staff and students" (Lesnick-Oberstein *et al*., 2015). Davies *et al.* (2021, p. 1) underline the link between objective reality and subjective experience when they observe that "our emotional encounters with failure are mediated by the neoliberal trajectory of higher education, with its unmanageable workloads, anxiety-inducing ranking systems and self-serving managerialism".

Davies *et al.* (2021) made this observation in their introduction to (yet another) recent theme issue, in this case in the journal *Emotion, Space and Society*, on "Reclaiming Failure in Geography: Academic Honesty in a Neoliberal World". Their reference to honesty is significant. In what is now a hypercompetitive environment, "disclosing failure remains a risky act in the contemporary neoliberal university" (Pickerill, 2019, p. 121). This is particularly the case for younger academics who are increasingly likely to be on fixed term or casual employment contracts and who exemplify, in deeply personal and subjective terms, the neologism 'precarity' (Loher and Strasser, 2019), a word that could well have been coined with contemporary academia in mind.

Most of the special issue papers on failure in Geography have been written by researchers in the early — and possibly the only — stage of their academic careers. But neoliberalism is a stressor for academics of all ages and at all career stages. Berg *et al.* (2016, p. 169) describe the case of a professor at Imperial College, London who was found dead when complaining that he was faced with dismissal after he failed to meet a research grant income target of 200,000 pounds per annum as a Principal Investigator. Even the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford (Dorling, 2019) reflects on his own failures to be sufficiently considerate of and constructive towards his colleagues and students in the current neoliberal environment. He later argues, in his article "Kindness: A New Kind of Rigour for British Geographers", that "[w]e cannot have greater cooperation that is meaningful without generosity,

hospitality, trust, friendship, respect or responsibility". In short, he is arguing for the exchange and the collegiality that is at least under threat, if not already replaced, by the competitiveness of the contemporary university system.

Notwithstanding the importance of these subjective experiences, a more objective conclusion to this section is required in the temporal context of 2023. The precarity experienced by most, if not all, academics, and by academia as a whole, has been considerably increased by two recent global shocks. The economic downturn from 2008 and the COVID 19 pandemic from 2020 have brought about the imposition of "(a)usterity measures and neo-nationalism, intended to manage various crises and emergency situations, [which have] in fact facilitated instability and increased precarity" (Loher and Strasser, 2019, p. 10). It is not just in their disciplinary contexts that human geographers have been experiencing troubled times.

4. Stepping into Many Rivers: Contextual Factors Influencing One Academic Career

The eminent geographers who recounted their experiences of Geography's quantitative revolution in Billinge *et al.* (1984) employed some interesting, and frequently negative, terms in the titles of their autobiographical accounts. These include 'outside man' (Brookfield), 'floundering' (Johnston), 'disillusions' (Pred) and 'pain' (Robson). In spite of this, they largely avoided the trap identified in the "Reclaiming Failure in Geography" special issue of telling "tales of triumph over adversity" (Horton, 2020, p. 5) "which can reinforce neoliberal logics of individualism" (Davies *et al*., 2021, p. 3). Rather, they place their experiences in the intellectual, organisational and locational contexts in which they found themselves, as exemplified by Warntz's (1984) "trajectories and co-ordinates". That is also the aim of this autobiographical section in which I seek to present what Smith (1984) termed the "recollections of a random variable".

My undergraduate studies at the University of Sheffield in the mid-1960s were biased towards Descriptive and Regional Geography. The most quantitative of the offerings came in the form of statistical analyses of demographic data in a regional course on North America and my 1966 honours dissertation on the differing types of agricultural activity present on the varying topographies and geologies of a small rural region was a study verging on environmental determinism, albeit presented in a descriptive and idiographic manner. However, my course was termed a Bachelor of Arts in Economic and Social Studies and included units in Economic History, Politics and Economics. This background, together with the "social eruptions" which Smith (2001, p. 6) saw as characterising the latter part of the decade, may well have been contexts which influenced my decision to commence a Master of Arts in Applied Geography at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1968. The coursework

component of this degree could be described as 'critical' since its focus was on the causes of and potential remedies for the regional disparities that then and now characterise the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, my time there could be said to have reflected the "three cornered fight" alluded to by Johnston (2022) since I was employed as a sessional tutor for a first year unit on Statistics (controlled by Peter Taylor) and I selected as my dissertation topic a cultural and idiosyncratic study of the place of Wales in British regional planning and administration (Jones, 1970).

While I was completing this dissertation, I obtained a post as Assistant Lecturer in Geography and Economic History at a local further education college and began applying for lecturing positions, mainly at British polytechnics where Geography degree courses were expanding at that time (Wright and Jones, 1972), but also at universities and colleges in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. All but one of these applications ended in failure. However, I was offered a lectureship in Geography at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) in Perth. This was an institution of which I knew almost nothing. Nevertheless, it offered me the prospects of travel and novelty and I accepted the position in 1970.

At that time Australia, like Britain, had a binary system of higher education. Only the universities had a research role, but numerous teacher training colleges and institutes of technology offering professional training and qualifications existed alongside them. WAIT had been created in 1968. It took over several professional courses previously taught by Perth Technical College and set up new offerings including a three year, post high school 'Associateship' in Social Sciences with majors in Geography, History, Politics, Sociology and Economics. During the 1970s, most of WAIT's associateship courses were reclassified as bachelor's degrees and it soon became apparent to me that, even though WAIT remained a teaching institution, a PhD would be required by any academic seeking advancement.

I chose to return to the United Kingdom for my PhD studies since this would provide me with a familiar rural research site in my birth country and because my supervision options at the University of Western Australia, the only university within 2,000 kilometres, were limited at that time. My research topic, the impact of transport change on rural service provision patterns from the coming of the railways to the (then) present, satisfied several academic and practical criteria. The theoretical perspective of spatial reorganisation (Janelle, 1969) permitted the (expected in the discipline at that time) use of quantitative techniques including functional indices (Lewis, 1970) and vertex connectivity (Freeman, 1975). It also allowed for consideration of radical/critical issues such as rural accessibility and social wellbeing (Bracey, 1970; Green, 1971). It thus allowed for my inclination towards more structuralist approaches. More pragmatically, its more humanistic and long-term historical perspective lessened the prospect of my research data becoming out of date before I could complete the

thesis on a part time basis. Finally, an unusually favourable Australian dollar: pound sterling exchange rate enabled me to survive the minimum residence/data collection period in the United Kingdom on a mixture of annual leave, study leave, leave without pay and employment on 'WAIT in Europe' study tours. I spent 1974 and 1975 in residence at the University of Manchester and then needed to 'keep up' with the rural change literature across Human Geography's positivist, humanist and critical paradigms until I finally submitted my thesis in 1982.

Both during and since this period, WAIT continued along the path of 'status creep' (Jones, 2002b) which had begun with its achievement of bachelor's degree granting capabilities in 1973 and continued through the attainment of the title 'Curtin University of Technology' in 1987 and the dropping of the 'of Technology' suffix in 2010. For the academics within this institution, this meant that survival, or at least the avoidance of failure, was dependant on increasing their research activity and, furthermore, that this research activity could be evidenced to the new administrative class in the apparently objective form of publications (in the right journals), citations (on the right indices) and grant income (from the right sources). For a newly qualified rural/historical geographer in an almost uniquely isolated Institute of Technology this could be seen to present some difficulties. Across Australian academia, Geography was and is a fragile discipline. Almost all the Geography departments in the traditional universities were small and, as students took what Harvey (2005) saw as the 'common sense' choice of opting for vocational rather than academic courses of study, Geography enrolments began to decline at a time when, also in line with neoliberal precepts, government income per student was falling. University Geography departments were steadily merged into multidisciplinary schools until, by 2000, hardly any remained as distinct disciplinary entities (Holmes, 2002). On the other side of the former binary divide, where most colleges and Institutes had either been taken over by or renamed as universities by the mid-1990s, the numbers of geographers were even smaller, separate Geography departments had never existed and most undergraduate Geography programmes were discontinued (Jones, 2002b).

However, for this random variable at least, contemporary shifts in the wider contexts of both Rural Geography and rural Australia counterbalanced this inauspicious institutional/national context. The complement of geographers at WAIT/Curtin has never exceeded seven, a number too small for the formation of autarkic silos. Although the Curtin geographers have endured threats of closure and numerous, frequently traumatic, organisational restructures, the discipline has always been located within a broader humanities faculty which encompassed anthropologists, historians, planners, literary and cultural studies scholars and specialists in sustainability and heritage. Furthermore, the tourism staff, located in the business faculty, included ex-geographers and they were encouraged to foster interfaculty research links, especially after the federal

government established Sustainable Tourism and Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centres which encompassed government, industry and university membership and provided considerable funding for applied research. Within the field of rural change, WAIT/Curtin therefore offered me a wide range of opportunities for research collaboration on diverse topics and in differing paradigms.

In a broader disciplinary context, geographers, such as Paul Cloke, were viewing rural change through both critical (Cloke, 1992) and humanistic (Cloke *et al*., 1995) lenses. Increasing numbers of human geographers were producing studies of heritage (Graham *et al*., 2000), tourism (Butler, 2006) and post-productivism (Almstedt, 2013) which also focussed on varying forms of rural change. New specialist journals were appearing in all these fields and relevant (for me at least) fora of communication and interaction, such as the International Conference of Historical Geographers (ICHG) and the International Geographical Union's Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems (IGU CSRS), were being established. As a significant part of a large, environmentally diverse and fragile, sparsely populated and 'settler' continent, Western Australia exhibited varied and idiosyncratic responses to these global rural change processes (Argent, 2002; Holmes, 2006) which were and are of national and international interest.

Initially in my research career I used material from my PhD studies (Jones, 1985), and comparisons between these results and those from rural Western Australia (Jones, 1994) and those from a subsequent visit to my PhD site (Jones, 2001). Subsequently, I worked with WAIT/Curtin University colleagues on rural change related topics as diverse as the safety of four-wheel drive tourism in the Australian outback (Jones *et al*., 2010), the impact of Thomas Hardy and the then Prince of Wales on Dorset's heritage and tourism (Jones and Dolin, 2012), and the sustainability of wine production and wine tourism in a time of climate change (Jones *et al*., 2023). Visiting scholars encouraged me to research the state's coastal 'shack' settlements (Jones and Selwood, 2012) and the development of Australian cattle breeds (Tonts *et al*., 2010) and my PhD students have extended my research interests to whale shark watchers on Ningaloo Reef (Catlin and Jones, 2010) and indigenous issues in a Nepalese national park (Thing *et al*., 2017).

Inevitably, several of my research collaborations have involved failures, from disasters to dead ends, and my retirement, slightly earlier than I had originally anticipated, occurred when I finally lost patience at having to work with a particularly trying member of the university's new administrative class. Nevertheless, most of the academics (if not the administrators) with whom I have collaborated over my career have responded with the generosity, hospitality, trust, friendship, respect and responsibility advocated by Dorling (2019), rather than with the competition assumed by neoliberal theory. As a white, male, heterosexual, English speaking, largely able, leading edge baby boomer, it behoves me to conclude my random variable recollections with some cautionary words:

> "It is not our fault if we are born into privilege, but we should at least first acknowledge, then apologise if at any time we have ever pretended that any of this is fair and that we are where we are due to merit, not due to what actually happened to us and to luck." (Dorling, 2019, p. 3).

I have been both lucky and privileged since what has happened to me is that I have spent my career in a place where many interesting rural trends were evident and at a time when there has been a lively, intellectual focus within Human Geography on the causes and implications of these trends. It is this context/these contexts that have sustained my academic activities.

5. Conclusion

The academic meanderings of this random variable may be seen to have taken place in the contexts of two contrasting narratives. On the one hand, that of an evolving discipline, one which Johnston (2022, p. 388) describes as "differ(ing) in substance — in every sense of the term; much bigger, much broader, much more sophisticated, eclectic and rigorous — from when moves to change it emerged in the 1960s/70s". On the other hand, that of a neoliberalising academy producing increasing levels of anxiety, precarity and failure for most of those within it over the same time period.

In both cases, however, the stories are more complex. Johnston (2022) admits that Human Geography's 'substance' is now so vast and diverse that the production of a further edition of *Geography and Geographers* is inconceivable. Taylor (2022, p. 384) fears that Human Geography's autarkic silos are becoming impenetrable because the rise of 'identity scholarship' means that "[q]uestioning other people's deeply held positions that are based on their experiences through their identity, which is by definition unavailable to outsiders, generates knowledge quarantines". Practitioners of Human Geography may now be operating in what Haggett and Chorley (1967) presaged as a dismembered discipline. In the context of the academy, Davies *et al*. (2021, p. 5) warn that "we must be careful not hark back to a halcyon age that never was". Dorling (2019) notes British Geography's history as a discipline of empire and, before the neoliberal era, the academy was frequently characterised by racism, sexism and exclusion. The subjective university experiences of the privileged and the rest were (and still are) objectively very different.

Over the last half century, academic careers, certainly for human geographers, have taken place in dynamic, uncertain and often paradoxical circumstances. "There is always evidence of major changes, re-orientations and new discoveries, all of which illustrate a dialectical interplay of inner and outer circumstances in the life histories of individual academics" (Buttimer, 1987, p. 138). This dialectical interplay may become less fraught for individual academics over the course of their careers/life histories if, as regards their outer circumstances,

they can accept that "the more 'I's the better our objectivity will be" (Hoefle, 2022, p. 78 citing Nietzsche) and, as regards their inner circumstances, they "know… thyself in order to better understand others" (Hoefle, 2022, p. 78 referencing Bourdieu). Ideally, and channelling Dorling (2019), they will then be able to apply the rigour of kindness to themselves as well as to others and, in the changing and challenging contexts in which they find themselves, thereby help Geography to become "the kind discipline of the future".

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