Can consumer participation help end homelessness in Australia?

Skye Constantine

Research Summary

Why was the research done?

While some solutions to homelessness appear to be reasonably clear (e.g. permanent supportive housing) the current research does not adequately explain all barriers to ending homelessness. One significant gap is the lived experience of people experiencing homelessness, and how this might contribute to better outcomes. This literature review explores how consumer participation might help end homelessness in Australia and argues for the creation of a body of knowledge speaking to the effectiveness of consumer participation in ending homelessness.

What were the key findings?

While the current research, policy, and practice show appetite for consumer participation in addressing homelessness, there is very little consistency in how it is understood and few examples of its successes in practice. Consumer participation is intended to ensure that people with lived experience are heard but it risks being directed by the 'people in charge … [who are] going to do whatever they're going to do anyway'[1]. It is important that the benefits of consumer participation are maximised and its potential harms mitigated. Currently, there is little research into how consumer participation is best understood and implemented. That said, homelessness continues to be a significant and increasing issue in Australia and it is well worth exploring how consumer participation might contribute to its end.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

Currently the uses of consumer participation in homelessness services appear to be based more in policy understandings than they are in evidence. Policy and practice would benefit from clearly defining the purposes of participation and considering the mitigation of its harms; for example, by ensuring the participation activities are linked to concrete outcomes that are consumer led. Overall, further research is needed to ensure better outcomes for policy and practice, and for the persons with experiences homelessness who need supports to achieve its end.

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[1] Service user respondent, cited in Phillips & Kuyini 2018, p. 1107

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> The homeless people themselves are the experts. And I know a lot of people will say 'But you're part of the problem, how can you be part of the solution?' Well no-one understands the problems better than a homeless person.
>
> <div align="right">(Paul, service user, in Davies & Gray 2017, p. 8)</div>

Homelessness is a complex issue, fraught with contextual considerations, inadequate resourcing, and unclear lines of responsibility (Constantine 2023a). Some aspects appear to be reasonably clear: there is strong evidence for permanent supportive housing interventions (e.g. Aubry et al. 2020; Boland et al. 2018) and emerging evidence for the value of peer support (e.g. Barker & Maguire 2017; Boland et al. 2018). However, the current research does not account for all the barriers to ending homelessness, and much of it fails to engage with the lived experiences and choices of the people that homelessness affects.

In Australia, listening to lived experience is typically enacted through 'consumer participation' activities. Consumer participation refers to the involvement of people in the service and policy decisions that affect their lives. It has an extensive history in Australia in the delivery of health services, particularly in health education and promotion, and its application has been extended to mental health, disability, and other human services (Baum 2015). It is often positioned as 'an important democratic right' (Department of Health 2021) and its development has taken place alongside various social and political movements (e.g. suffrage, Indigenous people's rights movements, and protest movements related to war and urban development) characterised by 'a protest against concentration of power' and 'the demand for increased participation in decision-making processes' (Baum 2015, p. 525), echoed in the rallying cry *nothing about us, without us!* Beyond the right to be involved, consumer participation has been championed by policy and services as fostering better understandings of services user needs, facilitating more targeted, and consequently more efficient, service responses (Anderson et al. 2006; Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care 2023b; Baum 2015; Constantine 2023b; Gregory 2007a). It follows that the implementation of consumer participation in the context of addressing homelessness makes good sense.

However, as with the issues of homelessness, consumer participation has historically been inadequately defined, and the lines of responsibility, power, and resourcing are not always clear. Further, there is currently a very little published research into the ways in which consumer participation might contribute to addressing homelessness. This highlights the critical value

that research into consumer participation and homelessness could bring, developing a body of knowledge as to its effectiveness and appropriate application.

This paper discusses the relevance of consumer participation to the challenge of ending homelessness and argues for the need of a field of knowledge that addresses both consumer participation and the end of homelessness. First, it overviews the concept of consumer participation, and how this currently sits in Australian policy and practice. Then it reviews the current evidence base for consumer participation and addressing homelessness. Finally, it addresses some of the conceptual challenges of participation and explores the participatory frameworks which might be relevant to both achieving participation and ending homelessness.

What's in a name?

Broadly speaking, this paper intends to explore the potential for, and the benefits of, listening to, and involving, people with experiences of homelessness in the responses to homelessness in Australia. This is commonly referred to as 'consumer participation' in the relevant literature, policy, and practice documents.

There are, however, debates as to the usefulness of this term (e.g. Baum 2015; Seal 2009) and it is not universally adopted. Consumer participation might also be referred to as 'client collaboration', 'service user involvement', 'lived experience voice', 'citizen engagement', 'community partnership', 'co-design', and various other permutations. While these terms are sometimes used synonymously, they aren't always intended to mean the same thing. The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (2008), for example, differentiates 'participation' ('when consumers, carers and community members are meaningfully involved in decision making about health policy and planning, care and treatment, and the wellbeing of themselves and the community'), 'engagement' ('informed dialogue between an organisation and consumers, carers and the community which encourages participants to share ideas or options and undertake collaborative decision making, sometimes as partners'), and 'involvement' ('the process of involving consumers, carers and community members in planning and decision making') (p. 3), while hedging these chosen definitions as 'language [that] may be further refined' (p. 7).

This paper uses 'consumer participation' as an approximate term, signalling the possibilities of people being involved in the decisions that affect their lives in meaningful ways. However, this term will be held lightly, with a recognition that its conceptual and practical ambiguities need to be engaged with through consideration of the available literature, guidelines, frameworks, and, most importantly, the voices of lived experience.

Consumer participation in Australian policy

Consumer participation has a lengthy history in Australian policy, dating back to the 1973 federally established Community Health Program which linked 'the provision of high quality, readily accessible, reasonably comprehensive, coordinated and efficient health and welfare services' with the services being 'developed in consultation with, and where appropriate, the involvement of, the community to be served' (Hospitals and Health Services Commission, cited in Baum 2015, p. 526). Currently, consumer participation standards and guidelines are nationally set for health services (Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care 2023b), mental health services (National Mental Health Commission 2023), and disability services (Department of Social Services 2022). The policy positioning of consumer participation in the homelessness services sector is not so clear.

Consumer participation and homelessness services
Currently, Australia's National Housing and Homelessness Agreement does not specify requirements for consumer participation in homelessness service provision leaving the states/territories to define their own standards in this regard. Queensland's *Homelessness Program guidelines, specifications and requirements* (2021), for example, directs 'a continuous improvement framework, which supports the participation of customers in quality improvement' (p. 31). New South Wales' *Specialist Homelessness Services: Program Specifications* (2021) includes the program practice principle of 'ensur[ing] people accessing [Specialist Homelessness Services] are able to express their views in the design, delivery and continuous improvement of services, through a range of appropriate mechanisms, including direct consultation' (p. 13). And the Victorian Specialist Homelessness Services sector is currently undertaking a significant 'capacity development' project, which names a sector-wide consumer participation strategy as one of its 15 core goals (Council to Homeless Persons n.d.). Evidently there is an appetite for consumer participation in the context of addressing homelessness, but this is not yet foregrounded and still in its earlier stages of development.

Is consumer participation evidence-based or policy-based?

Despite the 50-year long history of consumer participation in Australian policy, as recently as 2007 the Australian Institute of Health Policy Studies commissioned a research project 'designed to provide both an *introduction* [emphasis added] to the topic [of consumer participation] and an underpinning for further research' citing the existence of 'little evidence from the literature of [consumer participation's] success' (Gregory 2007a, p. iv). Gregory (2007a) notes that the existing literature tends to speak to the importance of participation but provides few examples of participation in practice.

This is concerning. While participation has arisen from 'consumers demand[ing] the right to participate in decision making' (p. 48) this does not mean that the purpose or practices of the participation are clear, or consumer led (Gregory 2007a). Consumer participation can be, for example, for the purposes of 'ethics and democracy (e.g. consumers' right to participate), improved policy outcomes, improved relationships with consumers, [or] serving political purposes, such as increasing credibility of decisions and increasing public confidence in the policy process' (Gregory 2007b, p. 23). Furthermore, Gregory (2007b) highlights that, when 'initiated by organisations', consumer participation tends to use 'the language, categories, and definitions relevant to the organisations' and 'consumers are expected to contribute in a way that fits within bureaucratic boundaries' (p. 23).

Currently, consumer participation appears to be based in policy more than it is in evidence. While some researchers have challenged the privileging of evidence over lived experience knowledge (Davies & Gray 2017; Glasby & Beresford 2006), the absence of research evidence risks consumer participation being used without regard for effective practices or for the expectations of the persons contributing lived experience.

Evidence and evaluation

In terms of evidence, the current research into consumer participation in the context of addressing homelessness is very limited. There are a handful of studies available, across both the Australian and the international literature, which are discussed below. One noticeable absence across this literature, however, is how consumer participation might contribute to *ending* homelessness. Constantine's (2023b) investigation into the ways in which a Victorian

homelessness services network represented consumer participation through their publicly available documents found that, while some service providers appear to associate consumer participation activities with their goals in ending homelessness, there does not appear to be any evidence explicitly connecting consumer participation and the end of homelessness in practice.

In the context of homelessness services provision, Phillips and Kuyini's (2018) interviews with service users and staff at New South Wales crisis accommodation services found that there were limited opportunities for consumer participation and a low awareness of what was available. Many who 'had participated in simple ways … were not aware that this was considered consumer participation' (Phillips & Kuyini 2018, p. 1105). Additionally, once an understanding of consumer participation was established, Phillips and Kuyini (2018) found that staff attitudes were a significant barrier or enabler with '9 out of 10 of the homeless participants' reporting that 'the attitude of staff directly affected their willingness and ability to participate in both positive and negative ways' (p. 1105). Phillips & Kuyini (2018) note that this was reported even though there were 'no questions related directly to staff attitudes' (p. 1105). Promisingly, of those who had knowingly participated, they reported personal 'benefits includ[ing] a renewed sense of hope, feeling worthwhile and appreciating the distraction' (p. 1108). For many, however, participation was seen as 'futile and pointless', with one respondent saying: 'People in charge, they're not going to listen ... They're just going to do whatever they're going to do anyway' (Phillips & Kuyini 2018, p. 1107).

Staff impacts on participation were also identified in Tseris' (2020) investigation into the employment of peer staff roles in a Sydney homelessness outreach service 'as a strategy to more closely align the service towards principles of service user participation' (p. 165). Tseris (2020) conducted six focus groups over six months, half with the peer staff only, and half with non-peer staff members also included. In this, the peer staff reported being unclear 'about both the aims and boundaries of their role' (Tseris 2020, p. 168) and spoke about the non-peer staff as not always valuing their knowledge and contributions. Some staff (both peer and non-peer), however, identified the peer staff as 'a key role … highlighting the social contexts of service users, which may not always be "front of mind" for other workers' (p. 167). Some also noted that the peer staff had rapport building and crisis management skills unique to their lived experience contributions. Tseris' (2020) research also examines consumer/peer contributions in the broader context, beyond intra-service dynamics. They found that conducting half of their focus groups with a mix of peer staff and non-peer staff provided opportunities for shared

reflections on 'systemic injustices' and to consider 'complex questions about practice' (p. 170). This included the 'discomfort produced by responding to homelessness through outreach work alone, without addressing structural determinants and policy drivers: "Sometimes people stay on our lists for years … how do you support someone to wait [for an offer of housing]?"' (Tseris 2020, p. 170). Here we can see the significance of the systemic context for consumer participation in responses to homelessness.

The international literature also emphasises the broader systemic contexts (Whiteford 2011). Whiteford (2011) draws on their ethnographic fieldwork in a daycentre for people experiencing homelessness, and having 'witnessed rough sleepers engage in both participatory forms of governance and openly critique the day-to-day running of the support services' (p. 51), to argue for consumer participation:

> [H]omeless people (with sufficient support and opportunities) are both capable and willing to contribute to the development of future policy, practice and service delivery in new and exciting ways. … [I]t is of course inescapably the case that homelessness is both a synonym of acute social exclusion and symptom of profound social injustice. … The coupling of rough sleeping with service user involvement, with its own professed participatory and liberationist aims and objectives, would thus appear to provide a critical portal through which to explore the contested interface between citizenship, human rights and social justice. (p. 46)

Alongside this call to action, Whiteford (2011) laments, the remarkable lack of literature attending to consumer participation and homelessness.

Anker's (2008) case study of a 'national interest organisation of homeless people' (known as SAND), which emerged from consumer participation activities based in the Denmark homelessness service system, also speaks to the relationship between consumer participation and the broader systems. SAND consists of representative homelessness service users who have advocated for changes to service provision and broader policy (Anker 2008). For example, SAND achieved a policy change resulting in payment of income support directly to eligible persons experiencing homelessness instead of accommodation providers, who then dispensed a smaller allowance. Despite this success, Anker (2008) suggests that SAND's role has since been reduced to an 'elaboration and enforcement of [current] government policies' (p. 44).

Anker's (2008) findings in relation to SAND might well be relevant when considering Black's (2014) evaluation of the Australian Council to Homeless Persons' Peer Education and Support Program (PESP). The PESP is significant in Australia as one of its longest standing consumer participation programs for people experiencing homelessness, having operated since 2005. Black (2014) found that the PESP is 'an effective consumer participation program which is highly valued by all its stakeholder groups' (p. 5) but that it might not be successful in its primary aim of 'provid[ing] people who have experienced homelessness with an opportunity to improve the effectiveness of the homeless service system' (p. 8). According to Black (2014), stakeholders felt that it was 'least effective … in its impact on government policy' (p. 41), with only 50% responding that they felt it had 'some impact', and that only a 'slightly greater proportion of respondents (64 per cent) felt that PESP had had a positive impact on service delivery for people experiencing homelessness' (p. 41). Black's (2014) evaluation suggested that this limited impact was not due to the PESP model itself but as a result of limited opportunities to be heard by government and by other key homelessness agencies.

While scarce, the evidence of consumer participation in the context of addressing homelessness broadly aligns with that of other service contexts. The potential personal benefits, in terms of self-worth and social inclusion (Phillips & Kuyini 2018; Whiteford 2011), are also seen in the broader consumer participation literature (e.g. Anderson et al. 2006; Baum 2015; Gathen et al. 2022; Goodhew et al. 2019; Luchenski et al. 2018). Additionally, the challenges of staff attitudes (Phillips & Kuyini 2018; Tseris 2020) have also been recognised in alcohol and other drug (e.g. Goodhew et al. 2019), mental health (e.g. Tobin et al. 2002), disability (e.g. Radermacher et al. 2010), and health contexts (e.g. Anderson et al. 2006).

Further, research into consumer participation in other service settings, such as health, also provides few answers as to impact and outcomes (Conklin et al. 2015; Gregory 2007a). Conklin et al.'s (2015) systematic scoping review of participation in health policy identified that, across the literature, the 'concept[s] and the indicators used to examine and determine outcomes [of consumer participation] remain poorly specified and inconsistent' (p. 153), and that this limits the usefulness of any conclusions as to the value of participation. That said, Goodhew et al.'s (2019) systematic review of consumer participation activities in alcohol and other drug services concluded, more optimistically, that such activities lead to the development of more effective and innovative interventions; improved, and more equal, relationships between services users and providers; and an increased organisational politicisation and awareness of social justice.

Gathen et al.'s (2022) scoping review of the impacts of consumer participation with 'people in vulnerable situations' (including homelessness, seeking asylum, intellectual disability, child protection) (p. 55) supported this, identifying potential benefits for both the service users' health and wellbeing and for organisational development. However, they also found evidence of potential harms. Furthering Phillips and Kuyini's (2018) findings about there being some sense of futility in participation, they concluded that service users 'need to experience concrete results from participation [and] if not, the process may result in feelings of powerlessness and frustration' which also risks 'unintended and negative impact on the [service] users' mental health and their feeling of empowerment' (p. 61). Overall, further research is needed into the impacts of consumer participation, negative and positive, on both the consumers and the sites of their participation.

Who are the consumers? What is the participation?

Given that participants may require the outcomes of their participation to be 'concrete' in order to avoid unintended harm (Gathen et al. 2022), it is important to clarify the purposes of consumer participation in the overarching project of ending homelessness. As discussed in Constantine (2023a), Australia is not currently adequately addressing the issue of homelessness and there are multiple barriers to its effective end. Research into the ways in which to implement participation, so as to maximise success and mitigate harm, is critical. Further, in the context of the massive project of ending homelessness, how can we know that the participation is worthwhile? And, considering that it might not be feasible for all persons to contribute, how can we be confident that the representation is adequate? This section will tease out some of the complexities of the concepts of both 'consumer' and 'participation'.

"Are we experts on homelessness … or homeless persons?"
So far, the relevant policy and the evidence appears to identify the consumer as a person with past or present experiences of homelessness. However, in relation to services more broadly, the 'consumer' in consumer participation is considered to be anyone who 'who has used, or may potentially use, [the relevant] services', as well as carers and consumer representatives/advocates (Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care 2023a). Taken at its broadest, this definition of consumer appears to be all inclusive. Within the homelessness sector, 'consumer' would include everyone who could potentially experience homelessness which, arguably, includes every member of society. Theoretically, any member

of society could qualify as a 'consumer' and could potentially contribute as a homelessness services consumer.

We don't, however, all have an equal risk of homelessness (Bell & Allain 2021; Bramley & Fitzpatrick 2018) and, further to this, we don't all have an equal perception of our risk of homelessness. For example, people with a past experience of homelessness are more likely to consider the possibility of being affected by future experiences of homelessness (Dys et al. 2023). In considering who might participate as a consumer, these considerations might be material. Ponew et al. (2023), for example, found that mental health professionals' own experiences of mental health and vulnerability 'influence [their] evaluation of the patients' situations' as well as 'what kind of remedies are imagined upon and what treatment options are offered or taken' (p. 7) with those without experience indicating more stigma in their attitudes and considering fewer options for future health. In short, lived experiences do matter.

However, Buck et al.'s (2004) research into a consumer advisory board with a homelessness healthcare organisation in the US raises further questions about lived experience and the adequacy of representation. Through their analysis of the advisory board's meeting agendas, minutes, and transcripts, they identified striking examples of self-awareness by the lived experience members around issues of expertise and representation. Questions were raised by the advisory board as to whether they were "experts on homelessness or … homeless persons" (consumer advisory board member, cited in Buck et al. 2004, p. 518) and whether they 'should speak for all homeless people or only for those who had changed their circumstances … [and] were working to enhance their living conditions' (p. 518). Further, Buck et al. (2004) identified a 'recurrent' theme, expressed by the participants, that 'homeless individuals often feel defeated [and] "… [i]f you choose to stay [homeless], if you don't have goals to move from this, [then] you won't move from it"' (p. 518). While these attitudes have basis in lived experience, they nevertheless risk perpetuating stigma and the belief that individual responsibility is primary in addressing homelessness.

These complexities in the conception of representation, and in the definition of 'consumer', pose a challenge as to understandings of consumer participation, its possibilities in contributing to better systems to address homelessness, and to better outcomes for the persons experiencing homelessness.

A parity of participation?

Perhaps the easier concept to consider is the 'participation' element of consumer participation. One early approach is Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation' typology. Activities and outputs are categorised and ordered from 'nonparticipation' at the bottom of the ladder, through 'degrees of tokenism' (informing, consultation, placation), and up to 'degrees of citizen power' (partnership, delegated power, citizen control) at the top (Arnstein, 1969). This model of participation is shown in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1.

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation (p. 26) [modified from source].
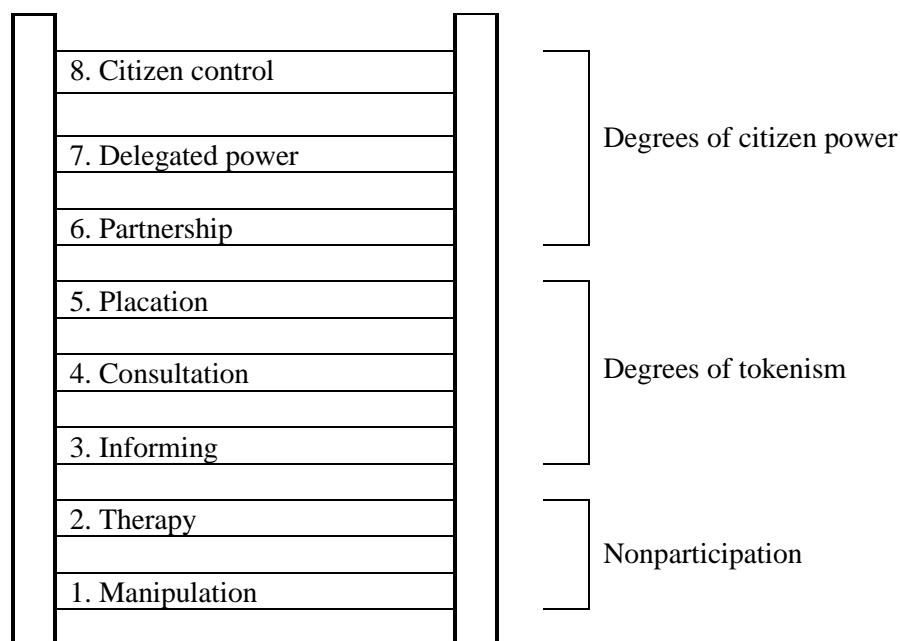
There are criticisms of this hierarchical approach, and alternate non-hierarchical models have been proposed (e.g. Bishop & Davis 2002; Tritter & McCallum 2006). A risk with these non-hierarchical models is that they downplay the 'democratic rights' aspect of participation and situate the decisions as to who participates, including when and how, in the very institutions, and the concentrations of power, that participatory principles challenge.

However, Arnstein's ladder has also been criticised from a social justice perspective as having 'failed to *adequately* [emphasis added] challenge the notions of participation that marginalise many social service clients' (Davies et al. 2014, p. 119). Drawing on interviews with homeless service users, Davies et al. (2014) assert that, for service users, participation 'was not just a tool for recognising their right to involvement. Their goal was structural change … [and] the

end to which service users aspired was social justice' (p. 125). That is, that the successes of participation must be measured based on the degree to which 'there were positive effects on economic, identity/cultural and political opportunities as a result' (Davies et al. 2014, p. 126). Davies et al. (2014) propose Fraser's justice framework, and its central concept of 'parity of participation', as a more suitable model for understanding participation in the considerations of social justice (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2.

Fraser's justice framework (Blue et al., 2019), p. 364) [modified from source]

Recognition

Representation   *Redistribution*
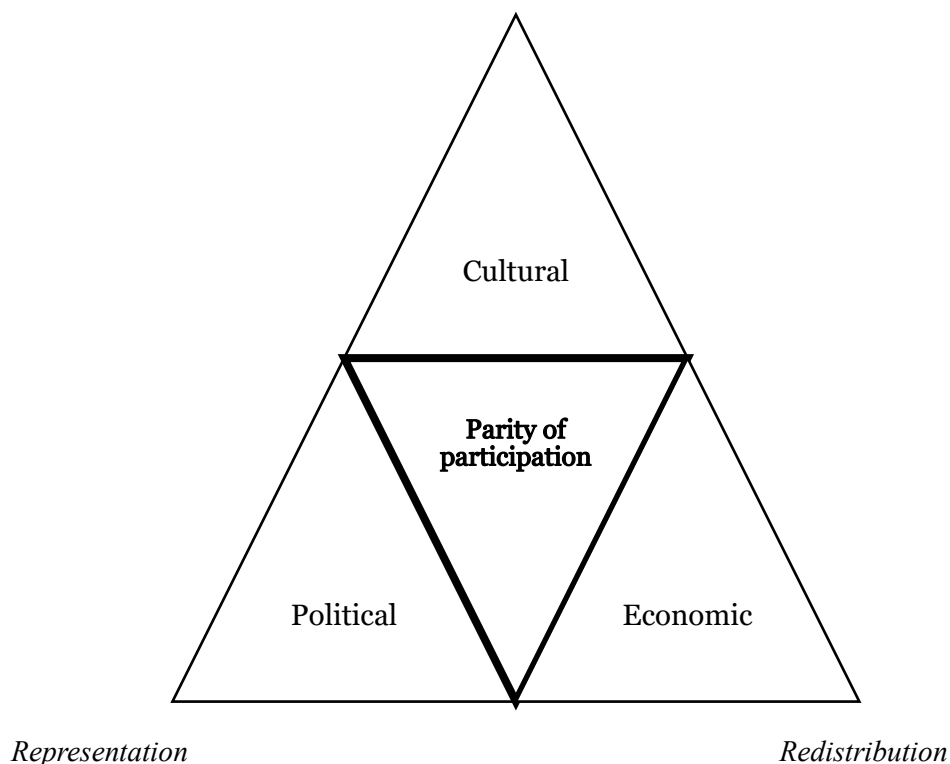
While Davies et al.'s (2014) aspirations for social justice might be essential in addressing homelessness, their parity of participation measure does not provide much direction as to *how* we move from the current state of crisis to a state of justice, or how participation is measured in the interim. Blue et al. (2019) propose that, rather than discard Arnstein's ladder altogether, the ladder can be enhanced through Fraser's justice framework, and that participation activities can be planned with respect to the following:

- Are there 'appropriate procedures to ensure that all relevant people and perspectives are represented at the appropriate scale'?
- Can we 'ensure all perspectives – not just dominant ones – are recognized and valued'?

- Can we 'respond to and mitigate the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources' and its effects on participation? (Blue et al. 2019, p. 363)

In this, Blue et al. (2019) provide the possibility of an understanding of consumer participation which might be both inclusive and effective, allowing for pragmatic understandings of the concepts of both 'consumer' and 'participation'.

Can consumer participation help end homelessness in Australia?

The core question of this paper is: can consumer participation help end homelessness in Australia? Based on the present research and the present conditions of the crisis, the answer is unclear. There is currently a small gap in our understandings of addressing homeless, a larger gap in our understandings of what might end homelessness, and a vast gap in our understandings of how consumer participation might contribute. This section will speak to the opportunities in the creation of a field of research speaking to both consumer participation and the end of homelessness, as they have been informed by the evidence currently available.

In the current research, there is some indication that consumer participation might present benefit for homelessness service users: possibly as a natural consequence of their own participation (as per Phillips & Kuyini 2018) or possibly due to receiving services that have been improved by lived experience knowledge (as per Tseris 2020). There are also, however, warnings in relation to unintended harms (Gathen et al. 2022). The benefits to current service users, and other persons experiencing homelessness, merits further investigation.

There is a stronger indication, in the current research, of there being institutional barriers to the effectiveness of consumer participation in the context of homelessness responses. That is, there are power-based barriers to participation ranging from staff attitudes (e.g. Phillips & Kuyini 2018) to a lack of responsive engagement from homelessness agencies and government (e.g. Black 2014), and further impacts from the broader systemic issues (e.g. Tseris 2020; Whiteford 2011). The policy and practice conditions which might enable effective consumer participation in the context of addressing homelessness appear to be a vital consideration; one which is currently under-researched and one for which understandings might be aided by existing participatory frameworks (e.g. Blue et al. 2019).

Finally, there appears to be hope, rather than evidence, that consumer participation could contribute to development of systems that can effectively address, and end, the incidence of homelessness in Australia. As discussed in Constantine (2023a), Australia's rate of homelessness currently represents a failure in its international human rights obligations and there appears to be a point at which the current evidence falls short of directing the solutions to this. These possibilities, of consumer participation contributing to the end of homelessness, certainly merit thorough investigation.

Conclusion

While there is some evidence of an appetite for consumer participation in the context of addressing homelessness, currently there are striking lacks in both evidence and guidance. As Australia progresses toward consumer participation in homelessness, it will need to ensure that people experiencing homelessness are able to contribute in ways that are meaningful for them, as well as those that create benefits for both them and for the broader population of people excluded from housing. Not only is this a matter of ending the harm of homelessness, but it is also a matter of avoiding any harms of participation. Overall, this paper has confirmed the need for a body of research into consumer participation and homelessness.

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