

Applying for Social Housing in Australia – The Centrality of Cultural, Social and Emotional Capital

Alan Morris, Andrew Clarke, Catherine Robinson, Jan Idle & Cameron Parsell

To cite this article: Alan Morris, Andrew Clarke, Catherine Robinson, Jan Idle & Cameron Parsell (2022): Applying for Social Housing in Australia – The Centrality of Cultural, Social and Emotional Capital, *Housing, Theory and Society*, DOI: [10.1080/14036096.2022.2085169](https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2022.2085169)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2022.2085169>



Published online: 03 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)






View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Applying for Social Housing in Australia – The Centrality of Cultural, Social and Emotional Capital

Alan Morris ^a, Andrew Clarke ^b, Catherine Robinson^c, Jan Idle^a
and Cameron Parsell ^d

^aInstitute for Public Policy and Governance, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, AUS; ^bSchool of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture, University of New South Wales, Sydney, AUS; ^cHousing & Community, University of Tasmania, Hobart, AUS; ^dInstitute for Social Sciences Research, University of Queensland, Brisbane, AUS

ABSTRACT

Social housing scarcity has underpinned the development of detailed social housing application processes across Australia. Applications require the strongest possible evidence of disadvantage and need, conceptualized in this paper as the required demonstration of “inverse distinction”. Drawing on 47 in-depth interviews in three Australian states with people who have expert knowledge of the application process, we argue that the onerous requirements of the application means that if an applicant does not have a skilled supporter or advocate, they are less likely to achieve an optimal result. Drawing on Bourdieu’s framework and the concept of emotional capital, we demonstrate that being prioritized invariably involves an applicant sub-contracting cultural and social capital to an advocate. Further, the latter needs to have the requisite emotional capital. This article shines new light on the practical and emotional workload of social housing applications for both housing professionals and those in need of housing assistance.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 December 2021
Accepted 25 May 2022

KEYWORDS

Applying for social housing;
cultural capital; social capital;
emotional capital; Australia

Introduction

Although there is much diversity in its trajectory, in most countries social housing as a proportion of the housing stock has declined dramatically since the 1980s (Hess, Tammaru, and van Ham 2018; Scanlon, Fernandez Arrigotia, and Whitehead 2015; Watt 2017). Not surprisingly in many countries this has been accompanied by it becoming an increasingly difficult resource to access (Bernt 2017; Fitzpatrick and Pawson 2007; Pahl 1975; Pato and Pereira 2016; Williams 1978). In Australia applicants have to compete to demonstrate that their need is so great that they warrant being prioritized and placed near the top of the waiting list, also referred to as the housing register (Aigner 2019; Flanagan et al. 2020; Muir et al. 2020; Turner 2009). The application process is critical to accessing social housing, yet there is little published evidence on how it functions in practice. We also have limited knowledge of what role professional social services and other advocates play in assisting vulnerable citizens to navigate the application process.

CONTACT Alan Morris  Alan.morris@uts.edu.au  Institute for Public Policy and Governance, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway, Sydney, NSW 2007, AUS

© 2022 IBF, The Institute for Housing and Urban Research

The advocacy efforts are part of a broader shift where social housing in Australia and elsewhere is integrated with health and welfare providers. Extending the housing literature which demonstrates the role of community organizations partnering with social housing providers to create the conditions for tenancy sustainment (Angel 2021; Parsell et al. 2019), our article demonstrates how the community organizations play a central role in ensuring certain applicants in desperate need actually access social housing.

The intense demand for social housing means that the possibility of failing to secure a place on the priority list, also called the very high needs list, is ever-present. In order to have any chance of accessing social housing in a reasonable period of time, it is essential that an applicant be placed on the priority waiting list. If consigned to the general waiting list, the applicant concerned may never access social housing (Powell et al. 2019).

In this article we scrutinize how the application process is enacted in practice. We draw on research from three Australian states – New South Wales (NSW), Queensland and Tasmania. In particular, we examine the work involved in ensuring that not only is the application completed, but completed in a way that is likely to result in an applicant being determined as high priority. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 47 practitioners with first-hand experience of the application process, and utilizing Bourdieu's conceptual framework (Bourdieu 1984, 1986), we argue that the information required to negotiate the application process means an applicant's chances of success as they compete for this intensely scarce resource are enhanced significantly if they have a skilled and experienced advocate. Besides Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital, we use the concept of emotional capital. We show that in order for the applicant to demonstrate that they are "worthy" of being placed on the priority list requires substantial cultural, social and emotional capital (Cottingham 2016; Reay 2004; Zembylas 2007) on the part of advocates and ultimately the applicant. The latter needs to be prepared to open up and present themselves as experiencing acute need and risk. Applying for social housing is more than an applicant, a form, and set of bureaucratic assessment procedures. Rather it is a process that is constituted by the actions of key stakeholders inside and outside of the social housing system who advocate on behalf of applicants.

In the next section we review the literature on accessing scarce housing and welfare resources. The application process for social housing in NSW, Queensland and Tasmania is then briefly outlined. Next the theoretical framing for the article is presented. The methodology is then mapped out. This is followed by an analysis of the application process and the importance of sub-contracting capital to enhance the possibilities of success.

Managing Access to Scarce Housing and Welfare Resources

In Australia, social housing has never been a substantial part of the housing stock. It reached a high point of around 6% in the mid-1990s (AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2021; Troy 2012). However, in line with trends globally, over the last three decades social housing as a proportion of the total housing stock has declined substantially (AIHW 2019). In 2020, it constituted about 4% of Australia's housing stock (AIHW 2021). Alongside this reduction, there has been a massive increase in house prices in Australia. Since the mid-1990s, and adjusting for inflation, house prices have trebled,

whilst incomes only increased by 50% (Pawson, Milligan, and Yates 2020). In the 12 months to June 2021, the weighted average increase in house prices in Australia's eight capital cities was 16.8% (ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2021).

Not surprisingly, the price increases have shut an increasing proportion of Australia's population out of home ownership and resulted in a spike in the number of households dependent on the private rental sector. In 2016, 27% of Australian households rented privately, up from 18% in 1994 (ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2019). Although rent increases have not matched house price increases, the proportion of low-income households (bottom 40% of households) in rental stress is substantial. In 2017–18, 43% of private renters were low-income households and of these 50.2% experienced rental stress (Productivity Commission 2021).

The inability to access homeownership, the increase in the number of people struggling in the private rental sector and the minimal growth in the social housing stock, has meant that the demand for social housing has remained high. Nationally, in 2019, there were 148,500 households on the waiting list for social housing and 12,100 for state owned and managed Indigenous housing (SOMIH) (AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) 2020). Historically, public housing was allocated to low-income families; usually at least one member of the family would be employed (Hayward 1996). However, the decline in the proportion of social housing relative to the population has meant that in the contemporary period for an individual or household to access social housing they usually have to be severely disadvantaged and or extremely precarious (AIHW 2021).

In light of these developments, there has been an intensified use of personal data to target the allocation of social housing to the most disadvantaged households. Data collection is central to assessment of the vulnerabilities of applicants and determining access to housing (Thomas et al. 2020). This emphasis on data-driven targeting raises both concerns and opportunities. On the one hand, it can prevent applicants who have minimal needs and are thus the easiest to house being allocated scarce housing resources (Dickson-Gomez et al. 2007). However, the process is not necessarily unbiased and objective. What people are willing to report to public officials about their problems (through application forms), and what data public officials hold on people's problems (administrative data), are products of institutions that systematically create advantages and disadvantages for some sections of society, particularly racial minorities (Vaithianathan and Kithulgoda 2020). When examining the application for social housing, as with other public resources, the social context of the data required and the strategies used to elicit it must be considered.

Research highlights how data-driven targeting create new "administrative burdens" (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015) for people seeking social housing and other forms of assistance. Although the application forms and the modes of applying differ from state to state in Australia and assessment workers have some discretion, there are substantial commonalities. In all states, in order to be prioritized, applicants have to be in "greatest need" and engage in forms of "self-presentation" aimed at "convinc[ing] gatekeepers that they are worthy of care" (Woolford and Nelund 2013, 293). In contexts where resources are scarce and targeted based on intensity of need, these self-presentations involve the demonstration of a "pathological" self (Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker 2014). This is typically a labour-intensive process that involves navigating complex and opaque application processes (Keene et al. 2021). It requires significant

investments of time, energy, and emotion (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). The demands of this process can place people with fewer resources and/or less capacity at a disadvantage, and deter eligible applicants from accessing needed housing and welfare resources (Keene et al. 2021).

Inverse Distinction: Theoretically Framing the Applications Process

This paper provides insight into the navigation of the contemporary data-intensive social housing application landscape. We conceptualize the process whereby applicants have to demonstrate their “neediness” and “damaged” circumstances in order to access the priority list, as an inverted version of the process of “distinction” described by Bourdieu (1984). Bourdieu demonstrates how social actors draw upon various forms of capital to distinguish themselves from others and gain an advantage in the struggle for symbolic recognition and the resources it begets. For Bourdieu, distinction is a process through which social elites establish and perpetuate an elevated social status for themselves, thereby gaining and maintaining exclusive access to valuable social goods (e.g. economic or cultural assets, positions of political, economic or cultural influence, etc.). This process is inverted in the data-driven targeting systems described above in that applicants must distinguish themselves from others by establishing a degraded (rather than elevated) social status in the form of the vulnerable or “pathological” self (Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker 2014).

For Bourdieu, the practice of distinction plays out within given “fields”: bounded social spaces (e.g. education, politics) in which actors struggle over field-specific stakes (e.g. qualifications, positions of influence) and employ field-specific forms of capital to gain an advantage in these struggles (e.g. financial resources, connections with powerful people). We conceptualize social housing waitlists as a “bureaucratic field”; a space characterized by a struggle over public goods administered by bureaucratic procedures (Bourdieu, Wacquant, and Farage 1994). Here, the field’s specific stakes are scarce social housing tenancies that are allocated based on need. Our analysis focuses in particular on the forms of capital drawn upon/available to applicants in their efforts to prove their neediness. We conceptualize neediness itself as a form of “symbolic capital”: recognition that an actor has attained valuable status within the given field (Bourdieu 1986). Social housing applicants gain this symbolic capital through the deployment and “conversion” of other forms – primarily cultural and social capital, as access to economic capital (e.g. money, assets), even at very modest levels, renders a person ineligible for social housing.

Valuable cultural capital in the bureaucratic field of social housing waitlists takes the form of embodied knowledge of how the system operates. This includes knowledge of the expectations and criteria deployed by housing bureaucrats and their non-profit partners, particularly regarding the emphasis placed on neediness, as well as how neediness is defined, classified, and substantiated. It also includes knowledge (and acceptance) of certain expert discourses, particularly those from the medical and social service fields, which enable people to present themselves as needy in ways that are bureaucratically accepted. Importantly, given that many applicants are indeed highly vulnerable and have biographies of severe disadvantage, they are unlikely to possess these forms of cultural capital at the outset, and can only gain them at the expense of significant “learning costs” (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). To enhance their chances of accessing the priority or

high needs waiting-list, applicants generally need to sub-contract cultural and social capital to advocates. The advocates use their cultural and social capital to assist applicants through the application process.

Social capital – an actor’s ability to draw on social networks or relationships (Bourdieu 1986) – becomes important to the analysis. Applicants’ ability to present themselves as appropriately needy is mediated through their level of engagement with a variety of advocates (e.g. homeless outreach workers, domestic violence refuge employees, general practitioners, psychologists and psychiatrists, etc.), which we conceptualize as a form of social capital. The key advocate, the person who assists the applicant in filling out the application form, usually has substantial cultural and social capital. Besides having an acute knowledge of the bureaucratic field, they are able to connect the applicant to a range of key actors. Relationships with these actors are valuable either because they (the actors) possess detailed knowledge of the bureaucratic systems and expectations that applicants themselves lack, or because they can provide institutional recognition of an applicant’s needs and vulnerabilities that help substantiate their neediness (in the case of mainstream medical practitioners or mental health professionals). Importantly, access to these valuable forms of social capital vary across jurisdictions, and are in some cases distributed in a relatively ad hoc and uneven manner that produces inequalities between applicants in terms of their probability of success.

Finally, all of the relationships and processes that constitute the field of social housing waitlists are mediated by “emotional capital” (Cottingham 2016; Reay 2004; Zembylas 2007). Cottingham (2016), drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and capital, concludes that emotional capital refers to “one’s trans-situational, emotion-based knowledge, emotion management skills, and feeling capacities”. She distinguishes between primary and secondary emotional capital, arguing that emotional capital can be linked to early family socialization (primary socialization) or acquired through education and one’s occupation (secondary socialization). Primary emotional capital “connotes the more rigid, socially constrained aspects of habitus developed during formative years ... ” (Cottingham 2016, 463). Secondary emotional capital implies “that an individuals’ emotional capital is malleable to different situational experiences” (Cottingham 2016, 463). Thus there is emotional reflexivity and individuals are able to adjust emotionally depending on the situation.

Key features of emotional capital required for assisting applicants for social housing include the capacity for caring, empathy and compassion. In a short time period, assessment workers need to have the emotional resources to establish rapport and win the trust of vulnerable applicants many of whom will have past experiences of being let down or discriminated against by service providers and social service bureaucrats (Ruiz-Fernandez et al. 2021). Their upbringing and professional training would have given many of the advocates the emotional capital required. However, variations in the emotional capital of advocates could play a crucial role in the success or failure of applications.

For applicants, emotional capital entails the capacity to weather the “psychological costs” (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015) of applying for social housing, particularly profound uncertainty (Keene et al. 2021), without losing patience and acting out or abandoning the process. It also often requires recounting intimate details of their lives and the capacity to not only perform but also accept and emotionally endure identities centred on deficiency and degraded social status. These identities are often highly stigmatizing and potentially

conflict with people's self-conceptions (e.g. one based on resilience or "survivorship"), thus enacting a form of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 1984) upon applicants that is, amongst other things, emotionally taxing and even potentially traumatic.

We examine what role each of these capitals play in the struggles of applicants to access scarce social housing and whether these capitals are unevenly distributed thereby deepening inequalities amongst applicants.

Methodology

To investigate the governance, management and delivery of the social housing application process, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a wide range of housing system professionals in Tasmania, Queensland and NSW,¹ predominantly in the capital cities Hobart, Sydney and Brisbane. This qualitative investigation took place alongside the examination of publicly available policy and practice documentation focused on the management and assessment of social housing applications.

Interviews were undertaken in early 2021 and were targeted to include a cross-section of professionals with knowledge and experience of social housing application policy and system design. Interviewees included professionals involved in frontline social housing application assessments, the provision of community housing, housing and homelessness support services, and housing, homelessness and organizations that advocate for social and affordable housing.

Twenty-one interviews were undertaken in Tasmania, ten in Queensland and 16 in New South Wales.² Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with participants offered the opportunity to review interview transcripts. Transcripts were thematically analysed with consideration given to both key state-specific themes and themes shared across all three jurisdictions.

The inclusion of diverse professionals involved in policy development, application assessment and applicant support was crucial in developing an in-depth and lived account of the administrative pathways to joining the social housing register. Whilst this paper does not address the important experience of applying for social housing from the perspective of applicants, it offers a unique broader view across the application and assessment process that is not available to applicants. As discussed below, it is the examination of this professional understanding of, and engagement in, the applications process which reveals the considerable labour and capital required to successfully lodge a strong social housing application. Importantly, by drawing on interviews with both housing officers in government involved in assessment and advocates outside of government, this research is able to understand the advocacy involved in applying for social housing from a range of perspectives. Participant triangulation allowed us to develop a broad understanding of the work required to gain access to social housing.

Applying for Social Housing: The Need for Cultural, Social and Emotional Capital

In Australia, the system and practices for applicants to be placed on the register for social housing varies across state jurisdictions. In NSW applicants can apply online, in-person at a government office responsible for housing, through community housing providers

(CHP)³ or by phone. In Tasmania, the only way for an applicant to apply is through completing an application in-person at a front door service operated by one of two non-profit organizations that have been commissioned by the Tasmanian government to do the initial interview with applicants. The applications are then submitted to the government department responsible for the register and allocation of properties. In Queensland applications can be made directly via one of 43 government service centres across the state and also through CHPs.

The criteria and documentation required to substantiate eligibility are similar in each state. Applicants must demonstrate housing need and meet criteria about residency, income, health, disability, domestic violence, homelessness, among other factors. Applicants are registered as priority (Tasmania, NSW), very high needs (Queensland) or general (all states). On completion the assessment data of the application is entered into an algorithm system, which determines priority based on need.

The key part of the application process is completing the application form. The answers given and the documents attached to substantiate responses are used to determine the neediness of the applicant and whether they are placed on the priority or general waiting list. The profound shortage of social housing means that the application form necessarily has a perverse quality. Its primary purpose is to give the applicant the opportunity to demonstrate “inverse distinction” – that they are sufficiently physically, emotionally and or financially “damaged” and precarious to warrant them being placed on the priority list for social housing. Julie, who had worked in NSW state government’s housing bureaucracy and in a CHP, summed up this perversity: “It’s like a race to the bottom. The ‘loser’ or most needy wins”. Holly (all the names used are pseudonyms), a senior CHP employee, had a similar analysis:

You’ve got to prove that you’ve got some sort of a medical need or complexity that means you have to be in social housing . . . Otherwise you’ll just go on the [general]] waiting list and really you’re never going to get housed on the waiting list in most of the city.⁴ In the regional areas it might be different.

The Need to sub-contract Cultural Capital

Our interviewees agreed that the application process is onerous and demanding, that applicants generally need assistance and if applicants apply by themselves their chances of being placed on the priority list would be severely dented. Applicants lacking the required cultural knowledge/familiarity, will likely struggle to answer questions in a compelling way. Previous work describes how these knowledge requirements impose “learning costs” on claimants and the non-take up of valuable supports in at least some cases (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Jaspar, an assessment worker in NSW noted:

[Completing the application form is] very, very overwhelming and that’s a lot of the feedback that I’ve received from our clients. It’s a really an overwhelming process . . . Sometimes people will say, “You know . . . this is too much. Forget about it.”

Jess, a manager of a team of assessment workers in Tasmania, captured this requirement to sub-contract cultural capital.

Re applicants, I think a significant proportion, [the] majority would need assistance and do get help from supports, family and advocates, as it is onerous. Also literacy, language interpretation would be an issue, especially for lower socio-economic cohorts.

Margaret, a frontline worker at a CHP in NSW, had a similar view:

We actually have a lot of people come to the . . . office for support and to help them actually fill in the application to get that to Housing to actually get into the system. It's just complicated sometimes. There might be some barriers to just understanding all the different requirements and information that needs to go with [the application form] so quite often we do provide assistance.

It was apparent that many applicants were unsure of how to proceed. Marita, a frontline worker for a homelessness service provider in Queensland, explained her role:

It's more common that they won't know how to do the process, and so I'll go through it with them. I assist them with identifying wellbeing barriers, complete the application with them, get it, and then when it's approved, also do community housing applications with them if they wish.

A high level of literacy/ cultural capital is required to accurately interpret some of the questions on the application form. Claire, a team leader of a CHP's access team in NSW, outlined the difficulty:

I think the most confusing thing is probably understanding what is being asked, if that makes sense. So I think when anyone reads it [the application form] you can have five different people read one document and five different people interpret that in five different ways. I think sometimes it's the interpretation of what is actually required. What are they asking in this question and if you don't have the context of why that question is being asked, sometimes it can be very difficult to know how much information to put [in]. Do I just skip it or . . . what do I do with that [question], or what does that even mean?

Tegan, a homelessness service provider worker from Queensland, explained that advocates not only help in the preparation of applications, they also advocate for the prioritization of eligible applications in their interactions with housing providers. She notes that applicants without this support are at a significant disadvantage.

We know that some of the most vulnerable people on that list probably don't have support. I think we try and do the best that we can in terms of assertive outreach strategies, but there's probably people who have managed to get themselves on that list, but haven't been able to sustain working with [a] service. In those situations, if that family or individual is not getting discussed at these meetings [with housing providers], I would say it's less likely they're offered housing.

We conceptualize access to an advocate as a form of *social capital* – i.e. advantageous social relationships or networks (Bourdieu 1986) – that is “convertible” into the cultural capital required to compose a competitive social housing application. Participants described how access to an advocate, and thus the capacity to convert social capital into cultural capital, is central to determining an applicant's chances of attaining priority status. As Margaret, a CHP employee from NSW, put it.

[Advocates] have enough of an understanding of whether the client's likely to be on the priority [list] ... I think a lot of the clients they're working with ... they're either priority or should be priority. So they then follow it up and they chase it through the system. So basically without an advocate I don't know how people would go.

In Queensland and NSW, access to an advocate and the cultural capital they offer is relatively ad hoc, as it depends on whether an applicant is engaged with non-government support services, such as a specialist homelessness service. In Tasmania, however, perhaps out of recognition of the inequalities in access to cultural capital, all social housing applicants have access to support workers at the point of application. The conversion of social into cultural capital is thus less important to the process of distinction in this state, setting up an interesting comparison that we take up below.

The Need to Sub-Contract Social Capital

In addition to skilfully responding to questions on the application form, social housing applicants are required to provide institutionally recognized evidence of their neediness to attain priority status. Thus the NSW application form has 31 questions and the form needs to be read together with an 11 page "Evidence-Requirements-Information-Sheet". In NSW a minimum of four documents are required to substantiate answers given. However, some applicants, depending on their responses to the questions posed, will require as many as 18 accompanying documents. These requirements certainly place a significant "administrative burden" (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015) on applicants; burdens which are augmented by the pressure to present oneself in a way that emphasizes one's needs and hardships.

Accessing this evidence often requires the mobilization of an extensive network of professionals who have the expertise and authority to identify and substantiate relevant needs or vulnerabilities. Such professionals range from social workers and case managers, to doctors, mental health practitioners, welfare bureaucrats and even the police. Thus, whilst the evidence itself functions as a kind of symbolic capital – insofar as it confers institutional recognition of certain forms of need – like the cultural capital described above, it is derived through the conversion of social capital, namely formal relationships with the aforementioned professionals. Our interviewees spoke extensively about the importance of these evidence requirements and the burden they place on applicants. For instance, Tanya, a frontline housing worker from Tasmania, commented,

Another thing is ... getting supporting documents for the housing application. So obviously if you have comorbidities or health conditions and things, that can strengthen your application and up you in the priority list. So that's a lot of stuff where you need to provide that additional support.

Yasmin, a support worker in a women's refuge in Sydney, was adamant that her organization's capacity to mobilize its social capital in support of the housing application process was crucial:

One hundred percent they need assistance doing the form. There's a lot of evidence requirements. Like obviously you've looked at the form and like every question has ... evidence requirements ... and they have to gather all of that and you know obviously just gathering all of that is a challenge ... But that's definitely something that we support them with; to get all the support letters and stuff in order.

Advocates described in detail how they mobilized their social capital – in the form of professional networks – to produce evidence of their clients’ needs and vulnerabilities, as well as meeting basic eligibility requirements like proof of identity. Karim, a homelessness support worker in Queensland, provided an overview of this process which she described as getting applicants “document ready”:

So, getting onto the waitlist, that is a battle in itself, right? [Part of that is] getting people document ready . . . So, say someone is on the streets, we know they are very, very unwell, but they don’t have documents to prove that. We have done the housing application, it’s gone to Department of Housing and they’re waiting for further information, because this person’s checked that they have chronic health issues, so [the Department] want medical documents or confidential medical report from the GP. This person does not have a GP. What do we do? We try and link them in with the GP, take them there . . .

And then the other thing is IDs [identification documents] . . . Lots of people, their stuff’s stolen. They’re more worried about where the next meal is coming from instead of worrying about IDs. So getting ID documents, medical documents to go along with the housing application, to get it approved, is the first battle.

The capacity of applicants and their advocates to obtain the required evidence varies. Much depends on their history, present situation and cultural and social capital. Amelia, a frontline worker in Tasmania, explained:

[The] process can be quite stressful depending on what that person’s experience of homelessness [is] or . . . why they’re coming in. Like most people who are rough sleeping have complex issues [and] sometimes that complexity is forgotten about and pushed back on: “You need to get this [document], you need to get this . . . Centrelink⁵ income statement” . . . [In] comparison, when someone’s just coming in because they are being forced out of the [private] rental market . . . they might go away and come back with the same paperwork in a day because they’ve got the capacity to do that.

In Queensland and NSW, if an applicant reports that they require social housing because they are fleeing domestic violence, they are required to provide substantiation. Yasmin, viewed this requirement as particularly taxing for applicants:

The types of documents people would have to collect for this question are copies of AVOs (Apprehended Violence Orders), Police Event numbers, doctor reports (GP or psychiatrist), support letters from social services. So, as you can imagine, these are quite onerous as many people don’t report to police or perhaps their doctor doesn’t record the injuries as resulting from violence. On top of that, if they’ve just experienced violence they might not feel like running around . . .

In Tasmania, whilst evidence may be provided, the discretion of housing assessment workers is applied in order to avoid re-traumatizing the applicant.

The last question in both the NSW and Queensland application form is potentially highly significant. An open-ended question, it asks applicants if there is any additional information the applicant would like to share. The question gives an applicant one last opportunity to argue their case. An experienced advocate could use this question to powerfully back an applicant. Yasmin highlighted the importance of advocates’ cultural and social capital to answer this question persuasively.

Yeah, so that would be where we provide the support letters and we provide a lot of support letters and yeah coordinate you know support. Like we'll just contact the other services that they're in contact with directly and say ... "Can you provide a support letter ... ". We always try and obviously look for something where we think they'd fit under priority ...

Access to an advocate is thus a form of social capital that provides access to further social capital (i.e. access to professional networks). As a result, the unevenness in access to advocates described above not only produces inequalities in the cultural capital available to applicants, but also in their access (or at least ease of access) to the networks required to verify their claims to neediness. Reflecting on how these inequalities play out for disadvantaged young people, Tanya, a housing worker in Tasmania quoted above, commented,

So that's a lot of stuff where you need to provide that additional support. To take young people to GP appointments or take them to specialist appointments to have those letters that state all that stuff. We support them with that, but then that's just another barrier, another layer for young people who don't have the support, just another thing they need to do. And when they're navigating all this stuff on their own without support, I reckon a large majority of them probably wouldn't bother because it's just all too overwhelming ...

As Tanya suggests, the burdensome nature of gaining evidence of one's needs means that applicants who do not have access to the support of an advocate will face difficulties that many will find insurmountable. Keene et al. (2021) point out in their study of waitlists for housing support in the USA, that the deterrent effect of such administrative burdens are accentuated by the sense of futility and hopelessness that many applicants experience. These observations highlight the centrality of emotional capital in making a social housing application, and it is to this dimension that we now turn.

The Importance of Emotional Capital

The relationship between the applicant and the assessment worker is characteristic of what Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald (1987) call the "bureaucratic encounters" that characterize welfare provision. Workers are not expected to reveal anything. However, over a short period of time the applicant is expected to divulge to the worker who in most instances they may have never met previously, personal information that will demonstrate that they are deficient enough to warrant being placed on the priority list. Their chances of accessing the priority list is often premised on them disclosing intimate and painful details in order for the worker to obtain a sense of their circumstances and needs. As such, the field of accessing social housing requires the contribution and mobilization of emotional capital by assessment workers. It is the workers' "stock of emotional resources" (Reay 2004, 572) that will help elicit deep accounts of applicants' situational crises, that will in turn become vital evidence of housing need. Workers have the privileged role of committing face-to-face time and providing visible emotional and practical care to applicants. In this role they draw on emotional skill to generate connection, rapport and trust with applicants:

So basically being assessment workers the first thing is establishing a bit of a rapport with them (the applicants) because they're all individuals and [we're] trying to get that [rapport] so they're a bit more comfortable to talk to us. (Alice, assessment worker in Tasmania)

In response to the question, “Would a successful application be reliant on someone’s ability to . . . represent their needs and [an applicant’s] willingness to talk about what they might need with that worker”, the response of Ashley was definitive:

Absolutely, yeah absolutely, . . . and again a lot of these people who are accessing us for the first time, we haven’t built a rapport with them. We haven’t developed that level of trust. They might not want to disclose x,y,z, which if they had, if they felt comfortable to disclose x, y, z, might have actually been beneficial in their application.

For some applicants, particularly rough sleepers, the generating of rapport and a sense of safety was particularly challenging:

So much of it is about rapport. These people who are often really sick of systems, really sick of them and they don’t want to divulge their entire life to someone that they’ve just met once. They don’t want to sit still in a small room for an hour and a half necessarily . . . What we’ve found is that by having Bev, she’s our specialist rough sleeper front door worker, [and] is based in services that they know and frequent, she’s known to them and they do tend to do that [opening up] bit by bit . . . (Ashley)

Ashley was confident that her colleagues had the requisite emotional capital, but conceded that however skilled, there was no guarantee that the applicant would open up and reveal the necessary information:

So for me, the blessing . . . is that you have very experienced, very qualified workers taking those applications . . . They know how to ask questions. They know how to make sure they’re presenting the best application they can on the information that the person shares with them. So that’s an incredible work scene because they do prompt and they’ve got a series of questions that they go through and they can give very qualified detailed advice about getting the strongest application possible. But the flip side is that yeah, the person [the applicant] has to engage in that process and choose to disclose it to another person and yeah, I find that really interesting.

In Ashley’s work-place, the development of rapport and trust is enhanced by a congenial setting, physical closeness and the applicant being able to see what is entered into the computer:

So you’re in an assessment room, so small, almost like a medical sized consult room. We try to make them as least clinical as we can, but there is a computer in between you and the person and a little desk and the staff are very big on making it as conversational as we can. And they’re more than welcome to have the applicant sit beside them as the information goes into the machine. I know that’s really important for a number of our workers so that again there is that weird power dynamic where if you’re speaking to me and I’m typing, if you haven’t developed the trust, like how do I know that what you’re typing is what I’m saying. So it’s always beautiful to watch the practice of different team members . . . They’ll either spin the computer around so that the applicant can see what we’re typing . . . And in the course of a conversation you do develop a rapport . . . Sometimes they [the applicant] might go, “Actually the reason I’m applying is because I’m experiencing family violence” or “I’m experiencing elder abuse”. And when that becomes apparent the staff are skilled and able to connect people to appropriate supports and get assistance . . .

Holly, the senior person in a CHP in NSW quoted previously, outlined the importance of an unrushed face-to-face interview for developing trust and encouraging the applicant to give relevant details.

Look, we try to have an interview process with people, a face-to-face interview. I know that a lot of like public housing [assessors] they're just too busy, but we do try to do that because sometimes it isn't until you've actually spoken to somebody about everything that you understand really what their needs are and what their evidence requirements are ... People might not necessarily reveal that to you just in a form. And sometimes I think there's a bit of a thing about, I don't know, people trying to not give them priority you know whereas for us it's about trying to understand if the client has a priority need and then helping them to apply and understand what they need to provide.

The last point about "people trying to not give them priority" is noteworthy. Holly is referring primarily to personnel within the Housing Departments of state governments where there is a good deal of pressure to keep the number of people on the waiting list as low as possible. An applicant who goes to a state government Housing Department in Queensland and NSW for assistance is more likely to be offered a range of "diversionary products"⁶ and perhaps is less likely to encounter much emotional capital. In some cases an applicant who is shifted into a "diversionary product", will be removed from the waiting list or de-prioritized.

Workers also reported organizational investment in their emotional capital in recognition of both the prevalence of adverse events in applicants' lives and the need for trauma-informed assessment work. Holly explained:

We do a lot of training around trauma ... Our pathways staff need that because a lot of that you know your pathway to homelessness is related to past trauma or something like that and it's yeah you're dealing with people who are very traumatised ... [It'] traumatising for them to re-tell their story and also for your staff to be hearing that.

There was a strong awareness that the application process if not handled with the appropriate emotional capital could re-traumatize an applicant. Julie explained:

Also refugees or people who are trauma, torture survivors, DFV (domestic and family violence) survivors ... experience additional layers and complexities in applying. Whilst the system aims to only ask a client to tell their story once and not multiple times, this is not always possible, so it adds further challenges to these applicants and brings up the trauma again, especially if not handled well by untrained staff.

Whilst often expressing discomfort with a deficit-focused assessment system, workers were also acutely aware of the importance of sensitively navigating the system with applicants who may resist divulging experiences of adversity or be unable or unwilling to mobilize narratives that make their adversity explicit:

I feel a lot of these kids inappropriately would communicate their needs and they do a lot. They go, "Things are f ... ed". To a worker, what does that mean? To someone who knows them it's a totally different meaning to just you know, "How's your family?" "It's shit". Sometimes that's the best you get out [of them]. They don't elaborate. It's sort of, it's a no go topic. "Unless you know me, I'm not going to tell you these things. It's personal". (Hannah, housing worker in Tasmania)

With respect to both cultural and emotional capital whilst interviewees were confident that the majority of their colleagues had the requisite capital, there was a recognition that there was variability. Julie commented,

As in any organisation there will be different levels of motivation, capacity, capability, training and interest in the outcome and some staff will go the extra mile to gather all of the evidence required to demonstrate that an applicant should be priority . . . There are also staff that have been in this type of role for a long time and are experts and committed to a good outcome for applicants, and there may be some who are disengaged or bored.

Discussion and Conclusion

The preceding analysis leads to four key conclusions. First, applying for social housing in a context of severe scarcity is necessarily a fraught and onerous experience. The administrative burden on applicants and their advocates can be substantial (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). The severe shortage of social housing in Australia means that applicants have to demonstrate that they are experiencing severe disadvantage and risk and thus deserve care (Woolford and Nelund 2013). The application process is designed to ensure that only applicants with acute needs are placed on the priority/very high needs list (Flanagan et al. 2020; Muir et al. 2020). However, even if severely disadvantaged, an applicant may be unable to access the priority list. The dearth of social housing means that the data driven approach is necessarily limited (Keene et al. 2021; Vaithianathan and Kithulgoda 2020).

Second, a successful application requires an inversion of what Bourdieu (1984) conceptualizes as distinction. Applicants must distinguish themselves from others in terms of their neediness by proving that their personal vulnerability, deficiency, incapability is greater than other applicants – i.e. a degraded and lowly social status – to gain access to a highly valued but incredibly scarce resource, social housing.

Thirdly, and most significantly, for this paper, the successful *demonstration* of inverse distinction is dependent on the accessibility of capital needed in generating the “best case” of inverse distinction. To demonstrate that they are sufficiently “deficient”, and unable to access housing in the market, applicants must engage support workers and medical specialists to evidence their problems. It is not enough to have problems – the most complex problems – but to be assessed as a priority for housing, applicants must have the capacity to convince the housing authority that their problems are so urgent, that they need to access social housing before the thousands of others on the waiting list. They need to convince the relevant bureaucracy they deserve care (Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker 2014; Woolford and Nelund 2013). However, because the required social and cultural capital is not evenly distributed across society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1997; Pinxten and Lievens 2014), access to social housing is thus not based solely on high needs, but is also based on having the resources – social and cultural capital – to illustrate need. Their advocates usually have the necessary capital to make sure that if an applicant is a priority list candidate, that they are placed there. They need to illustrate that the applicant is “damaged” and or needy enough to have the possibility of accessing social housing. Thus, paradoxically, for applicants to demonstrate that their need for social housing is urgent, they require the resources and expertise that is the antithesis of high need. The demonstration thereof is an intensive process (Keene et al. 2021).

Finally, the article has demonstrated the importance of emotional capital. Applying for social housing is potentially extremely challenging from a mental health perspective. We show that in order to demonstrate neediness, applicants often have to reveal and

evidence painful experiences. It is thus crucial that the advocate has the requisite emotional capital and develops a rapport with the applicant so that they feel comfortable telling their story (Ruiz-Fernandez et al. 2021). A lack of emotional capital could certainly hamper the development of an optimal application.

From a policy perspective, in Queensland and NSW especially, what is apparent is that there is a good deal of contingency with respect to an applicant optimizing their application. If they apply by themselves, it is likely that they will have more difficulty proving to the housing authority their inverted distinction status and that indeed they deserve to be classified priority. They may not have the requisite cultural and social capital to demonstrate that they are adequately damaged. If they apply in a government housing office, there is a possibility that the person assisting may not facilitate placing the person on the priority list. In Tasmania, the fact that all applicants have to go through a frontline worker, certainly creates the conditions for a fairer system. Of course, in all three states the skill and determination of advocates will vary and impact on their capacity to ensure the best outcome for their “client”.

The Tasmanian approach, where almost all applications are made through face-to-face interviews with a housing worker, does remove a good deal of contingency and ensures that every applicant is able to sub-contract cultural and social capital. Whether it makes a difference to how long somebody placed on the priority list has to wait for a home is unclear. What is evident is that there is desperate shortage of social housing, which in turn is creating enormous distress for tens of thousands of Australian individuals and families. Future research should examine how applicants view the application process and its impacts.

Notes

1. The decision to focus on the three states, NSW, Queensland and Tasmania, was premised on two factors. The study is funded by an Australian Research Council grant and the researchers are based in the three states concerned. Secondly, we were interested in illuminating the differences in the application process in the respective states and the impacts thereof.
2. Ethics approval was obtained from the respective universities.
3. Community Housing Providers (CHPs) are non-profit housing organizations that provide housing to low income people unable to access the private market. Housing managed by CHPs is referred to as community housing. Housing owned and managed by state governments is referred to as public housing. When referring to community and public housing, the term social housing is used.
4. By city, she is referring to Sydney where the shortage of social housing is particularly acute. Outside of Sydney, applicants do have a greater chance of accessing social housing.
5. Centrelink is the government agency responsible for administering and distributing social security payments.
6. Diversionary products mainly involve diverting people into the private rental sector. In NSW, the “products” offered include an interest free loan to help pay a rental bond and a rental subsidy that enables tenants to pay a subsidized rent for three years.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council [LP190100074].

ORCID

Alan Morris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7652-5370>

Andrew Clarke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1324-8032>

Cameron Parsell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7289-896X>

References

- Aigner, A. 2019. "Housing Entry Pathways of Refugees in Vienna, a City of Social Housing." *Housing Studies* 34 (5): 779–803. doi:10.1080/02673037.2018.1485882.
- Angel, S. 2021. "Housing Regimes and Residualization of the Subsidized Rental Sector in Europe 2005–2016." *Housing Studies* 1–21. doi:10.1080/02673037.2021.1921122.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2019. "More Households Renting as Home Ownership Falls." Media release, 17 July 2019. Canberra: ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/more-households-renting-home-ownership-falls>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2021. "Residential Property Price Indexes: Eight Capital Cities." Canberra: ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/residential-property-price-indexes-eight-capital-cities/latest-release>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2019. "Housing Assistance in Australia 2019." Canberra: AIHW. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2019/contents/housing-and-housing-assistance-in-australia>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2020. "Housing Assistance in Australia 2020." Canberra: AIHW. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2020/contents/priority-groups-and-waiting-lists#wait-lists>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2021. "Housing Assistance in Australia 2021: Social Housing Households." Canberra: AIHW. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia/contents/about>
- Bernt, M. 2017. "Phased Out, Demolished and Privatised: Social Housing in an East German 'Shrinking City.'" In *Social Housing and Urban Renewal: A Cross-National Perspective*, edited by P. Watt and P. Smets, 1–36. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. "'The Forms of Capital', Trans. Richard Nice." In *Chapter 9 of Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson, 241–258. Westport, Canada: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P., L. J. D. Wacquant, and S. Farage. 1994. "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field." *Sociological Theory* 12 (1): 1–18. doi:10.2307/202032.
- Bourdieu, P., and J. C. Passeron. 1997. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Cottingham, M. D. 2016. "Theorizing Emotional Capital." *Theory and Society* 45 (5): 451–470. doi:10.1007/s11186-016-9278-7.
- Dickson-Gomez, J., M. Convey, H. Hilario, A. M. Corbett, and M. Weeks. 2007. "Unofficial Policy: Access to Housing, Housing Information and Social Services among Homeless Drug Users in Hartford, Connecticut." *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy* 2 (8). doi:10.1186/1747-597X-2-8.
- Fitzpatrick, S., and H. Pawson. 2007. "Welfare Safety Net or Tenure of Choice? Dilemma Facing Social Housing Policy in England." *Housing Studies* 22 (2): 163–182. doi:10.1080/02673030601132763.
- Flanagan, K., I. Levin, S. Tually, M. Varadharajan, J. Verdouw, D. Faulkner, A. Meltzer, and A. Vreugdenhil. 2020. "Understanding the Experience of Social Housing Pathways, AHURI Final Report No 324." Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

- Hansen, H., P. Bourgois, and E. Drucker. 2014. "Pathologizing Poverty: New Forms of Diagnosis, Disability, and Structural Stigma under Welfare Reform." *Social Science & Medicine* 103: 76–83. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.06.033.
- Hasenfeld, Y., J. A. Rafferty, and M. N. Zald. 1987. "The Welfare State, Citizenship, and Bureaucratic Encounters." *Annual Review of Sociology* 13 (1): 387–415. doi:10.1146/annurev.so.13.080187.002131.
- Hayward, D. 1996. "The Reluctant Landlords? A History of Public Housing in Australia." *Urban Policy and Research* 14 (1): 5–35. doi:10.1080/08111149608551610.
- Hess, D. B., T. Tammaru, and M. van Ham. 2018. "Lessons Learned from a Pan-European Study of Large Housing Estates: Origins, Trajectories of Change and Future Prospects." In *Housing Estates in Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Segregation and Policy Challenges*, edited by D. B. Hess, T. Tammaru, and M. van Ham, 3–31. Singapore: Springer.
- Keene, D. E., A. Rosenberg, P. Schlesinger, S. Whittaker, L. Niccolai, and K. M. Blankenship. 2021. "'The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease': Rental Assistance Applicants' Quests for a Rationed and Scarce Resource." *Social Problems*. doi:10.1093/socpro/spab035.
- Moynihan, D., P. Herd, and H. Harvey. 2015. "Administrative Burden: Learning, Psychological, and Compliance Costs in citizen-state Interactions." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25 (1): 43–69. doi:10.1093/jopart/muu009.
- Muir, K., A. Powell, K. Flanagan, W. Stone, S. Tually, D. Faulkner, C. Hartley, and H. Pawson. 2020. "'A Pathway to Where?' Inquiry into Understanding and Reimagining Social Housing Pathways." AHURI Final Report No 332. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.
- New South Wales Government. 2021. *Housing Pathways: Application for Housing Assistance*. Sydney: NSW Government, Communities & Justice. https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/applying-assistance/assistance?SQ_VARIATION_549474=0
- Pahl, R. E. 1975. *Whose City?* Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Parsell, C., L. Cheshire, Z. Walter, and A. Clarke. 2019. "Social Housing after neo-liberalism: New Forms of state-driven Welfare Intervention toward Social Renters." *Housing Studies* 1–23. doi:10.1080/02673037.2018.1563673.
- Pato, I., and M. Pereira. 2016. "Austerity and (New) Limits of Segregation in Housing Policies: The Portuguese Case." *International Journal of Housing Policy* 16 (4): 524–542. doi:10.1080/14616718.2016.1215962.
- Pawson, H., V. Milligan, and J. Yates. 2020. *Housing Policy in Australia: A Case for System Reform*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pinxten, W., and J. Lievens. 2014. "The Importance of Economic, Social and Cultural Capital in Understanding Health Inequalities: Using a Bourdieu-based Approach in Research on Physical and Mental Health Perceptions." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 36 (7): 1095–1110. doi:10.1111/1467-9566.12154.
- Powell, A., A. Meltzer, C. Martin, W. Stone, E. Liu, K. Flanagan, K. Muir, and S. Tually. 2019. *The Construction of Social Housing Pathways across Australia*. AHURI Final Report No. 316 Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited. <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/316>
- Productivity Commission. 2021. "Report on Government Services, 2021: Housing and Homelessness." Canberra: Australian Government. <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2021/housing-and-homelessness>
- Reay, D. 2004. "Gendering Bourdieu's Concepts of Capitals? Emotional Capital, Women, and Social Class." *The Sociological Review* 52 (2_suppl): 57–74. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00524.x.
- Ruiz-Fernandez, M. D., R. Ortiz-Amo, E. Andina-Diaz, C. Fernandez-Sola, A. M. Ortega-Galan, C. Fernández-Sola, and Á. M. Ortega-Galán. 2021. "Emotions, Feelings, and Experiences of Social Workers while Attending to Vulnerable Groups: A Qualitative Approach." *Healthcare* 9 (1): 1–14. doi:10.3390/healthcare9010087.
- Scanlon, K., M. Fernandez Arrigotia, and C. Whitehead. 2015. "Social Housing in Europe." *European Policy Analysis* 17: 1–12.
- Thomas, K., J. Messing, A. Ward-Lasher, and A. Bones. 2020. "No Easy Decisions: Developing an evidence-informed Process to Allocate Housing Choice Vouchers to Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence." *Housing Policy Debate* 30 (5): 783–785. doi:10.1080/10511482.2020.1755336.

- Troy, P. 2012. *Accommodating Australians: Commonwealth Government Involvement in Housing*. Sydney: Federation Press.
- Turner, E. 2009. "Reforming the Social Housing Waiting Game." *Public Policy Research* 16 (2): 114–119. doi:10.1111/j.1744-540X.2009.00566.x.
- Vaithianathan, R., and C. I. Kithulgoda. 2020. "Using Predictive Risk Modeling to Prioritize Services for People Experiencing Homelessness in Allegheny County." Auckland: Centre for Social Data Analytics. https://www.alleghenycountyanalytics.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20-ACDHS-24-MethodologyReport_01142021_v2.pdf
- Watt, P. 2017. "Social Housing and Urban Renewal: An Introduction." In *Social Housing and Urban Renewal: A Cross-National Perspective*, edited by P. Watt and P. Smets, 1–36. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Williams, P. 1978. "Urban Managerialism: A Concept of Relevance?" *Area* 10 (3): 236–240.
- Woolford, A., and A. Nelund. 2013. "The Responsibilities of the Poor: Performing Neoliberal Citizenship within the Bureaucratic Field." *Social Service Review* 87 (2): 292–318. doi:10.1086/671072.
- Zembylas, M. 2007. "Emotional Capital and Education: Theoretical Insights from Bourdieu." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 55 (4): 443–463. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8527.2007.00390.x.