Territorial stigma: ‘Housos’ and the representation of disadvantage in the media

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Abstract

In October 2011 the Australian comedy series ‘Housos’ premiered on SBS Television, despite vocal opposition earlier in the year from social housing tenants in Western Sydney. Housos is a satire about the daily life of tenants in a fictitious social housing estate called ‘Sunnyvale’, a lawless zone where people act outside of the law and common norms of society. The depictions of the social housing tenants draw on a number of caricatures and stereotypes, with the characters often portrayed as feckless individuals who shun work, survive on welfare benefits, indulge in substance abuse, routinely commit crimes and cause generalised disorder.

This paper reports findings from research which forms part of a larger ARC Linkage project entitled ‘Residents Voices’. The questions and methods used in this study emerged after screening of the first episode of Housos at an inner city social housing estate for an audience consisting of social housing tenants and community workers from across the greater Sydney metropolitan area. These questions were then taken up in a tenant-led research project conducted over the 9-week season of Housos in Sydney and Adelaide.

Keywords: territorial stigmatisation, social housing estates, media, television, images of the poor, stigma, neighbourhood reputation

Introduction

In October 2011 the Australian comedy series ‘Housos’ premiered on SBS Television, an independent part publicly funded free-to-air station. The nine part series screened over the following weeks, despite vocal opposition earlier in the year from social housing tenants in Western Sydney (Crikey, 2011; Molitorisz, 2011). In
response, the television station that planned to screen the show issued an explicatory press release stating that Housos was an “exaggerated parody” (Molitorisz, 2011).

Housos is indeed a satirical parody about the daily life of tenants in a fictitious social housing estate called ‘Sunnyvale’, a lawless zone where people act outside of the law and common norms of society. The depictions of the social housing tenants draw on a number of caricatures and stereotypes – with names such as Dazza, Shazza and Franky, portrayed as feckless individuals who shun work, survive on welfare benefits, indulge in substance abuse, routinely commit crimes and cause generalised disorder, and exhibit highly dysfunctional families and relationships. Each of the episodes deals with a different theme such as defrauding the welfare system, drug dealing and redevelopment of the estate.

In the Australian context, the use of the term Houso in the title of the program immediately identifies a subject associated with very specific and well-defined urban localities, and evokes well-rehearsed sets of stereotypes and popular perceptions concerning the jobless underclass. This paper reports on the findings of a study conducted collaboratively with social housing residents in Sydney and Adelaide, which sought to explore and theorise the issue of territorial stigmatisation through the experience of tenants themselves examining and reflecting upon the television program.

Territorial stigma, disadvantage and the media

Building on Goffman’s (1986) seminal work, Wacquant’s (2007) concept of territorial stigma provides a useful framework to investigate the ramifications of ‘blemish of place’. Wacquant (2007) argues that a key omission in Goffman’s (1986) thesis is a link to ‘blemish of place’ or a discredited neighbourhood reputation, which leads to what he terms as ‘territorial stigma’. From this perspective, analogous to the situation of tribal stigma, territorial stigma can project a virtual social identity on families and individuals living in particular neighbourhoods and thus deprive them of acceptance from others (Ruetter et al., 2009).

Place and person become intertwined and, consequently, ‘blemish of place’ can add an additional layer of disadvantage to any existing stigma that is associated with people’s poverty or ethnic origins. In this way community identity is constructed by others, often outsiders, and stigma is not just associated with the neighbourhoods but also the individual persons who live there.

The consequences of experiencing the effects of ‘territorial stigma’ can be dire with the allied effects identified in the literature including: residents living in areas with adverse reputations adopting ‘self-defeating behaviours’ (Arthurson, 2012b); discrimination by employers on the basis of post code address (Bradbury and Chalmers, 2003; Palmer et al., 2004); businesses being reluctant to operate in or near particular neighbourhoods (Jacobs et al., 2011); changes to the nature and quality of service provision (Hastings, 2004); the selling off of social housing to the private market (Arthurson, 2012a; Darcy, 2010); the displacement of social housing
residents (Wacquant, 2008; 2009); and impacts on residents’ health and well-being (Palmer et al., 2004).

The media is one of the key instruments through which images of social housing estates and their occupants are depicted and relayed to the general public. The media plays an active role in mediating territorial stigmatisation, which appears as one of the central aspects in debates determining the future of social housing estates (Hastings, 2009; Jacobs et al., 2011). Stressed urban communities are sought out by the media to set ‘nightmarish portrayals of urban life’ that may serve or extend negative stereotypes (Lee, 2007). In the end it matters little if these areas are or are not “in fact dilapidated and dangerous, and their population composed essentially of poor people, minorities and foreigners … the prejudicial belief that they are suffices to set off socially noxious consequences” (Wacquant, 2007: 68). Residents of stigmatised places bemoan the fact that others and the media, in particular news and current affairs programs, stigmatise their neighbourhoods and occupants, often without even having visited there or knowing the people (Kelaher et al., 2010; Hastings and Dean, 2003).

Residents’ Voices and the Housos study

This research formed part of a larger Australian Research Council funded Linkage project entitled ‘Residents Voices’ (Darcy and Gwyther, 2012). The questions and methods for the Housos study emerged after we organised a screening of the first episode of Housos at an inner city social housing estate for an audience consisting of social housing tenants and community workers from across the greater Sydney metropolitan area. This was followed by hosting discussions with an expert panel of social housing tenants, some of whom had raised previously concerns about the program.

Some audience members stated they “enjoyed the show”, while others expressing the viewpoint that the stereotypes drawn on in the program would “reinforce the stigma attached to social housing” (Tenants). The discussion and Question and Answer (Q&A) session that followed resulted in a group of tenants developing a set of research questions for further investigation of this issue. These questions focussed on: the role and focus of satire in society; the wider public’s conceptualisations of social housing estates; the stigmatisation of residents of estates by the media; narrow and prejudiced understandings of social housing; and the dangers of ‘glamorised’ portrayals of disadvantage in the media.

These questions were then taken up in a tenant-led research project conducted over the 9-week season of Housos. Two active tenants joined us as tenant-researchers and recruited tenants from their local area to participate in the study. The Residents’ Voices team provided institutional and research assistance during recruitment and throughout the project. The tenant-academic research team then recruited tenants from Adelaide and also non-tenant viewers of the show to participate in the research. Each week the 19 participants were sent an episode of Housos with a set of research questions. Participants watched the episode in their own time and responded to each
week’s questions by writing and email or recording an audio or video diary on their mobile phone.

The analysis presented here was produced by a tenant-academic team who reflected collaboratively on the panel and Q&A discussion and the diary entries from the 19 participants including: (1) twelve residents of a number of inner city and suburban estates in Sydney and Adelaide; (2) two community workers who work on estates; and (3) five self-nominated viewers of the show.

It was important for the academic researchers on the team not to impose a pre-existing analytical framework onto tenants. The research team decided to hold a final focus group to conclude the study whereby the two tenant-researchers, a tenant community worker and tenant participant from the study, reviewed and interpreted participant contributions. The group reviewed the tenant diaries to explore the ways in which tenants mediated between the virtual identity of a Houso presented in the show and their actual personal identity and experience with managing stigma (Ruetter et al., 2009). They also reviewed the non-tenant diaries to better understand how others construct images of social housing tenants from this parodist representation.

Findings

In this study tenants expressed mixed views about whether Houso informs negative public perceptions or if indeed the highly aggrandised caricatures actually work to reinforce and further stigmatise estates from the viewpoints of outsiders. As one panel discussant suggested, “I don’t think [it reinforces stigma]. It’s so exaggerated nobody in their right mind would believe it” (Tenant). Nevertheless, many other social housing tenants were affronted by these perceptions and felt they had derogatory effects on residents’ feeling of self-confidence and self-esteem. One tenant stated the show demonizes social housing tenants, while another stated

People do assume, simply because I’m on a pension and I live in social housing; I’m a drug addict, I’m a dole bludger, and I’m just the worst that can be. And this [Houso], I think, gives them the right to say they’re right, and I’m no good because of where I live and what income I have. (Tenant).

Other comments further supported the notion of geographical confinement or territorial constraint through which social housing neighbourhoods have become prison-like (Wacquant, 2001), confining and constraining those within.

… by being confined - the stigma forced in a sense - psychologically forced people to stay within their area that they understand and are safe with; they know the rules and all that. So there are positives for them as well. They know how to survive within that area. (Tenant)

In turn, the viewpoint was commonly put forward that these feelings of confinement and awareness of knowing how to survive in stigmatised neighbourhoods could lead to self-limiting aspirations and behaviours for residents. One tenant stated,
They're taught this is what is expected of you; this is your expected behaviour. If you don't conform to that pattern of expected behaviour you're damaged goods. This becomes a barrier” (Tenant).

A related aspect of these self-limiting behaviours included the finding that people often choose not to venture outside of the neighbourhood, instead staying within the estate boundaries where it felt safe and familiar, as demonstrated by this comment “There are two sides to that [territorial stigma]. There's a sense of feeling safe and secure within that, and feeling uncomfortable out of it” (Tenant).

Moving onto the main storylines in Housos, participants remarked on how the narrative in the show was played out like a game in which interactions and relationships between the houseos and various government agencies resulted in weekly winners and losers. The police force figure prominently, but so too do Centrelink, child protection and local government. In the highly irreverent spirit of the parody, representatives of these agencies usually appear self-interested, if not corrupt, bumbling and incompetent. They constantly scrutinize and frequently interrogate the houseos in unsuccessful efforts to catch them defrauding the system or prove them guilty of other crimes.

After watching these episodes, non-tenant participants in our study consistently reflected on their belief that the system was not effectively preventing welfare cheats and ‘bludgers’ from loafing at their (taxpayers’) expense. They called for greater surveillance and more stringent requirements to work.

… the Government should look into it, as they have done lately … I see grandfathers, father, sons, all the way through they just, all on the dole; all houseos. (Non-tenant viewer)

Tenant participants on the other hand, took up this theme to reflect on the highly regulated life on the estate, and on the disempowering, or even infantilising nature of these relationships:

Yeah, the human services. So you're totally surrounded by all these agencies, so it's usually agency as parent. (Tenant)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, relationships with housing managers were characterised by tenant participants as particularly controlling, “It's territorial authoritarianism - housing authorities thinking they can control who talks to their tenants”(Tenant).

Tenants commented further on the way the episodic structure of Housos sets up a weekly problem of economic survival as a contest against the system or even a game, where winning could support a positive self-image. In the program, the houseos always ‘win’ at the expense of frustrated authorities. Equally, tenant participants did not seek to deny or disown illicit activity in their own neighbourhood lived experience, except to point out that it was the practice of a minority, and even then was usually intermittent. Participants in the focus group were also less concerned about the legality or morality of cheating the system – rather they explored the implications of the game metaphor for tenants’ individual and collective identity.
There are certain rules about how you play it and all that kind of stuff … Actually you've got this social political system, and it's a system with all these various elements like government departments, politicians, developers, and the middle class. They're there to protect their interests and maintain a certain kind of lifestyle for themselves and their own interests. (Tenant)

Tenant participants were highly attuned to implications of conflicting interests with those of non-tenants, often demarcating “them”, defined as “the authority and society”, with “us”, as the tenant body (Tenant). When reviewing the video diaries, focus group members identified the negative stereotyping and highlighting of difference imposed by ‘mainstream’ citizenry as a possible defence against disadvantage. The reflections of tenant participants on their own game-playing included several accounts of deliberate and self-conscious use of ‘negative’ social status to produce positive collective identity and other benefits.

All participants freely identified places in their city that fictional Sunnyvale referred to, and linked living in these places with particular social characteristics and behaviours. Non-tenant participants most often reiterated commonly held ideas about concentrated poverty: “That's what they’ve grown up with and many of them have been there that long, that's all they know.” (Non-tenant viewer) Tenant participants, on the other hand, pointed to social distinction of another kind, and were more likely to emphasise the positive aspects of their local community life:

> It’s not all negative actually, I find that people here will help you quicker that say somebody in private, we’re quick to help one another. We’ll go out of our way really quickly, I think we have more communication that people in private do, and we have a better community than people in private do because they’re all so isolated … we’re part of a community. (Tenant)

In response to the final episode of Housos, many participants noted the way that the housos stick together to defend their place when confronted with a government plan to redevelop Sunnyvale and break up the social housing estate. “Well to tell you the truth, they are pretty close, ah?” stated a non-tenant viewer, or “they were actually all pretty supportive of each other, and help each other out where possible” stated a tenant. The suggestion here is that stigma based on place or territory may be offset by the mutual support and potential solidarity that tenants can offer each other.

**Conclusion**

In the end it matters little whether Housos is real or imagined as the exaggerated parodies are shown here to reinforce existing attitudes in ways that potentially affect real peoples’ lives. To a large extent the views expressed by social housing tenant participants supported Wacquant’s (2001) arguments that economic and political forces and changing modes for governing poverty have resulted in geographical confinement or territorial constraint of residents on estates.
Tenants voiced some of the obvious signifiers of this situation pointing to judgements made about their worth and potential and the territorial taint attached to places, they inhabit. They also recognised their own experience in the ways that state agencies constantly scrutinise and frequently interrogate the housos in their unsuccessful efforts to catch them defrauding the system or in seeking to prove them guilty of other crimes.

When tenant and non-tenant participants reflected on the fictional representation they almost always talked simultaneously about ‘real world’ tenant and social issues. Tenants frequently referred to experiences of discrimination and social barriers that make life harder and also to the effects of housing management. Non-tenant participants often rehearsed common prejudices about social housing, and consistently reflected on their belief that the system was not effectively preventing welfare cheats and ‘bludgers’ from loafing at their (taxpayers’) expense.

Tenants were not mere victims of territorial stigma, but did highlight the ‘othering’ imposed by ‘mainstream’ citizenry in programs such as Housos. Tenant participants’ reflections on their own real life game-playing included several accounts of deliberate and self-conscious use of ‘negative’ social status to produce positive collective identity and other benefits.

References

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