‘People often say oh bludger or whatever, they don’t try and think what could be going on’: understanding the complexities around labour force participation

Kath Hulse and Lise Saugeres
Swinburne University of Technology
Swinburne-Monash AHURI Centre

Australian Social Policy Conference
University of New South Wales, 11 July 2007
Outline

- Research into labour force participation (and housing assistance)
- Contribution of interpretive social science
- Our research – qualitative interviews
- Biographies
- Logistics of daily life – health, caring, etc
- Cultural attitudes
- Conclusion
Research into labour force participation (and housing assistance)

- Policy discourse about decreasing ‘welfare dependency’ (eg no focus on home owners) – framed in terms in economic and behavioural terms;
- Focus on policy settings eg financial incentives and disincentives;
- Limited research on ‘behavioural responses’ to (dis)incentives to employment participation;
- Looking for causal explanations (eg importance of rent-setting, security of tenure, location, etc);
- Predominantly positivist (using quantitative research methods).
Primary NRV1 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)
Our project: interpretive social science

- Explores the motivations, meanings and understandings of people (beyond ‘behavioural responses’)
- Explores cultural framing of these motivations, meanings and understandings
- Focus on everyday social life – lived experiences
- Importance of personal biographies
- Integrative rather than dissecting
‘Home Life, Housing and Work Decisions’

- 105 in depth interviews
- 6 locations (Vic and NSW)
- Receiving Centrelink payments and government rental housing assistance
- Two thirds on ‘longer term’ benefits
- Two thirds women and one third men
- Mixed age group
Personal biographies underlie current attitudes and priorities

Family/employment/housing histories are interconnected:

- **Instability in family background** – often associated with residential mobility
- **Child abuse and family violence** (mainly women) – concern with safety
- **Low level of education** – low parental (and own) expectations
- **Fractured employment histories** – low skill/low wage jobs
- **High levels of residential mobility**: three patterns: residential mobility with periods of stability; continuous mobility, mobility then stability (public housing)
Considering paid work: the practicalities of everyday life

- Additional expenditures associated with working eg child care, transport/travel, work clothes, etc
- Trade-offs between money and time – pay more for food and other goods, less time with children, etc
- ‘Putting together a day’ – physical and mental health, parenting, transport, etc
Calculating the financial return

‘Cleo’, 24, partnered, two children, renting privately, Central Coast:

Until I got a job we wouldn’t be able to afford to have them in (child care) every day, and then it depends on how much. Because I don’t have any skills I would probably get a low paying job as well, and it probably wouldn’t work out to be better to be working and paying daycare because it’s too hard to pay for. I don’t think it would be worth it. Yeah, I don’t think it would be worth it.
Time and money

‘Tammy’, early 40s, sole parent plus 15-year-old son with mental health issues, private renter, Greater Dandenong,

I’d be lucky to make – well, sorry, to earn – nearly as much as I receive from the government. I was hoping to make a little bit extra than that because when you work you’ve got employment expenses, travel and clothes, maintenance most definitely in the work place most of the time and that sort of thing. And also the way I cope financially now, I wouldn’t be able to cope when I’m working because I’ve learned how to get things for the absolute lowest price in this area. I have a lot of extra time. I couldn’t do that whilst holding down a job.
Physical and mental health

‘Joanna’, 50, sole parent, 2 children, private renter, Darebin:

In terms of working, being a mother is a 24 hour job and, you know, when I was working and come home, I felt good but I felt extremely tired. Some days I’d wake up the next morning and I’d have to get K (daughter) off to school and I’d come back and just go to bed because I knew I had to work in the evening. After a while it built up, and you end up not coping with it. But if you have a partner you can work around things and hopefully you have a partner that does it.
Work, caring and transport

‘Caroline’, 31, sole parent with 1 child, public housing, Ballarat

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.
Cultural attitudes

- Strong views on parenting – a ‘good mother’
- Paid work is about more than money – identity and status
- Work includes caring and unpaid work
- Stigma
‘Sally’, 39, sole parent with 3 children, private renter, 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……..
‘Tammy’, in her early 40s, sole parent, 15-year-old child, private renter, Greater Dandenong:

My son was always embarrassed to say ‘My mum’s at home’, and the kids at school would go ‘What does your mum do?’, and even up to Year 12 he would not tell them I stayed home. He was embarrassed. And then when I graduated as a marriage celebrant, one of his friends said ‘Oh, what does your mum do?’ and he said ‘Oh, she’s a marriage celebrant’, even though I’m not working. I had a title to who I was. Funny, isn’t it? I’m proud to be a mother. I’m proud to be at home. But the guilt trips you have along the way, it really makes you feel guilty that you’re not out there, because what you’re doing isn’t enough, when in fact it is enough.
Unpaid work outside the home

- 47 of 71 women and 12 of 34 men had done unpaid work outside the home

- **Women**
  - extension of domestic duties, longer term, not expected to lead to a paid job
  - more flexible with caring responsibilities

- **Men** – trying to get skills and experience, shorter term, hoped it would lead to a paid job
Stigma

‘Faye’, 40, single, private renter, Ballarat:

But people who are long-term unemployed, yeah, are very much looked at negatively. And called awful names like dole bludgers and, [pause] you know, it’s assumed that they’re lazy, yeah, for sure. And you know, I hope that I don’t treat anyone that way. I think I, you know, as a person have empathy and understanding of people’s situations being in and out of the labour force, and being intermittently a customer of Centrelink, I can appreciate how some people just evolve into long-term unemployed circumstances.
Stigma (area)

‘Carl’, 37, single (1 child), public renter, South Western Sydney

It was devastating. I became depressed and seemed like every time I turned up for an interview and was qualified for the position I got knocked back. So depression set in and I didn’t want to do anything then, after getting knocked back so many times. So I tried changing addresses, doing a PO box, and that didn’t work neither because stupid me put it under (area name), not the street name. So now when I apply for a job I don’t mention that area at all and it seems to be getting me further in for a second interview or a third interview.
Conclusions

- Past experiences critical in understanding attitudes to, and decisions on, economic participation (cf family instability, domestic violence, moving, etc)
- Paid work is about money but also about contact with people, skills and self-confidence, and status and identity
- Views on paid work affected by practical issues of financial return relative to costs, importance of time, and implications for time, putting together a day, and stress (health)
Conclusions (contd)

- Mental and physical health are important in considering work (health problems more prevalent than DSP receipt), in particular depression and anxiety disorders
- Strong views about being a ‘good mother’ - not restricted to pre-school years
- Participation in unpaid work – seen as undervalued
- Place is important – adds to difficulties in practical details of daily life, connection with safety and security, bad reputation of area (double stigma).
Further information


Contact:
khulse@swin.edu.au
03 9214-5321