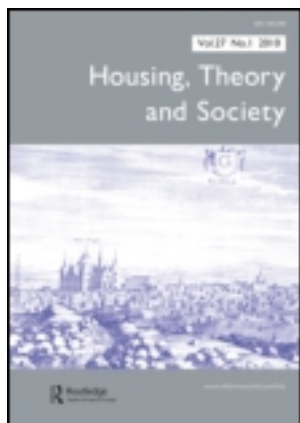


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Publisher: Routledge

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Housing, Theory and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/shou20>

The Social Forces and Politics of Housing Research: Reflections from within the Academy

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Available online: 09 Jul 2008

To cite this article: Rowland Atkinson & Keith Jacobs (2009): The Social Forces and Politics of Housing Research: Reflections from within the Academy, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 26:4, 233-247

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14036090802057364>

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The Social Forces and Politics of Housing Research: Reflections from within the Academy

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ABSTRACT *In this paper we draw upon our experiences of the UK and Australian policy environments to make a series of tentative observations about the current state of housing research. We explore the political constraints that confront academic researchers by reflecting on how the changes within academia, styles of policymaking and nature of public engagement/publication affect the relative ability of academics to view themselves as progressive forces contained by these complex forces in tension. We argue that the promotion of a more critical and less politicized housing research agenda requires a more proactive response from the academic community than has hitherto been the case. We conclude that a politics of housing research production in Australia presents a distinctive set of issues that require attention; particularly a fragmented approach to social problems that has accentuated a silo approach to housing research focused on individual State responses, rather than concerted national action on social problems in this arena.*

KEY WORDS: Policymaking, Politics of research, Reflexivity, Social change

Introduction

Spatially oriented social research appears to have subjected itself to a renewed self-consciousness, both about its engagement with social politics generally (for example Amin & Thrift 2007) and increasingly with the question of how academic work and workers can be effective in engendering more equitable and effective public interventions (see for example Allen 2005, Wacquant 2004, Ward 2007). This self-critical exploration is to be welcomed. Many researchers and academics see themselves as both impassioned and yet politically distanced voices seeking effective solutions and engagements. There is little doubt that this position is fraught with convoluted problems of definition, identity and other political difficulties, not the least of which is whether academic work can simply be seen to be contributing to

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1403-6096 Print/1651-2278 Online/09/040233-15 © 2009 Taylor & Francis

DOI: 10.1080/14036090802057364

something progressive, how it might go about achieving this and whether “we” might all agree on what such a standpoint consists.

One of our main objectives in writing this paper is to subject both ourselves and Australian housing research to this kind of critical gaze. Such a task, in our view, is important since the discourses and structures that inform housing research in Australia are rarely interrogated or aired (see Winter & Seelig 2001). As such, there is a paucity of discussion about the opportunities and constraints surrounding housing research and its utility in terms of policy, that is to say the role of government in creating mechanisms and modes of intervention that support a notion of public good and social equity in opportunities and outcomes. Ultimately this lack of debate within the domain of housing, we argue, impedes opportunities for reflexive and critical research – research that can plan ahead and augment new policy-oriented agendas, as well as responding to, or indeed helping to deny or re-direct, short-run, politically driven, policymaker needs.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to be explicit about the kind of approach we have taken in writing this paper. It is our view that current housing research practice is informed by a set of foundational stories or narratives (Fischer & Forrester 1993, Rhodes & Brown 2005) that are rarely acknowledged explicitly. We are located within a policy–academia nexus which has tended to create imperatives guided by the attempt to satisfy both of these communities, perhaps even to the distaste of both. The narratives underpinning this working environment are advanced by different groups (namely the policy community, practitioners and academic researchers and to a much lesser extent the variety of communities upon whose positions we seek to advance) each of which provides their own particular inflection commensurate with their interests, or positions. In this context, our deployment of the term “narratives” is used to denote the parameters within which policies are articulated. These narratives have the effect of structuring or constraining the type of research which is generated. The important point to note, at this juncture, is that each of these discourses vies with each other in shaping the type of housing issues that are interrogated and the modes of research that are undertaken.

Our view of housing research, as a site of discursive or narrative contestation, can be contrasted with other recent contributions in the field. For example, those that have sought to advance typologies for understanding the different type of research activities. In Australia for instance, Jones and Seelig (2004:14) provide a detailed overview, arguing that three models of policy-orientated research can be discerned: the “engineering”, “engagement” and “enlightenment” models. The “engineering” model conceives research as primarily problem-orientated, casting academics as akin to technicians. The “enlightenment” model portrays researchers as critics who are able to provide explanations that can lead to social progress. Hence, the “enlightenment” model extols the importance of scepticism and a critically reflexive stance. The engagement model portrays research as overtly political and as part of the policy process itself.

These typologies are helpful in explaining relations between researchers and policymakers, but in our view they do not provide a sufficient account of the complexity of power relations within research communities or the discourses that inform choices and strategies. Furthermore, the typologies presented are narrowly construed and overlook the tensions and ambiguities which researchers have to

grapple with when undertaking projects. What is perhaps missing from these accounts are the political and institutional contexts within which research activity takes place (though see Clapham 1997 for a discussion of UK practices) and in this sense we are referring to the kind of structures of national, state and local government and governance as well as the flavours and currents of ideology in power at any one time within these structures.

It is important to add that in writing this article we have been aware of a tendency to censor or discipline the presentation of our own thoughts. Of course, in subtle ways our own community operates as a context with conditioning and structuring influences within which criticism is not easy, since this may be of peers, of the institutional constraints which are out of the powers of members to change, or of funders and the mechanisms by which they operate. Writers like Wacquant (2004) rightly point to the effect of such established forms of thought, or *doxa*, to which members of communities, like the academic, need to subscribe. For Wacquant the diminution of social research and critique as a means of considering “the world as it should be” has become a feature of academic environments within which neoliberalism, contractualism and “narcissistic preoccupations of the moment” have eroded these capacities. In many ways we would agree with this account, but it is only one element in a story of how we situate ourselves as researchers in the interstices that we work within.

Wacquant is particularly critical of policy research, which he sees acting as a buffer to critical thought; in other words being caught up in short-termist work on the terms of reference of policy communities which are attributed with ill intentions or perhaps non-intentions in relation to a range of problems. Perhaps we may be seen then within our own paradigm as being inevitably influenced by these subtle pressures. Certainly our article has undergone several iterations as we have sought to anticipate the remarks of various colleagues, as well as second-guessing the ways in which our own identities might inflect the discussion of our observations as British outsiders operating within a culture seeking distance from its colonial past. However, this position of being insider/outside (inside the academy yet not fully “Australian” researchers) also generates an opportunity to explore the systemic differences and contrasts to which comparative housing research has long drawn upon.

Our contribution from here on is structured as follows. We begin with a discussion of the kind of positionality implied by being academics working in an applied field, and the influences that this has on critical, long-term and progressive thought. Second, we examine the kind of social and policy structures that inform the kind of housing research done in different national contexts as a means of thinking through these relationships in an international framework. We then discuss, in more detail, the peculiarities, benefits and tribulations of working between policy and academic fields as a prelude to a concluding discussion on the nature of the production of housing research in the UK and Australia.

Homo academicus or Homo domus? Academics as Agents of Social or Policy Transformation?

An assessment of why we do what we do, how we do it and who we engage with has become a more contentious arena for discussion as policy regimes are re-made (such

as the move to evidence-based policy-making under the Blair government), and universities are restructured and re-incentivized in ways that do, and do not, value community engagement over other work, particularly academic writing and grant getting. Perhaps the nub of this issue can be summarized by a series of important framing questions:

1. On what rules and norms should we agree that university research should be carried out?
2. Which social problems, populations and vulnerable groups should we have in mind in carrying out such research and on whose say so?
3. What means and mechanisms can we concur are the most effective in yielding more socially equitable outcomes?

Each of these formative queries represents a need for substantive discussion in its own right but our central focus in this paper is on the last of these stages. An academic's role is undoubtedly both an interesting and challenging position to occupy. On a circuit which can be crudely summarized as consisting of teaching, research and administration we might assume a range of political commitments. Yet regardless of these positions, the relative interface between public (those to whom actions and transformative capacities might be granted) and policy (those who might be granted direct powers, either by legislation or daily practice, to intervene) communities and academia is highly varied. A typical academic might carry out funded research for either academic or external "industry" sources, or indeed with no funding at all. Most such work is reported in academic journals which is variably reported within (i.e. cited) the academy.

Even where articles are read by more academics and by some lay/professional readers it is generally acknowledged that their broader impact is unlikely to be high. In short, research and evaluation in academic, policy and broader communities have varying shelf-lives and impact; yet clearly the danger of pursuing only academic publishing is, that there is little broader short of the students we might produce, that of inheriting a series of commitments and points of reference; there is little broader leakage or dissemination. This risk is often present and needs to be addressed where possible in academic life.

Academics committed to progressive and ameliorative action are often caught in a trap between serving their own community, which valorizes journal articles and "internal" outputs, and achieving what might be thought of as the broadcast of broader and transformative knowledge to external communities. In many ways this refers to the distinctive and reflexive core of all social investigation, that in acting to understand our societies so too are we capable of producing changes in those systems. We argue that a community of academic researchers interested in issues such as housing and urban research represent an unusual grouping, because they carry out a range of research for a spectrum of funders, and step beyond this traditional "information envelope" of academic publishing circuits. They are also, in theory at least, able to produce such transformative knowledge, regardless of whether policymakers act on such knowledge or not.

We need not subscribe to some systemic or revolutionary critique in order to believe that engaging with such work is *more* public than with that which is restricted to academic circuits of knowledge. Understanding that generating such evidence and

participatory approaches to research does not lead to correlated changes in public life or behaviour is part of the journey into policy research, but neither should it prevent us from trying to generate consciousness-raising and technical research which might improve our societies in a deeper way.

There are, in fact, potentially advantageous modes and insights to be gained from such research. While we are not, we think, under any particular illusion that much policy-oriented work is “set” as tasks by policymakers and politicians, we would argue that where academics work with policy professionals the capacity for change directed *outside* the policy and academic fields is significant. It seems overly strident to suggest that such work is, crudely, a sell-out. We would suggest that policy-engaged work may, or may not, change and improve public interventions, but it also more concretely allows a public interest to be addressed and communicated with; where this is achieved by sophisticated outputs that are broadcast in more diverse ways than those granted by the traditional academic publishing route.

At the risk, no doubt, of being seen as subservient to policymakers we would argue that it is possible to adopt a stance within which the benefits of exchange and influence of this relationship are seen as more beneficial than ascribing such relations to forces of neoliberalism (Wacquant 2004). Indeed, there is such a range of policy-oriented research and with such a variety of interpretations, impacts and uses that either critique or promotion runs the risk of seeming one-dimensional. Where we would agree with Wacquant is that there are a complex series of forces, narratives and working practices that subtly determine the kind of research that is carried out.

Structures that Inform Housing Research

As one of our aims is to highlight some of the influences, power relations and structures that inform commissioned housing research, it is necessary to consider the formal rules and procedures of research funding agencies, such as The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). It is these funding mechanisms, in conjunction with the institutional environments of universities and State Housing Authorities that shape some of the fundamental practices of housing research. Most commissioned housing research relies on a competitive framework which relies largely on the peer review and assessment of individual projects. In the case of AHURI, the decisions as to what themes will be included in their research agenda are made by a research board which comprises State and Federal government representatives, independent academics and the AHURI director. The fact that State housing departments have such a predominant role in determining the type of research that is funded has meant that most projects commissioned need to demonstrate relevance to these particular concerns and priorities. In practice, research projects therefore predominantly seek to provide particular answers to housing-related problems encountered by state governments. The exception to this is the small budget set aside for research that is more exploratory, as part of AHURI’s “Policy Horizon” theme,¹ akin to the New Horizons funding stream of the UK Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

AHURI’s expenditure on research currently amounts to around \$2.6 million dollars per annum and takes three forms. First, an annual round, which in 2005 made available \$1 million a year for projects (though in 2007 this rose to around

\$2m). Second, the collaborative research ventures (CRV) which consist of larger projects up to \$750,000 over a 3-year period where the emphasis is placed on addressing substantial issues which require more concerted research effort. For example, these are currently CRV 1 “Housing affordability”, CRV 2 “Housing careers and Australia’s housing futures” and CRV 3 “Housing assistance and non-shelter outcomes”. In contrast to the annual competitive funding round, CRVs are, as their name implies, arrangements in which academics from different research centres work together on a single theme. Third, AHURI also, periodically, invites researchers to bid for ad hoc consultancy projects.

It is not possible to have a precise figure for comparing the total funds available in Australia spent on housing and urban research. However, an institutional comparison can be made with the UK where there is a far greater density and breadth of organizations providing funds for housing based research. For example, alongside the UK government (DCLG²) there is the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council. Also there are funds available from the European Community that housing researchers have been able to access, usually entailing collaboration with other European researchers. Housing research is also funded by the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Executive, Regional Development Agencies in England and local authorities among others.

Another important component of the UK housing research landscape is the existence of a broader group of researchers working on these issues. Whereas AHURI membership and bidding is available only to subscribing academic institutions the British system has been more open to independent consultants and think tanks as well as the “in-house” researchers of central, local and other branches of government which carry out their own research as well as external commissions, when deemed necessary. In this sense, the UK arrangement is highly competitive and yet the proliferation of agencies and agendas which touch on housing issues also ensures that funding monies are generally high when compared with the Australian context.

A paper of this size has meant that we can only provide the briefest description of the procedural mechanisms (for a more comprehensive account see Jones and Seelig 2004) but some mention should be made of the Australian Research Council’s (ARC) contribution to housing research since it is also technically available to academics for funding housing-related projects. Housing researchers, because of their contacts with State Housing Authorities have been successful in capturing “linkage” grants. The role of academics in housing research has certainly been bolstered by the availability of ARC monies, though the bulk of projects remain linked to industry, and its concerns as partners, in many of these projects.

Academic Perspectives

In many ways the Australian academic context is similar to that of the UK insofar as publishing in peer reviewed journals and capturing research income are accorded significant weight and prestige. Recent proposals by the former Commonwealth Government for a Research Quality Framework akin to the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) were axed by the incoming Rudd Government in 2008, which will use only a simplified system based on research metrics and other

indicators. Yet it is worthwhile reflecting on the UK experience where the primary mechanism for allocating research funding, the RAE, has been in place since 1986. Some of the consequences of the RAE have included an increase in the number of articles published as university departments effectively competed with each other for funds, but also a reconfiguration of departments, as universities have adopted tactics to maximize their chances of securing funding.

For 2008 the awarding of funds is premised on a peer review process with departments being ranked on a scale that ranges from 4* to 1. It has become relatively common amongst UK universities to entice research staff with a high profile to join their departments to bolster their chances of securing a high ranking, with academics sometimes being “poached” by rival departments looking to secure academic “stars”. The similarity to the transfer market currently operating in English Premier League Football – where top stars are enticed with offers of a high salary to switch clubs – has been noted by a number of commentators in the academic press (see Warner 1998).

Some mention should also be made of two other important mediating structures that operate at the level of governance, since these also exert significant influence on the research agenda and the type of projects funded. First, the Commonwealth/State relationship frames, to a large extent, the policy agendas that are advanced. To give one example, it is clear that both state and Commonwealth governments have all too often sought to blame each other for the problems of housing. State governments target the Commonwealth for not providing sufficient resources through the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA), while the Commonwealth Government views the lack of funds for public housing as largely of the state’s own making and claims that state governments are unwilling to draw upon their Goods and Services Tax (GST; an Australian value added tax currently set at 10%) receipts to invest in public and affordable housing. Australian researchers have to engage with this tension in most housing policy-oriented research while facing a broadly inward-looking orientation by state housing and other authorities which have tended to see their own jurisdictions as the beginning and end of problems that might be addressed. To this extent a key difference between this kind of federal silo-mentality and centralized British model may offer important insights into the way that priorities and social problems are located and dealt with. We discuss the implications of this tension later in the paper.

Second, it is necessary to report on the views of the housing policy community about the housing research provided by the academic community. The work of Jones and Seelig (2005) is especially helpful. Their report discusses the conversations that took place in a workshop they convened that brought together researchers and housing practitioners. As well as noting the range of opinion (both positive and negative) about the utility and quality of Australian housing research they found that practitioners valued the pragmatic orientation of the AHURI research program and the emphasis on implementation. However, they also noted a concern amongst policy officers that “the political realities were poorly understood by some in the research community” (Jones & Seelig 2005:12). The implication is that researchers fail to pay sufficient heed to the practicalities of policy implementation and the obstacles that arise from competing objectives within government (e.g. competition for scarce resources within the department, pressures on staff time, and other policy

objectives). In other words, research findings that initially gain support are often sidelined or relegated and are often skipped over by analysts who have little time for large reports.

To some extent this also suggests that a normative element of much housing research, i.e. that investments, priorities and actions should be focused in particular ways, is ignored where this appears to ignore the “realities” of policy work. The job of academic researchers to be free to observe, analyse and advance solutions in ways that are unencumbered by such institutional and political perspectives appears to be an important characteristic of AHURI-produced research but is no less disconcerting for appearing not to have had significant impacts on the working practices of the SHAs.

A series of complex interactions around research production, utilization and impact is thus opened by these comments. Certainly the growth of interest in evidence-based policymaking in the UK has generated significant interest in these questions (Davies, Nutley & Smith 2000). This has also led to the realization that the production of research is only one half of the equation; much of what is produced is under-used and faces a number of hurdles prior to implementation as policy or diffusion as knowledge through policymaker and practitioner systems. In this respect, the production of knowledge also requires improved strategies for transmission and receipt by key groups involved in designing and delivering services like housing (Percy-Smith, Burden, Darlow, Dawson, Hawtin & Ladi 2002).

A good example of this is the low impact of many research reports, which are intended for government and other state institutions but where dissemination is often patchy and use by elected members even less so (Percy-Smith, Burden, Darlow, Dawson, Hawtin & Ladi 2002). Where the British government’s modernization agenda has been premised, in part, on the use and deployment of social research (Nutley & Webb 2000) this has played little part in the Australian Federal relationship with academia or its research products.³

At this juncture we feel it is pertinent to return to Kemeny’s (1992) thoughtful contribution to the quandary faced by researchers operating in a highly charged policy environment. His work provided an impetus for researchers to recognize more explicitly the need to maintain a distinction between research that is prescriptive, namely to improve policymaking, and that which is heuristic, and which seeks to *understand* housing policy and the problems that it encounters. Broad ranging housing research generally offers more scope for critical enquiry, as researchers have the opportunity to overcome the disciplinary gaze (referred to by Allen 2005) and chart a form of enquiry that is more independent. In all political contexts there is a continued tension between research which fulfils “managerial” objectives and that which is more autonomous and normative, with the risk it runs of being perceived as marginal to the interest of policymakers and practitioners.

Researchers have responded to the policy agenda in a number of ways. First, increasing numbers of housing researchers have sought to promote their work as independent and critically informed. In particular, efforts have been made to draw upon sociological theory in relation to housing policy and practice. The critical turn in housing studies can be traced back to the writings of Kemeny who, in an article written in the early 1980s, argued that housing research “tends to be weak in the development of theory and orientated to empirical case studies” (Kemeny 1984:162).

In his view, this weakness was a consequence of the “heavy policy emphasis in housing studies, directed to the solving of individual problems as they arise” (p.162). Kemeny’s arguments were set out in more detail in his book *Housing and Social Theory* (Kemeny 1992). Looking back it is now clear that his book encouraged many housing researchers to draw upon the theoretical developments within disciplines such as geography, sociology, economics and political sciences and which produced, particularly in the European context, a more informed engagement with housing issues as a lens through which a much broader range of themes could be observed.⁴

Evidence of Kemeny’s influence can also be found in monographs on social theory in relation to housing (recent examples include King 2005, Marston 2004, Clapham 2006 and Cowan & McDermot 2006) now being published alongside articles in journals such as *Housing Studies*, *Urban Studies*, *Home Cultures* and *Housing Theory and Society*, to say nothing of the broad range of journals on urban affairs more generally. These texts are important as they provide examples of a more confident approach, promoting an alternative agenda for housing research that is interdisciplinary and heuristic, rather than overtly policy or practice-orientated. We would argue that, indeed, much housing research is now carried out by researchers on a twin-track engagement with these issues, often producing both policy-oriented and academic outputs. This fulfils researchers’ ambitions to raise income, connect with a policy environment on one level while producing “deeper” academic interventions on another, and often with more critical reflections and implications. This occurs by responding to the influence of research-orientated academic practice that tends to valorize academic, over policy, engagement.

In this context housing researchers have an ambiguous role *within* the academy since they are seen as a complex and hybrid grouping without a single disciplinary focus which challenges some colleagues’ understanding of a compartmentalized university/disciplinary environment (geography, sociology and so on). However, research which has operated in this context has often provided a nuanced understanding of the policy process; for example, showing how power conflicts affect decision making as well and how policy outcomes impact on existing spatial and social structures (Marston 2004). These points also relate to the way in which we perceive our roles in relation to changing social relations and problems; this may as much be about how we deal with communities as policymakers. Here Castells comments on his own aims and initial naivety in his relations with communities. No doubt sentiments which echo with many researchers:

In my romantic period of studying social movements from the trenches, I always told the militants that in exchange for their help in my research I would give back some level of knowledge and consciousness of their actions. I always tried to do this, and fed the results of my writing back to the movement, where they were usually well received, albeit I do not think I was terribly helpful to their fate (Castells 2006:220).

The problem of engaging with policy is where it might be seen to come attached to an offer of direct, or uncomplicated, routes to progressive social change. It is certainly not clear that privileged access to groups, policymakers or communities, offers anywhere near such prizes.

Another issue relates to the links between the kinds of agendas we respond to as housing researchers. For example, funding institutes are often seen by academics as culpable in helping to reinforce narrow or empiricist research agendas that undervalue either theoretical innovation or reform. Yet it is by no means clear where such boundaries lie. Often what is seen as technical research not only contains deeper theoretical formulations (though we would accept that such underlying positions may not be well explicated in such research) but also contributes in quite direct ways to issues of social relevance and progression. So, for example, funding agencies such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Department for Communities and Local Government in the UK might be singled out as promoting prescriptive policy-orientated research at the expense of other kinds of enquiry. Yet work with the commissioners of housing research and the academic community has influenced the development and range of policy research programs, with academics sitting on the research boards of organizations like the JRF and the new DCLG.

A key feature of this kind of funding climate is that it may promote innovation, new synergies between consultants and government as well as generating an agenda that is perhaps more closely in sympathy with the needs of academics and policymakers. All of this may sound either incredibly conservative or blissfully ignorant of the “realities” of research commissioning and agenda setting exercises. Yet we would argue that closer engagement with researchers empowers them to the extent that they are able to help frame responsive, progressive and often concealed areas of social welfare and plight. While the parameters of such research are still ultimately framed by central and state government departments and their policy “clients” there is reason to believe that this is close to an enlightened view of policymaking and its links to research practice (Weiss 1979). The extent to which these concerns connect with a broader social relevance and constituencies probably remains debatable yet the offer of disengagement from such contact appears to hold out little hope for change, empowerment or transformation.

Implications: The Housing Research–Policy Interface

In a recent article which provided a strongly critical account of contract housing research, Allen argued that funding institutions are able to exercise a “disciplinary gaze” (Allen 2005:996) that reinforces a docility within the research community. Allen draws from the work of Foucault (1977) in developing his argument, suggesting that the pressure on academic staff to win research consultancies and generate research income for their universities has had significant implications for the conduct of research. For example, it has encouraged many academics to focus more intently on publication outputs that comply with the UK (Research Assessment Exercise) thereby boosting their own standing within their department. Allen describes his own experience in which capturing research contracts was a means to produce academic publications in peer reviewed journals:

Although my teaching load left little time for involvement in contract research, by now I *felt* that I *needed* research contracts ... I had come to feel that my ability to produce publications in peer-reviewed journals was highly dependent on my ability to access empirical material and that my ability to access

empirical material was contingent on my ability to win research contracts (Allen 2005:997).

Allen's contribution to these debates foregrounds a more reflexive analysis of power relations in contract research, within which charges of overt interference in the writing-up of compliant results has sometimes been put forward. However, Allen argues, a more subtle interplay of expectations and influences operates within which researchers may feel both critical and objective at the same time as submitting themselves to the "disciplinary gaze" of research institutes, thereby putting off-limits behaviour and outputs that might be likely to "rock the boat" or threaten the viability of future funding. Writing so candidly about his experiences in the research process in this way should be welcomed. In particular, Allen's account makes more explicit how research activity is also a political activity in that it is strategically used by academics as a way of securing promotion and collegial respect.

We began our paper by describing the context and social relations that inform Australian housing research, highlighting how funding institutes, Commonwealth/state relations and the views of housing researchers themselves all impact on research agendas. These institutional arrangements and structures operate in complex ways and involve the observable characteristics of these organizations but also, as we have argued here, the identities of researchers and the community and historico-governmental conditions under which such researchers engage with this type of work. All of this coalesces to form a complex and path-dependent explanation of the policymaking and research-commissioning culture in the Australian context (Hudson & Lowe 2004). In our view, social housing policy debate is narrowly framed in Australia to an issue, predominantly that of "housing affordability"⁵: namely the problems of low-income households accessing owner-occupation and the private rental market (Yates & Wulff 2000).

Such a narrow frame has, in effect, crowded out other policy issues, for example the challenges of state housing authorities and their efforts to revitalize their public housing stock or address the consequences that arise from needs-based lettings policies that excludes all but those in acute housing need from accessing public housing. In this context it is important to ask whether the competitive framework in which researchers seek to answer research questions identified by funders indeed constrains innovation and leads to a mode of conservatism in which researchers fall into line to make recommendations based on perceptions of what is acceptable. To take one simple example, areas of housing management and housing supply are almost impossible to approach from a perspective in which a need for investment and capital funding are recommended. Indeed, we would argue that this is effectively now outside policymaker and researcher psychologies because of the way that such recommendations are effectively shot down or perceived to be naïve.

Clearly it is not inherently problematic that issues of affordability are at the forefront of the contemporary housing agenda. However, it would also appear that the interplay of federal/state government relationships and the socio-tenorial composition of Australian housing (Paris 1993) has produced a research culture which has tended toward more strongly private solutions to public housing problems. Going further than this we would also suggest that housing governance, as it is played out between the Commonwealth and states/territories, has generated

knowledge and data collection “envelopes” that have made it more difficult to encompass a broader interpretation of housing and urban research, a *national* housing research agenda has been difficult to develop in such conditions.

The first of these envelopes concerns the ways in which overlapping responsibilities and contestations over funding for social housing operate between these two tiers of government. This has tended to have the effect of producing an uncertain climate for research and a politically-charged administration – particularly insofar as it is linked to the administration of stigmatized and marginal social housing portfolios which contain secondary constituencies largely ignored by all of the major political parties.

The second envelope can be identified in the continuing “silo” problem in state-level housing management responsibilities in the sense that housing is seen simply as “housing” and is rarely articulated as a social problem for policy focus to be connected with urban, health, transport, planning, policing, education, labour-market and sustainability portfolios. Housing has perhaps, therefore, been given the responsibility of managing a declining social housing sector which thereby prevents innovation and connection with wider planning and urban management responsibilities.

Ways Out?

Perhaps the answer to some of the challenges we have identified lies in supporting more policy-savvy researchers capable of working as media-operators and engineering high impact research. However, this also implies a mutual contract in which policymakers should be responsive to normative, thoughtful and critical responses to the problems they face. To this end a theoretically informed approach to housing issues and further dialogue with policymaking communities is essential and is often well-received by practitioners as something relevant to but outside the daily experience of frontline work.

In all of this it also appears that academic Australian housing researchers have lacked a voice of their own and a stronger sense of community that might help lobby and channel the kinds of concerns we have identified. It is important to remember that doing policy-related research does not constrain researchers in terms of the breadth of publishing opportunities available. Indeed, as Allen acknowledged, it often supplies insight and entry into contexts more often difficult to access by “straight” academia research. Second, there is no reason to accept that academic or unfunded housing research cannot run alongside, and with, that which is funded by a range of agencies. What may be more threatening is the way that academia itself values such activities, as an emerging value system and incentive structure tends to devalue long and deep thinking on critical issues through an emphasis on research grant funding. In this sense we need to be careful in who, or which, structures are targeted for criticism – academics should be lobbying for the inclusion of a diverse range of outputs, as valuable products that display impact and contributions to knowledge and the community. We reject, in this sense, the idea that policy-relevance is tantamount to a taint on research quality or significance.

From our perspective, the ability of universities and academics to engage with policy remains a beneficial, though at times ineffectual, means of producing the

potential for social transformation, opportunity and equity. Understanding why this often does not happen is more important than suggesting that such work is counter either to work that is critical, or that which takes the time to think how things *should* be.

Conclusion

Our response to the issues we raise here and in the Australian context is to pose a number of tentative questions and issues for further debate. In particular, what might be done about the way that housing contract research operates in practice? At one extreme lies the belief that an inherently short-term political culture surveils and disciplines contract researchers. However, as Allen argues, this comes both from within us as well as from perceptions about the constraints imposed by funders. At the other end of the spectrum lies a position which sees contract research as an important tool for policymaking and which provides evidence to act strategically and incrementally to produce results which significantly address social problems. Clearly a blend of these positions reflects the reality, but also a reality which shifts from contract to contract, from one policy funder to another and from one researcher's collegiate affiliation to another.

The subtleties of research in its practice should not allow a final analysis within which research is seen as a machine made, run and oiled by policymakers. Nevertheless there is a danger that academics have and do internalize the rules of the game and thereby produce a more conservative research agenda and findings in order to help ensure the greater probability of funding and application of results.

Another challenge thrown up by the nature of political relationships in social research is that of the broader machine, within which research is but one component. The system of social relationships in which housing research is procured and produced is also one where political agendas have created a close correspondence between research projects and the needs of policymaking. In this context there is less latitude for creativity, overt competition for small amounts of research funding (in Australia) and a greater liability for research to act in a circuit-making (rather than "circuit breaking" or critiquing) mode.

The particular industry orientation of government and, increasingly, universities, has produced stronger concerns with income generation and real-world application. These problems aside, the internal administration of universities now also puts up more effective tariffs and costs to research procurement and bidding through growing research and enterprise bureaucracies, which include ethics departments, legal teams, research offices and departments devoted to research capitalization. This has grown to the point that the burdens of internal reporting and project management for contract researchers are such that competitive advantages are eroded. To give one key example, it has been a constant bugbear for many researchers to go through the iterative process of ethical approval when they are recruited presumably as certified practitioners, and often teachers, of methodology and good practice – yet these disciplining activities come from within academic institutions, not from policymakers.

In all of this perhaps the issue of short-term policy horizons is worth mentioning and continues to influence a largely unorganized group of likeminded researchers

who compete against each other for relatively small amounts of funding. This is not to belittle the activities of researchers but rather to remark that there is a particular absence of common identity and positional weight to Australian housing and urban researchers. Here the sense is that the researcher's gaze is turned inward and atomized in the competitive funding environment. The resulting sense of fatalism is palpable and has generated an often dejected engagement. That, in turn, undermines efforts to integrate social justice themes to discussions on economic development and urban life.

A key feature of the distinction between Australian and British housing research can be focused on the way in which a federal vs. centralized government structure contributes to the formulation and identification of housing problems, the procurement of research and its implementation in policy. In this context the "problem" of the social relations of contract research is not merely about how policy and research actors work together, it is also about the ways in which wider social, institutional and political structures reinforce a particular kind of housing research milieu.

Perhaps in the search for biographical and reflexive accounts of research practice lurks a fear that we are part of a bigger machine operating often without logic and incapable of making decisions that make life better for the poor and dispossessed, fatigued by our investigations and fatalistic of our capacity to engender change. In this context it is natural that we may see ourselves either as blameless do-gooders with important results for policy-makers to act on (and which it is "their" fault if "they" do not) or as jobbing researchers whose results are subject to the whims of political influence or non-decision-making. Understanding the nature of these systems seems critical to the creation of a program of research and proposals for public and social change that might be capable of producing more equitable outcomes.

Notes

1. So far under this trance of funding AHURI has commissioned a project on social exclusion and its utility for housing research (Arthurson and Jacobs 2003), a critical review of intervention studies and evidence based policy (O'Dwyer 2004) and understanding and enhancing research policy linkages (Jones and Seelig 2004, 2005).
2. It is important to note that other central government departments are also interested in housing research insofar as it touches on their own budgets, so for example the Department of Health has been interested in issues of health and housing, and several government departments were involved in the ESRC-funded Evidence-Based Policy and Practice Network (2002–2005).
3. In the UK social research has been facilitated in its links with central government through various means including inviting academic comments on policy proposals and research agendas, joint funding of autonomous academic centres and doctoral programs (like that of the DCLG on sustainable communities) as well as contractors of central government research on housing, urban and interrelated issues.
4. The growth and interest in housing research as a viable and important strand of broader policy, geographical, sociological and economic disciplines was also buttressed by the creation of the European Network for Housing Research in 1988. Annual conferences around Europe facilitated dialogue, often with the aim of addressing European-level housing questions, such as integration, migration and social housing, and with an often direct engagement with housing and economic policymakers. This has been supplemented by Asian and Latin American affiliations.

5. It is likely that part of the reason for this is the socio-tenurial structure in Australia whereby owning is either seen as a self-evidently preferable tenure and the problems of homeowners have thereby become the articulated concerns of politicians.

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