

Beyond positivism: Giving a voice to low income renters in research about housing assistance and paid work

Kath Hulse and Lise Saugeres

Associate Professor Kath Hulse
Institute for Social Research, Mail H53
Swinburne University of Technology
PO Box 218
Hawthorn, Vic. 3122
ph: (03) 9214 5321
email: khulse@swin.edu.au

Abstract

Does housing assistance encourage or discourage participation in paid work? This question is generated by a public policy paradigm of moving low income households from reliance on 'welfare benefits' and into paid work. Much of the consequent research in Australia and internationally has investigated the structural financial disincentives faced by such households in considering paid work and the statistical correlations between receipt of 'welfare benefits', including housing assistance, and engagement in paid work. Other than a handful of qualitative studies which investigate 'behavioural responses' to structural financial disincentives, we know very little about the attitudes, preferences and decision making of the people in receipt of housing assistance.

In this paper, we report on research that took a more sociological approach to the issue, connecting with research outside of 'housing studies' which considers the practices of everyday life and the ways in which these interact with cultural attitudes and values. The research involved in-depth qualitative interviews with 105 low income households living in social housing or getting Rent Assistance, two-thirds of them women. It found that those interviewed had experienced considerable instability in family life, paid work, housing circumstances and other life experiences. As a result, their daily lives were shaped by the need to (re)establish some stability, particularly in terms of managing their mental and physical health and caring for children and other relatives. Giving a voice to low income renters in this way shows the complex range of factors which underpin decision making about housing and paid work, and the interrelationship between housing and other important aspects of individual and family wellbeing.

Key words: qualitative research, interpretive sociology, housing assistance, economic participation

Introduction

Housing research in Australia and elsewhere has long been criticised on three related aspects: the strong but often unexplicated influence of positivism on housing research (e.g. Marston 2002); lack of explicit theory and failure to connect with theoretical developments in various disciplines (e.g. Kemeny 1992, Jacobs and Manzi 2000); and uncritical acceptance of constructs, questions and issues framed within housing policy debates (e.g. Ball et al. 1988, Saugeres 1999). There are, however, clear and positive signs that some housing research is addressing these criticisms. A few researchers have engaged explicitly with issues of epistemology (e.g. Allen 2005), and more explicit linkages are being made with theoretical debates (e.g. Clapham 2005, Jacobs et al. 2004), including a questioning of the ways in which 'housing problems' are identified within a social constructionist perspective (e.g. Jacobs et al. 2003).

Notwithstanding these developments, much housing research remains atheoretical in its conception and positivist in its approach, particularly that which is funded by governments to investigate 'housing problems'. Whilst the general issue of conducting research within an environment in which funding streams are allocated by governments to address perceived policy concerns has been canvassed elsewhere (eg Atkinson and Jacobs 2006), there are few accounts of whether, and how, other types of research could be attempted in this environment. Similarly, whilst there has been considerable discussion of the limitations of positivism in general, there are few specific examples of how research grounded in different epistemologies could investigate the same research questions within one program of research. This paper attempts to illuminate these issues through one case study: an in depth examination of a research project we were involved in which was framed in terms of interpretive sociology but conducted within, and funded as part of, a program of applied and 'policy centred' research.

The paper is somewhat unusual in that it is a detailed and reflexive account by us, as practising researchers, on the potential and challenges of applying the understandings and methods of interpretive sociology to a program of research framed in terms of housing and public policy issues of the day and which anticipated clear answers about causal linkages between predefined variables. The aim of the paper is to reflect on how this framework affected three key aspects of the research process: the conceptualisation of the research topic, epistemology and research methods, and the insights generated through our research.

We proceed as follows. Firstly, we argue that the construction of the policy problem to which the research was addressed was shaped substantially by the institutional settings in which housing programs in Australia are embedded. Secondly, we question an assumed dichotomy between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' research projects, finding that they differed not so much in terms of research methods but in epistemology and theoretical perspective, and we outline our research approach which involved an in depth investigation of perspectives of the people whose observed behaviours were the focus of the research program. Thirdly, we provide examples from our research of the contributions that interpretive social science can make to enhancing understanding of the cultural attitudes of, and practical considerations facing, low income people in Australia who are not in paid work, focusing in particular on the role of housing and place. Finally, we reflect briefly on the challenges and limitations of undertaking such research within a research program which was explicit in its positivism.

The construction of a 'policy problem'

Much housing research, as indicated above, has been criticised for assuming that 'housing problems' are self-evident and based on an 'objective' assessment of difficulties being faced by people and households. An upsurge of interest in social constructionism by housing researchers, albeit belatedly, has provided an alternative view of such problems as being contested and socially constructed (Jacobs et al. 2004,

Clapham 2005). Whilst much of the research which has been grounded in social constructionism has been stimulated by a post-Foucaultian interest in discourse through analysis of language and text, work on the construction of social problems has a much longer and more varied genealogy. In this context, it is important to consider the ways in which policies are constructed in terms of institutional arrangements that are in place to 'deal with' definitions of housing problems (Kemeny 2004: 64).

Our research was located within a program of research funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research institute (AHURI) which established a National Research Venture (NRV1)¹ on 'Housing Assistance and Economic Participation'. The NRV is essentially a linked program of research projects in several universities, negotiated with 'users' in federal and state/territory government departments with responsibility for housing assistance, either directly via a 'user group' or indirectly via AHURI Ltd.² NRV1 was originally conceived as investigating the linkages between government 'housing assistance' and what have been termed 'non-shelter' outcomes, drawing attention to the possible role of government housing programs in shaping not only traditional 'shelter' outcomes such as affordability, housing quality and appropriateness, but also broader non-shelter outcomes. The NRV was preceded by a systematic review of research 'evidence' on the linkages between housing assistance and such outcomes, in particular, education, employment, health, crime, neighbourhood effects and social capital, income and wealth distribution and rates of poverty, and housing market effects (Bridge et al. 2003).

The research program subsequently narrowed its focus to only one type of non-shelter outcome, 'economic participation', which referred to 'employment, retirement, education and training decisions' (AHURI 2003: 3). This decision was explained as being because 'the [federal] government welfare reform agenda is very much focused on the role of income maintenance and subsidy programs in promoting higher rates of economic participation' and 'the recently concluded CSHA agreement requires State Housing Authorities (SHAs) to design and implement reforms that will promote economic participation among public housing tenants' (AHURI 2003: 3). The latter refers to the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA), a multilateral agreement between the federal government and all state and territory governments which has been the centrepiece of Australian housing policy since 1945. These arrangements have indicated considerable institutional path dependence over more than 60 years and are the primary means by which the SHAs maintain and develop their public housing portfolios.

The NRV1 research program was thus framed explicitly in terms of the policy paradigm of 'welfare reform'. Since 1999 the federal government has used the CSHA to promote changes to social housing to minimise work disincentives, and one of the guiding principles of the (current) 2003 Agreement is 'to ensure that housing assistance supports access to employment and promotes social and economic participation' (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 1(1) 7). For the first time, a financial penalty is applied to states and territories which do not introduce measures to reduce workforce disincentives for social housing renters including, but not restricted to, reform of rent setting systems in public housing (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: Schedule 1, 22). Thus it is in their financial and political interests to demonstrate that their programs do not provide such disincentives. A similar situation can be seen in the United States where housing researchers have attempted to demonstrate the positive effects of government rental housing assistance programs on 'welfare reform' (see Sard and

¹ The NRV was initially called a Collaborative Research Venture (CRV).

² The authors wish to thank Professor Gavin Wood (RMIT University), Director of AHURI NRV1, for his openness to different research approaches, support for our research project, and constructive discussions of the contributions of research from different disciplines and research approaches.

Bogdon 2003 for a review). The policy paradigm of welfare reform meant that the emphasis was mainly on engagement in paid work rather than other types of economic participation, such as voluntary work.

Further, the conception of housing assistance was also narrow. The NRV focused on *direct government rental housing assistance programs*, in particular, public housing and housing allowances for private renters embedded within the income support system (Rent Assistance (RA)).³ This excluded consideration of tax concessions for housing purposes, notably, capital gains tax exemption for owner occupiers. In other words, the 'policy problem' to which the research program has been addressed is primarily confined to direct government assistance to renters, which is typically subject to more scrutiny from governments than assistance to owner occupiers. This flies in the face of other research, for example, the so-called 'Oswald thesis' which suggests that people who own their homes outright (with no debt) are likely to reduce their labour force participation (cited in Bridge et al. 2003). The reasons for this focus appear to be, firstly, that the institutional settings have been very important such that state and territory governments are preoccupied with maintaining federal funding for their public housing portfolios. Secondly, it appears that government 'users' of the research are less interested in economic participation more generally than in public tenants and people in receipt of RA payments who do not engage in paid work, regarding this as a behaviour which can (and should) be changed if housing assistance programs are designed differently. This reflects a view about behaviours termed 'welfare dependency', the assumptions of which have been critiqued by a number of writers (eg Martin 2004, Levitas 2005). There appears to be no such concern with regulating the behaviours of owner occupiers.

A question of epistemology not research methods

The NRV has as its overarching research question: 'How do housing assistance programs impact on economic participation outcomes once we control for the mediating effects that intermediary variables such as "health" and "neighbourhood" have on economic participation outcomes?' (Wood and Ong 2005). This question indicates a positivist epistemology (and objectivist ontology), referring to a theory of knowledge that is based on direct sensory perception of observable phenomena in which the researcher is detached from the object of the research. The task is to identify the linkages between several discrete variables to develop a causal explanation and hence to generate capacity for prediction. The question itself implies the direction of causality: that housing assistance is an independent variable and causes, either directly or via intermediary variables, changes in economic participation. At face value, this is curious, as one would expect not having a job to be a likely cause of being in receipt of housing assistance. The question can only be understood in terms of policy makers' interest in considering changes to rental housing assistance programs to improve rates of engagement in paid work. Whilst this is understandable, to the extent that policy makers want to know which 'levers' to pull in achieving their outcomes, the implied direction of causality is questionable.

The research question recognises that causality can be difficult to determine and that the role of other 'mediating variables' such as 'health' and 'neighbourhood' was to be established. It recognises that these variables were multi-dimensional and that there were, for example, various aspects of government housing assistance that could affect employment participation in addition to rent setting, such as allocation and transfer policies and the location of new public housing. There is also recognition that these effects could be positive or negative and that there would be some measurement

³ The NRV was also to 'permit exploration of the potential impacts on economic participation outcomes attributable to HA [housing assistance] measures that encourage home ownership (e.g. First Home Owner Grants (FHOG))' (AHURI 2003: 4).

difficulties, for example, that the quality of employment participation 'outcomes' might not be measurable from the data, if for example a person was in paid work but not in one that met their expectations in terms of job type or conditions (AHURI 2003: 4).

Much research into economic participation in Australia (and elsewhere) is explicitly positivist and focuses on observable behaviours rather than subjective understandings. It attempts to establish relationships between key variables, for example, between low rates of participation in paid work and poor physical and mental health (ABS 2005), child care, lack of training and disability (ABS 2006) and low educational level and anxiety and stress disorders (Laplagne et al. 2007). One way of looking at this type of research is as a mapping exercise to situate clusters of observed behaviours and to represent (diagrammatically) the ways in which these appear to be linked. A useful analogy for such positivism is the map of the London Underground which represents graphically the transport network, the stations and the linkages between them through use of geometric lines and colours.⁴ We know that the Underground does not look like that due to topography and other factors, but the map is useful in illustrating the whole system and the interlinkages between the parts and has been widely copied. However, it is an abstraction from people's daily lives and does not enable an understanding of many important questions, such as why people travel on the Underground, whether their previous experiences have affected their travel, whether they feel safe, what they think about the services, and how their travel links with other aspects of their lives. Further, the abstraction may be misleading, for example, it is quicker to walk between some of the stations, but this is not obvious from the map.

Whilst identifying the relationships between housing assistance and economic participation is useful in clarifying component variables and mapping the relationships between them, like the map of the London Underground it is an abstraction and there are several limitations. Even in its own terms, it typically identifies correlation rather than demonstrates causality. More fundamentally, the variables are social constructions but can become reified so that we forget the concepts that lie behind them. For example, the concept of paid work is essentially gendered as it treats differently the same activity, e.g. domestic work, child care and other care work, when it is carried out in the home compared to outside the home. Aggregation of observable behaviours disguises diversity in the social world and does not tell us about the lived experiences of people who are in receipt of rental housing assistance and the motivations, attitudes, beliefs and understanding that underlie their behaviours. There is little empirical research even into what changes in behaviours are associated with financial incentives and disincentives to paid work (Reference Group on Welfare Reform 2000: 48), without considering any other factors that people may take into account. One study did explore some of these 'other factors' and found unemployed job seekers who rented their accommodation took into account non-financial factors, such as retaining skills and self-confidence, as well as financial factors when making decisions about paid work. It also noted that there appeared to be some differences in attitudes which were associated with gender (Hulse and Randolph 2004).

The plan for NRV1 recognised some of these difficulties and always envisaged that there would be some qualitative research, originally in two stages. The first was to establish 'subjective understanding' of affordability, appropriateness, stability, poverty and unemployment traps amongst housing assistance recipients, the perceived relative importance of mediating variables that impact on economic participation outcomes, and the norms of economic participation amongst housing assistance recipients (AHURI 2003: 7). The second was to 'seek to validate and extend the findings of the quantitative modelling exercises. Evidence is more convincing if it can be corroborated from multiple methodological approaches, i.e. if it employs triangulation methods of validation' (AHURI 2003: 9). The process of triangulation was not detailed and the often

⁴ Originally designed by Harry Beck and first printed in 1932, and in use ever since.

vexed issue of combining quantitative and qualitative data was not considered further, although there are various options for doing this (Miles and Huberman 1994, Flick 2002).

The two stages of qualitative research were subsequently rolled into one project which had as its stated aim: 'To explore factors that encourage or discourage recipients of housing assistance in making transitions into various forms of economic participation, including the relationships between these factors' (Hulse and Saugeres 2008). We were members of the research team that conducted this project.⁵ Whilst the research design for the NRV distinguished between quantitative and qualitative research, the essential difference was one of epistemology rather than research methods (quantitative versus qualitative), since some methods can be used in both contexts (Crotty 1998). Our research was grounded in an interpretivist epistemology in which knowledge is derived from everyday concepts and meanings – lived experiences and actors' definitions. This involves understanding of the whole rather than component parts (variables), and includes a time dimension and a cultural context. It recognises that attitudes of today are often grounded in previous experiences and the cultural context in which people live their lives. Such research is not intended to establish causation ('why'), although it may generate understanding of the chain of events; it is intended to understand how people come to make decisions ('how').

Interpretive research can be informed by a wide range of theoretical perspectives. Our thinking was shaped by feminist theory and started from the view that much housing research has been gender-blind, not acknowledging the ways in which the social construction of gender shapes women's and men's housing experiences and needs differently. This is despite women comprising just under two-thirds of all those in receipt of government rental housing assistance in Australia. Some of the positivist housing research has noted that the highest number of people receiving housing assistance and living under the poverty line are women, but without exploring this further. Our interviews were designed to explore the issues facing women and men in terms of economic participation. They explored how housing impacted differently on women's and men's labour market decisions, reflecting unequal gender relations within the family, the labour market and patriarchal social structures and policies.

Our research involved 105 in-depth interviews with people living in six locations in New South Wales and Victoria. All were in receipt of Centrelink (income support) payments and in receipt of government housing assistance, either living in various types of social housing or renting privately and in receipt of RA. They were selected to mirror the major groups in receipt of these two types of assistance (social housing and RA), namely, approximately two-thirds women and one-third men, different stages in workforce participation (younger, middle years and mature age), and including people with physical and mental health and other issues. Data from the quantitative research had already indicated the characteristics of housing assistance recipients (Kelly et al. 2005). Interviewees were recruited through local agencies and services, supplemented by articles in local newspapers and a very limited amount of snowballing.

In interpretive research, interviews are seen as being rooted in social interaction. As Mishler (1986) points out, the interview is a discourse that is shaped by the asking and answering of questions, so that it is a joint product of what the interviewer and interviewee talk about. Our view is that qualitative interviewing requires an open-ended format by which the interviewer guides the interview according to the research framework but allows for the interviewees to express themselves on their own terms. As a result, the interviews focused around themes such as: family and education history; housing history; practical issues and attitudes in regard to benefit receipt,

⁵ The team comprised researchers from Swinburne University of Technology and the University of New South Wales and the chief investigators were Kath Hulse and Bill Randolph.

housing assistance, paid work and voluntary activities, mental and physical health, caring responsibilities and age; trade-off questions about paid work; and aspirations and plans for the future. The interviews averaged about one and a half hours, and the nature of the interviews meant that they were often not linear, that is, not working through the themes and questions chronologically.

The interviews were recorded electronically, with the permission of the interviewees, then transcribed and analysed with the assistance of NVivo software. Essentially the process of analysis involves immersion in the data, notwithstanding the assistance of the software. Whilst each person interviewed had their own story and unique set of circumstances, analysis of such a large number of interviews enables patterns to be discerned and a framework developed for communicating the findings, which are then illustrated through use of narrative (Flick 2002).

The contribution of interpretive social science

What then did a research project based on interpretivist sociology add to the research program of the NRV? It is not our intention here to give a full account of the findings, since this is given elsewhere (2008). Rather, in this section, we reflect on three of the contributions made by the project from the extremely rich and textured data generated.

The importance of personal and family histories

One of the contributions of the project was to highlight that attitudes to, and decisions on, economic participation cannot be understood purely in terms of a snapshot of currently observed behaviours, nor in terms of correlations even when these attempt to account for past circumstances, as for example between living in public housing and not living with both parents as a teenager (Kelly et al. 2005: 14). Our research found that current experiences, attitudes and understandings of people in receipt of housing assistance are integrally related to their previous experiences. Most of those we interviewed had very fractured and unstable employment and housing histories and, importantly, these were linked with instability in family background and circumstances. Even though individual experiences were extremely varied, patterns of high levels of residential and geographical mobility, of employment mobility with periods in and out of the labour force, and of family instability both as children and as adults were common to almost all the interviewees.

Typical of this was Katrina, 21, single parent with two children, living in western Sydney:

We got, we moved around a lot because dad was hardly ever home, he was working a lot. He was doing security and all I remember was that we used to move around a lot and we stayed at a couple of mum's friends' families, like friend's houses for a while until we got another place and stuff like that.

Level of educational achievement for many was low, often associated with low expectations by their families and themselves. Our interviewees had worked mainly, and often episodically, in low skilled and low paid jobs. We also found quite high rates of reported child abuse and family violence which often had profound effects on subsequent family, housing and employment circumstances. For example, Lorna, 53, single, on the Disability Support Pension, living in Ballarat:

R: I've got an older brother who was not a very nice person. So I grew up in a very volatile single family with a lot of domestic violence and family violence and abuse.

I: So when you were living with your mother?

R: With my mother and brother. When I was about 12 my grandmother stepped in and I went to live with her, which gave me a bit of a break. So

yeah, she sort of - I think I would have been a runaway living on the street child if it hadn't have been for her.

There were many reasons for instability, but a pattern of residential mobility and instability was common. Three broad patterns of housing histories were apparent. Firstly, most had moved several times within one or two areas but had stayed in the same housing for several years, usually when they have had children, before finding themselves in unstable housing situations again, for instance, due to a marriage or relationship breakdown, escape from domestic violence or abuse from neighbours, or simply an increase in rent or a house sale. Many had lived across housing tenures. Secondly, a significant number had moved a very high number of times between states, sometimes countries, as well as within the same town, and had often lived across tenures. Several in this group had also escaped violence and had stayed in one type of housing and place for several years, but they were more usually people who had not had any children and had a very strong history of area mobility as adults. Thirdly, the smallest category was people who had moved a few times when they were younger but had now been living in the same property for many years, usually public housing. Typical of these was Jackie, 36, partnered with several children, living in Ballarat:

Yes, we haven't moved. That's probably from my past, you know. I don't want to uproot my kids like I was. I'd make friends at a school and then gone, you know. My kids are a very stable foundation. I said to John [her partner], when they grow up we can move and do what we like, but at the moment we are not going nowhere.

The interviews indicate that past experiences of instability and mobility are important in understanding attitudes to different types of economic participation, including paid work and current decisions. Further, these experiences of family/relationships, education, paid work and housing are interconnected. For example, a family or relationship breakdown often triggered a change of housing and/or area, withdrawal from education and/or inability to maintain a paid job. For some people, their experiences of instability and mobility had been interspersed with relatively stable periods in terms of family relationships, paid work and housing, although many had never been in this situation. These findings enable a deeper understanding of the current attitudes and decisions of housing assistance recipients about paid work and other types of economic participation. They also highlight the importance of a growing body of research on the 'meaning of home' which is likely to vary according to the past experiences of households and the people within them. Our research supports the view of Clapham (2005: 30) that the meaning of home for households and individuals cannot be seen in isolation, but in the context of other aspects of life such as employment or family issues.

Cultural attitudes: Safety and security

In view of past experiences of instability and insecurity, whether or not these had involved residential mobility, many of those interviewed valued highly safety and security for themselves and those for whom they were responsible. For some, this meant security of tenure in their current housing, particularly in the case of those living in social housing or seeking to access such housing. For example, Jacob, 38, single, living in public housing on the New South Wales Central Coast with his father who has health problems:

I: Do you know what would happen to your rent if you did work?

R: Yeah, and that's why I don't want to work. I'd lose everything, I waited 11 years for it, you know, why should I just let it go in one hit. I mean, the jobs, I mean, you're going to pay for it in the long run but this is a house for life. No matter if I've, I mean, if I want to go and I can leave the house to

my dad, you know what I mean. It's there all the time, you don't have to worry about getting kicked out unless you misbehave, of course, but we don't do that. We're all pretty quiet, there's only five houses in our cul de sac.

The way in which security was interpreted often went beyond security of tenure as used within a housing policy discourse. The desire for security was often less specific, reflecting a weariness with having to pack up and move home again. For instance, Donna, 52, single, with five children who do not live at home, renting privately in western Sydney:

I: Any problems living here?

R: Only because of the high rent and not working. It's really frazzled me and it's not that easy for me to just pack up everything I've got and look for something else, because I've already done that and it still doesn't work out. I need to be settled in cheap accommodation.

In other situations, finding affordable accommodation meant sharing with others, which resulted in a lack of control over their living environment and in potential or actual risk to personal safety. For example, Ralph, 53, single, living in a private boarding house in Dandenong, had been retrenched from his job and could no longer afford the rent on his house while on income support payments including RA:

When you lose your job and you can't get another one and you're on Centrelink payments, you can't afford \$180 a week. So eventually I had to leave that place because I couldn't pay the rent ... I mean, the last year and a half and two years has been sort of a rough ride because it's put me in a, in an area I haven't experienced before ... This first place, what happened ... after a couple of months another guy moved in and he ended up being into drugs, so, you know, and then it took me a while to actually know what he was doing, what it was all about, and that's quite a scary sort of situation after a while and, you know, without going into details, it got sort of pretty messy at the end and I couldn't quite handle it ... So I ended up leaving after about 13 months and I moved into another place and the woman in there, she was quite sick, depressed and schizophrenic. I was in there a couple of weeks and she called the police for no reason. So these are the things, so now I'm in another place, here, and just the people in there are just, they're just different from what I've been brought up as, you know. I'm dealing with really low class desperate people. I know that sounds awful, but that's the situation. It makes it really difficult because it doesn't make you feel good about yourself.

These examples provide insights into the ways in which people in receipt of housing assistance view their situation and the importance of safety and security to them. They also indicate how perceptions of safety and security can affect daily lived experiences. Private renters are concerned about the insecurity and instability of their housing and their lack of control over the condition of their premises and whether they can get necessary repairs done. They are, however, able to exercise control in a negative sense if the problems are too severe by moving out. Some had attempted to share or move into cheaper accommodation but often these arrangements had not worked out. Public renters had the benefit of additional security, which some found had settled their families so that they could then think about finding work or trying to improve their educational level. Others found that public housing threw up additional problems with neighbours, restricted choices, and problems with the quality of housing that negated the anticipated benefits of security of tenure. They wanted to move back into private rental so that they could exercise more control over their circumstances.

Place: The logistics of everyday life

The research highlighted the importance of the place in which people in receipt of housing assistance live. Place is affected by bureaucratic decision making, in the case of social housing tenants, and by affordability and other constraints for those renting privately. Place mattered to many of those interviewed because they did not have access to a car and/or didn't have a current driver's licence.⁶ For the men, this was mainly due to problems with drugs or alcohol, health problems or criminal charges, whilst the women said mainly that they were affected by health problems, could not afford a car or felt uncomfortable about driving. Some were planning to buy a car or hoped that they would get their licence back in a few months, and thought that this would make a big difference in terms of looking for work.

Most of the casual work available to men requires them to drive as part of the job, such as truck driver, construction worker, bus driver, repairman, courier or removalist. Other employers also required their employees to have a car. For instance, Gus, 58, who lived in public housing in south-western Sydney and could not afford to buy a car, had applied for a job as a handyman in a hardware store:

If you don't have transport they don't want you because you can't be on time or if it is raining - what are you going to do, you will be late. I said to him I can walk, I can do the exercise, walk or pushbike. No, it doesn't work like that. So transport is the priority always.

For many of those without a car, having to rely on public transport severely restricted the employment that they were able to find as they could only take up work in areas which they could travel to and from by public transport and in jobs that did not require driving/having a car. Women with children, particularly single mothers, had to find work near the school and where they lived or somewhere that did not involve a long journey.

Caroline, 31, a single parent with one child living in public housing in Ballarat, did not have a car for a while because she could not afford the repairs. After obtaining a bank loan and having a car for a few weeks, she could do some casual work once a week:

There's a home daycare lady down the road now, which I can drop her off to and she'll take her to school for me if I go to work, and I think it's \$4.50 an hour. But the thing - I had no bus service to take me, because the buses didn't start until 6.30 a.m. and I had to already have her dropped off by then, and then try to find another bus to get me back to work, to be at work by 7 a.m. So I couldn't do the three bus trips when there's none, and I wasn't going to pay \$20 a day in cabs to do that. So now I've got the car I'm not so stranded like I was.

Even with a car, many mothers found difficulty in combining paid work with dropping off and picking up their children. For example, Melissa, 36, single, with three children, living in Darebin:

It would probably have to be worth it for me to travel. Living in Darebin I'm close enough to the city that I would be prepared to jump on a train. It's only 15 minutes. The way petrol is, there's no hope that I would drive somewhere. It would have to be somewhere accessible by public transport or within a 10 to 15 minute drive. I've travelled from Brunswick to South Melbourne, which was 45 minutes down Punt Road twice a day. Drove me mad. Didn't have kids then. With kids it's totally different. When it comes to your work, it's one thing about your start time and your finish time, but

⁶ 33 of the 71 women interviewed and 28 of the 34 men did not have access to a car for a variety of reasons.

you've got travel time on top of that and if you're travelling during peak hour, your work day becomes a lot longer.

Not having access to a car created stress for those who had caring responsibilities which was compounded when they lived in places with a high concentration of people with particular needs. This created more stress, as well as a sense of insecurity and fear for their safety and their children. In turn, this could have an impact on their abilities and decisions to take up regular paid work. Single mothers feared for their children's safety, especially in areas with social problems, and felt it was particularly important to be there when their children were at home. For example, Sally, 39, a sole parent with three children aged 11 to 15, living in western Sydney:

I know some people that do long hours of work and they get their 15-year-old to mind their five-year-old. I wasn't willing to let my kids mind themselves at 5 in the morning when I had a younger one, and I didn't even walk around the block at that time in the morning. I wasn't sure how safe they were in the house. Maybe it was just an involuntary fear, just being a single parent I wasn't willing to leave them there in case there was an accident or electrical fire or anything. I thought, if I got back and something happened to them ... So maybe there's an inbuilt sort of unreasonable fear when you're a single parent, especially in an area where ... I mean, one day I came out and the police were chasing a guy with a knife in his hand and they ran through my backyard.

Not having access to a car and having to rely on public transport was difficult for people in most areas but was a particular issue in regional areas (Ballarat, Central Coast) and some outer suburbs, particularly in Sydney. The logistics of daily living when working or looking for work were very difficult or so daunting, when combined with other factors such as health or caring responsibilities, that some people left the labour force and were not currently looking for work.

Conclusions: Reflections on the research

Research of the type undertaken in this project has been described as aiming to 'elicit the contextualised nature of experience and action, and attempts to generate analyses that are detailed, "thick", and integrative (in the sense of relating individual events and interpretations to larger meaning systems and patterns)' (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005: 2). We have illustrated three examples of the ways in which this type of research, through eliciting the experiences of people in receipt of housing assistance and how they construct meaning, deepens our understanding of attitudes to, and decisions on, economic participation, particularly paid work. The examples show some clear differences between the experiences of men and women, particularly women who have primary caring responsibilities.

How then can the findings of this type of interpretive research be related, if at all, to other research on housing assistance and economic participation from a different epistemology? As discussed above, the original research design for the NRV envisaged an accumulation of evidence from different data sources and different research designs to answer one major research question which was framed very much within a positivist paradigm. A first option is to attempt to integrate diverse projects to produce one set of findings which attempt to validate findings from different perspectives. This is likely to be the preferred position of policy makers who generally want clear and valid answers to the questions they have posed so that they can make changes to 'policy levers' that are likely to deliver the results that they want.⁷ This can

⁷ In discussion at the conference, a participant made the interesting observation that practitioners are more likely to relate to qualitative research which indicates complexity,

be attempted formally with triangulation techniques that attempt to establish 'validity', or less formally and more pragmatically through identification of 'common ground' from research conducted in different disciplines and using different theoretical perspectives as well as different research methods. There is, however, a danger that positivist (quantitative) research is given a privileged position and that the interpretive qualitative research will be used as 'colour and movement' to make the findings of quantitative research more vivid. For example, it can be used to provide interesting quotes out of the context in which they were made.

A second option is to conclude that there are epistemological incompatibilities between our research and the other projects in the NRV which cannot be reduced to technical questions of integration of different research methods. In this sense, our research project could be conceived of as what Flick (2002: 263) describes as being conducted separately but side by side with projects using other research methods. In this case, it is quite possible for findings to be divergent or contradictory. This would be a missed opportunity as some iteration between research methods was envisaged in the research design. In practice, this involved sharing of information and informal discussions.

A third option is to acknowledge and respect different epistemologies and theoretical perspectives (and research methods) and to consider the contributions of various research projects as focusing on different aspects of an issue in a way which is complementary and which leads to a fuller understanding than for any individual research project (Kelle and Erzberger 2002). In essence, our research focused on the subjective meanings that people in receipt of housing assistance have about family life, housing and economic participation, in particular, paid work. The other projects establish relationships between variables such as housing assistance status and type of economic participation and tested hypotheses, for example, about whether the administration of housing assistance operates in such a way as to discourage people from engaging in paid work. The former is about the construction of meaning in the context of lived experiences, whilst the latter is about patterns of observed behaviours. Presentations on the NRV to date have tended to adopt this model, with joint but separate presentations of the research findings. This option of separate but complementary research findings is perhaps the most desirable, and this was the approach ultimately adopted in the Final Report of the NRV (Dockery et al 2008) although the recommendations are based on integration of the findings in some cases.

Finally, and returning to the issue of the construction of problems to be researched in a housing policy discourse, our research raised considerable questions about assumptions of so-called rationality in decision-making that frame policy makers understanding the linkages between housing assistance and economic participation. The people that we interviewed have different experiences, concerns and perspectives than the policy makers who are interested in changing their behaviours. It is important that social science researchers be involved in research 'regarding vulnerable and marginalised populations in the present climate of "moral discourse" in the postmodern world' (Lincoln and Denzin 2000: 1048). This has many dilemmas and complexities, as discussed above. The ultimate contribution of interpretive research is that, notwithstanding the processes of mediation involved, it is a means of representing the voices of people who would otherwise be unheard in debates about housing policy. In the case of our research, there was a particular emphasis on the voices of women who are most affected by government housing assistance in Australia.

situational context and the importance of actors' meanings, since they are aware of these on a day to day basis in their work.

References

- ABS (2005) *Australian Labour Market Statistics, April 2005*, Cat. no. 6105.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra
- (2006) *Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Aug 2004 to Jun 2005*, Cat. no. 6239.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra
- AHURI (2003) *Collaborative Research Venture 1, Housing Assistance and Non-Shelter Outcomes, Full CRV Plan*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne (unpublished)
- Allen, C. (2005) 'On the epistemological limitations of the "area effects" debate: Towards a phenomenology of urban deprivation', *Housing, Theory and Society*, 22(4), 196-212
- Atkinson, R. and Jacobs, K. (2006) The social forces and politics of housing research in Australia and the UK: Reflections from within the academy, Occasional Paper No 7, Housing and Community Research Unit, University of Tasmania, <http://www.utas.edu.au/sociology/HACRU/HACRU%207.pdf>
- Ball, M., Harloe, M. and Martens, M. (1988) *Housing and Social Change in Europe and the USA*, Routledge, London
- Bridge, C., Flatau, P., Whelan, S., Wood, G. and Yates, J. (2003) *Housing Assistance and Non-Shelter Outcomes*, Final Report, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne
- Clapham, D. (2005) *The Meaning of Housing: A Pathways Approach*, Policy Press, Bristol
- Commonwealth of Australia (2003) *2003 Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, Schedule 1, Housing Assistance (Form of Agreement) Determination 2003*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra
- Crotty, M. (1998) *The Foundations of Social Research*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney
- Dockery, M., Feeny, S., Hulse, K., Ong, R., Saugeres, L., Spong, H., Whelan, S. and Wood, G., (2008) *Housing Assistance and Economic Participation, Final Report*, National Research Venture 1, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (forthcoming)
- Flick, U. (2002) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn, Sage, London
- Hulse, K. and Randolph, B. (2004) *Work Disincentives and Housing Assistance*, Final Report, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne
- Hulse, K. and Saugeres, L. (2008) *Home Life, Work and Housing Decisions: A Qualitative Analysis*, Research Paper, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne
- Jacobs, K., Kemeny, J. and Manzi, T. (2003) 'Power, discursive space and institutional practices in the construction of housing problems', *Housing Studies*, 18(4), 429-46
- (eds) (2004) *Social Constructionism in Housing Research*, Ashgate, Aldershot
- Jacobs, K. and Manzi, T. (2000) 'Evaluating the social constructionist paradigm in housing research', *Housing, Theory and Society*, 17(1), 35-42
- Kelle, U. and Erzberger, C. (2002) 'Quantitative and qualitative methods: No confrontation', in Flick, U., Kardorff, E. and Steinke, I. (eds) *Qualitative Research: A Handbook*, Sage, London
- Kelly, S., Ong, R. and Wood, G. (2005) *A Detailed Profiling of Housing Assistance Recipients Relative to Benchmark Groups in the Australian Population*, Research Paper no. 4, National Research Venture 1, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne
- Kemeny, J. (1992) *Housing and Social Theory*, Routledge, London

- (2004) 'Extending constructionist social problems to the study of housing problems', in Jacobs, K., Kemeny, J. and Manzi, T. (eds) *Social Constructionism in Housing Research*, Ashgate, Aldershot
- Laplagne, P., Glover, M. and Shomos, A. (2007) *Effects of Health and Education on Labour Force Participation*, Staff Working Paper, Productivity Commission, Melbourne
- Levitas, R. (2005) *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour*, 2nd edn, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke
- Liamputtong, P. and Ezzy, D. (2005) *Qualitative Research Methods*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne
- Lincoln, Y. and Denzin, N. (2000) 'The seventh movement: Out of the past', in Lincoln, Y. and Denzin, N. (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- Marston, G. (2002) 'Critical discourse analysis and policy-related housing research', *Housing, Theory and Society*, 19(2), 82-91
- Martin, S. (2004) 'Reconceptualising social exclusion: A critical response to the neoliberal welfare reform agenda and the underclass thesis', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 39(1), 79-94
- Miles, M. and Huberman, A. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*, 2nd edn, Sage, Newbury Park, Calif.
- Mishler, E. (1986) *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000) *Interim Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform: Technical and Other Appendices*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra
- Sard, B. and Bogdon, A. (2003) *A Place to Live, a Means to Work: How Housing Assistance Can Strengthen Welfare Policy*, Fannie Mae Foundation, Washington, DC
- Saugeres, L. (1999) 'The social construction of housing management discourse: Objectivity, rationality and everyday practice', *Housing, Theory and Society*, 16(3), 93-105
- Steinmetz, G. (ed.) (2005) *The Politics of Method in Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC
- Wood, G. and Ong, R. (2005) *Housing Assistance and Economic Participation, National Research Venture 1: Housing Assistance and Economic Participation, Final Report: Stage 1*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne