

**‘Pathways’, ‘careers’ and ‘revolving doors’: an exploration of the social function of metaphors in homelessness discourse and research.**

**by**

**Dr Rodney Fopp**

Dr Rodney Fopp  
Senior Lecturer  
Sociology  
School of International Studies  
University of South Australia  
St Bernards Rd  
Magill SA 5072  
08 8302 4789  
[rodney.fopp@unisa.edu.au](mailto:rodney.fopp@unisa.edu.au)

**‘Pathways’, ‘careers’ and ‘revolving doors’: an exploration of the social function of metaphors in homelessness discourse and research.**

Like sociologists who use ‘class’ and ‘stratification’, and physicists who use ‘black hole’, researchers who investigate homelessness and housing issues use metaphors. To name just a few, we hear of ‘sliding’ into homelessness, ‘pathways’, ‘revolving doors’, ‘exit points’ and homeless and housing ‘careers’. ‘Pathways’ and ‘careers’ are very popular among researchers and regularly appear in national and international journals, and in the titles of funded research.

Using the work of George Lakoff, this paper examines the use of such metaphors in research about homelessness. While valorising and acknowledging the necessity of metaphors in any learning, including research, the perspective is advanced that many metaphors are part of a certain way of perceiving and explaining homelessness, the neutrality of which ought (where possible) neither to be taken for granted nor smuggled into research.

## **Introduction**

The recent literature concerning housing research has included various explorations of the importance of the language used in both the academic and research literature (Darcy and Manzi, 2004), on the one hand, and the public and policy and bureaucratic discourses (Jacobs and Manzi, 1996), on the other. This literature has led to the application of a confluence of discourse analysis and social constructionist approaches to housing research in which, at least to some extent, the former is conceived in terms amenable to social constructionism or, as Keith Jacobs et al (2004, p. 4) put it, discourse analysis is one of the 'manifold strands of social constructionist research.' Much of the theorising of this analysis follows Norman Fairclough (1992) with his three dimensional analysis which includes 'text analysis', 'discourse practice' and 'social practice'.

Increasingly the use of particular forms of language in housing discourses are being analysed. Undoubtedly, previous articles on the language and discourse of housing have mentioned metaphors (Jacobs and Manzi, 1996, pp. 547-548). However, more recently there seems to have been an increase in interest in their use. Featuring prominently in this trend in housing research, analysis and policy implications is the 'pathway' metaphor (Clapham, 2002; 2004). Metaphors have also been analysed by Greg Marston (2000) in 'Metaphor, morality and myth: a critical discourse analysis of public housing in Queensland' and 'Constructing the Meaning of Welfare as a Policy Metaphor?' (2004).

In everyday communication, the use of metaphors as figures of speech may be belittled or discounted as related to poetry rather than rigorous analysis. However, although their significance in learning and academic disciplines may not be appreciated or even discredited, metaphors are rife in everyday language. As George Lakoff (1980, p. 3) notes:

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought and action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor.

Yet, without detracting from their use in language and literature, metaphors are much more than literary devices. In the mid 1960s Berger and Luckmann (1972 [1966], p. 55) wrote regarding symbolism and symbolic language:

Language is capable not only of constructing symbols that are highly abstracted from everyday experience, but also of 'bringing' back these symbols and presenting them as objectively real elements in everyday life. In this manner, symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and of the common-sense apprehension of this reality.

In housing policy, for example, politicians laud their social policies as 'safety nets'; military personnel describe the accuracy of the dropping of bombs as 'surgical strikes'. Academic disciplines use metaphors that have become so endemic that they are often unrecognised as figures of speech. Like sociologists who use 'class' and 'stratification', and physicists who use 'black hole', researchers who investigate homelessness and housing issues use metaphors. To name just a few, we hear of 'sliding' into homelessness, 'pathways', 'revolving doors', 'exit points' and homeless

and housing ‘careers’. Such language appears to be very popular among researchers, policy makers and funding bodies and, as will be demonstrated, regularly appear in national and international journals, and in the titles of funded research.

The South Australian Social Inclusion Unit (2003) provides more evidence to substantiate the claim about the widespread use of certain metaphors in the discourse about homelessness. They discuss the events which allegedly ‘trigger’ homelessness (p. 12), the ‘steady slide’ into homelessness (p. 35) and the “downward slide” into increasingly marginal and insecure accommodation ultimately leading to homelessness’ (p. 37), ‘the cycle of instability and spiralling debt’ (p. 37), homeless ‘careers’ (p. 22), ‘pathways’ in and out of homelessness (pp. 12, 22, 39, 45, 53, 74, 76) and ‘exit points’ (p. 35). A typical example of the use of metaphors can be detected in the following from the same report (South Australian Social Inclusion Unit, 2003, p. 35):

As identified in the recent work of [McKenzie and Chamberlain 2003] the incidence of poverty and gradual accumulation of debt can underpin the *slide* into homelessness. SAHT [South Australian Housing Trust] and AHA [Aboriginal Housing Association] recognise that following such experiences [evictions due to rent areas] customers return to the service [SAHT and AHA] for housing, often in worse circumstances than when they were evicted. As well as the administrative costs involved in *failed* social housing tenancies, this ‘*revolving door*’ syndrome imposes significant social and economic costs – including homelessness – on the individuals, families and communities affected [emphasis added].

Regarding homelessness, the metaphors above include the ‘slide’ into homelessness, ‘failed’ social housing, the ‘revolving’ door of being evicted from social (which is usually public) housing only to return to the same agencies on eviction. The latter is also described as a ‘syndrome’.

In relation to research about housing in general, and homelessness in particular, there are a number of questions which can be posed about the language used. We could begin with questions such as: How extensive and prevalent is the use of metaphors in research into housing and homelessness? What social function do they perform? Do they contribute to or reinforce the dominant discourses and metanarratives about housing and homelessness and, if so, how? What is conveyed about people who are homeless when such figures of speech are used about them and their circumstances? Do the metaphors reflect the stated experience of people who are homeless?

This paper, while having its background and context in the more general housing discourse literature, differs in two substantial ways from previous analyses. Unlike previous research which has been about housing per se, this paper is primarily concerned with the use of metaphors in research, analysis and policy development regarding *homelessness*. It is acknowledged that some of the metaphors used are similar in both the housing and homelessness literature (for example, pathways) but, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, this metaphor has entirely different implications when used in housing more generally and homelessness in particular. Thus, this paper examines the use of such metaphors in research and literature about homelessness, as it is influenced by, and contributes to, the general cultural and social

discourse about its explanation, the alleged characteristics of people who are homeless, and how they are expected to change their circumstances.

This paper is different in another way, namely, that the analysis applies the work of George Lakoff to analyse the use and implications of the metaphors used in the homelessness discourse. Previous work has largely used discourse approaches such as that of Fairclough (1992).<sup>1</sup> However, for nearly three decades George Lakoff has investigated the role of metaphors to such varied circumstances as the first Gulf War (1991), and the debates between liberals and conservatives over ‘family values’, welfare and social security policy issues in the United States (Lakoff 1995). While valorising and acknowledging the necessity of metaphors in any learning, including research, it is argued that the metaphors used in the language of homelessness are part of a certain way of perceiving and explaining homelessness, the neutrality of which ought (where possible) neither to be taken for granted nor the metaphors and the association smuggled into research.

However, before embarking on the stated analysis I wish to make a several observations. The first is about the meaning of metaphor. The definition used here is that a metaphor likens one thing to another and can assist in our understanding by pointing or referring to things we do not know or understand by those we do. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) also claim that metaphors can define and structure everyday activities. For example, arguments are likened to war. So a claim can be ‘*indefensible*’, or ‘*shot down in flames*’, an argument is ‘*attacked*’ at its ‘*weakest point*’, and criticisms can be ‘*right on target*’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 4). Likewise, the metaphor ‘Time is Money’ can be identified in the question ‘How do you *spend* your time?’ or ‘I’ve *invested* a lot in them’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, pp. 7-8). Secondly, while I am not exempt from this analysis<sup>2</sup> its point is not to slight anyone who has used them but to explore the social function which the metaphor performs. The salient issue is how metaphors used in the literature about homelessness have connotations and nuances which contradict, or may be in tension with, the experience of people who are homeless.

### **Theorising Metaphors - George Lakoff**

Lakoff’s article (1995) entitled ‘Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or Why Conservatives Have Lefts Liberals In the Dust’ explicates some particular uses of metaphors which are relevant to this current examination of metaphors in the discourse of homelessness. Particularly germane to the focus of this article is Lakoff’s probing analysis of the figures of speech which combine to become a

---

<sup>1</sup> There are several reasons for using Lakoff rather than Fairclough in the following. Firstly, as far as I am aware, Lakoff’s work has not been previously applied to housing and related issues in the way canvassed in the following. Secondly, his work emphasises metaphors which, while a part of discourse, has a narrower focus than Fairclough. Thirdly, he seeks to examine the meanings inherent in metaphors for the purpose of highlighting how they defend and justify particular ideologies. It is this connection with specific worldviews that is particularly relevant in this paper. Finally, while his analysis is applied to international events (such as the Iraq wars), he has entered the foray of social policy. His analysis of ‘safety net’ exemplifies the form of analysis attempted here.

<sup>2</sup> It would not take a super sleuth or the eagle eyed to find my use of metaphors somewhere in my contributions to homelessness research. I have certainly used ‘backlog’ and ‘bottleneck’ to describe the difficulty getting into supported accommodation and the difficulty getting out (Fopp, 2002). Some of the metaphors I have used have been rather challenging such as ‘Shutting the Door in Their Face (Fopp, 1997) or ‘SAAP: What a safety net! – Holes at one end and a trap at the other: exit points in the Supported Assistance Accommodation Program - Analysis and Implications’ (Fopp, 1994).

‘system’. In this way, different but related metaphors are more than a cluster of metaphors about the same topic; they coalesce to represent a particular social worldview and a normative social model of how society should operate (Lakoff, 1995, p. 211). In this way they perform a social function; they serve particular social interests.

Lakoff demonstrates this by using the example of what he calls ‘Keeping the Moral Books’ which use ‘...Moral Accounting Schemes’ (Lakoff, 1995, pp. 178-179). In this worldview, morality is likened to a financial transaction so that there is a ‘moral imperative not only to pay one’s financial debts but also one’s moral debts’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 179). He notes that morality is judged by keeping a record, a tally, which adopts the language of ‘gain’ and ‘loss’ or, we might add, credit and debit, in order that the moral books are ‘balanced’.

So, if someone does something gratuitously for me I might say, ‘I’m indebted to you’ (meaning ‘I’m in your debt’) or ‘I owe you’ or, in the vernacular, ‘I owe you one’. If having arrived home early and unexpectedly from work all week I might say to my colleagues who invite me to an after work drink, ‘Yes. I’ll be there. I’m got some runs on the board’. By this I mean that I am in credit when it comes to arriving home on time. Arriving home late once may cancel the credit; arriving home late two or three times may incur a debt to my family, which can only be repaid by actions which will balance the books.

My readers may find this model of moral accounting pecuniary, mechanical, cold and one which fosters point scoring in relationships rather than mutuality and reciprocity. However, Lakoff highlights the rules of morality which may be implicit in prevalent figures of speech but explicit in the moral terrain, at least in Western cultures. According to this worldview, moral action is ascribed a positive value such as credit; what is regarded as socially immoral action is assigned negative value such as a debt or debit in an accounting ledger (Lakoff, 1995, p. 179). If we are in debt or have moral debts they must be repaid in order to restore the balance sheet in the accounting view of morality (Lakoff, 1995, pp. 179-180).

Lakoff also demonstrates that moral accounting is based on the premise that to be rich is better than to be poor. ‘Well being is wealth’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 183). Furthermore, strength and weakness, and health and illness, are also counterparts used in the language of actions which are normative and those that are not. It is better to be strong than weak. So moral actions are undertaken by those who possess moral strength and immoral actions are regarded as weakness. Moral persons are strong; immoral persons are weak. Moral persons are healthy; immoral persons are sick or, as some might say, pathological (Lakoff, 1995, p. 183).

The metaphors of ‘strength-weakness’ and ‘health-illness’ are also combined so that moral action attests to strength and the health to remain ‘upright’ while moral weakness and illness are characterised as in a state of ‘fall’, or of falling, or ‘Being Low’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 185). So, according to this worldview, moral action involves standing up to evil while immoral action leads to the conclusion that perpetrators are weak, feeble, insufficiently disciplined and resilient in the sense of being unable to withstand what are regarded as negative forces. The traits of personal weakness are themselves regarded as negative or evil or immoral forces (Lakoff, 1995, p. 186). In

this world view, morality is essentially personal behaviour, and ‘deviations’ reside in the individual person, which is known as the residual explanation for social problems.

To its adherents, the consequences of this world view and model of the social realm follow ineluctably. Those who are moral are strong, healthy, resistant, resilient; those who do not have ‘moral strength’ will ‘fall’ for any temptation. Moral strength necessitates discipline and denial otherwise a moral ‘flabbiness’ results (Lakoff, 1995, p. 187). Policies are required which develop and reward such discipline and prevent such flabbiness. But for the ‘conservative’ mind to which Lakoff is referring, moral action is a matter of acquiring the strength to resist, to be more disciplined and self-reliant (Lakoff, 1995, p. 187).

The policy implications are clear: the conservatives Lakoff investigated are opposed to policies which support or provide services for people who are seen to need them because of their alleged weakness, or lack of discipline or self-reliance. Accordingly, the protagonists of ‘Moral Strength’ are opposed to providing condoms to high school students, or clean needles to those who use them, because it panders to the morally weak. They should be able to “‘Just say No’” (Lakoff, 1995, p. 187).

Lakoff also notes the social consequences of the use of metaphors which expose a moral world view and normative model of social organisation. The first is that moral strength ‘imposes a strict us-them dichotomy’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 186). This allows for the target groups to be diagnosed and remedial policies to be easily identified. A second consequence is that ‘giving highest priority to the metaphor of ‘moral strength’ rules out any explanations in terms of social forces or social class (Lakoff, 1995, p. 187). Lakoff (1995, p.187) continues:

If it is always possible to muster the discipline to just say no to drugs or sex and support yourself in this land of opportunity, failure to do so is laziness, and social class and social forces cannot explain your poverty or your drug habit or your illegitimate children. And if you lack such discipline, then by the metaphor of Moral Strength, you are immoral and deserve any punishment you get.

In more traditional sociological terms, the ‘moral strength’ metaphor provides the explanation for social problems which putatively reside in the individual person rather than in alternative explanations which might include the social hierarchies and structures which, in turn, unevenly distribute wealth and other services to citizens.

According to Lakoff, metaphors such as ‘moral strength’ are ‘both conceptual in nature and deep in the sense that they are largely unnoticed, that they have enormous social consequences, and that they shape our very understanding of the everyday world’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 210). By contrast, ‘superficial metaphors’ (Lakoff, 1995, pp. 210-211) are those which ‘rely on much deeper and less obvious metaphors for their power’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 211). Nonetheless, their ‘... power consists in evoking a world view beyond itself’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 211). The example Lakoff uses to illustrate the more superficial metaphors which depend on deeper and less obvious metaphors for their power is ‘safety net’ (Lakoff, 1995, pp. 210-211) which is a well-known metaphor in the dominant discourses of homelessness (Erebus Consulting, 2004, pp. 5, 10, 68, 98, 115, 172, 198). An understanding of Lakoff’s approach here is instructive as it not only provides an analysis of ‘safety net’ but the metaphors in homelessness discourse.

### **Policy as a ‘Safety net’ – Lakoff’s analysis**

As Lakoff notes, the ‘safety net’ metaphor popular in ‘liberal moral politics’ in the United States brings to mind a person walking on a tightrope which, as a figure of speech, conjures up ‘a straight and narrow path – a moral path’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 210). However, as is well known, people fall from tight ropes with serious and life-threatening results. In Lakoff’s analysis, ‘walking the tightrope’ refers to a straight and narrow path; the safety net then becomes some form of income and other support for otherwise independent, hard-working citizens when they have fallen off as, or example, when they are unemployed. They are citizens who have moral strength. They are not indolent, are usually on the straight and narrow path and so they merit government support while they are unemployed.

Lakoff’s analysis is also applicable to SAAP which, as indicated, is often referred to as a ‘safety net’ (Erebus Consulting, 5, 10, 68, 98, 115, 172, 198; Norris et al 2005: i, iii, 9, 10). Now it possible that SAAP is a safety net in the more neutral sense of being a point below which no Australians should fall.<sup>3</sup> However, according to Lakoff’s analysis, SAAP could also be for those people who have walked the tightrope, who have been disciplined and independent, walked the straight and narrow path, shown moral strength, but who have fallen. Several points are noteworthy here. Firstly, Lakoff’s point about the more superficial, or we might say simpler, metaphor deriving its force from a broader and deeper conceptual scheme can be identified here. In this instance the safety net is the simpler metaphor which derives its metaphorical and social and political force from the metaphors of ‘moral accounting’, ‘moral strength’ and ‘moral health’. In this context, then, the safety net not only conveys the idea of ‘falling’ into homelessness but highlights the qualities of the person who was on the tightrope and thus for whom SAAP is intended. In other words, the metaphor not only identifies SAAP as the policy response to homelessness but identifies the target group.

Secondly, because it depends on the deeper conceptual metaphor of moral strength, the safety net metaphor makes judgements about the qualities of those who ‘fall’ and, thus, who should be eligible for the Program. In this way the safety net is not a merely descriptive or neutral metaphor. SAAP is not for everyone who ‘falls’ but those who behave in a certain way, who were on the tightrope and deserve or merit the safety net. This would explain the media attention to homelessness among young people (who allegedly leave home because of family tiffs) and the counselling and parent-child mediation services within SAAP which are aimed at reconciling young people and their parents.

Thirdly, while the metaphor is not neutral it presents as more benign, and may even appear to be sympathetic to people who have become homeless (‘a policy has been provided for them’). But it provides little space for debate or contestation about the precursors of homelessness other than it occurs to individual persons who have ‘fallen’. While the metaphor could be interpreted to include the notion of being

---

<sup>3</sup> This was the suggestion of one of the referee’s of the original paper. It certainly is a possible interpretation. However, a point of this paper is that metaphors have slippage; they may not necessarily be linked to the most obvious worldview or ideology. By using Lakoff, ‘safety net’ is associated with another ideology. The fact that the previous Howard government used the same metaphor for income security for people who are unemployed, and with a similar ideology to that diagnosed by Lakoff in the United States, gives some credence to the possibility that a similar ideology was used when applied to SAAP. See Parker and Fopp 2004, 2005.

‘pushed’ into homelessness (a sudden wind caught the person on the tightrope and they fell, or the tightrope collapsed) the safety net focuses on the actions of the individual person; it draws attention to ‘fall’ rather than ‘was pushed’. By focussing on personal attributes and, thus, on the residual accounts of homelessness, the safety net metaphor defects and neutralises debate, and depoliticises the issue, by emphasising the changes needed in individual persons.

### **Homeless careers**

As indicated, one of the most recent, powerful and popular metaphors is that of a homeless ‘career’ (McKenzie and Chamberlain, 2003). By this term, McKenzie and Chamberlain refer to ‘the transitional stages involved in the development of any form of biographical identity’ (McKenzie and Chamberlain, 2003, p. 1). They maintain that the idea of a homeless career ‘draws attention to the process of becoming homeless as people pass through the various phases before they develop a self-identity as a homeless person’ (McKenzie and Chamberlain, 2003, pp. 1, 13). It also ‘highlights the factors that influence how people move from one stage of homelessness to another’ (McKenzie and Chamberlain, 2003, p. 1). According to McKenzie and Chamberlain, there are three ‘routes’ into adult homelessness: ‘housing crisis career’, ‘family breakdown particularly as a result of domestic violence’ and the transition from youth to adult homelessness’ (McKenzie and Chamberlain, 2003, pp. 2, 60-61). It should be emphasised that, while McKenzie and Chamberlain may have first applied the career metaphor in Australia, they have explained its use more than others. Subsequently however, the career metaphor has been almost universally recognised but unexplained in the other research and literature regarding homelessness in Australia. It is this universal and unquestioned appropriation of the career metaphor, its implications and social function found in the literature, which is the focus of analysis in this article.

It should also be noted that McKenzie and Chamberlain adapted the career metaphor from, inter alia, Howard Becker’s usage in *Outsiders the Study of Deviance* (1973). Becker (1973, p. 24) claims that the notion of ‘career’ originated in the study of occupations and refers to ‘the sequence of movements from one position to another in an occupational system made by any individual who works in that system.’ He also maintains that ‘the model’ of career ‘can easily be transformed for use in the study of deviant careers’ to which his entire book is devoted.

There are several observations that can be made about the use of the ‘career’ metaphor. Firstly, the ‘career’ is linked, as Becker notes, with studies of occupations (Becker, 1973, p. 24). To have a career in ordinary parlance is to have a job; most homeless people do not. To have a career means being in employment in which there is a hierarchy of roles with commensurate and increasing rewards; in so far as unemployed people are employed they are not in such jobs. To have a career is to have options between which employees can choose. To have a career is to have opportunities for advancement in terms of gaining higher income, greater prestige, more favourable salary and employment packages. To have a career is usually sufficient to compete successfully in the private rental or home ownership market.

By definition, metaphors do not always fit in a one-to-one correspondence with the thing to which they are being compared. It is this ambiguity and flexibility, this slippage, which not only gives metaphors their linguistic appeal but facilitates

exploring relatively unknown horizons by those things we already know. It is this 'is' and 'is not' (or like and unlike) character of metaphors that is so conducive to exploring new things.

But in the case of 'career' as applied to people who are homeless, the metaphor is not only a misfit but it is outrageously contrary to their experience. To be homeless is in most cases to be unemployed or at least underemployed. To use the career metaphor with its links to occupations (and the more privileged occupations at that) to choices, upward mobility, promotion and success is so far from the experience of homelessness that it could be interpreted as romanticising homelessness, ascribing to it features which are totally foreign to the experience itself. The risk is that the career metaphor softens the sheer hardship of homelessness, rendering it anodyne. Undeniably, the many researchers who have used this metaphor are acutely aware of the misfit between the connotations of the metaphor in everyday language and the experience of people who are homeless as diagnosed here. However, the issue of the social function that the metaphor performs, remains as a salient issue.

Secondly, as Becker notes, in the study of occupations the distinction is made between "successful" careers and those which are not (Becker, 1973, p. 24). It is not clear how this can be applied to people who are homeless. A successful homeless career not only strains the meaning of terms but could be regarded as sanctioning homelessness with an attribute of 'success' which it clearly does not have. This is aggravated by Becker's insistence that careers 'can easily be transformed for use in the study of deviant careers' (Becker, 1973, p. 24). When 'career' is used in relation to the homelessness literature and research it has the connotation, via Becker, of being associated with deviance. In Australia, the dominant discourse is that deviance is a choice and related to residual deficiencies in the person who is so labelled.

Yet, homelessness has very little to do with personal choice. In addition, residual explanations, although marked in the popular discourse, are not the only explanations for homelessness. As McKenzie and Chamberlain (2003, pp. 18; 17) note concerning young people: 'In some cases, teenagers are "kicked out" or abandoned, but in most cases they feel compelled to leave because of an unbearable situation.' To 'feel compelled' leaves little room for choice; the 'unbearable situations' are not of the young person's doing.

Despite this, the notion of a homeless career, or a career in homelessness, associated as it is with personal agency and choice, reinforces the dominant and powerful accounts of who becomes homeless and why. Associated as it is with occupations and employment, 'career' does not reflect the experience of people who are homeless, most of whom are unemployed. Becker's use of careers, with its connotations of deviance, choice and residual explanations for 'social problems', galvanises the dominant discourses, buttressing the aspects of choice, deviance and personal explanations for social problems.

Thirdly, links can also now be forged between the 'career' metaphor and with the implications of metaphors analysed by Lakoff. Initially, the links may seem obscured and obtuse. It may not be immediately clear that the metaphor of 'career' is connected to the underlying metaphor of 'Moral Accounting' or 'Moral Strength'. But such apparent impediments should become clearer when it is remembered that

some metaphors are linked to 'Moral Strength'. Just as Lakoff analysed the connection between the 'safety net' metaphor and 'Moral Strength', so 'career' can be linked to the self-discipline and self-reliance which characterises 'Moral Strength'. Further, the 'career' metaphor also contains the image of the consequences of not having the strength to resist and, thus, of 'falling' or sliding into homelessness.

In summary, the metaphor 'career' has powerful social connotations. Although there may be 'chequered' careers, or a step in the process may be a 'bad career move' it is worth emphasising that, socially understood, careers are about choices, developing potential, opening opportunities and securing rewards. Homelessness, on the contrary, is socially perceived as a downward and retrograde step. As Clapham notes (2002, p. 65):

Categories are not always of our own choosing and do not all carry the same standing. Clearly for a home-owner to become categorised as a homeless person carries a substantial reduction in social status. It will influence the way that they are treated in society through the different discourses and practices, which are associated with each category. These contain normative guidelines, which reflect expectations and attitudes and practices, which are associated with each category.

What Clapham suggests about the reduction in social status possessing its parallel discourses, is accentuated and reinforced by the career metaphor. In any colloquial sense, 'career' is not only counter to the experience of people who are homeless, but also carries the burden of what is the norm by which (usually) negative and stereotypical judgements are made.

### **The 'pathway' metaphor in homelessness discourse**

In the literature, the language of 'career' is also associated with the language of 'pathway' (Norris et al, 2005, p. 9) which, in turn, has been also used in the language of housing and housing research more generally. For example, 'pathway' has been recommended by David Clapham (2002; 2004) as a postmodern 'analytical framework' for use in housing research. It is based, inter alia, on what Clapham considers to be the postmodern search for individual or a household's 'identity and fulfilment through lifestyle choice.' According to the pathway metaphor, housing is 'increasingly viewed by households as a means to an end – personal fulfilment – rather than an end in itself' (Clapham, 2002, pp. 67-68). In conjunction with this emphasis on individual agents and households is the notion of 'major different pathways' which does not have homogenous or monolithic assumptions about a 'universal set of [housing] preferences' or that all persons and households 'act rationally in their attempts' to realise their housing objectives (Clapham, 2002, p. 64).

According to Clapham, the 'pathway' metaphor also has the advantage of describing a household's previous housing and future options in a continuum which a 'snapshot' of a point in time could not reveal (Clapham, 2002, p. 66). In this way, a 'pathways' approach reveals a 'major strength' in that it can recognise that changes in housing involve 'social practices ... as well as the more widely recognised physical changes' (Clapham, 2002, p. 64). The latter, 'builds on' (Clapham, 2002, p. 64) and is more characteristic of 'the concept of housing career' (Clapham, 2002, p. 63).

Moreover, the pathways approach examined by Clapham (2002, p. 62; 2004, pp. 95-97) adapts Giddens' concept of 'structuration' which, he maintains, 'sits very well within a social constructionist approach' (Clapham, 2004, p. 95). He continues:

Giddens argues that individuals act on a basis of their stored knowledge of what is appropriate in particular circumstances. In this way actors carry knowledge of social structure into interaction which, therefore, has both an agency and structural dimension. The outcome of the action will depend on the power relations between the actors, part of which is the ability to sustain a particular knowledge or discourse in the minds of others (Clapham 2004, p. 95).

Thus, a housing pathway in Clapham's schema is 'defined as patterns of interactions (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space (Clapham, 2004, p. 96). While acknowledging that 'the concept of a housing pathway is the application of a metaphor to the field of housing' it is also 'a way of framing analysis' (Clapham, 2004, p. 96) and not a theory or research methodology.

It is clear that the metaphorical framework of 'pathway' provided by Clapham (2002; 2004) concerned housing *per se*. And Clapham (2003, p. 123) has applied the pathways analysis to homelessness which 'can be seen as an episode or episodes in a person's housing pathway. Thus,

The pathways framework can shed light on the factors which influence homelessness, influence the nature of the experience, and enable some to, move out of it The output of research using pathways framework has been in the form of biographies which have been used to construct ideal type pathways. This useful start need to be supplemented in two major directions to draw most benefit from the framework. These are the incorporation of structural elements and to the biography and the analysis of the public policy interventions (Clapham 2003, p. 123). .

Clearly, Clapham's intention in adopting 'the pathways approach' is to attempt to account for homelessness using sociological tools of analysis. But do the sociological tools of analysis necessitate the appellation 'pathways'? Moreover, it is intriguing to examine how the appellation 'pathway' compares to the colloquial usage, and the way it is used in the Australian homelessness research.

Consider the latter. Norris et al (2005) briefly attempt to explain the use of the pathway metaphor. They claim it is 'attempting to convey ... homelessness as a process rather than one single once and for all event.' Further, 'It is also an attempt to account for the antecedents of homelessness, for its "causes" ... or for the "reasons" or "factors" why people become homeless.' (Norris et al, 2005, p. 9). The authors then proceed to examine the literature on causation noting that (unlike the popular discourses) the literature generally rejects residualist explanations for homelessness. But even if the latter claim is contested, the authors' following comment about whether metaphors such as 'pathways' and 'careers' are appropriate is germane:

On the whole, however, the [Australian] literature overwhelmingly rejects explanations that attribute homelessness to the characteristics and behaviours of the individual. Terms like "pathways" and "careers" go against the grain of most of the arguments in the literature because they imply some degree of choice in becoming homeless, as if people were simply deciding different pathways at certain points in their lives, or taking up different careers options

from a range of possibilities and one of them happened to be homelessness (Norris et al, 2005, pp. 10-11).

Norris et al are arguing what has become a *leit motif* in this argument, namely, that in the vernacular ‘path’, ‘pathway’ or ‘pathways’ as metaphors have connotations of choice, of deciding between options, which is totally removed from the experience of people who are homeless. The metaphor contradicts that part of the research which demonstrates that homelessness has its antecedents in structural factors. Yet, simultaneously, it also reinforces the dominant discourse which claims that homelessness is a ‘choice’ and residualist explanations associated with it. Thus, even if the ‘pathway’ metaphor can be justified and sustained sociologically there remains the issue of how it compares with colloquial use and the social function it might perform.

Generally speaking, in the vernacular ‘pathway’ may connote a course of action or movement in a certain direction for which there are intersections or junctions leading in other directions. Proceeding along a path is often an unfettered decision which someone decides to undertake. It is often pleasant such as ‘a walk along the garden path’ or something to which one may aspire (such as a ‘career path’). A pathway may be difficult (as in ‘It has been a long, hard road’) and may then capture something of the experience of homeless. As intended by those who use ‘pathway’, it may even be a process or sequence of events rather than one event, which is like the experience of homelessness.

Such strain and tension in the meaning of metaphors is not uncommon. However, the salient questions are: (1) overall, does the metaphor reflect the experience of homelessness? and (2) what social function does it perform? Since there is, in my view, some ambiguity and slippage in potential meanings of the ‘pathway’ metaphor it could be interpreted in the public discourse as a romanticising gloss irrespective of its stated use. More importantly, its freight denotes degrees of choice and agency which is belied by the experience of homelessness.

It is also instructive to ascertain if the ‘pathway’ metaphor fits with Lakoff’s more conceptual and deeper metaphors. In addition to ‘Moral Strength’, Lakoff argues that another deeper and conceptual metaphor for morality is ‘Moral Bounds’ (Lakoff, 1995, p. 188). This is particularly useful because, while highlighting the pathway metaphor, Lakoff’s analysis also demonstrates the links between career and pathway. In Lakoff’s schema action is seen as having two related aspects: (1) ‘prescribed bounds or a prescribed path’ from which (2) there should be neither transgressing nor trespassing (Lakoff, 1995, p. 188).

To have a career path is to follow a socially acceptable path which, paradoxically, allows employees to extend their bounds within acceptable, perhaps even laudatory, limits. Compared to this characteristic of a ‘career’, homelessness is regarded as transgressing on to deviant paths, with the potential to lead others astray. Homelessness thus analysed blurs the boundaries between actions which are socially acceptable and those which are not. In this sense, the metaphor of career, although it may be ‘superficial’ in Lakoff’s sense, can be identified as being attached to deeper and more conceptual metaphors such as ‘Moral Bounds’ (linked as they are to ‘Moral Strength’ and ‘Moral Health’) . In this case, the ‘career’ metaphor bolsters the

underlying conservative social expectations and values. In so far as it is associated in the vernacular with normative criteria, the 'pathway' of homelessness is regarded as deviating from socially acceptable, and creating new, paths.

### **Conclusion**

The article began by establishing the extent and range of metaphors used in the research and literature on homelessness. Unlike other references to 'metaphor' in the literature, which have their roots in discourse analysis, the argument above has adapted George Lakoff's analysis of metaphors to examine the social function performed by a range of figures of speech in the homelessness research and literature. His analysis of the metaphors of 'moral accounting', 'moral strength' and 'moral health' were first applied, as Lakoff himself did, to the 'safety net' metaphor.

It was argued that metaphors such as 'safety net', 'career' and 'pathway' are not merely neutral ways of examining homelessness and the experience of people who are homeless. On the one hand, their connotations romanticise homelessness conveying the idea that it is about options and opportunities. On the other hand, in the popular discourse they carry a freight which is normative, and is associated with popular and powerful social attitudes and beliefs, and expectations and practices which accentuate, legitimate and socially sanction powerful residual discourses about the explanations of homelessness with their associated socially valorised remedies. Unless our findings about homelessness and the experience of people who are or have been homeless reflect such explanatory and normative public discourses, their use in our research and its language should be contested.

## References

- Anderson, I. (2001) *Pathways through homelessness: towards a dynamic analysis*. (Urban Frontiers Programme Research Seminar, University of Western Sydney, Urban Frontiers Programme).
- Becker, H. S.(1973 [1963]) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, The Free Press).
- Berry, M., Dalton, T., Engels, B. and Whiting, K. (1999) *Falling Out of Home Ownership: Mortgage Arrears and Defaults in Australia* (Brisbane, University of Queensland Press).
- Burt, M R (1992) *Over the Edge; The Growth of Homelessness in the 1980s* (New York, Russell Sage Foundation).
- Cassey, S. (2002) Snakes and Ladders: Women's Pathways Into and Out of Homelessness, in T. Eardley and B. Bradbury (Eds.) *Competing Visions: Refereed Proceedings of the National Social Policy Conference 2001*, SPRC Report 1/02. (Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney).
- Catherine House Inc. (2003) *Like a Mouse in a Wheel: A Study of Homelessness for Women: The Challenges and Successes* (Adelaide, August 2003).
- Clapham, D. (2004) Housing pathways – A Social Constructionist Research Framework, in K. Jacobs, J. Kemeny, and T. Manzi (Eds.) *Social constructionism in housing research* (Hampshire, England, Ashgate).
- Clapham, D (2003), Pathways Approaches and Homelessness Research. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 13, 119-127.
- Clapham, D. (2002) Housing pathways: A Post Modern Analytical Framework, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 19(2), pp. 57-68.
- Clay, N. & Coffey, M. (2003) Breaking the Jobless/Homeless Cycle: "Foyers": in the Australian Context' *Parity*, 16 (7), pp. 7-9.
- Day, J. (2003) *Pathways Into and Out of Homelessness: Young People – Points of Intervention*. Paper presented at the National Homelessness Conference: Beyond the Divide, Brisbane.
- Darcy, M. and Manzi, T. (2004) Organisation Research: Conflict and Power within UK and Australian Housing Organisations, in K. Jacobs, J. Kemeny, and T. Manzi (Eds.) *Social constructionism in housing research* (Hampshire, England, Ashgate).
- Erebus Consulting Partners (2004) *National Evaluation of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP IV). Final Report*. (Canberra, AGPS).

- Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge, Polity Press).
- Fopp, R. (2004a) Official statistics: A brief analysis of the SAAP National Data Collection, *Parity*, 17(6), pp. 40-41.
- Fopp, R. (2004b) The voice of people who are homeless: some considerations, *Parity*, 17(9), p. 7.
- Fopp, (2003) 'After Burdekin: A Brief Evaluation 14 years on', *Parity*, 16(7), pp. 13-14.
- Fopp, R. (2002a) The causes of homelessness. An unpopular account of popular causes, *Parity*, 15(9), pp. 14-15.
- Fopp, R. (2002b) Increasing the potential for gaze, surveillance and normalisation: the transformation of an Australian policy for people who are homeless, *Surveillance and Society* (<http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles1/homeless.pdf>) 1(1), pp. 48-65.
- Fopp, R. (1999) Re-presentations of homelessness, *Parity*, 11(9), pp.18-19.
- Fopp, R. (1997) *Shutting the door in their faces. Barriers to housing experienced by young people* (Griffith ACT, National Youth Coalition for Housing).
- Fopp, R. (1996) No-where to go – an analysis of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program based on the work of Michel Foucault, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 31(2), pp. 209-222.
- Fopp, R. (1994) SAAP: What a safety net! - Holes at one end and a trap at the other: exit points in the Supported Assistance Accommodation Program – Analysis and Implications, Part 1, *National Shelter Housing Action*, 10, (1, March), pp. 36-40.
- Fopp, R., Parker, S. with Hume, A., Talbot, C., Carson, E. and Quinn, C. (2004) *Getting Out and Staying Out: Pathways to Independent Living: Best Practice, Critical Interventions and Strategies for Addressing Homelessness in South Australia: Final Report*. DHS/AHURI Project (Adelaide, University of South Australia and UnitingCare Wesley), pp. 1-115.
- Fopp, R., Carson, E., and Parker, S. (2003a) *Vulnerable in the City: A study of accommodation and other services for vulnerable adults in inner (Adelaide)*, Social Policy Research Group, University of South Australia), I-vi, 1-89,
- Fopp, R., Carson, E. & Parker, S. (2003b) 'Paying off the Landlord's House': *Entering and Sustaining Home Ownership Among South Australians on Low Incomes*. (Adelaide, University of South Australia, Social Policy Research Group) i-v, 1-67.
- Hastings, A. (2000) Discourse analysis: What does it offer housing studies?, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 17, pp. 131-139.

- Haworth, A. and Manzi, T. (1999) Managing the “underclass”: interpreting the moral discourse of housing management, *Urban Studies*, 36(1), pp. 153-165.
- Hunter, C. and Nixon, J. (1999) The discourse of housing debt. The social construction of landlords, lenders, borrowers and tenants, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 16, pp. 165-178.
- Jacobs, K., Kemeny, J., and Manzi, T. (2004) Introduction, in K. Jacobs, J. Kemeny, and T. Manzi (Eds.) *Social constructionism in housing research* (Hampshire, England, Ashgate).
- Jacobs, K. Kemeny, J., and Manzi, T. (Eds.) (2004) *Social constructionism in housing research* (Hampshire, England, Ashgate).
- Jacobs, K., and Manzi, T. (1996) Discourse and Policy Change: The significance of language for Housing Research, *Housing Studies*, 11, pp. 543-560.
- Kolar, V. (2003) *‘Kicking Into the Wind’*. *Longitudinal Study of Outcomes for Families who Have Experienced Homelessness: Second Report*. (Melbourne, Hanover Welfare Services).  
(<http://www.hanover.org.au/fifthestate/archives/070.040/70/HFOS%20Second%20Report%20May%202003.pdf>)
- Kuzman, G. (2003) *Roundabout and Recycling Factors Contributing to the Breakdown of Young People's Post Emergency Services Placement Which Compel Many to Return to Emergency Accommodation*. (Adelaide, St John's Youth Services).
- Lakoff, G. (1995) Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or Why Conservatives Have liberals In the Dust, *Social Research*, 62(2), pp. 177-213.
- Lakoff, G. (1991) Metaphor and War: the Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf, *Viet Nam Generation Journal and Newsletter*,  
([http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Texts/Scholarly/Lakoff\\_Gulf\\_Metaphor\\_1.html](http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Texts/Scholarly/Lakoff_Gulf_Metaphor_1.html)) Pt 1 and 2, Vol 3.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors we Live By* (Chicago, Chicago University Press).
- Lindsay, M. (1993) *Moving Forward: National Evaluation of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program*. June 1993, (AGPS, Canberra).
- Marston, G. (2004) Constructing the meaning of social exclusion as a policy metaphor, in K. Jacobs, J. Kemeny, and T. Manzi (Eds.) *Social constructionism in housing research* (Hampshire, England, Ashgate).
- Marston, G. (2000) Metaphor, morality and myth: a critical discourse of public housing policy in Queensland, *Critical Social Policy*, 20(3), pp. 349-373.

- May, J. (2000) Housing histories and homeless careers: A biographical approach, *Housing Studies*, 15(4), pp. 613-638.
- MacKenzie, D. & Chamberlain, C. (2003) *Homeless Careers: Pathways In and Out of Homelessness*, May 2003. A report from the *Counting The Homeless 2001* project, funded by all state and territory governments and the Salvation Army. (Melbourne, RMIT and Swinburne Universities' Melbourne).  
<[http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/reports/Homeless\\_Careers\\_2003.pdf](http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/reports/Homeless_Careers_2003.pdf)>
- McNamara, N. (2000) *Drifting ... A Report into the Depth of Need for Single Men's SAAP Services and Accommodation Options in the North Metropolitan Region*. (Victoria, Merri Housing Service).
- Norris, K., Thompson, D., Eardley, T. and Hoffman, S. (2005) *Children in the Supported Accommodation Assistance program (SAAP) Final Report*. August. (Sydney, Social Policy Research Centre)
- Parker, S. and Fopp, R. (2004) The Mutual Obligation Policy in Australia: the rhetoric and reasoning of recent social security policy, *Contemporary Politics*, 10(3-4), pp. 257-269.
- Parker, S. and Fopp, R. (2005) Mutual obligation. Regulating supervision and surveillance in Australian Income Support Policy, *Surveillance and Society*, ([http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/Articles3\(1\)/mutual.pdf](http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/Articles3(1)/mutual.pdf)) 3(1), pp. 107-128.
- Parker S. and Fopp, R. (2004a) "I'm the slice of the pie that's ostracised...": Foucault's technologies, and personal agency, in the voice of women who are homeless, Adelaide, South Australia, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 21, pp. 1-10.
- Social Inclusion Unit (2003) *Everyone's Responsibility: Reducing Homelessness in South Australia* (Adelaide, Department of Premier and Cabinet).
- Snow, D.A. and Anderson, L. (1993) *Down on their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People* (Berkley, University of California Press).
- Stojanovic, D., Weitzman, B., Shinn, M., Labay, L., and Williams, N. (1999) Tracing the path out of homelessness: The housing patterns of families after exiting shelter, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(2), pp. 199-208.
- Sydney City Mission (1995) *Shadow people: The Reality of Homelessness in the 1990s* (Sydney, Sydney City Mission).
- Turner, G.W. (1987) *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. 7<sup>th</sup> Edition edited by J. B. Sykes (Melbourne, Oxford University Press).
- Watkins, L. (2003) *Silting Up? A Survey of London Hostels and Move-on Accommodation and Support*. (Resource Information Service, Greater London Authority).