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Coffey, J., Threadgold, S., & Farrugia, D. et al. (2018) 'If you lose your youth, you lose your heart and your future': affective figures of youth in community tensions surrounding a proposed coal seam gas project. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 58, 665-683.

Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/soru.12204>

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: *Coffey, J., Threadgold, S., & Farrugia, D. et al. (2018) 'If you lose your youth, you lose your heart and your future': affective figures of youth in community tensions surrounding a proposed coal seam gas project. Sociologia Ruralis, 58, 665-683*, which has been published in final form at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/soru.12204>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions.

Accessed from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1419403>

**‘If you lose your youth, you lose your heart and your future’: Affective figures of youth  
in community tensions surrounding a proposed Coal Seam Gas project**

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## **‘If you lose your youth, you lose your heart and your future’: Affective figures of youth in community tensions surrounding a proposed Coal Seam Gas project**

‘Any discourse about the future has to begin with the issue of youth because more than any other group youth embody the projected dreams, desires, and commitment of a society’s obligations to the future. This echoes a classical principle of modernity in which youth both symbolise society’s responsibility to the future and offer a measure of its progress.’ (Giroux, 2003, p. 141)

### **Abstract**

The article discusses the tensions regarding the challenge to balance agriculture with a proposed coal seam gas mine in the in a regional centre in New South Wales, Australia, which revolved around notions of youth and ‘the future’. ‘Youth’ as a symbolic category were positioned at the heart of the issues associated with land-use in the region on both sides of the debate. Young people were described throughout the study as an abstract symbol of ‘the future’. How exactly ‘the future’ was related to youth as a symbolic category depended largely on participants’ perspectives on the proposed Coal Seam Gas (CSG) mining project. For those who supported the CSG project, the figure of youth signified hope of economic invigoration. For those who opposed the CSG project, the loss of landscape for future generations of youth was a key concern due the potential irreversible environmental impacts associated with the extractive industry in the area. We argue ‘youth’ becomes a ‘figure’ imbued with the region’s affective anxieties surrounding land-use change. The concept of affect is developed to aid understanding of the collective and embodied dynamics at play in the differing perspectives on CSG extraction and its impact for the future of Narrabri.

### **Introduction**

51 A growing body of literature has sought to understand the social, economic and political  
52 implications for land-use change in rural communities. Analyses of changes in land use have  
53 documented the shift from productivist (agriculturally based land uses) to multifunctional  
54 landscapes (Abrams & Bliss, 2013; Argent, 2011), including cultural and/or environmental  
55 amenity migration (Abrams & Bliss, 2013; Argent, 2011; Mann & Jeanneaux, 2009),  
56 agricultural change and/or intensification (Lambin et al., 2001), and mining and mining  
57 exploration (Carrington & Pereira, 2011). Land-use changes associated with the mineral  
58 resources sector involve a particular set of challenges, particularly related to social and  
59 environmental impact. Environmental concerns related to Coal Seam Gas exploration, for  
60 example, relate to risks to water supply and damage to cropping lands (Greer, Tabert, &  
61 Lockie, 2011). Rural land use change planning involves balancing complex natural systems  
62 and diverse community interests, with decisions having immediate and long-range  
63 implications that impact on the livelihoods and lived experiences of individuals, and at local  
64 and regional levels (Mann & Jeanneaux, 2009). Competing visions for a place can result in  
65 significant protest and conflict.

66  
67 The proposed Coal Seam Gas (CSG) expansion was a polarising issue in this research in  
68 Narrabri, NSW. Agricultural, manufacturing, service and mining sectors have long operated  
69 side by side in this region, and have provided the foundation for the community's relative  
70 prosperity and identity (Askland et al. 2016). More recently, however, there has been a  
71 significant re-orientation of these landscapes which has challenged community cohesion in  
72 many places throughout the State of New South Wales. International demand for coal,  
73 coupled with the emergence of the coal seam gas (CSG) industry in the states of NSW and  
74 Queensland (QLD) in particular, has seen increasing competition for land and generated new  
75 challenges for all stakeholders. For communities with a largely agricultural heritage, this

marked shift in land use towards more intense extractive activities poses distinct problems given perceived threats to the natural resources upon which agricultural production is dependent (Sherval et al., under review). Subsequently, rural and regional spaces have become increasingly contested domains, characterised by transformations in established relationships between local communities, governments, industry, and non-governmental actors (Askland et al. 2016).

The increased local prominence of coal and CSG was seen by some in the study as an asset to the Shire and as having the potential to contribute to the region's economic resilience well into the future. This is built upon a narrative of economic diversity as one of the Shire's strengths. Indeed, economic diversity is a commonly-held ideal of the Shire, regardless of one's position in relation to land use changes. Perceptions diverged as to how coal and CSG expansion would influence Narrabri as a place. Participants who characterised Narrabri as 'economically diverse' but with 'future vulnerabilities', particularly regarding the retention of young people, tended to support the extractive industries and the proposed CSG project. Participants who defined Narrabri as a 'strong agricultural community connected to the land' tended to express opposition to extractive projects in the region. From their perspective, coal and CSG offered a tempting short-term opportunity at odds with more long-lasting and sustainable land use practices centred on the agricultural capacities of the Shire. These differing perspectives on CSG underpinned how Narrabri's future was perceived – and figures of youth were central in how alternative visions of the future were imagined.

Those who were generally supportive of the development of the extractive industry in the area use youth as a figure of hope or promise for continuing prosperity in the region – as a talisman to ward off the specter of the 'ghost town' which haunts local psyches. Those who

are opposed to the development emphasised a concern for the region's youth on environmental grounds – arguing that the proposed CSG project will render the area an inhospitable 'hellhole' no one would want to live in. The article draws on the concept of affect to explore the ways in which these emotionally-charged notions of 'the future' operate in Narrabri land-use change debates and become attached to 'youth'.

### ***Theoretical framework: affective dimensions of 'the future'***

Affect is used as a conceptual framework useful for understanding the symbolic force attributed to youth as both a social group and affective figure in participants' different perspectives on CSG and the region's future. This framework has recently been explored in rural studies to understand the formation of embodied, emplaced youth identities (Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2015). It is based on Spinozan and Deleuzo-Guattarian understandings of affect as involving, but not limited to, emotions of human subjects as they emerge through connections with other bodies, places, and objects (Anderson, 2009; Fox, 2015). It refers to an embodied and relational understanding of experience and life, challenging the Cartesian approach to human existence as formed through a mind-body split. Affect, as a relation of 'lived power', refers to the embodied processes by which an imagined potential 'crystallises into the actuality of a specific interaction or response' (Davidson, Park, & Shields, 2013, p. 4). Affect is the capacity to act, produced relationally, through a body's engagements and interactions (or intra-actions in a Baradian (2008) sense). This approach also focuses on the body and embodied sensations as crucial for understanding processes of human action and the formation of social contexts or 'environments' (Clough, 2009). This understanding of affect has rests on a different ontological understanding of the human subject than is typically used to analyse 'emotions' (for a thorough description see Fox, 2015). This understanding of affect does not preclude the significance of human emotions, however, unlike the ontology

underpinning the study of emotions, affects do not *belong* to subjects or objects or reside within them; rather, affects bind subjects together (Ahmed, 2009, p.119). Though this approach can be used to analyse subjectivity and the politics of embodiment for young bodies (Coffey & Ringrose, 2016; Farrugia et al., 2015; Fox & Alldred, 2016) its frame of reference extends well beyond individual bodies, minds and emotions to collective bodies and movements, ecologies, atmospheres and systems (Anderson, 2009, 2016). Because affect is foremost produced relationally, it is always in flux based on changing dynamics of context depending on the social and spatial milieu. As such, the concept lends itself well to analyses of the everyday embodied politics of interaction: ‘infused with power, grounded in place and located bodies, affect is viscerally political’ (Davidson et al., 2013, p. 5).

Stemming from this broader framework, the primary focus on affect in this article is as a ‘structure of feeling . . . [which can] exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action’ (Williams, 1977: 132). Ahmed’s concept of affective economy (Ahmed, 2004) develops this framework further for analysis. In affective economies, ‘emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments’ (Ahmed, 2009, p.119). In Narrabri, the figure of ‘youth’ embodies the potential for economic invigoration and hope for a future premised on economic principles of economic health equaling community health. ‘Youth’ is also used as a figure to communicate apprehension regarding Narrabri’s future in the face of an additional resource extraction project. A focus on the affective economies operating in this context enables an understanding of what figures of youth *do* and how they work to ‘bind subjects together’ to form individual and collective affective attachments (Ahmed, 2009, p.119) which cohere around different politics and visions of the future. The affective dimensions of figures of ‘youth’ are used strategically as an argument to preserve

the future in participants' discussions of CSG. This focus can assist in accounting for the impetus behind participants' actions and differing perspectives, and their currency and force in relation to proposed CSG expansion in the region.

### ***'Youth' as a relational, affective figure***

Sociologists argue that 'youth' is a relational concept, not a static, age-based category (White & Wyn, 2008). Viewing 'youth' as a relational category understands that people who are the same age vary infinitely in terms of the possibilities and trajectories available to them along social and spatial lines. Further, meanings attached to youth change significantly over time. Rather than focusing on age, this perspective places focus on the 'quality and nature of relationships between young people and their social context' (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, p. 51), highlighting that youth as a category is 'forever in the making' (Nayak & Kehily, 2013, p. 8). The embodied and affective dynamics through which young people experience themselves are increasingly recognised in youth sociology (Coffey, 2016).

Sukarieh and Tannock (2014) describe that the category of youth has become a primary focus of local, national and international NGO policy and programming, as the new developmental target and 'hope for the future' (p.12). 'Youth' as a group of people come to symbolise and embody the projected dreams of a society's future (Giroux 2003). Society's fears and hopes for the future are also projected on to young people as a symbolic category. This is seen in generalised concerns for the future of society related to the behavior of 'problem youth', or the impact of social conditions for young people's futures. In youth sociology, the figure of the 'hipster' has been discussed as a way of exploring contemporary class dynamics in relation to youth identities (Ravn & Demant, 2017, Threadgold, 2017). We draw on Tyler's (Tyler, 2008, 2013) work on 'figures' as



embodiments or expressions of underlying social crises or anxieties to understand the way ‘youth’ works in participants’ discussions of the future of Narrabri. We argue ‘youth’ in these examples extends beyond a social or relational category to become a ‘figure’ imbued with the region’s affective anxieties surrounding land-use change.

### ***Rural youth, mobility and the future***

There is a relatively small but growing body of research on young people’s relationships and experiences of regional places in Australia (Cuervo, 2014; Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Farrugia, 2016; Farrugia, Smyth, & Harrison, 2014a, 2014b; Waite, 2017). The primary focus on studies of youth in rural and regional areas of Australia relate to identity, employment and mobility. Farrugia (2016) has argued that mobility has become an ‘imperative’ for young people in rural areas, related to broader global shifts and changes in structural arrangements of education and labour markets (Farrugia, 2016). The ‘mobility imperative’ highlights young people increasingly have no choice but to be ‘mobile’ as the resources they need to construct their lives progressively depend on it, related to increasing disparity between rural / urban locales and ‘the valorisation of metropolitan lifestyles in popular culture’ (Farrugia 2016). This has led to increased anxieties about youth out-migration from rural to urban spaces.

The issue of how to retain young people in rural and regional areas of Australia has been a significant concern for communities in recent decades. Rates of youth loss from rural regions of Australia have increased over the past twenty years, as ‘young people are more likely to search out capital cities than the rest of the population’ (Argent & Walmsley, 2008, p. 139). This migration is attributed to the changing nature of the economy as a primary factor, and the associated socio-economic decline felt by many rural areas as industries fold (Argent & Walmsley, 2008). Paired with the rise in post-secondary education rates in recent decades,

particularly for young women (Wyn & Woodman, 2006), the local labour market is often too small or narrow to ‘absorb school leavers’, which has meant young people have had to move elsewhere to seek post-secondary training and employment (Argent & Walmsley, 2008, p. 142).

Argent and Walmsley’s (2008) study drew on Australian Bureau of Statistics data to estimate that 34-40% of youth aged 18-24 moved out of the Narrabri area between 1996-2001 (p.146). This proportion was relatively low compared to other nearby areas such as Walcha and Quirini in which up to 67% of young people moved away in the same period. Argent and Walmsley (2008) lament the ‘the erosion of social capital’ that accompanies young people’s out-migration from rural areas; particularly those youth who are ‘the best and brightest’ academically and in sport. Gabriel’s study of recurring narratives in Tasmanian media around loss of youth from regional areas described the tone of contemporary media representations of Australian regional life as ‘overwhelmingly bleak: regional communities are dying; regional services are withdrawing; an underclass is forming; youth are disappearing; the bush has been forgotten.’ (Gabriel, 2002, p. 209)

The constructions of *desirable youth*, inevitably entails the construction of *undesirable others* (including the unemployed, early school leavers, recreational drug users, and single teenage mums) (Gabriel, 2002, p.211). Youth sociologists highlight the ways characteristics of ‘desirable’ youth tend to be aligned with those required by the current neoliberal economic and policy conditions in which young people are required to be self-responsible, entrepreneurial, and flexible in order to succeed in an increasingly deregulated and precarious youth labour market (Cairns, 2013; Kelly, 2001; Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Francis and Hey (2009, p.226) show how ‘neoliberal discourses of meritocracy and individuality project

responsibility for failure away from social structures and institutions and onto individuals'. Kelly and Pike (2017) characterise the 'neoliberal present' as 'marked by recession, sovereign debt crises, austerity and the language of strivers and skivers, and lifters and leaners'. As Kelly (forthcoming) writes, this neoliberal present marks the lives of hundreds of millions of young people who are growing up in the years following the 2007-08 Global Financial Crisis in conditions characterised by high levels of youth unemployment and precarious employment, student debt accompanying increased costs for higher education, housing costs that lock many out of home ownership, and challenges for physical and mental health and well-being. Further, Sukarieh and Tannock (2014) argue that the interest and investment in youth is aligned with neoliberal interests. The policy language of 'resilience' and 'capacity building' has the effect of shifting attention from the previous focus on structural disadvantage, deflecting attention and resources from systemic problems of inequality (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2014). The characteristics of the 'neoliberal present' resounded through the interview data, particularly in relation to the privileging of economic logics in the town's priorities and views for 'youth' and the 'future'. For many in this study, the presence of Santos, a multi-national extraction company, promised opportunities for the town's youth which could keep them from moving away.

243

In the microcosm of contemporary Narrabri as a regional centre, the current affective 'structure of feeling' (Anderson, 2016) towards CSG is inflected by a neoliberal present (in which economic principles of the market drive social policy) as well as Australia's recent past whose modern identity as a wealthy nation has been forged through the phenomenal success of the extractive industries. 'Youth' are mobilised within different structures of feeling depending on the economic or environmental priorities of participants within a generalised concern for the future of the region.

251

252 Where Farrugia's (2016) work has developed affect in relation to young people's  
253 subjectivities as a crucial dimension of the mobility imperative for rural young people, this  
254 article develops an understanding of the affective economies underpinning how young people  
255 as a symbolic category are mobilised towards different political ends. This focus is  
256 particularly important in aiding analysis of the affectivities of the 'neoliberal present' and the  
257 ways neoliberal reason (or logics of economic health equating human or community health)  
258 operates sensuously and collectively. This approach is also useful in enabling analysis of  
259 what categories of youth are currently 'made up of' in the current social climate. The article  
260 draws on the concept of affect to understand the collective, embodied, visceral and political  
261 dimensions in how 'youth' and 'the future' operate in relation to the issue of CSG extraction  
262 in Narrabri.

263

#### 264 **Methodology: background**

265 The study aimed to explore how local communities experience, perceive and respond to land  
266 use change and to develop an evidence base for policy, planning and community engagement.  
267 Narrabri Shire was chosen as the initial site to research these themes due to its history of  
268 significant land use change and the intensification of coal mining and emergence of gas  
269 interests that currently challenge the traditional agricultural base of the community. Narrabri  
270 Shire is the proposed site of Santos's Coal Seam Gas exploration, approved by the NSW  
271 Government Department of Planning in 2008. The project has been the source of controversy  
272 in recent years following intensifying local protests and a number of court appeals  
273 challenging the legality of aspects of the development which were said to have taken place  
274 without appropriate approvals. At the time of writing, this CSG project is the only one  
275 remaining in NSW following the withdrawal of other gas plans in late 2016. Though local

opposition to the CSG project has strengthened in recent years, the project is also strongly supported by some residents of the Shire and key stakeholders such as business groups and the Chamber of Commerce (Murphy, 2017).

The community's experience with the contested introduction of cotton and, later, genetically modified (GM) crops established Narrabri Shire as a possible site for comparison of historical and contemporary attitudes to changing land uses. The Narrabri Shire also presented an opportunity to explore the changing nature of land use contestation and the formation of new allegiances. The Leard Blockade against Whitehaven's Maules Creek Coal Mine, which started in 2012, and the more recent civil disobedience campaign against Santos' activities in the Pilliga, have triggered nation-wide attention as conservationists from across the country join local farmers in protests against what they see as unsustainable and undesirable land use changes. As is the case with the extractive activities, these protests are themselves a source of community debate and contention. Consequently, the Narrabri Shire presented a unique opportunity to explore the intricacies and complexities around land use change.

The Narrabri study aimed to explore how local residents within the Narrabri Shire conceptualise and experience land use and land use change; how local residents respond to changing land use/s and land use impacts; and how governments can support the ongoing viability of rural and regional communities in a context of changing and competing land use patterns. The primary data collection occurred during September and December 2015 with members of the research team spending a total four weeks in the Narrabri Shire. During these visits, the researchers gained further insight into the issues facing the community through observations and casual conversations with local residents.

A total of 65 participants were interviewed for the project; a sample size designed to provide breadth whilst remaining manageable given the need for in-depth analysis of rich and detailed narratives. The participant group consisted of two cohorts: local stakeholders and key stakeholders. A total of 51 local stakeholders living in town or in the rural areas of the community were interviewed, including representatives from agriculture, commerce, industry and government sectors, local services, and various associations and action groups. The inclusion criteria for local stakeholders were that participants had to be over the age of 18, proficient in English, and residents of the Narrabri Shire. A total of 14 key stakeholders, including local policy makers, planners and decision-makers were also interviewed. The criteria of inclusion for key stakeholders was the same for local stakeholders, with the addition that they held a position of influence in the Shire<sup>1</sup>. The key stakeholders were interviewed for both their professional and personal knowledge and experiences of land use change. In total, 38 men and 27 women participated in the study and the sample was skewed towards those in the older age brackets (45<). The overrepresentation of men and older community representatives can be seen as a reflection of the population targeted for the study, with many of those in key stakeholder positions being men over the age of 45.

Data was analysed using established qualitative data analytic techniques designed to maximise sensitivity to emergent themes and commonly held narratives in exploratory qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative research software, NVivo, was used to organise data and assist in identifying themes for analysis. This software facilitated analysis of the unstructured data and allowed simultaneous exploration of conceptual ideas (big picture) and investigation of the detail of the qualitative material. The overarching themes identified in the analysis of the primary data were: place and place attachment; land use change, soil and water; co-existence, proximity and reciprocity; knowledge, risk and

trust; and, government and governance (for a full discussion of these please see (Askland et al., 2016). This article explores further conceptual themes related to those above, also identified in the initial analysis: affective figures of youth, and the future.

The following section explores the affective dynamics related to the figure of ‘youth’ in participants’ discussions of the proposed CSG mine and its implications for Narrabri’s future in the context of land-use debates. Reference to ‘youth’ was made in relation to the town’s future economic prosperity and viability, which some saw as being provided by the extractive industry through the proposed CSG mining. The figure of youth was also used to communicate fear that the landscape – and Narrabri more broadly - would be made uninhabitable through irreparable damage through the extractive industries. Both arguments use the figure of ‘youth’ as the lynchpin to lay claim on the future of the region. Though this issue was highly polarising, the way figures of youth were used were not straightforwardly demarcated – one participant, for example, used both future images of youth in her concern for the region’s future related to land-use. Affect was analysed following Fox and Ward’s (2008, p. 128) premise that ‘any statement regarding how a person is ‘affected’ by anything else can be taken as a relation of affect’. The affective dimensions of the category of ‘youth’ are crucial for understanding how the future is figured differently in participants discussions of CSG. A focus on the affective economies operating in this context enables an understanding of what figures of youth *do* to produce different politics and visions of the future.

**‘An air of hope’: CSG as future opportunity and economic prosperity**

350 Many participants who articulated positive attitudes towards coal mining and CSG  
351 exploration used 'youth' to justify the development of these industries in the area. 'Young  
352 people' as a social group and 'figure' were used strategically to argue the need for jobs and  
353 prosperity through expanded 'economic diversity'. Economic diversity was described as a  
354 definitive characteristic of Narrabri, and seen as essential for the town's retention of young  
355 people; without which the town would have 'no future'. In this sense, participants who  
356 formed a positive attitude towards the extractive industries viewed Narrabri as a town that  
357 requires diversity in order to sustain its unique vibrancy. Steven, a local resident, articulated  
358 views in favour of extractive industries, including CSG, and made a direct link between the  
359 existence of Narrabri as a community and the economic diversity of the Shire. He describes  
360 'youth' as symbolic of the future of the region. Agriculture, he explained,

361

362 cannot sustain the community anymore, you have to be diverse if you want to keep  
363 community. I'm not saying [farmers] can't sustain themselves, what I'm saying is  
364 they can't sustain the entire community even though they're your number one, they  
365 can't sustain the community. You have to have diversity, even farming has to have  
366 diversity...if you don't have diversity the number one thing you'll lose is your youth  
367 and young people. So you lose the heart and your future and you've got to keep it at  
368 all costs.

369

370 Here, the figure of 'youth' is used to symbolise the 'heart' and 'future' of the community. The  
371 significance of 'young people' in securing the town's future extends beyond physical young  
372 people as a social group to also operate as a symbol of hope for the future. Without economic  
373 diversity, he argues, youth will not stay in the area, and so diversity must be maintained 'at  
374 all costs' in order to sustain any kind of future for the region and community.



375

376 Support for the extractive industries is also founded on economic priorities for Carter, a local  
377 white-collar professional, who describes CSG exploration as an ‘opportunity’ for young  
378 people though providing the social and economic foundation for a good community and a  
379 ‘feel good place to live’:

380

381 Opportunity. What drives [young people staying or moving back to Narrabri from  
382 elsewhere] is opportunity. So if you get kids who enjoy growing up here and there's  
383 opportunity for them, then I think the two go together... Professional jobs in Santos,  
384 professional jobs in mining, professional jobs in the service industries...If you can  
385 string all of those together and add to them a bit with some local initiatives, then  
386 you've got the chance of a real good community...More houses, more opportunities,  
387 more jobs, more money circulating...But for all the things I said to you before about  
388 making this district a special district; there's your funding right there. When you look  
389 at little towns that are niche towns...people love to live there for whatever reason it is,  
390 and that's the opportunity that exists here. To create a feel good place to live.

391

392 Here, CSG and mining exploration synonymous with the vitality of Narrabri, premised on  
393 economic priorities. Carter describes growth in employment, housing and ‘more money  
394 circulating’ as producing the conditions for a ‘good community’ where people ‘love to live’.  
395 The affective relations in Carter's example align bodily sensations with place (feel good  
396 place, people love to live here) through intensive attachments which are premised mainly on  
397 economic features of money, wealth and funding. Young people figure in his example as an  
398 inevitable bonus in that the economic opportunities which will create Narrabri as a feel good

399 place will mean ‘kids will enjoy growing up here’ and will stay if there are employment  
400 opportunities for them.

401

402 Claire, a young person involved in local community organisations connected with young  
403 entrepreneurs, is also strongly in favour of CSG exploration and describes the extractive  
404 industries in general as the source of hope for young people themselves and for the future of  
405 Narrabri:

406

407 I’ve lived here for all of my life and I went through a period when I was growing up  
408 where I just thought it was the worst town in the world and I don’t know whether that  
409 was because I just wanted to get out and into the city or whether I generally went  
410 through a bad stage. But now I think everybody has this kind of air of hope and a lot  
411 of young people are moving back, so that’s one change that I’ve really seen...People  
412 really expect it to move forward. Everybody is saying that Narrabri could be the next  
413 big thing in terms of regional towns and stuff like that and I’ve heard a lot of people  
414 say that. People are investing in property and things here, which before maybe five or  
415 ten years ago, people simply wouldn’t do.

416

417 For Claire, the extractive industries are the basis for an affective ‘air of hope’ permeating the  
418 town, attracting young people to move back. This ‘air of hope’ infusing Narrabri can be  
419 understood as an affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009); a way of attending to the  
420 significance of felt, embodied sensations in discussions of CSG mining and Narrabri’s future.  
421 It communicates the force with which economically-based notions of ‘opportunity’ and  
422 progress were circulating in the accounts of those who supported the development of the  
423 extractive industries in the region.

424

425 Indeed, the notion of progress runs throughout positive discussions of CSG exploration,  
426 which often describe the extractive industries as both complementary to the economic  
427 diversity of the town and as an inevitable reflection of social and economic progress in the  
428 region. Attitudes such as these—in which mining is seen as essential for social vitality and  
429 economic progress—are formed through the prism of a definition of Narrabri as  
430 economically diverse, and a broader view which sees the future of the Shire as depending on  
431 economic factors for its survival. For these participants, economic opportunities are  
432 prioritised as *the* most important factor which will drive the future vitality of the town.

433

434 Hamish, a young man who has a number of family members working for Whitehaven and  
435 who is considering future employment within the mining sector, is generally positive about  
436 the extractive industries and their activities. For him, the opportunity to earn good money  
437 through the mine is an incentive to stay in Narrabri; it offers him financial opportunities, and  
438 allows him to maintain a lifestyle associated with the freedoms presented with living in a  
439 regional area:

440

441 If I don't get into [proposed programme of study], I'll definitely be coming back and  
442 I'll be trying to get a job with Whitehaven for sure because it's great pay, and I love  
443 Narrabri.

444

445 He, along with others in favour of CSG mining, saw the economic opportunities afforded by  
446 the extractive industries as a panacea against fears of young people leaving and Narrabri  
447 becoming a 'desert town' (ghost town), devoid of people (customers) as has happened in  
448 nearby areas:

449 Hamish: We went to Singleton not that long ago and I remember we walked into a  
450 pub similar to this and one of the bosses there said, “Oh, thank you so much for your  
451 business. We haven’t had anyone come here in so long. We were just about to...”

452 Karina: Yeah, it was like \$5.00 bowling.

453 Hamish: Yeah it was so cheap, you know, it was a desert town. People are worried  
454 about Narrabri becoming similar to that, like when the mines move out. Before the  
455 mines were here, Narrabri has thrived agriculturally. It’s one of the biggest  
456 agricultural places in Australia. It’s huge. You’ve got some of the best land here.  
457 You’ve got some of the best yields here. So that’s never going to disappear. So that’s  
458 why I don’t think the mines are a bad thing economically for Narrabri because they’re  
459 going to bring a heap of money here, like new airport upgrades, they built a new pool  
460 for us, all these incentives come with it. So a hundred years down the track when  
461 they all pack up and leave, really it’s just going to return to what it once was but  
462 there’s going to be a heap more infrastructure here...

463

464 Hamish’s description of this ‘desert town’ and his encounter with the pub owner desperate  
465 for his business operates affectively. The specter of a deserted, ruined place devoid of people  
466 (customers) collectively haunts residents and business owners in Narrabri. The affective force  
467 of desperation of these images of empty shops and streets motivates Hamish and others to  
468 support ‘the mines’. Their promise to ‘bring a heap of money here’ offers relief against the  
469 imagined and real aspects of the ‘ghost towns’ and other, less ‘economically vibrant’  
470 townships which surround Narrabri. Hamish’s enthusiasm for the potential CSG expansion  
471 rests on the assurance that it will not pose a threat to agricultural land or crop yields, or  
472 negatively impact the landscape of Narrabri: ‘Once they pack up it will return to what it once  
473 was’. Other participants reported very large sums of money (\$A200 million) had been

provided for infrastructure and public projects over recent years, such as the new pool Hamish mentions, and the sponsoring of the local football team. This was a point of tension throughout the interviews, and whilst some viewed all investment by Santos as ‘good for the town’, we were repeatedly told that some parents had removed their children from the team in protest since the uniform was changed to prominently feature the Santos logo. These tensions were significant given the importance of these community and sporting assets to the identity of the town and its efforts to retain youth (see Atherley, 2006; Tonts & Atherley, 2005).

Another participant, Wendy, was much more concerned about the potential for irreversible environmental and landscape impacts associated with extractive industries. She describes seeing the Muswellbrook mine from an airplane looking ‘like a dead moonscape where before it was beautiful rolling plains and graziers and all that sort of thing... There’s no going back and that’s the scary thing I think, is that you can’t go back.’ However, she also said she was aware of the potential opportunities CSG might afford, emphasising that the health of a town is premised on its young people:

I don’t want to bag out anything but I just want them to be careful because there is plusses and you’re encouraging young people to take – the young people have got to be encouraged to towns otherwise the town dies. Coonabarabran is very much a welfare town and there’s nothing for young ones to do there, nothing, no progress, no future, no aims, no goals.

Wendy describes towns like these as ‘dying towns’, which have a tangible ‘negative feeling’:

499 Business has closed up, no industries in town, no future for the kids, there's just  
500 nothing for the children, the growing up children. No way they can get  
501 apprenticeships. If they stay in the town they basically either are on welfare or there  
502 might be an odd one that might get an apprenticeship in the local garage or something  
503 but it's just – it has a different feel about it and very negative, no matter how much  
504 the community itself tries very hard to put things out there and get workshops and  
505 programs and things like that there's just nothing, no excitement generated. It's  
506 missing soul.

507  
508 Wendy's description of the desolation of these 'dying towns' nearby is even more vivid than  
509 Hamish's of a 'desert town'. For Wendy, the wretchedness of these places centres on the lack  
510 of opportunity for young people, which spirals into a future with 'no aims or goals' – no  
511 future at all. The affective atmosphere she describes is one of misery; of a place devoid of  
512 excitement, hope, and soul. Steven, Carter, Claire and Hamish drew primarily on the  
513 importance of 'youth' for ensuring a town's vitality through improved economic  
514 opportunities, and either downplayed environmental concerns related to extractive industries  
515 or did not mention them at all. Wendy, however, is so concerned for the future of young  
516 people in the region she sees extractive industries as offering a potential opportunity where  
517 few others exist, though she holds concerns for the integrity of the landscape ('no going  
518 back'). The affective dimensions in Wendy's depiction of 'dying towns' 'missing soul' and  
519 offering 'no future' for young people are crucial for attending to the significance of embodied  
520 intensities and *what they do* in relation to the issue of CSG extraction and the future in  
521 Narrabri.

522  
523 **Environmental concerns regarding CSG: creating an unlivable future for young people**

524

525 Many other participants opposed CSG expansion for the same reason used by participants  
526 who supported it: evoking affective imagery and language to describe its impact on young  
527 people, or future generations of people living in Narrabri. Participants described being  
528 extremely concerned about the potential impact of CSG expansion in the area and feared for  
529 the future it will leave for the town's young people.

530

531 I'm not doing it for my benefit. This is for the next generations. I haven't even got  
532 any kids that live in Narrabri. All mine are gone. It's for the next generations of  
533 children and the people that want to live in Narrabri that I'm trying to hold back these  
534 stupid projects that are not necessary. (Carl)

535

536 Many who opposed CSG regarded the industry itself as having 'no future', or a very short  
537 one of only 30 years. In a region which has seen six generations of agriculture, 30 years is  
538 short indeed, and does not offer intergenerational longevity. The phrase 'short term gain for  
539 long term loss' was one we heard repeated numerous times throughout interviews.

540

541 The thing is we've been in agriculture for six generations. The last thing I'm ever  
542 going to do is to be turned onto an industry that has no future. Even if it had a 30-year  
543 future here, that's not the sort of future that you can then give to your grandchildren  
544 and their children. If our grandchildren grow up and live and work here, it's not the  
545 sort of place, in 30 years' time, when they're looking for educating their kids and  
546 those sorts of things, they'll be just nothing left. (Arthur)

547

548 I think the agenda from all governments is to progress the coal and gas industries  
549 irrespective of community thoughts or wants or needs or long-term any thought put  
550 into it, short-term gain, long-term loss. (Carl)

551

552 Concern that CSG would have an irreversible impact on the landscape was echoed by  
553 participants opposed to the expansion of CSG in the region. Like Wendy in the section above,  
554 many mentioned they were concerned mining expansion would lead to the desolation of the  
555 landscape, becoming a polluted ‘hellhole’, as was described has occurred in former mining  
556 areas such as Muswellbrook:

557

558 If the government keeps progressing their coal and their coal seam gas the way they  
559 have been, we’ll just end up like a place like Muswellbrook or something like that. It  
560 will be a hellhole. It won’t be a nice place to live between the noise pollution, the  
561 light pollution and the methane pollution. It won’t be very nice and as I said, it’s got  
562 nothing to do with me. It’s all about the next generations. (Carl)

563

564 The strongly affective language (‘hellhole’, a range of forms of pollution) paints a picture of  
565 environmental decimation, like Wendy’s ‘moonscape’ above, also referring to nearby  
566 Muswellbrook. The preservation of Narrabri’s quality of life is described here as tied to  
567 maintaining the integrity of the landscape – for the ‘next generations’. The figure of youth is  
568 evoked against this affective landscape as signifying an intergenerational responsibility for  
569 environmental preservation. Similarly, Paul and Hazel are so concerned with the potential for  
570 CSG to impact their surroundings they would not want their grandchildren to visit them, and  
571 would move to another area:

572



573 Paul: ...and you think oh well, I don't know, maybe we should move somewhere but I  
574 don't know, I really like it here. But faced with that prospect, the air pollution, the  
575 whole general theme of it you think no I don't think I want to do that. I don't know if  
576 I want my grandkids and visit and to sort of surround our lovely life that we have  
577 here. So maybe we would move.

578 Hazel: For us the bottom line is if all this goes ahead and this whole area becomes  
579 industrialised we would have to move. That's how it would affect our future life and  
580 our retirement plans. But where would we go? I don't know.

581 Paul: And who would want to live here? I mean it'd have to be...

582 Hazel: Who would want to buy our house? I have grandchildren. I want a future for  
583 them.

584

585 The affective imagery of 'industrialisation' and 'pollution' 'surrounding' them communicates  
586 a creeping sense of contagion and loss which amounts to 'no future' in the area for them, or  
587 their grandchildren if the CSG project proceeds.

588

## 589 **Discussion**

590 Affective notions of youth as hope and the future of the town are mobilised for those  
591 supportive of the CSG project. This largely rested on economic grounds. Affective  
592 descriptions of 'youth' were used as a symbol of hope and to justify or welcome the  
593 economic prosperity promised through investment of Santos in the town's facilities and the  
594 promised creation of jobs. Figures of 'youth' were also evoked by those opposed to the CSG  
595 project who were concerned that CSG extraction and infrastructure will destroy the landscape  
596 and leave an inhospitable 'hellhole' for future generations of young people. Figures of youth  
597 operated affectively and are a key dimension of the strength of feeling related to these issues.

598

599 Whilst the figure of youth signifies hope of economic invigoration for those who support the  
600 CSG project, concern for the future of the region's landscape for future generations of young  
601 people is evoked by those concerned for the potential irreversible environmental impacts  
602 associated with the extractive industry in the area. There are different affective economies  
603 (Ahmed, 2004) attached to figures of youth operating in this context of arguments  
604 surrounding Narrabri's changing land use. In affective economies, 'emotions do things, and  
605 they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the  
606 very intensity of their attachments'. Affective economy is a useful tool for understanding the  
607 intensities which 'bind subjects together' – in other words, explaining the force and  
608 significance of figures in how narratives of youth operate towards different political ends.  
609 Narrabri as a place is contested. A focus on the affective relations at play aids understanding  
610 of the dynamics of contestation which centre on the role and figure of youth for the future of  
611 the *place*.

612

613 Those who supported the CSG project mobilised figures of youth as the town's future in need  
614 of economic opportunity to counteract the sad-affects of nearby 'deserted towns' which  
615 loomed as collectively-felt embodied sensations of desperation and dread. These affects  
616 hovered as virtualities or potentials in the bodies and spaces of business owners and residents  
617 of Narrabri. Such specters required a vigilant warding-off. Economic priorities were seen to  
618 offer a silver-bullet solution. Core values emphasising the importance of economic prosperity  
619 offered by a multi-national mining company in tandem with a focus on youth as requiring the  
620 purported economic opportunities are mobilised to redirect the visceral worry of a future  
621 town devoid of heart, soul and customers to one which carries an 'air of hope'. Affective  
622 intensities circulate in descriptions of places as desolate or vibrant, underpinned by a core

emphasis on economic principles of wealth, development and opportunity through industry. As Carter's example in particular showed, economic prosperity was seen as *the* indicator of quality of a good life and the future continuation of Narrabri as a (successful, prosperous, vibrant, 'feel good') place. The 'structure of feeling' informing Carter, Steven and Hamish's perspectives on CSG and the future of the region are primarily economically motivated, which then informs how 'youth' are mobilised as figures.

Participants who are strongly supportive of the CSG mine do so on the grounds of economic benefit, which then informs how the figure of youth is drawn in. Keeping young people in town is an absolutely critical dimension of the place-attachment-affect. The economic investment Santos promises is articulated by Carter and Hamish in particular as *the* way to provide a 'future' for young people. Community wellbeing is approached as being ensured through economic health and prosperity - priorities of 'investment', consumer spending and profit propping up 'the community'. That this economic advancement is being made by a predatory resources industry does not figure as a threat because the town's future economic prosperity is held as paramount. Further, there is the sense that the town itself is responsible for manufacturing employment opportunities for its young people in an increasingly de-regulated and precarious youth labour market.

Giroux (2003) has argued that under the conditions of neoliberalism, economics are dissociated from its social costs, and the 'political state has become the corporate state'. Under such circumstances, he writes, 'the state does not disappear...but is refigured as its role in providing social provisions, intervening on behalf of public welfare, and regulating corporate plunder is weakened'. This situation in the 'neoliberal present' (Kelly 2017) is particularly relevant to the social conditions in Narrabri, in which a multi-national resources

company is positioned as the solution to structural issues such as a lack of employment opportunities for youth. Because the state is seen as having no real role in ensuring viable employment for young people in regional areas such as Narrabri, mining corporations such as Santos are seen (and encouraged by the state) to provide such opportunities in their stead – despite that there are no guarantees that the jobs promised will be realised, and very little corporate responsibility for the longevity of these jobs, which are rumoured to have a life span of anywhere between 10 and 30 years.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored the affective dynamics related to the figure of ‘youth’ in participants’ discussions of the proposed CSG mine and its implications for Narrabri’s future. The figure of youth was used to embody hope for a future enabled by economic invigoration purportedly offered through a CSG project proposed for the region. For others who opposed the CSG proposal on environmental grounds, the figure of youth was used to communicate fear of an unlivable future in Narrabri – of a landscape made uninhabitable through irreparable damage through the extractive industries. Both arguments used the figure of ‘youth’ as the lynchpin of their arguments regarding the future of the region. A focus on the affective economies operating in this context enables an understanding of what figures of youth *do* and how they work to ‘bind subjects together’ to form individual and collective affective attachments (Ahmed, 2009, p.119) which cohere around different politics and visions of the future.

These findings add to the growing field of rural youth mobilities research through further developing a focus on affect. Where Farrugia’s (2016) work has developed affect in relation to young people’s subjectivities as a crucial dimension of the mobility imperative for rural

young people, this article develops an understanding of the affective economies underpinning how young people as affective figures are mobilised towards different political ends. This focus is particularly important in aiding analysis of the affectivities of the ‘neoliberal present’ and the ways neoliberal logics of economic health equating human or community health operate sensuously and collectively. This approach is also useful in enabling analysis of what categories of youth are currently ‘made up of’ in the current social climate. Young people were not differentiated into ‘desirable’ or ‘undesirable’ categories in participants’ descriptions of the imperative of retaining young people to ensure Narrabri’s future. However, as the discourses in broader neoliberal narratives which categorise people as ‘lifters and leaners’ continue to gain purchase in Australian society, it is perhaps more important than ever to redirect attention to the structural forces shaping all young people’s lives and the particular dynamics faced by rural young people in these conditions.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments and feedback on this paper.

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<sup>i</sup> Please refer to the report (Askland et al. 2016) for full details of the recruitment strategy and process of identifying participants from key and local stakeholder groups.