

***“When you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there”<sup>1</sup>***

Does politically motivated research contribute to unethical research practices?

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*Measurement of social groups on the margins of a society represents a major political issue for decision-makers and militants, and can lead to a partisan use of statistics.*

*(Firdion et al., 2008:9)*

On the 21st of December 2008, the then Prime Minister, the Hon. Kevin Rudd MP and the Minister for Housing, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP released the Government's White Paper: 'The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness' (the White Paper). Following the release of the White Paper the Federal Government placed significant focus on reducing homelessness through the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) with State and Territory Governments. The White Paper and the NPAH position the resolution of homelessness as a contemporary political and public policy imperative. In this context it is especially important to consider how research is produced because there is an ethical risk inherent in engaging vulnerable individuals and groups of people in research activities. Research can be used for political purposes including measuring the success or failure of Government policies and accountability for associated spending of public money. It is therefore important to reiterate a fundamental principle of ethical research: If research does not contribute to knowledge or benefit those involved, regardless of whether or not it fulfils a political need for data, it is unethical. Ethical research practices that are inclusive of vulnerable people, including those who are homeless, are described in this paper as the 'roads' that lead to an ethical research destination.

The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (National Statement) presents a series of guidelines that are intended for use by researchers, research review and governance bodies and research participants within Australia (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007). According to the National Statement, the conduct of ethical research involves considerations of research merit and integrity, justice, beneficence and respect. Included in these considerations are key practice concerns that relate to risk, benefit and consent, which are fundamental to the ethical conduct of human research. It is noted in the National Statement that 'risks to research participants are ethically acceptable only if they are justified by the potential benefits of the research' (2007:17). It is also noted that gaining consent is not necessarily a straightforward process as consent given by research participants 'might reflect deference to the researcher's perceived position of power, or to someone else's wishes' (2007:20). This paper is structured to reflect the key themes of the National Statement.

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Chamberlain and Mackenzie's cultural definition of homelessness includes people living in marginal and insecure tenures, those who 'couch-surf' and people who sleep rough (1992). People who sleep rough are conspicuously homeless because they reside in public spaces. Researching rough sleepers poses significant ethical considerations because rough sleepers have no retreat to private spaces (Firdion et al., 2008). Compounding the potential for unethical research to be conducted on rough sleepers is the NPAH that obligates States and Territories to achieve a 25 per cent reduction in the number of rough sleepers by 2013. Counting rough sleepers has therefore become a considerable political issue and research undertaken to report on this political obligation is highly unlikely to satisfy basic ethical research principles as it does not benefit those involved in the research or make useful contributions to knowledge that focus on the prevention of homelessness or address the complex structural problems that cause homelessness (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007).

The importance of improving health and quality of life outcomes, including appropriate accommodation for rough sleepers is acknowledged as fundamental. However the concern raised in this paper relates to research undertaken on rough sleepers in order to fulfil political obligations without taking ethical practice into consideration including: the relative risk versus benefit to the participants of the research; informed consent in light of power imbalances and; considerations of what contribution the research will make both to knowledge and to the research participants and homeless populations more broadly (National Health and Medical Research Council et al., 2007).

### **Risk versus Benefit**

The benefits of research must outweigh the potential risks to research participants. Risks include burden, harm, discomfort and inconvenience arising from participation in the research. Firdion et al. (2008) highlight that a potential risk of participation in research is that it may be used for political purposes. Firdion et al. (ibid.) discuss this in relation to learning about and locating 'deviant' population groups in order to justify political aims and target political activities. Another risk however is the way in which research classifies and constructs homeless people as pathologised subjects. Paradis highlights that such research contributes to the marginalisation of homeless people by 'locating within marginalized communities and individuals the deficits responsible for their marginalization...because it seeks explanations for homelessness in the behaviour of individuals' (2000:840) rather than looking to the social conditions that have given rise to their marginalisation.

Political imperatives that drive research run the risk of exploiting research participants for their own ends. Exploitative research does not account for the complexity of homelessness and the experiences of homeless people themselves because it is driven by research or political agendas and assumptions. Paradis, a researcher who worked with homeless women in Canada, has highlighted that research is exploitative when:

The researcher's interests alone shape every step of the research process, from the formulation of the question through the collection of the data to the write up and dissemination of the results. And research resembles a colonial economy when researchers enter the world of participants uninvited,

extract a resource called data, process this resource into a product called theory, and use the product only toward their own ends.  
(Paradis, 2000:840)

## **Power Imbalances**

Individuals are often treated as objects from which data can be extracted, which implicitly positions research participants as less powerful than researchers, the latter of whom define and construct the production of knowledge. The unequal power implicit in the researcher-participant relationship poses problems for informed consent (Firdion et al., 2008). Firdion et al. (2008) have highlighted that participation involving or occurring in the presence of case workers or homelessness agency workers is complicated by the power that inheres in these relationships. Firdion et al. refer to this situation as producing a feeling of “having to reply” (2008:11). This feeling to which they refer is relatable to a sense of reciprocity that research participants may feel, particularly if they are in a researcher-participant relationship with a case worker or agency that regularly provide them with assistance and with whom they have developed interpersonal relationships.

Reciprocity has its roots in Mauss’ (1970 [1969]) theory of reciprocal gift exchange in which he contended that social bonds and solidarity are maintained through gift exchange. Reciprocity however does not only refer to gift exchange, but also to other forms of social exchange that are integral to the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Maiter et al. have proposed that reciprocity underlies ethical research conduct because ‘it underlies social relationships in general and ethical research relationships with diverse communities specifically’ (2008:307). Reciprocity should not be viewed as an arduous necessity that is tokenistically applied to research to claim ethical practice, but as enlightening to the research ‘since the process of negotiating priorities and learning what study participants expect to obtain from cooperating with researchers reveals valuable cultural knowledge’ (Maiter et al., 2008:308). Treating research participants as ‘data mules’ rather than equal stakeholders in the research perpetuates power inequalities by maintaining the position of the researcher as more powerful than the participant.

## **Participatory Research**

Approaches to research with the homeless that attend to power inequalities and reciprocity are deeply consultative and participatory and proceed from a starting point where the knowledge of the participants with a stake in the research informs and directs the research. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach that is often used to respond to a particular social issue. PAR ‘has been defined as a collaborative process...[that is] explicitly oriented towards social transformation’ (Kindon et al., 2007:9). PAR research methodology is defined by the key terms ‘participation’ and ‘action’ that refer to research that seeks to create change by engaging those being researched in the processes of research development and knowledge production. Recognising that people who are poor, disempowered and marginalised hold knowledge is a means of empowerment and ‘represents a counterhegemonic approach to knowledge production’ (Kindon et al., 2007:9).

PAR offers an ethical framework for research among homeless people and proceeds from the same basis of research merit and integrity, justice, beneficence and respect outlined in the National Statement. Paradis, who has used feminist PAR in her research with homeless women, says that 'transforming exploitative aspects of the traditional model can yield research that promotes the interests of marginalized people and advocates for changes to an oppressive social system' (Paradis, 2000:840). Research methodologies, such as PAR, that focus on engaging people are ethical and more likely to yield useful results with a practical application.

Refocussing on social policy outcomes, recent National data provided by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Council of Australian Governments indicate no improvement in housing affordability for renters or buyers and consistent demands for specialist homelessness services. Despite significant National and State funding allocated to improving housing affordability and homelessness, no significant outcomes have been achieved. Political will is required to solve a situation where there is competition for scarce resources (affordable housing), especially amongst people who are on low incomes and living with disadvantage. Ethical research that is inclusive of homeless people should be the basis for *developing* policies that will have a positive effect on their target group, rather than unethical enumeration activities that show arbitrary progress towards policy goals. In theory The Road Home is wonderful, but if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.

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