Episode 167: Juliet Watson

**KL:** Katie Linder

**JW**: Juliet Watson

**KL:** You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and sixty-seven.

[intro music]

# Segment 1:

**KL:** Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

**KL:** On this episode, I'm joined by Dr. Juliet Watson the Deputy Director of the Unison Housing Research Lab and the Senior Lecturer in Homelessness in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies at RMIT University in Australia. Juliet has extensive research, teaching, and practice experience in the areas of homelessness, gender-based violence, and youth. Her doctoral thesis won the biennial Australian Women’s and Gender Studies Association PhD Award in 2016. This research formed the basis for her book, *Youth Homelessness and Survival Sex: Intimate Relationships and Gendered Subjectivities*. Juliet was also the recipient of The Australian Sociological Association Award for the Most Distinguished Peer-Reviewed Article Published by an Early Career Researcher in 2017. Her current research centers on socio-cultural contexts and experiences of homelessness, social housing, gender-based violence, and poverty.

Thanks so much for joining me on the podcast today, Juliet.

**JW:** Hi, Katie, thanks for having me!

**KL:** So I'm really fascinated to hear a little bit more about your research on homelessness. First, can you share a little bit about what led you to research in this area?

**JW:** Yes. So before I entered academic life, I actually worked as a social worker for many years and I worked in the homeless sector, and I also worked in the sector that looks at gender-based violence—I worked in sexual assault crisis for a while. And I guess the work that I was doing really interested me and I was practicing in this area, but I wanted to learn more, I suppose. It was a combination of wanting to learn more and also to explore what I knew from my working life and being able to combine that with academic study.

So really it was, you know, work experience, I was interested in the areas, I wanted things to change, and at the practice level you're often working at a very individual level with people, which can be incredible. And, you know, working with people seeing their lives change, but I wanted to be able to explore the issues that I was seeing in a much deeper way.

**KL:** Okay, so tell us a little bit about some of the research questions you're asking when it comes to homelessness. And it sounds like these are very informed by your engagement with the practice side of things. But what are some of the things you're exploring?

**JW:** So I'm particularly interested in how gender operates in the homeless field. So women's experiences of homelessness in particular. And I wanted to look at not just how many women were experiencing homelessness, I guess traditionally we've thought of women as being the “hidden homeless.” That I think is changing a bit because we're getting more evidence of the numbers of women experiencing homelessness, but we're not necessarily looking at what is unique about women's experiences of homelessness. What is it that is shaped by gender in people's experiences of homelessness? Now gender is just one lens that you can look at, and I've also started exploring areas such as people from diverse backgrounds, for example, asylum-seekers, experiences of homelessness. This is very embryonic in the research I'm doing. But gender has been the main focus.

Other research questions that we're looking at, I'm involved in a project here where I'm located that's looking at social housing and how that supports people experiencing homelessness. So I guess looking at homelessness. What happens when people move into the next stage? So they're able to access housing, very difficult in Australia to access housing, but the the people who access social housing, what happens then? What are the supports they need? What is it that actually sustains those tendencies? So I'm involved in a longitudinal study following a cohort of people over a three-year period to see what challenges they face and what actually happens during that time.

**KL:** Okay, so it sounds like you have multiple projects going on here. Can you talk a little bit about your choices for method and design as you're thinking about creating this research responding to these questions?

**JW:** So the project that I just mentioned, which is the social housing project, that's the largest project I've been involved in. I guess made a bit of a shift in the way that I work prior to that I've been very much involved in a small qualitative studies. This one is a larger group. We're following different waves of people through social housing. So our first wave is a hundred people survey work with those people to get a baseline picture of what their situation is, and then following up 12 months after that, and then another 12 months again. So that's a different kind of work that I've been doing.

The project also has a PhD projects attached to it that will be doing more I guess at that qualitative work and I am one of the supervisors for those projects. So we have a PhD student who is doing interview-based work with people who have just settled in and we've got another PhD who is going to be doing an ethnographic study of two different sites of social housing.

But traditionally the kind of research I've done is much more of that qualitative nature, very much informed by feminist methodologies, looking for women's stories women's narratives to inform us about their experiences. So semi-structured questions, narrative analysis, that kind of work to really tease out what women are experiencing.

**KL:** So I'm curious, you kind of gotten into this a little bit, kind of the theoretical frameworks that are kind of underpinning some of the work that you're doing. Can you talk a little bit about the approaches you're taking kind of from that perspective as well?

**JW:** So the feminist approaches which he approaches?

KL: Yeah, yeah.

**JW:** I think that the approaches that I've used most in the research that I've done particularly because it's been, it's involved research with women. And, you know, when you're looking at homelessness, a lot of things are said about homeless people without actually hearing from the people experiencing homelessness themselves.

So I think it's been really important in the work that I've been doing to highlight their voices in that—to actually highlight their experiences. I'm not sure how it is in America, but in Australia there are a lot of preconceptions about what it is to be homeless, and it tends to be dominated by, I guess, the image of the white homeless man on the street, and that's what homelessness is, it's all about rough sleeping. It tends to be the image of a man.

Now we know in Australia that rough sleeping only makes up about six percent of the homeless population. Most people are actually doing what we call couch surfing, then moving from place to place staying with friends, family, acquaintances for short periods of time. Or they're also in emergency accommodation and these stories aren't really recognized particularly, and that's more often where women are going to be with moving around.

So it's really important to challenge those stereotypes about homelessness. When women are considered, again, it tends to be the image of the “bag lady” rather than the woman who is potentially a single mum moving around with her family with nowhere to stay. So it's important that we highlight those voices. We, you know, we want to hear about those stories, and that's just from a gender perspective, a woman's perspective. There are there are a whole range of experiences that we need to tap into to fully understand I guess the impact of homelessness and how people are managing it.

**KL:** Okay, so I'm curious just what you've learned so far from this research. You're talking a lot about kind of expanding our understanding of these populations. What are some of the things you're taking away so far?

**JW:** Well, I've learned a lot [*laughs*] as you can imagine. In terms of gendered experiences of homelessness one thing I researched was looking at practices of what we call survival sex. And I think survival sex tends to be associated with commercial sexual activity or sex work. But what I was finding with women that I've interviewed—young women I interviewed in particular—is that certainly women, not all women, but some women find it necessary to partner up with a man in order to have somewhere safe to stay or to feel safe while they're homeless. But it's not necessarily as simple as a straight transaction of sex for security, sex for material support. These can actually be wrapped up in I guess experience as a relationship. So it might be the practice of staying in a relationship longer then you would choose to because if you leave that relationship, your circumstances will deteriorate quite rapidly. Or it might be just, you know, it could be as simple as hooking up with someone briefly because that will make you feel safer at that time or that will give you somewhere safe to stay that night.

Women's experiences of pregnancy. I mean, this is here we go, a very gendered experience, being pregnant. This is a group that we've been researching. My colleagues at the University here at RMIT, and at La Trobe University, what it means to be pregnant how this is recognized by the housing system what we discovered in Australia as there are no, not really reliable nationwide statistics on the amount of women who are pregnant and homeless. Now looking at small studies that have been done in the United States and the United Kingdom, it seems to be that women are pregnant and—women who are pregnant and homeless—this is occurring at a higher rate than it is among the general population. Yet we don't really have proper kind of data on that in Australia. And we know by from speaking to the service system out here that there isn't a coordinated response in how you manage situations when women present who are pregnant. It's just a couple of examples I can give you of things I've learned and that I'm still learning about.

**KL:** Well, we're going to dive a little bit deeper into your work specifically with pregnancy and homelessness. We're going to take a brief break and when we come back, we'll hear a little bit more from Juliet. Back in a moment.

The “Research in Action” podcast discusses research in higher education that has a direct and immediate impact on faculty staff and students across the world including topics that directly benefit student success. Here at my own institution, student success is a top priority and we all work towards that common goal. Oregon State University Ecampus student success counselors recently developed the dynamic Ecampus Learning Community where all online students can receive robust support with student success coaching throughout their academic journey, establish an academic support network, and build lasting connections with their peers around the world. More than 90% of students accepted the invitation when it launched and it's been a resounding success. Tour the community yourself at Ecampus.oregonstate.edu/elc.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Juliet, I definitely want to dive deeper with you on your research on pregnancy and homelessness, which you mentioned at the end of the last segment. Can you share a little bit about your most recent grant to research in this area?

**JW:** Sure. So we've received a second grant to look at this area, and this is specifically providing us with funding to interview women who have experienced homelessness while they've been pregnant. So the first round of funding looked at service responses from the housing sector and from health services, and gave us some incredible information about what was happening.

But this stage is looking at what has that experience been like for women? So it's really exciting to be able to get that perspective and see how it, I guess, aligns with what the services are saying.

**KL:** Okay, so tell us a little bit about your approach in this project. You talked a little bit about in segment one about kind of a narrative approach. Are you kind of going along this in a similar vein or are there other kind of pieces of data that you're going to be collecting along the way as well?

**JW:** So one of the things we wanted to do with this stage of data collection is actually get a bit of a history from the women about their experiences of homelessness, but also their, I guess, their pregnancy histories because it might not just be their current experience, or most recent experience, that's relevant here.

You know, there are possibly past pregnancies that have occurred and that really have a bearing on the woman’s situation at present. So by being able to collect that data, we're getting a much richer picture of women in the system. I should, I guess, adhere that many, many years ago as a social worker, again I worked in the field of pregnant women and addictions. So I worked to the hospital that offered a service to women who had high level substance abuse difficulties. So for example, they were using heroin, or amphetamines, or misusing alcohol, and a lot of the women that came through my homeless at that time. And what I learned at that stage was these women had incredibly complicated lives and when they turned up at our service that might not have been their first pregnancy. They might have actually had previous pregnancies coming through our service.

So it really, I guess, said to me and said to the research team, that these histories are really important. And, I guess, the other thing that we're hoping to capture because this came up in the first stage is pregnancy doesn't necessarily mean a live birth at the end of it. Women are potentially miscarrying. You know, and that could be brought on by the circumstances, or they may be having to terminate their pregnancy for a range of reasons. This again came up in the first stage. And so it's important to get that that long history to be able to capture all the nuances of what's happened.

**KL:** Hmm. Can you talk a little bit about your goals for this project? Who are you hoping to inform or what kind of change are you hoping could happen based on the results?

**JW:** Yeah, so what we're doing with this second phase is it's going to culminate in a forum where we invite key stakeholders to come along and hopefully establish a network of policymakers and practitioners to be able to effect some change in this area.

What would be great is to see some standardization of approaches to women experiencing homelessness who are pregnant. Key things that came up were the importance of continuity of care for women who are getting that antenatal support. I suppose so at the moment, unless a woman is has a particular profile such as she's a young woman, or there is maybe that high-level drug and alcohol use, those women might get specialized support.

But if it's a woman who's pregnant, she's not young, and by not young I mean she's probably over 22, who is homeless, she's couch surfing, she's just going to go into the general health system. But she has special needs that are not being picked up on so we would like to see services being able to provide—this is what the services are telling us they want to be able to provide, they just don't have the resources to do it. So specialized care for women going through the system.

Another key factor is how pregnancy is recognized by the housing sector or the homelessness sector. And being able to set women up in housing that they can then prepare for childbirth, prepare for motherhood. So if women are not in stable accommodation until they give birth, how do you even start to plan to be a parent? You know, most people if they've decided to have a baby start thinking, “Well, this is the kind of parent I'm going to be, this is where the baby's going to sleep.” You know, “I'm going to be this kind of parent and these are the people who are going to be involved.” But if your housing is not secure, if you're sleeping on a couch somewhere, or an emergency accommodation, how do you even start to contemplate what it will mean to be a parent?

**KL:** Okay, so I would imagine, Juliet, that working with this population that is kind of doubly vulnerable with pregnancy and with homelessness, could cause some challenges in ethics approval—at least it would here in the US. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about that in terms of framing that out. I would imagine some people wouldn't want to tackle a project like this because of those challenges. Tell us a little bit about what that has been like to kind of get this approved for you to go ahead and commence with the work.

**JW:** Look it's really interesting. We actually didn't have that many problems getting the ethics approval for this research. I think it was helped by the fact that we have strong relationships with our partner organizations that are helping the recruitment. So the first stage when we were interviewing the practitioners, or the people from the different sectors, there was a lot of enthusiasm for this project. And we partnered with housing provider, Launch Housing, who very much wanted this research done as did one of the key hospitals in Melbourne.

So when it came to applying for the ethics approval to interview women it went through reasonably smoothly, which was surprising because generally when you do research with vulnerable groups, you know, understandably, there are a lot of things that you come up against. I think we were able to emphasize our experience in the field. All of us have a lot of experience working with, and doing research with, vulnerable groups and women in particular and women who have experienced violence in the past. And I guess we were going through services for our recruitment that are supporting women, it wasn't a matter of just hanging around services and hoping to grab people is that these are women who are supported. But yes, it was surprisingly easy [*laughs*]. I'm not sure if I can offer advice because they've been other projects where it's taken a lot longer to get ethics approval where I thought it would be easier.

One thing that did come back to us from the ethics committee though was they queried about the potential for us to be interviewing a lot of young women, and we thought that was quite interesting because there's it highlights an assumption that's out there that it's young homeless women, teenage girls, who are pregnant and homeless. And again, this is perhaps better verb bit of a myth that, you know, women have childbearing age much longer than their teen years and the women, you know, that we were going to interview we're going to be from a range of ages. We weren’t targeting young mums in particular.

**KL:** Mmm. You've mentioned a couple times as you're describing this, Juliet., “we.” Can you talk a little bit about the team that you're working with on this project?

**JW:** Absolutely. So it's being led by Professor Suellen Murray, who's here at RMIT University with me, who has a long history of leading projects on violence against women and women's homelessness. And a colleague, Dr. Jacqui Theobald from La Trobe University, whose area I guess of expertise also is homelessness and women, but she has a particular interest in the women's refuges movement. She’s a social worker and historian and in she's looked at yes, the establishment of women's refuges in in Victoria. So we're a great team and I guess we're all really passionate about this area. That's what that's what is so great about working with this team. We all have the same goals. We're interested in hearings women’s stories, and particularly we're interested in systemic change as a result or the research we're doing.

**KL:** Julia what is next for you with this project as you continue it?

**JW:** Well, we are hoping we'll see how we go. We're hoping to expand the project internationally. So we are looking at partnering with the University of Edinburgh who have a research unit there, a health and inclusion research unit led by Dr. Fiona Cuthill who—I've been over to Edinburgh, she's been over here to Melbourne—and we're putting in a grant to do a comparative study between Scotland and Victoria State here in Australia to see how things are similar and how they're different. And in particular, what we want to do is be able to do a longitudinal study of women who've experienced homelessness while they've been pregnant.

So the current project we're working on is the one-off interview to find out what that experience was like for them and get that history. But we’d really like to know what happens a year after they have a child, two years after they have a child, because the challenges don't necessarily stop. Once the baby is born, in fact I'd say they probably just start at that point. And you know a lot of the time with not being put into ongoing accommodation they’re being put into what we call transitional accommodation, which may only be for three months or six months. So what happens longer-term? So fingers crossed we're successful with that funding application. You never know, but we're very excited about the prospect of being able to get that longer-term view.

**KL:** Well this research, Juliet, is fascinating. We're going to take another brief break. When we come back, we'll hear a little bit more from Juliet about some of her work on family and domestic violence. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 3:

**KL:** Juliet, I know you've also done some work on family and domestic violence. Can you tell us a little bit about your research in this area?

**JW:** Yes, so I was involved in a project again with the researchers I just mentioned—Suellen Murray and Jacqui Theobald, and another researcher from New South Wales, Jane Bullen. This research looked at crisis and emergency responses to women, and families, women and their children, who are escaping family violence or domestic violence. We tend to call it family violence here in Victoria, but obviously it encompasses other forms of intimate partner violence and domestic violence.

So we were funded by the Department of Health and Human Services to do a study that looked at what the responses are. What are the accommodation responses and what are the support responses for women who are forced to leave their homes due to family violence? And this actually came out of a royal commission that happened in Victoria that looked at the sector more broadly. This was a huge investigation. The first of its kind in the world that examined service responses to family violence. So a recommendation was looking at crisis responses. So it was our job to go out and find what was happening. And this involved visiting women's refuges and speaking to refuge workers. Also visiting outreach support services, speaking to people from government, and of course, speaking to women about their experiences of emergency accommodation and support. And that meant speaking to women who had gone into refuge or other forms of emergency support, or women, and women who hadn't done that because it's, you know, it's very interesting to find out why that wasn't available to them or the appropriate response at the time.

**KL:** So I'm curious, you know, it seems like there could be so many factors so many different stakeholders that you've just mentioned as well who are involved in this work. Is this a project in which you were trying to kind of map what was happening? Or take a different approach in terms of trying to get your, get a perspective on all the different elements that we're going into this question?

**JW:** Yes, it certainly was a project of moving parts and we were trying to find out what actually happens when women contact for emergency support. So yes, there was definitely a mapping aspect to it.

We were very interested in finding out what was considered good practice or best practice in the field. But also what are the challenges that are faced by both women wanting to access services and the system in being able to respond to those women? And you can probably guess there were many challenges involved, but there was also some really great work going on, too.

**KL:** So I'm really curious, Juliet, we've heard kind of throughout this interview about how you are working with women in particular who have probably experienced significant amounts of trauma throughout their experiences as homeless women, as pregnant homeless women, as women who are experiencing family and domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and I'm curious if you can talk a little bit about your approach to talking with these women about these sensitive subjects and how you are kind of thinking about how to approach these things with them.

**JW:** Sure. So as I mentioned earlier, I am a social worker prior to becoming an academic, and I was a sexual assault counselor for many, many years. So I guess I come to this work with a very solid understanding of the underpinning factors of gender-based violence and the impact that that violence can have on victim survivors.

So when I do the interviews I guess there's a bit of a change of pace because I've got my research hat on rather than my counselor hat on, but I'm still informed by what I know. I'm still informed by knowing what the impact of trauma can be. So the first, I think the most important part of the work is doing everything you can to avoid further trauma for people that you're interviewing. And making sure that they are in control of the process. And some of this is of course just good ethical research work and making sure that your participants are aware of what the information is going to be used for, aware of what their go, you know that they can stop the interview at any time, which might be after the first question. But also for me it's checking in at regular intervals when I'm interviewing women just to make sure that it's okay. I usually preface more difficult questions to, by letting women know that something sensitive might be coming up and do they want me to skip that question. Picking up on visual cues where they are face-to-face interviews. I think all of this is incredibly important work to be doing.

I guess also if I'm employing research assistants making sure that the research assistants also have those skills. It's not about employing people to do interviews just because they have the qualifications to do academic work. For me, it's really important that they're able to bring these qualities to the interviews that they do.

I think where appropriate to it's good to be able to, if you've got a list of questions that you're going to be asking women, if they were to see those questions before they agree to the interview, I think that’s perfectly fine. One they can become a they can turn up to the interview a bit more prepared, but they can also make a more informed decision about what they'll be talking about. They're just some of the things that I do.

**KL:** Yeah, that's really helpful. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about, Juliet, as I'm hearing this, you know, it's so important to keep the person that you're interviewing at the center particularly, you know, as you're kind of talking about not wanting to re-traumatized people. And yet it may be in tension with the research, and completing the research, you know, and making sure that you have a complete picture of what is happening, the lives of these women. Wondering if you can talk about how you balance that tension of wanting to have a complete picture, wanting to have enough data even to kind of move a research project forward, while also really respecting the choices of your subjects in participants to not engage in certain aspects or to you know end an interview if they need to do that.

**JW:** That’s a really great question. And I don't know that there's a single answer to that. I think each interview has its own rhythm, and you need to respond to that. And as you know, we've talked about putting the participant at the center of what's going on.

One thing. I think we're aware of is not overburdening populations that we're interviewing. So, you know, there—particularly when you're looking at family violence and going out and interviewing women, you don't want to be over-researching groups. There are certain groups that do get a lot of attention. So making sure that you're not making participants repeat stories over and over again that they have asked in they've been asked in previous interviews potentially by other research projects.

So if there's information already out there about certain things, do you need to go over it again? So things like if I look at the refuges as project, we know the impact of family violence. There's probably more to know—there's always more to know. But we were quite specific about not going over what the impacts of the violence were for participants. We actually wanted to know about their engagement with the service system. So we were quite specific. That other information other reports have been done on that.

So, I think being aware of the specific aims of your project and not kind of… I mean, there's always got to be space for people to be able to extrapolate and if you, particularly if you're doing semi-structured interviews, you don't want to be too strict because some of the best information comes as you're developing that dialogue with someone. But you also don't want to be voyeuristic what you're doing. You don't want to be collecting information just for the sake of it because it seems a bit interesting at the time when that information is available elsewhere. But certainly there is a, you know, there's a tension there and recruitment can be difficult, and I've certainly experienced projects where recruitment is tricky. But I think also a lot of the time if you've got good relationships with your partner organizations, if that's where you're doing the recruitment, in a sense, they're often doing the safeguarding as well because they we won't approach participants directly. The services have a knowledge of the people that they're working with and I guess can consider who would be appropriate who is someone who—I don't want to say will be able to stand up to the research—but for whom it's not going to be a traumatizing experience.

I mean, luckily, I have to say, most of the research I've done so far I've had participants who have been quite clear about wanting to tell their stories about feeling heard, but you can't guarantee that that will be the case.

**KL:** Mm-hmm. Juliet, you have raised so many important issues questions and such fascinating things for us to be thinking about with our research. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing about your research on homelessness. This has been really fascinating.

**JW:** Thank you so much for the opportunity, Katie.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week's episode of “Research in Action.” I'm Katie Linder and we'll be back next week with a new episode.

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