Feeling at home in a multi-generational household: The importance of control

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The project

3-year Australian Research Council Discovery Project

*Living together: The rise of multigenerational households in Australian cities*

- 3 hypothesised principal drivers
  1. *Structural changes in Australian society*, notably the ageing of the population, changing employment structures, and constrained housing supply
  2. *Public policy decisions* about the provision of housing and areas of family significance, notably higher education, child care and aged care
  3. *Social and cultural views about the family*, influenced by shifts in the social and cultural makeup of our cities

- Dependency  
- Family  
- Home
Housing and wellbeing

- As a fundamental basic civil right

**Article 25.**

- (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.


- Shelter
- Safety
- Comfort
- Stability
- Family wellbeing
- Positive sense of self / empowerment
Family wellbeing

- **Neighbourhood conditions**
  - Good quality and safety
  - Accessibility of housing to employment and educations

- **Relationship of housing to occupant**
  - Not overcrowded
  - Affordable
  - Opportunities to create positive sense of self & empowerment
  - Stable and secure

- **Physical attributes and availability of housing**
  - Good quality and safety
  - Housing, not homelessness

Source: Bratt, 2002: 15
Housing and psychological wellbeing

- The role housing places in promoting one’s sense of self and feelings of empowerment at the individual level *within* the household

- Ontological security: the confidence people have in the stability of their identity and their environments

- Control

  “Control over a space is important to people’s understandings of what it means to be at home, because this control over a space also means the ability to exercise a degree of autonomy over their lives.” (Parsell, 2012:160)
Control

- Tenure

- Relationships with other household members

- Control over use of space and decision-making regarding the dwelling

- The relationship between control and feelings of home in the context of the dwelling
Multigenerational households

- Households where 2+ generations of related adults cohabit in the same dwelling & the oldest of the youngest generation is 18+

- 1 in 5 Australians (4.3 million) in 1.2 million multigenerational households

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<th>Australia</th>
<th>Sydney</th>
<th>Brisbane</th>
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<td>As % of total population</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
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Source: Liu et al. 2013

- More likely owner-occupiers in detached dwellings

- More common amongst several overseas-born communities, but 2/3 born in Australia & rest of Oceania
Mixed methodology

1. Statistical analysis of custom census tables, 1986-2011

2. Detailed survey of multigenerational households in Sydney & Brisbane
   – August 2012 to July 2013
   – 337 valid completions

3. Solicited diaries on thoughts and experiences of living in multigenerational households (over 4 weeks)
   – 22 diaries from 15 households

4. In-depth interviews
   – 21 interviews with 17 households
Power & control

1. Importance of ownership

2. Use of space within the dwelling

3. Decision-making processes relating to the dwelling
Importance of ownership (1)

• Legal ownership & comfort

“[Home is] a place that you can go to where you can just relax … Definitely a place that you own yourself. I think that’s a big thing – home ownership, but a place too where it’s quiet” (QLD410I).

“Home is where – I mean well it’s mine and so I feel really comfortable at home. I feel that I can always be there, that I don’t ever have to find somewhere else to be.” (QLD402I)
Importance of ownership (2)

• Unequal or joint ownership

“As the home owner I suppose I’m the boss. Even though it’s multigenerational it’s not a fully equal multigenerational – we haven’t contributed to buy a home and are trying to live together … as the home owner with people living there basically free of charge I suppose I still feel as though I’m in control.” (QLD402I)

“I guess our situation’s a bit maybe unusual because it’s our financial house. Often it would be the parents and their children move in … I guess maybe that’s partly why I’m happy because I’m financially in control of the situation … I don’t feel that I’m living in her house, she’s living in my house which I guess at the end of the day psychologically probably makes a bit of a difference.” (QLD416I)
Importance of ownership (3)

• Lack of ownership

“Facilitator: Does this feel like home to you now do you think?
Interviewee: Oh not so much. It is because we live here but it’s not – it’s mum and dad’s house and we’re just living here. That’s how it is.” (QLD405I)

“So I really had to compromise on the way that I would like to live in my own home, and how my parents would like to live, and it’s their house and they’re paying for everything, so of course I compromised on some lifestyle choices” (QLD404-2I)
Use of space within the dwelling (1)

- Privacy
  - 49% survey respondents identified privacy as a challenge

“My only real problem is privacy … [he] walks through without a knock or hesitation … as far as he’s concerned, it’s his house.” (QLD415D).

“As I’d feared I have no time to myself in mum’s house.” (NSW213D)

“you always have somebody there, you always have somebody to talk to, you always have different perspectives on situations … I think that in itself can be a challenge, because you never can be alone, you never can have any privacy, you can never get away from people being there all the time. So yes, I think lack of privacy is a big challenge” (QLD408I)
Use of space within the dwelling (2)

• Impact on social life

“I’ve tried having friends over but I sort of avoid it now because you just don’t get privacy” (QLD410I)

“I … have very rarely had any visitors – it’s too uncomfortable for me and for mum” (NSW213D)

“[She] doesn’t have her friends drop in because it’s not her house” (QLD405D)

“When I have friends over [other household members] are extremely relaxed about it. We are always able to have a few drinks and make noise and they always go to a different part of the house” (NSW202-1D)
Use of space within the dwelling (3)

- Adapting to other household members

“Interviewee: Well, it is her house and I try to treat it that way but it’s a bit difficult sometimes. It’s just I think your home is somewhere where you can have your friends over, where you’ve got your stuff around you … your memories and pictures and those kinds of things.
Facilitator: So is it because you don’t think your mother would like it if you did that?
Interviewee: I’ve asked occasionally and she said no.”  (NSW213I)
Decision-making (1)

• Contribution

“Interviewee 1: we all moved in here together and we have all been here, lived throughout the renovations and throughout the installation of the new kitchen and the new deck and the new living area … I guess it makes it feel there’s a lot more ownership between all of us. Whereas I think yes if we had bought a house and renovated it to our taste and had it all beautiful and then mum and dad moved in they’d always feel …

Interviewee 2: It’s different anyway … I still felt that it’s your home but we’re living with you … you can imagine the work and the effort that we all had to help to get it to be a family home. It’s part of caring about it and loving it and looking after it and trying to make it better … if it was all done it wouldn’t have felt the same … we would have been guests then …” (QLD408I)
Decision-making (2)

• Reaching a consensus

“… any sorts of decisions like that. I guess everybody is involved to some degree in those, which can be frustrating if you just want to make a decision and do it. But on the other hand I think it’s important because it’s everybody’s home so everybody needs to be involved in some of those decisions.” (QLD408I)

“While I have bought and sold homes before I tried to ensure my daughter was informed and felt an equal in the decision making process. We saw two houses before this one I would have loved but she did not, so we continued until we found one that we both wanted” (QLD401-1D)
Home and control

• Individuals’ feelings of home are influenced by their sense of control over their dwellings, including:
  – Property ownership
  – Decision-making processes
  – Control over use of space

• Not only sense of control, but *relative* sense of control
Discussion

• A better understanding of the relationship between the family, housing and control in housing policy and practice – promise for personal and social benefits

• Need to look not only at household level, but also at relationships between members of the household

• Design solutions will help, but aren’t enough on their own

“If it is correct that the way in which a family relates to its housing has the opportunity to translate into a sense of mastery over the world, and there is no evidence to the contrary, it would appear that this connection holds great promise for improved housing promoting far-reaching personal and social benefits.” (Bratt 2002:21)
Potential for collaboration

• Collaboration between research on the form and nature of social interactions within families and housing researchers concerned with meanings of home.

• Move away from considering ‘The Family’ as an institution, and towards the practices of families and the importance of emotion in mediating these practices.

• The importance of relationships and emotions in understandings of the dwelling as home, rather than treating ‘The Family’ or ‘The Household’ as a single entity.