

# BabyBoomWomen@Work2020

## - Reflections on the Methodology of a Research Project Using Futures Scenarios and Computer Mediated Communication

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*This paper reports on a research project in progress undertaken at La Trobe University, Australia using futures scenarios and computer mediated communication. The project aims to identify elements of preferred futures and develop suggestions and ideas to inform policy development concerned with paid and unpaid work and retirement options for women of the baby boom generation in 2020. The scenarios have been displayed on an interactive website since March 2001 <<http://HS053287.health.latrobe.edu.au/bbww/>>, together with a list of questions and an invitation for readers to respond directly via email to the researcher, participate in a discussion group on the website, or respond to the questions online. The paper has a focus on the methodology of the study, in particular CMC and the development of the study's scenarios.*

**Keywords:** computer mediated communication, methodology,  
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### *Introduction*

Like other industrialised western countries, Australia has an ageing population. Longer life expectancy and an increasing proportion of older people in the community are expected to put pressure on government income support systems. These pressures are exacerbated by older workers - men more than women - leaving the workforce.

With an increasing proportion of older people in the Australian population, paid work after the age of 65 years may become an option or a necessity in the future. This discourse is now entering the public domain. For example, the Federal Minister for Aged Care views older workers as having "enormous potential for the Australian economy if we can unlock this source of labour" (Bishop, 1999). Accordingly, she has suggested that older people should continue to make a contribution to the economic and social life of Australia, and that this would involve a longer working life in the paid workforce and an increased volunteer sector.

An ageing workforce requires fresh policies. In Australia, there are currently significant disincentives to continued part-time or self-employment for older workers: high benefit reduction rates on the age pension, and taxation penalties for those who attempt to combine partial income from superannuation benefits with part-time and/or self-employment.

For the individual, work after the traditional retirement age has the capacity to contribute to financial security in older age and the potential to add purpose and meaning to life. However, there is very little research on this issue. Most research to date has focused on early retirement and on men. New research is needed as the baby boomers who have different work experiences, attitudes and expectations approach the traditional retirement age.

The issue of women's paid and unpaid work after the traditional retirement age has to be considered in the context of globalisation and its ensuing changes to the nature of paid work. It has been argued that globalisation is characterised by a "re-commodification of labor" in which workers have increasingly lost all rights except their right to sell their labor power. All over the world, employers have downsized, outsourced, and have made permanent jobs into contingent ones. Employers have attacked job security requirements, work rules, worker representation, healthcare, pensions, and other social benefits, and anything else that defined workers as human beings and employers as partners in a social relationship, rather than simply as buyers and sellers of labor power" (Brecher, et al., 2000: 3).

Women's experience of paid work differs from that of men. While women's labour force participation has increased steadily in all Western industrialised countries since the 1960s, a gender gap between men's and women's labour market participation is still a common feature. Even when length of employment, qualifications, occupation and age are accounted for, women have historically received lower wages than men. Further, a significant proportion of women work part-time, and many more women than men are dependent on social security payments. Not all part-time jobs are permanent and enjoy conditions such as holiday pay, sick leave and job security. Women who work part-time tend to be locked out of career structures designed for full-time employees (Williams & Thorpe, 1992: 58).

It has been argued that women are disadvantaged by horizontal and vertical occupational segregation. Horizontal segregation refers to the recruitment of men and women into sex-typed masculine and feminine occupations (e.g., women in care giving, teaching, services, offices; men in technical design and operation, maintenance and repair, construction, transport and traffic), while the term vertical segregation has been used to describe the way men are most commonly found working in the highest levels within occupations, while women are found in the lower grade occupations and the lowest levels within the same occupation (Rantalaaho, 1997: 19; Williams & Thorpe, 1992: 59-61).

This paper reports on an Australian research study using futures scenarios and computer mediated communication (CMC) to identify elements of preferred futures and develop suggestions and ideas to inform policy development concerned with paid and unpaid work and retirement options for women of the baby boom generation in 2020. The focus of this paper is on the methodology of the study, in particular CMC and the development of the study's scenarios.

### *The project*

BabyBoomWomen@Work2020 is part of a research project undertaken at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. The project explores how women of the baby boom generation (i.e., those born between 1946 - 1964) envisage work after the age of 65, and the policy implications of an ageing female workforce. The research project comprises three studies:

- Study 1 includes focus group discussions with female baby boomers exploring how they view paid and unpaid work after the traditional retirement age.

- Study 2 is the subject of this article. It involves futures scenarios displayed on a website and aims to identify elements of preferred futures and develop suggestions and ideas to inform policy development concerned with paid and unpaid work and retirement options for women of the baby boom generation.
- Study 3 comprises the analysis of data from the Healthy Retirement Project, a longitudinal study undertaken by the Australian Institute for Primary Care. Study 3 examines data from the Healthy Retirement Project which relate to retirement planning and views on retirement, contrasting the views of women of the baby boom generation with those of men of the same age and with older groups of men and women.

Studies 1 and 2 collect qualitative data, while Study 3 examines a subset of quantitative data from an existing project. The data from the three studies together with relevant literature will be used to critically reflect on existing policy concerned with work and retirement options for women of the baby boom generation and to inform policy development. The three studies are undertaken by the author of this article as part of her doctoral thesis in public health. At the time of writing, BabyBoomWomen@Work2020 is a research study in progress.

### *The Methodology of BabyBoomWomen@Work 2020*

#### *Computer Mediated Communication*

The Internet is an excellent medium for quick and inexpensive communication with individuals who are geographically distant. It offers opportunities to reach research participants that may otherwise be more difficult and costly to locate. CMC crosses time and space barriers, and in its asynchronous forms people can choose their own time and place to respond to a research request. It provides a safe environment in particular for women, older people and people with disabilities who may otherwise have to travel to participate in a research project. CMC allows easy handling of data and does not require transcription as the text is already provided.

It has been argued that "whilst the Internet and WWW does offer new and exiting prospects for sociological research, in many aspects the methodological issues which it raises are by and large not new. The key issue that any survey research conducted via the Internet will have to con-

tend with, as with non-Internet based surveys, is that of sampling bias" (Coomber, 1997). Other challenges for researchers who use CMC include computer literacy and recruitment. Access and gender as well as access and age are issues as to date more men than women and more young people than older people use the Internet. However, this may change in the future. Older people are already the fastest growing group of people using the Internet, and the proportion of women using the Internet is approaching their representation in the population. Further, Internet research is more likely to attract respondents from English-speaking western countries than from the rest of the world - the vast majority (approximately 70%) of people who have currently access to the Internet live in the U.S., Canada, or Europe (NUA Internet Surveys, 2001).

### *The Website*

This study aims to identify elements of preferred futures and develop suggestions and ideas to inform policy development concerned with paid and unpaid work and retirement options for women of the baby boom generation in 2020. The design of the study involves an interactive website which went online in March 2001. The website is hosted by one of the servers at La Trobe University, School of Public Health. It includes:

- four scenarios for the year 2020;
- a list of questions and an invitation for readers to respond directly via email to the researcher, participate in a discussion group on the website, or respond to the questions online (this feature was added in June 2001);
- references;
- hyperlinks to relevant organisations and publications;
- information about Studies 2 and 3, including preliminary findings from the first three focus group discussions;
- information about the researcher; and
- a response rate survey (added in May 2001) which seeks feedback from those readers who have visited the website but have not participated in the research.

The postings to the website and emails in response to the website make up the data for this study.<sup>1</sup>

The target audience for the website includes women and men of all ages who have an interest in the topic. The rationale for choosing such a broad audience - rather than limiting it to female baby boomers - is twofold: Firstly, it is difficult if not impossible to verify age, gender or other characteristics of people who make postings to a website. Further, it is unlikely that a website would attract women from a wide range of different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. However, Study 1 seeks to achieve this through face-to-face focus group discussions. Secondly, the study BabyBoomWomen@Work2020 endeavours to collect ideas and suggestions for the development of policies concerned with paid and unpaid work and retirement options for women of the baby boom generation. While it is likely that this topic is mostly of interest to women, men's experience and views as well as those of people who are older or younger than the baby boomers are also relevant and of interest. Policies for the future of female baby boomers have to be inclusive and consider the interests of men and women of all ages.

The website was promoted through registration with search engines, postings to email lists with a focus on policy, research, women, health, media studies, Internet research and futures studies, emails to individuals, newsgroups, and registration with other websites for the purpose of providing a hyperlink to the study's website. Originally, it was anticipated to keep the website online for six months. However, this period has been extended because of technical difficulties associated with the server, for example a six week period during which the website was not available or not fully functional, a change of server resulting in a different URL, and a lower than expected response rate.

### *The Scenarios*

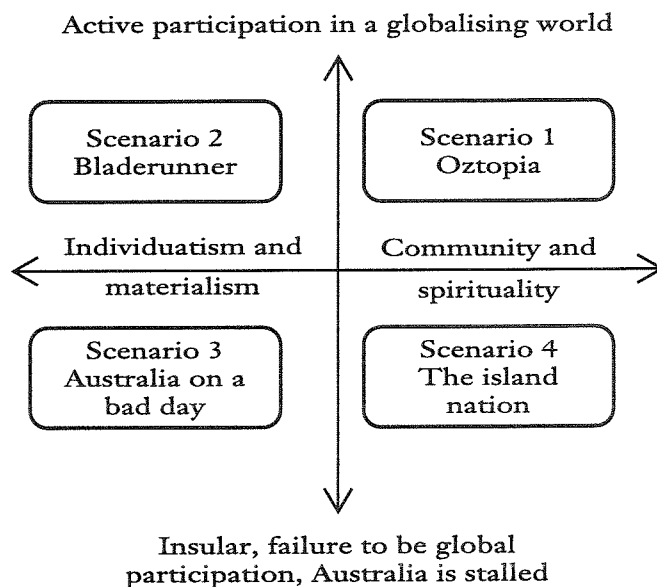
Four scenarios for the year 2020 have been developed for this study. The year 2020 was chosen because those born in 1955, the mid-baby boomers, will reach the age of 65 years in 2020. At that age, Australians become eligible for the age pension. The scenarios describe possible future policy environments in which baby boom women engage, or do not engage, in paid and unpaid work. Futures research and scenario planning have utilised scenarios in a range of ways for the purposes of planning, change management, policy development, and research. Scenarios have been described as "contrasting pictures that provide a framework for considering a range of alternative futures" (Slaughter, 1996: 101).

The four scenarios are based on work undertaken by the Global Scenarios Project. This was launched in May 1994 by author Bryce Courtenay and Napier Collyns from the Global Business Network to develop possible scenarios for Australia in a changing world. The Economic Planning Advisory Commission (EPAC) sponsored the Global Scenarios Workshop held on 4-5 October 1995 which was part of a program at the Macquarie Graduate School of Management. The workshop had approximately 400 participants, including young people and leaders from the arts, business, education, media, politics, religion, and science (Economic Planning Advisory Commission, 1996). EPAC had responsibility for publishing studies on medium-term issues, coordinating budget submissions, and undertaking task-force work, and reported to the Prime Minister of Australia.

The participants of this workshop identified what they regarded as the two most critical and uncertain dilemmas to describe different scenarios for Australia. These were the issues of:

- Australia's successful participation in the global economy, global politics, and social responsibilities, or failure to be a global participant and the insularity as a result of this; and
- the development and growth of community and spirituality, or a society which celebrates and rewards individualism and materialism only.

The scenarios that were developed describe four different worlds that could result from the response of governments, the business sector, and society to the challenges of change over the next ten to twenty years (Economic Planning Advisory Commission, 1996). *Oztopia* describes an Australia that is actively participating in a globalising world, and has developed its spirituality and sense of community. *Bladerunner* is also an active participant in a global world, but its predominant values are individualism and materialism. *Australia on a bad day* describes a country that has failed to compete and participate in the global communities, a free market economy that has brought uncertainty and insecurity for most of its citizens. *The island nation* depicts an Australia with strong shared community values, a weak economy, poor participation globally, and a return to nationalism.

*Figure1 Four Scenarios*

These four scenarios provided the starting point for the scenarios of the study *BabyBoomWomen@Work2020*, which were written by the author of this article. At the time of writing the scenarios, three face-to-face focus group discussions with women who were born between 1946 and 1964 had been conducted (subsequently, additional focus groups have been completed). The issues raised in these focus groups and in relevant literature were considered in the development of the scenarios.

The scenarios describe future environments in which women of the baby boom generation have - or lack - the opportunities and choices to engage in paid and unpaid work. Since March 2001, the scenarios have been displayed on an interactive website together with a list of questions and an invitation for readers to address these questions or provide any comment on the topic. The questions included:

- How likely are the scenarios?
- What aspects are likely?
- What aspects are less likely?
- What are the factors that make them more or less likely?
- Which scenario(s) do you prefer?
- What (if any) other elements would you include in your preferred scenario(s)?



- What factors will contribute to achieving your preferred scenario(s)?
- What will be the major challenges to achieving your preferred scenario(s)?
- What factors could prevent your preferred scenario(s) from becoming a reality?
- What overall strategies should be adopted to achieve your preferred scenario(s)?
- What action has to be taken now or in the near future to achieve your preferred scenario(s) or elements of your preferred scenario(s)?  
(for example, in the areas of taxation, finance/savings, health, support services, education, training, housing, transport, retirement policy, and pension policy)

### *Discussion*

The combination of futures methodologies with web-based technologies to explore women's futures is quite unique. However, two other studies have used focus group research and CMC. These include the UK study *women@2020living* (Andrews & Townsend, 2000) which explored women's housing futures, and an Australian study undertaken at Deakin University, *Women Towards 2010* (pending publication). This study focused on family life, paid work, health and well-being.

While the use of the Internet is increasing, not all people have equal access to this technology. In Australia, people on lower incomes, those who live in regional or rural areas, women and older people are less likely to use the Internet (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). Therefore, those who participate in online research do not represent the voices of the general population. It was anticipated that the individuals who participated in this online research study would be likely to have tertiary education and a personal or professional interest in the topic. Another component of the project (i.e., Study 1) attempted to reach research participants from a broad range of different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

The number of responses to this study has been low. Only 21 postings/emails addressing the questions were received during the first seven months. An equal number of individuals emailed the researcher commenting on the website, pointing her to relevant research, or expressing a personal or professional interest in the research. The number of "hits" to the website, i.e., the number of times a page is called from the server, was just under 2,000 during this period. The length of the material on the website may have contributed to the low response rate (the four scenarios and the questions which can be downloaded as a pdf file from the website take up eleven pages).

During July and August 2001 the website was not available for two weeks and not functional for a further four weeks due to problems with the server. Subsequently, the website was reinstalled on a different server and its URL changed. This has affected the continuity of the study and may have discouraged people from re-visiting the website.

It has been suggested that over the last decade response rates for all types of surveys have declined. The "growth in the amount of survey research being undertaken has resulted in an increase in the number of requests to individuals to complete surveys. This may lower response rates, since individuals' overall attitudes toward the survey industry may be unfavorable, and the aura of 'uniqueness' to the participation in the survey process diminishes. Low response rates are a concern for researchers, since answers from survey respondents may differ substantially from those of nonrespondents, resulting in a biased estimate of the characteristics of the population" (Sheehan, 2001).

The research on response rates to web-based research is scant and inconclusive (Cook, et al. 2000; Sheehan 2001; Smith 1997; Witmer, et al. 1999). Witmer, Colman and Katzman (1999: 147) noted that the lack of research on response rates in electronic surveys is not surprising, "given the inconclusive and inconsistent studies that define acceptable response rates or report methods to increase them in traditional paper-and-pencil methods". They considered a 50% response rate minimally adequate for traditional survey research, response rates around 20% not uncommon for unsolicited surveys, and found response rates to online surveys to be 10% or lower. The use of incentives is common with face-to-face methods such as focus group research. However, incentives are difficult to incorporate in web-based research as research participants may be located in different countries or may choose to stay anonymous.

Building on the work of the Global Scenarios Project (Economic Planning Advisory Commission, 1996), the four scenarios were written by the author of this article. It has been suggested that scenarios should be developed and written in a collaborative environment as "individuals operating alone are not as good as a team at assembling a group of divergent scenarios (Ogilvy, 1996: 208). While a broad range of people contributed to the Global Scenarios Project, it is acknowledged that the development of the four scenarios for BabyBoomWomen@Work2020 could have benefited from additional and diverse views and experiences.

### Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of a research study using CMC and futures scenarios to identify elements of preferred futures and develop suggestions and ideas that may be used to inform policy development concerned with paid and unpaid work and retirement options for women of the baby boom generation in 2020. The focus of the paper was on the methodology of the study, in particular CMC and the development of the study's scenarios.

While a combination of scenarios for the future and CMC offers opportunities to reach research participants that may otherwise be more difficult and costly to locate, and allows research participants to make their contribution from the safety and comfort of their home, work place or community Internet facility, limitations were experienced during the course of the study. To date, the number of responses to the website is very low. This may be due to the length of the material that research participants are required to read, to the technical difficulties experienced, or the way the website has been promoted. More research is needed to find out whether scenarios can be effectively used with web-based research for the purposes of policy development, and determine the most effective ways of promoting such a website. Further, additional research is required examining response rates for different types of web-based research.

The four scenarios *Oztopia*, *Bladerunner*, *Australia on a bad day* and *The island nation* - are available at <<http://HS053287.health.latrobe.edu.au/bbww/scenarios.htm>>

### Note

1. The website is available at <<http://HS053287.health.latrobe.edu.au/bbww/>>

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