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Permanent residents in caravan parks, managers and the persistence of the social

ABSTRACT

Until recently, permanent residents in caravan parks were often absent from discussions about homelessness and housing in the Australian context. When permanent residency was recognised and legislated for in the 1980s, efforts were made to ensure scope for standard community infrastructure such as roads, sewerage and community gathering places. Although the number of long term caravan parks in Australia has recently decreased, on the edge of Melbourne some parks are expanding to cater for a growing clientele reflecting a new and partly de-institutionalised society. This society is characterised by mobile, temporary and casualised work and changing, volatile family relationships; each trend creating a need for different forms of housing. In this paper, preliminary interviews with ten caravan park managers from the outskirts of Melbourne reveal their role in the complex relationship between space, community formation and social solidarity: a relationship which directly impacts on the health and well-being of caravan park residents.

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Introduction

During the 1980s, Australia witnessed a relatively new social phenomenon in relation to caravan parks. Permanent residency within parks had established a foothold which could not be ignored, yet past regulations forbidding the practice were being circumvented by the moving of caravan wheels once every six weeks (Mueller and Collie 1980). For some, particularly the elderly in warmer beach locations (Bostock 2001), caravan park living was a lifestyle choice. For many, however, it was taken up as a cheap housing option when constraints prevented

other alternatives. The constraints arose from neo-liberal policy changes, which reduced commitment to public housing, and to the inflated cost of private housing, leaving the poorest Australians with little hope of good housing (Paris 1993:40,43,173). Acknowlegement of the emerging problem resulted in a suite of reports being tabled (Dean 1981; Department of Community Welfare Services 1983; Planning Branch MMBW 1984; Management Research Group 1985; Office of Local Government 1987; Australian Institute of Urban Studies 1990; Victorian State Electricity Commission 1991; Wensing *et al* 2003). These recommended that while parks were not ideal forms of accommodation, in the absence of cheap alternatives, and in a climate of growing inequities, rising house prices and reduction in public housing, they should be treated as residential areas with associated rights to services. Local councils should register, and new standards

should be applied to parks with ten permanent sites or 20% permanent residency. There were calls to separate permanent residents from holiday makers, and for the provision of equitable access to health (Bernard van Leer Foundation 1993), mail, social and transport services, group meetings and recreational facilities (Mueller and Collie 1980). Such recommendations were an attempt to ensure minimal standards in permanent resident sectors of caravan parks, to allow communal meetings and recreational gatherings, and to ensure access to basic play facilities for children.

There are a number of constraints which lead individuals to seek caravan park-living as an option for housing, and these relate to both work and family issues. Institutional complexes of work and family are bound closely to individual and social selves in contemporary life, and in our understandings of it. Kevin McDonald (1999), using Touraine's theory of social action, has suggested we have been undergoing a process of de-socialisation and de-institutionalisation in many areas, such as the fracturing and destabilisation of kinship ties, roles and responsibilities, and of expectations about full time work. Other scholars (e.g. Bauman 2001; Casey 1995) have noted the need for mobility in new and insecure global work contexts. Modern meanings of work have shifted, affecting patterns of self-formation and social solidarity (Casey 1995:25). Working life is 'saturated with uncertainty' and this uncertainty is 'a powerful individualising force', dividing rather than uniting people' (Bauman 2001:24). This uncertain and unstable work situation then, can be understood as leading to a furthering of the process of individualisation of the self. This is coupled with widespread challenges to the significance of the nuclear family, where, particularly since changes to the Family Law Act in the 1970s, it has become easier and more socially acceptable to exit marriage. Currently there has been a growth in lone-parent households, a decline in fertility, and a rise in the aged sector: demographic changes which directly impact on housing futures (Gleeson 1997:80,83). Preliminary reports on permanent residents in caravan parks reflect

some of the destabilisation of familial roles, for, in some ways, communities of permanent residents in caravan parks exemplify extreme cases of processes affecting society as a whole. They also provide an illustration of the significance of geography and 'space' for understanding contemporary social relations (Giddens 1995; Gregory and Urry 1995).

The current study argues that the position of caravan park manager is quite crucial to the health and well-being of permanent caravan park residents. The process of screening and selecting park residents has resulted in the diversification and specialisation of parks. Deliberate actions taken by park managers in relation to the physical layout of buildings and facilities, have been sought to enhance order and reduce insurance risk. While some park managers actively support and promote social integration among residents, others suppress communal activities and decrease the potential for new urban villages to develop as cohesive communities.

Before outlining the evidence from the current study, the next section examines the background literature on the changing mobile home landscape, the legislative context, resident profiles, discrimination, social cohesion, segmentation and the agency of the managers in caravan parks.

Changing landscape

In the last two decades there has been a growth in permanent residency in caravan parks, and an evolution of specialised manufactured housing estates (MHEs), specifically targetted for the aged, as formerly developed in the USA (Lea 1994; Hart 2002). These MHEs are enclosed, privately-run estates consisting of factory-built cabins or houses which residents generally purchase, then enter into a lease arrangement for a plot of land. Changes in caravan technology and the deskilling of home building have merged the two formerly separate accommodation concepts. Gradual changes from wood to aluminium, larger sizes, 'pop up' sections, toilets and good quality annexes have led to greater scope for the dwellings to be considered permanent (Office of Local Government 1987:9-24). Such technical developments have occurred

within a public policy context in which there has been a demise in public housing, an escalation of costs for private housing, and a shift in government responsibility for urban infrastructure onto the private sphere. Mowbray and Stubbs explain that urban infrastructure is necessary, but governments now encourage privatisation of this through the encouragement of developments such as MHEs, where roads, community facilities and security are provided by the developer (Mowbray and Stubbs 1996:129).

Over the same time frame, Government and legislators at all levels have worked toward equity for caravan park dwellers and acted to avert the vulnerability of this sector to homelessness. New patterns of wealth polarisation undermine these efforts. Gleeson confirms a pattern of wealth spatialisation, in which 'real' wealth has moved from the outer area of cities to the inner area. The inner area, however, is increasingly split between the wealthy renovators, who gentrify the inner suburbs, and the poor, who are attached to the declining public housing sector (Gleeson 1997:81). The equity concerns of pre-1980s policy have been dislodged by entrepreneurial promotion and the redevelopment of cities, and a declining commitment to public housing. This has aggravated spatial polarisation and inequity (Gleeson 1997:88). Caravan parks or MHEs are 'sold from beneath' the permanent residents, as the increasing value of city residential land makes such sites attractive to developers. By the mid 1980s it was recognised that capital gain from caravan park properties may be more important than income generated from rent (Management Research Group 1985:16), and in recent years this has intensified, resulting in the closure of many caravan parks in cities and desired coastal locations (Greenhalgh and Connor 2003:2).

Legislative context

A draft code of 1972, suggesting a six week maximum stay in tourist parks, was initially followed by Councils, but by 1980, in metropolitan areas, the majority of caravan sites were held by permanent residents (Mueller and Collie 1980:11-17, 22). The 'permanents' had no formal residential status and planning proceeded in relation to tourists only, leading to a lack of playgrounds and indoor space for delivery of services within the parks. Councils were advised to provide a hall and outdoor play areas and to develop adjacent space (Mueller and Collie 1980:61; Wensing *et al* 2003:3). Once permanent residency on caravan parks was recognised, governments were required to ensure some level of minimum citizen access rights to roads, sewerage, and educational and welfare services.

During the late seventies and early eighties, a number of studies concluded that permanent residency in caravan parks was a 'reality, in many ways a necessary and legitimate choice' for the poor, the aged and other specified social groups, given the urgent need for low cost housing (Office of Local Government 1987:18). The *Local Government (Moveable Dwellings) Act 1986* (No. 21, Ordinance 71) was amended to allow for minimum site sizes, a system of licensing, separate sections for permanent residents, and provision for councils to set standards (Office of Local Government 1987:18-22; Management Research Group 1985). For example, in New South Wales, new parks were required to reserve 10% of the total area for recreation and provide hot and cold running water (Dept of Local Government 1986:3-6). A 1983 Victorian Committee of Review moved to ensure equity for residents in relation to postal and educational services (Department of Community Welfare Services 1983:34-37). A TAFE report recommended that parks have a kiosk, outdoor recreation space and a communal indoor recreation area (Management Research Group 1985:42).

Profile

As caravans have evolved into mobile homes and manufactured houses which, in fact, do not move, definitions have become blurred. Permanent or long term residents are defined as residents of a movable dwelling, or owners of such a dwelling on a rented plot of land. All reports note the difficulties in accurately assessing the number of Australians living for long periods in a caravan park, or in a MHE (e.g. Mowbray and Stubbs

1996:130,138,142; Wensing *et al* 2003:5), but Greenhalgh and Connor (2003:2) estimate that residential parks provide housing options for more than 68,000 residents in Australia. Data collected on the social profile of those in parks in the 1980s and since, suggest that for many it is not a lifestyle choice (Office of Local Government 1987; Department of Family and Community Services 2000; Wensing *et al* 2003), as many residents are from blue collar or skilled trades backgrounds (Dean 1981; Mueller and Collie 1980:17).

Discrimination and health

A significant literature already exists linking housing to health, whether directly through factors such as exposure to extremes of temperature, the prevalence of moulds, or levels overcrowding; or more indirectly through the use of causal models of housing types or nature of tenure as predictors of mortality (*e.g.* Engels 1987; Navarro 2002; Power and Matthews 1997). For instance, the long term British Whitehall study found that 'housing tenure predicts mortality independent of occupationally defined social class' (Marmot and Smith 1991:1391).

Although correlations are often established, causal laws are not, and sometimes large quantitative studies have ambiguous and complex results (*e.g.* Bassuk *et al* 1996). Allen's important review article proposes an approach integrating individual agency and the significance of emotion to help explain 'the variability and complexity of the relationship between housing, health and illness' (Allen 2000:49). Caravan park living, considered the most marginal of housing forms, is assumed to be related to poor health, but few health studies appear to have closely monitored the physical or emotional health of park residents.

Given the social profile of permanent residents in caravan parks and their obvious clustering, it is not surprising that researchers have found evidence of discrimination, stigma, isolation as outsiders and second rate citizenship (Mueller and Collie 1980:28-30; Department of Community Welfare Services 1983:43; Wensing *et al* 2003:1). There is recent agreement that such residence is associated with drug use and violence

(Proudley and Wylie 2001). Much of the research on permanent residency has been action-focused around policy, legislation and service delivery, covering concerns about the effects of caravan life on children's schooling and pre-schooling and play (Dean 1981; Department of Community Welfare Services 1983:41), rather than issues relating to health status.

Ironically caravan park accommodation is now considered both a problem and a solution by welfare services. In the current housing climate permanent residents are seen as a risk category for homelessness 'proper'. The parks are also used as emergency housing by welfare services, including supported accommodation (Bostock 2001; Wensing *et al* 2003).

Social cohesion

There is some evidence of social cohesion and enjoyment of caravan park lifestyle, particularly in coastal areas with older aged residents (Mowbray and Stubbs 1996:134,137; Greenhalgh and Connor 2003:5,7). Community welfare officers report that caravan park dwellers 'seem in the main to be highly supportive of one another, developing a "community spirit" and preferring spaces which are separate from the tourist vans' (Management Research Group 1985:44; Office of Local Government 1987:103). The aged, in particular, have developed innovative ways to share resources, often relying on each other for assistance and support and have sometimes 'built up a supportive community where people look out for each other' (Lea 1994:1; Greenhalgh and Connor 2003:5,7). In a study of metropolitan Sydney MHEs, Mowbray and Stubbs found evidence of a cohesive community life, community atmosphere and 'great community spirit' (1996:134,137).

Managers and segmentation

By the 1980s, evidence emerged of attempts by some park owners to limit or specialise in certain categories of tenants. Operators determined who could enter a park and the level of rent charged. 'The practice of deliberately selecting residents who are likely to cause the fewest problems,

appears to be widespread' (Mueller and Collie 1980:24). More entrepreneurial parks were seeking to reduce the numbers of unemployed and drug and alcohol abusing residents, in favour of more 'stable' tenants such as pensioners. In some instances 'undesirable' tenants were encouraged to relocate to other parks by a variety of means. The Office of Local Government commented in its report that 'if this practice became widespread it could lead to the "streaming" of permanent resident tenants thereby creating classes of parks based on tenant types' (1987:41).

Reports from the 1980s embodied normative views of the 'good' and 'typical' caravan park manager. A report from the Victorian Committee of Review in 1983 stated that the quality of park management can compensate for other deficiencies, particularly if they are a 'good manager', live in the park, are available 24 hours a day for emergencies, and are 'able to show a sincere concern for well-being of the park residents'. Such concern is in the context of a close and partly communal lifestyle and should *not* reflect patronising welfare (Department of Community Welfare Services 1983:37). Requirements for the role suggest that the:

> … *typical profile of a caravan park owner-operator shows him as a person of trade or business background, who has become disenchanted with routine occupations, and who wished to exercise entrepreneurial skills whilst maintaining independent control. The job entails long hours but a light workload (Management Research Group 1985:20).*

Mueller and Collie (1980:25) acknowledge the countervailing forces in the role:

> *It would be grossly unfair to the many concerned park operators to say that park owners are by definition cold authoritarians. We have met many operators who take a great interest in their park community, who make themselves available as park counsellors, chauffeurs, helpers, who put on Christmas parties for the children and waive overdue rent in times of hardship. However they are entrepreneurs who want to make profit … a*

> *well run park has high facilities and no trouble from residents.*

Of many recommendations made in reports from the 1970s, one advocated the formalisation of training for caravan park managers. A TAFE report in the mid 1980s advised promoting existing courses for caravan park management, so there could be a pool of locum personnel to release managers (Management Research Group 1985:22). There is now a TAFE certificate and diploma course in Caravan Park Operations which acknowledges the multi-skilled nature of the job, the range of skills which may be required, and the nature of the legislation which must be complied with in a caravan park (TAFE 2004).

The reports examined in this study reveal a situation in flux, as lines between caravan parks and MHEs become blurred, and there is great scope for owner-managers to 'stream' a park, exclude difficult clients, or co-operate with welfare agencies in crisis accommodation provision or, indeed, to sell the property without regard for their permanent residents. The pivotal role of caravan park managers is an area which has not been subjected to in-depth research, particularly in the current context of accelerated land values in inner cities, broad changes in work and the family, and the polarisation of wealth in society. This research has been undertaken to begin such a research agenda.

Method

A qualitative exploratory approach was selected in order to apply a micro lens to this form of housing, so that the strategies used by both managers and residents to respond to new contexts could be revealed. A small pilot sample of ten caravan park managers was chosen by drawing a line around outer metropolitan Melbourne and searching for caravan parks in the suburbs closest to the major arterial roads leading into Melbourne from the south west, west, north west, north, north east, east, and south east. Park managers were contacted and asked if they contained a majority of permanent residents and whether they might be available for an interview. The first ten fitting these criteria were selected. Six female managers and four male managers were interviewed.

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Semi-structured interviews of twenty to forty minutes were conducted by the author and a research assistant between January and April 2004. The circumstances of the interviews were not ideal, given the need for the managers to be available to residents. This meant interviews were often punctuated with telephone calls and client requests. Interviews were structured primarily to gain insight into the category of person who was a permanent resident and how the permanent residents were living.

The interviews were taped, transcribed and then coded using NVivo software. After free coding (categorising themes freely during the process of reading transcriptions), it became apparent that the study was revealing information on two major issues: the role of the managers and the perceived circumstances, motivations and behaviour of the residents. Four major themes were discerned in the manager's role: maintaining order, obtaining rent, and fostering community and care. Each of these also had a number of sub-themes. For perception of the residents, themes clustered around the social characteristics, social links, health issues and motivations for coming and staying at a caravan park. Obvious limitations of the study include the small sample size, the crude method for drawing the sample, and the reliance on the managers' points of view for information about the lives of the residents. Given the segmentation and selectivity operating in the individual parks, one could not assume each park was a microcosm of the profile of caravan park residents generally, but taken together there are some grounds for claiming representativeness of outer urban parks.

The results from these interviews are analysed in four sections: 'Imploding families'; 'Disappearing and mobile work'; 'Spatially and organisationally segmenting park communities'; and 'Managers as social pivots'. The first two sections clarify how the social profile of residents reflects Touraine's de-institutionalisation of society in terms of the institutional complexes of family and work. The third reveals the agency of the managers in structuring park communities, and the fourth considers the active role of the managers, in contrast to the residents, as pivots

for orchestrating 'community spirit' and organising emergency and crisis care.

Imploding families

Caravan parks, whether directly involved in crisis accommodation for welfare services or not, reveal the 'unravelling' of contemporary family relations. Some cater for separated women and some for men, and some experience a convergence of 'weekend' children:

> Domestic violence is mostly the case ... we are always striking them ... family breakups, the lot. It's mainly women ... 16, 17 year olds to forty plus (getting away from) violent situations outside the park (CP6).

Two park managers made specific reference to single and separated men as a segment of their clientele. One female manager referred to her residents as 'my boys', and these individuals referred to themselves as 'the old bachelors'. The park contained many single men in their forties and fifties, 'especially out of broken relationships'. The manager said:

> I just look on it as a holding bay for them to sort themselves out, and then some of them go back to their partners.

The manager also acknowledged there was a demand their park was not meeting:

> I had a father ring up the other day and wanted to put his 19 year old son in here (following an argument) ... and we don't take that (we stopped a lot of the young ones coming in). Then a couple of hours later a mother rang up with a twenty year old son. I thought that's funny, but I still said no. And especially over Christmas, I get the wives ringing up ... I had three wives last Christmas ring up, 'Do you have a place for my husband?' That floored me, that did! (CP1).

Disappearing and mobile work

Lack of work in country towns and regional areas in Australia means there are many young men seeking short term work in urban areas on major road works and in the light manufacturing industries. This is reflected in the following comments:

There are a lot of people at the moment working on the bypass and they are going to be working on that for the next six to twelve months … It's cheaper than travelling back and forth from whatever country town it is they have come from (CP9).

Because of their work commitments, they have to move from town to town, so this is a preference … you can just rent week by week. We have a lot of people who only rent with us because they don't know when their contract will finish (CP10).

The parks also cater for global travelers. Backpackers from Holland, Ireland and Germany stay for several months of seasonal horticultural work (CP1):

And we have people that are travelling around Australia, quite well educated people … They've found work here for a couple of months … a couple of them are teachers, some of them are engineers (CP9).

Caravan parks also provide housing for local people who are constrained, and 'global' people who choose to work for short periods away from their homes. They also house the unemployed, although often efforts are made by managers to avoid this category of clientele.

Spatially and organisationally segmenting park communities

In most of the parks, the physical infrastructure influenced the category of clientele who would be made welcome. This was most obvious in the case of children, but it also affected younger women and mothers. Playgrounds were small, run down, or removed in most parks. New cabins had only a single bedroom and were not suitable for units larger than a couple. Single women were also not welcome. Few had a general community meeting place. For example:

Well, we haven't got a playground … it was thirty years old so we made it into a lawn area (CP1).

The cabins are only small. They are only big enough for a couple … We don't really like to take in families with kids. Not a place for them (CP2).

We take children but we don't have any … I don't have anything against children … our accommodation is one bedroom. We just don't have room for them (CP3).

We can't have permanent things like tennis courts, swing sets, pools … for insurance reasons, we just cannot afford the insurance (CP9).

One manager rationalised concern for the lack of facilities for children by shifting responsibility to parents:

I actually feel sorry for them (children) because there isn't anything here for them to do. It really is just a cabin park. A part of me thinks, 'If I have to rear my children here, I know I would find some way of getting out'. (Parents') ultimate aim would be to get into something where the children have their own backyard and closer to parks (CP9).

Managers have a strong focus on maintaining order and receiving rent, and they practice selective gate-keeping to ensure the wider agenda:

We have to choose people who come in (CP7).

We try to make sure people have jobs (CP1).

They need to be employed (or) obviously the pensioners need to be able to afford the accommodation (CP7).

We don't take people that are unemployed (CP8).

No, we don't really take single mothers with children at all (CP2).

Actually at the moment we are trying to take in older ones. They are a lot quieter, easier to manage. At the moment we are a bit more particular who we take (CP3).

Limitations on the power to evict (e.g. Tenants Union of Victoria 1999) has led to more stringent screening, checking of references and the prioritising of a 'happy park' over a 'full park'. Managers avoid:

… the type that would cause any hassles (CP4).

The normal thing is asking them if they are on the 'metho' program or something like that (CP6).

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Managers as social pivots

Minimal levels of social cooperation existed between neighbours in most caravan parks for medical emergencies and health issues. However, when a fire started in the park:

> … residents were everywhere with their fire extinguishers (CP6).

Managers argued that such forms of aid between neighbours works as a 'first resort', with management functioning as a 'back up':

> They do help each other out but they do come to us too … they do keep an eye out for each other (CP2).

> If they have a problem, they come to us anyway (CP8).

> We had a couple of our pensioners who have gone in for their medical treatment and one of the other residents have either taken them in or told us what's going on and we've also assisted as well (CP10).

> Late at night we get called out … If anybody needs an ambulance they call for us first, even though an ambulance can get through. They tend to like that … feel of somebody there with them … There are certain ones that will always help … rare that somebody will be on their own (CP5).

> When a child injured himself the parent knocked on a neighbour's door and they've run them down to the hospital … they know they can always come to the office. They buzz us and they'll ring for an ambulance, or you know, we'll organise something for them (CP9).

Neighbourly help in special circumstances, therefore, existed alongside a form of dependence on a (mostly) father-figure, manager. Managers were also likely to mediate in social problems and emotional crises. For example:

> Some people come in and tell you their dramas (CP4).

> I'm everything in one. I'm a financial adviser, tourist guide, an entertainment organiser and medical officer (CP1).

> It's different every day. It's extremely interesting. It's a bit of a role of maintenance, management and being a bit of a social worker sometimes (CP5).

Managers listen to social problems, but some tire of it and others have learned now to pass these on to specialists. For example:

> You have your days when you get 'peopled out' and you get tired of the problems … and the phone ringing (CP9).

> If I think somebody's a bit stressed I can just give them (Anglicare) a call and they will pop out to see them (CP1).

> If they come here with a problem, I pass it on … I take it on and then I find a way of saying, 'Look there's a couple of really lovely girls that come here on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. I'm going to give one of them a ring to come and see you' (CP9).

> We used to (counsel) before but under the new Government legislation with Health and Safety … the only one where we are qualified is financial … we have to use groups like St Vincent de Paul and we will get people in contact with them (CP10).

One managing couple estimated thirty percent of their residents were depressed, something they responded to:

> They get their down days. You see them moping around (Wife).

> You try and pick them up (Husband) (CP6).

Another manager noted the importance and occasional burden of their role:

> I can't think of anything we offer out of the ordinary that other parks don't offer apart from ourselves. We are always here for people … You would be amazed (what we are called on to do) … The other side of that is that they tend to think they own you a little (CP5).

Reliance on the managers may be more likely in the absence of alternative representative structures. Among the parks in this study, there were no currently operating resident committees. Two had ceased functioning and another was still being mooted:

There was talk of them forming a social committee … they are all talking about it at the moment. It hasn't been organised so far (CP7).

We did have a committee, years ago, but because of non-activity, they didn't think it was doing anything … they just decided to disband it (CP8).

There were however, activity-centred gatherings of small networks of residents. Residents gathered informally around barbeques, in the laundry, to watch football matches on a large screen television, and to walk around the park. Small groups also united for occasional activities outside the park: shopping, going to Church, going to a servicemen's club, playing bowls or picnicking at a lake.

Managers modified this picture of small scale activity with comments reflecting separation and individualism in the parks. For example, the residents were said to live separate lives 'like any other neighbourhood' (CP9), and generally do not join for an activity unless it is organised by management (CP4, CP8). Residents were said to 'tend to stick to themselves a bit' (CP2) and 'like their privacy' (CP4).

Several managers organised special occasion events such as a Melbourne Cup sweep, an Easter raffle and a football grand final celebration. The Christmas parties run by management had varying levels of success (note that Christmas is widely considered as a significant time for celebration in Australia). Two events indicated the persistence of at least a minimum level of family interaction, but the other two suggested management may have been significant in interrupting the 'flatness' of existence where a 'sense of family' and shared 'memories' were lacking:

Harry tried to do something (on Christmas Day) but there was nobody here. The ones that were here were pretty quiet but the majority went out to extended family, which was nice. And New Year was exactly the same … They have a family and they may not see them very often but they do see them at that special time of year (CP5).

We have a Christmas party each year which a lot don't go to, because they either go home to families, be out or whatever (CP4).

In contrast, some Christmas parties were well-patronised:

At Christmas normally we put on a Santa Claus in the park and do a social gathering and have a barbeque. That's a special event in the park (CP10).

One manager, from a large family himself, organised a 'sausage sizzle' for the first Sunday of every month and held a very successful Christmas party, funded at least in part by contributions from the residents. The couple commented:

We had a real good Christmas party and New Year's. Everybody came. What we did is shut the front gate off and I think a lot of the people here never experienced a Christmas like it. The last managers … more money was spent on alcohol than on the kids for their Christmas party. We changed that around last Christmas … There are a lot of people that don't have (a strong sense of family) and they were so appreciative (Husband).

We just thought let's go for it. There are about 19 kids in the park and we spent about twenty to thirty dollars on each present, had a Santa Claus, the whole lot. We've got photos and all that … memories like that. We show the people and they say, 'Come and have a coffee'. Memories. We don't expect anything of them. They have a bit of loose change and that builds up for Christmas and we go from there (Wife) (CP6).

Although the multi-skilled nature of caravan park management and the importance of availability have been recognised in government reports and TAFE courses, potential significance of the welfare and community building aspects of this role, albeit constrained by legal and professional barriers, may have been underestimated. Local neighbourly social cooperation exists in the parks, but managers negotiate the outside world of welfare for an often vulnerable community.

Conclusion

Recent theories about the complex subjectivity of individuals draw on the notion of 'intersectionality' (George 2001), where a variety of individual positions are possible due to the differing intersections of dimensions such as class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religion. The metaphor of 'intersection' is useful here in a different way. The phenomenon of the permanent resident in caravan parks can be seen as a microcosm or extreme, negative case of what is happening at the state, national and global levels. In one social and spatial situation we see in sharp relief the intersection and implementation of social and individualising forces related to work, family, demography and housing. The decline of manufacturing, loss of jobs and growth in casualised, part-time, short-term and mobile contract work is reflected most particularly in the road workers from the country, using caravan park housing for short-term contracts. The increasing insecurity of families is reflected by the aggregations of divorced men; the weekend influx of visiting children; the possible demand by families for accommodation 'outlets' for husbands and youth; and, in a few parks, accommodation for sole mothers and children, and crisis accommodation for domestic violence refugees. Demographic patterns of an ageing population, a reduced fertility rate and more people living alone, are reflected starkly in caravan parks (and MHEs). Finally, the situation of many permanent residents reflect the result of economic forces and government policy, which has diminished public housing and seen the rise of housing prices in capital cities such as Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne.

The evidence offered by this small study suggests potential for exploring marginal housing in socially embedded ways. The actions of managers and owner-managers are quite crucial in firstly, establishing the structural segmentation of resident communities and secondly, acting to mediate between individual residents and outside agencies. Some managers also gauge whether or not to socially engineer a few occasions and possibilities for the development of community spirit and social cohesion.

These are uncertain times of late capitalism, a period of increasing disparities of wealth, and a context in which neo-liberal welfare policies operate. Each of these impacts negatively on the housing alternatives of the poor. This study of caravan parks reflects the de-institutionalisation of family and work in physical and spatial structures, which inadvertently impact on family and community relationships. However, small elements of community cohesion persist through the cooperation of neighbours who 'look out for each other' and the managers who reveal what one verbalised: 'We are not only here to collect rents'. Qualitative studies such as this indicate scope for future research to include consideration of agency and emotion as advocated by Allen (2000) in order to enhance an understanding of the complex links between housing and health.

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