

SAGE Research Methods Cases

Disadvantaged Citizens as Co-Researchers in Media Analysis: Action Research Utilising Mobile Phone and Video Diaries

Contributors: Dallas Rogers & Kathy Arthurson & Michael Darcy

Book Title: SAGE Research Methods Cases

Chapter Title: "Disadvantaged Citizens as Co-Researchers in Media Analysis: Action Research Utilising Mobile Phone and Video Diaries"

Pub. Date: 2013

Access Date: March 23, 2014

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Ltd.

City: London

Print ISBN:

Online ISBN: 9781446273050

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013509351>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305013509351>

Disadvantaged Citizens as Co-Researchers in Media Analysis: Action Research Utilising Mobile Phone and Video Diaries

Link to the Research Output

- Arthurson, K. , Darcy, M. , & Rogers, D. (in press). *Televised territorial stigma: How social housing tenants experience the fictional media representations of estate in Australia. Environment and Planning A.*
- Rogers, D. , Darcy, M. , Butler, P. , & Smith, R. (2012, February 8–10). *Satirical mediation: Stigma, social satire and the representation of public housing tenants and estates in Housos.* Proceedings of the 6th Australasian Housing Researchers' Conference, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia.

This case study outlines the methodology (action research) and tools – (1) mobile phone video diaries and (2) focus groups – that we used to explore representations of disadvantaged Australian social housing tenants as presented through the medium of television. The academic researchers worked with disadvantaged citizens living in social housing acting as co-researchers for the project. The study focused on the Australian 'comedy' television series 'Housos', which aired in 2011. The show depicted the lifestyles of fictional tenant characters on an imaginary social housing estate. Tenants were portrayed as feckless and antisocial individuals who engage in a range of irresponsible and sometimes criminal behaviour in order to avoid work and whose family and other relationships were dysfunctional. Soon after the programme commenced, social housing tenants approached us to conduct a research project on the programme. We conducted an action research project with tenants over the 9-week first season of the show with residents in New South Wales and South Australia. Each week, participants watched the current episode and responded to key research themes and questions in a creative medium of their choice, such as mobile phone video diary recordings.

Learning Outcomes

This case study outlines the methodology (*action research*) and methods (*mobile phone video diaries* and *focus groups*) that were used to explore representations of disadvantaged Australian social housing tenants as presented through the medium of television. The academic researchers worked with disadvantaged citizens living in social housing acting as co-researchers for the project. After reading this *method-in-action* case study, you will be able to

- Identify some key challenges, including situational and methodological issues that must be considered when conducting research in collaboration with disadvantaged citizens
- Better understand the unequal power relationships and politics of action research and critiques of the relationships between researchers and those whose experiences are being researched
- Design research projects with the subjects of media representations as co-researchers
- Identify some methodological and technical issues that must be considered when conducting research with new media research equipment
- Debate the pros and cons of using new media equipment for research purposes

Introduction

This *method-in-action* case study forms part of an Australian Research Council–funded Linkage project ‘Residents Voices’ (Arthurson, Darcy, & Rogers, in press; Darcy & Gwyther, 2012). Residents Voices was designed to create opportunities for social housing residents to develop and express their own knowledge and understanding of the links between place and disadvantage. As social scientists who do not belong to disadvantaged groups, we recognised that their lived experiences could reflect very different personal viewpoints to our own. Social housing tenants and other disadvantaged groups are often spoken about by others rather than having their own voices heard directly. Thus, the research commenced from acknowledging

the importance of directly involving their voices in all phases of the study design, implementation and analysis.

This entry outlines the methodological tools that were used with social housing tenants as co-researchers to explore representations of tenants as presented through the medium of television. The study focused on the Australian 'comedy' series 'Housos', a nine-part television series that aired in 2011 on SBS Television, an independent, part publicly funded, free-to-air station in Australia.

Housos is a satirical parody about the daily life of social housing tenants in the fictitious 'Sunnyvale' social housing estate. It is a highly embellished representation of Australian social housing estates where people act outside of the law and common norms of society. The depictions of the social housing tenants draw on a number of dominant caricatures and stereotypes – with characters 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, along with highly dysfunctional families and relationships.

Each episode is slap-stick and addresses a different theme. These include the *Housos* attempts to defraud the welfare system through feigning injuries that might qualify them for disability pensions, and drug dealing activities involving transporting illegal steroids to Asia. The final episode for the first series concerns plans for redeveloping Sunnyvale estate whereby the social housing tenants, facing relocation to other neighbourhoods, organise various forms of resistance. On the spectrum of Australian television programming, *Housos* is on the fringe and pushes the boundaries of mainstream televised comedy. To view *Housos*, see the shows' producers' official *YouTube* station <http://www.youtube.com/user/SuperchocTV?feature=watch>

Soon after the programme commenced, social housing tenants approached the academic researchers to conduct a research project on the programme. We conducted an action research (AR) project with tenants over the 9-week first season of the show with residents in the Australian states of New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia (SA). Each week, participants watched the current episode and responded to key research themes and questions in a creative medium of their choice, such as mobile phone video diary recordings.

This case study describes the following:

- The research methodology of *AR* and our working with tenants as co-researchers utilising an ‘expert’ panel of social housing tenants to manage the project, develop the research questions and analyse the data
- The research method of *mobile phone video diaries* the research team used to collect data from social housing tenants about their views of the show
- The research method of *focus groups* that we used to bring the ‘expert’ panel of social housing tenants back together to analyse the *mobile phone video diary* data

Action Research: An ‘Expert’ Panel Discussion to Set the Scope of the Research

AR is a methodology – a guiding system and/or justification for the use of certain research methods – which ignores the boundary between academia and society as a basic principle of operation. In AR, academics collaborate with community or organisational stakeholders to enable these stakeholders to

- define the aims, objectives, and questions for the research;
- conduct the research;
- interpret the results; and
- apply the results to produce positive social change. (Greenwood & Morten, 2000, p. 94)

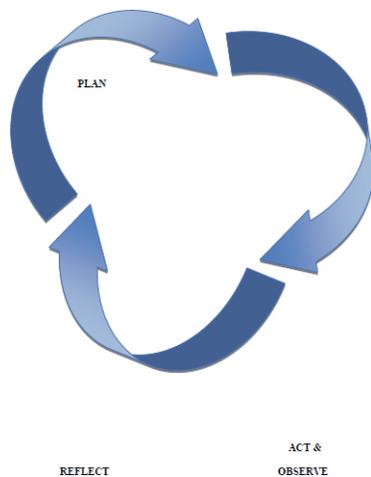
AR is often attributed to Kurt Lewin's (1946) research approach adopted in the United States in the 1940s. However, this so-called first generation of AR soon became difficult to justify under the ‘prevailing positivistic ideology’ in the United States in the middle of the 20th century (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 560). The latter favours the ‘scientific method’, applying rigorous quantitative methods such as controlled trials and addressing questions about the size and levels of effects of particular changes. Then second generation AR emerged in the late 1960s in the United Kingdom, morphing

into third generation AR in Australia and Europe, which was focused more explicitly on emancipation and critical action. By the mid-1970s, social activists such as Paulo Freire (1973) were deploying critical emancipatory AR and participatory AR (PAR) in the developing world in fourth generation AR.

More recently, AR has been moving away from Freirian political activism and more traditional forms of PAR by focusing on the role of civil society organisations (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007) as a way of gaining legitimacy for contentious knowledge, and gaining a stronger basis to intervene in policy issues.

This central ethos of PAR is a focus on generating knowledge through collaboration and reflection of the social practices of the *self* and *others* to inform a process of social change. The community or organisational stakeholders must test the 'value' or 'utility' of the knowledge that is generated by PAR through the research process. This is achieved through a sequence of AR cycles. [Figure 1](#) provides a diagrammatic representation of one AR cycle.

Figure 1. Action research cycle.



As shown in [Figure 1](#), PAR progresses as a series of self-reflective cycles:

- *Planning a change*

- *Acting and observing* the process and consequences of the change
- *Reflecting* on the processes and consequences
- *Replanning*
- *Acting and observing* again, and so on. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563, emphasis in original)

PAR is research about ‘practice’ and not simply research involving practitioners. PAR rarely progresses as a neat progression of self-reflective cycles consisting of planning, action, critical reflection, revision and further action; it is more often a messy process. In the field, PAR more commonly progresses as an overlapping set of stages as the academic/community team establishes a process for working together.

The fluid nature of the PAR processes is reflected in practice in that some research questions become obsolete as the research progresses and new questions are posed as the participation of different people may also fluctuate (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Thus, a limitation of this method is that building research momentum can be time-consuming and challenging.

PAR departs significantly from ‘Cartesian’ approaches to research and ‘rationalist’ orientations to knowledge generation, which consider that there is one objective truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In many ways, PAR is more closely aligned with earlier Socratic conceptions of knowledge creation that posit that to know the world, one must understand the *self* and *others* through rational thought (Foucault, 2011). Throughout antiquity, the philosophical question of how to gain access to knowledge – the truth about the world – was inseparable from the moral pursuit to *know thyself*.

PAR dispenses with the researcher/research dichotomy, replacing it with a set of alternative research relationships. Participants often collectively identify as ‘co-researchers’, ‘research teams’ or ‘collaborative researcher partners’, depending on the social and research contexts. PAR is therefore a social process of collective action whereby a group of people comes together to change the practices through which they are interacting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

The validity of PAR methodologies is in their political utility and the capacity to create research spaces to engage in ethical conversations about *the self* and *others*, to

investigate practice through practice and to ‘understand and think about research, or the ethical practice of research within systems of interconnected power’ (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009, p. 282).

The Housos PAR project was designed to create opportunities for social housing residents to develop and express their own knowledge and understanding of the links between place and disadvantage within the television programme. The research questions 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 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screening of first episode of Housos at an inner city housing estate in Sydney.



The screening was followed by a panel discussion and Question and Answer (Q&A) session with a panel of ‘experts’ and audience members comprising social housing tenants. In keeping with the central ethos of PAR, the focus was on generating ‘community knowledge’ through collaboration, discussion and reflection of the television programme.

Audience responses to the programme varied on a continuum, with some ‘enjoying the show’ and others expressing the viewpoint that the stereotypes drawn on in the programme would ‘reinforce the stigma attached to social housing’ (Residents’ Voices, 2011).

The Q&A session resulted in a group of tenants developing a set of research questions to further investigate the issues that the panel discussion identified (Figure 3). The themes of the questions encompassed

Figure 3. Tenants commenting on Housos, the television show.



- The role and focus of satire in society,
- The wider public's conceptualisations of social housing estates,
- Stigmatisation of residents of estates by the media,
- Narrow and prejudiced understandings of social housing,
- The dangers of 'glamorised' portrayals of disadvantage in the media.

Following the panel discussion and Q&A session, two active tenants, Ross Smith from Central Sydney and Peter Butler from Western Sydney, asked the Resident's Voices team to join them as co-researchers to further progress this PAR study. The Residents' Voices academic team agreed to provide institutional and research assistance for the recruitment of participant into the study, to provide assistance with project management and to support a tenant-driven analysis of the research data.

Mobile Phone Video Diaries: The Remote Capture of Real-Time Data by Co-Researchers

The availability of low-cost mobile phones with video camera capabilities has made it feasible to ask participants to record video diary entries without the presence of a researcher. Video material (data) can be played back to the videographer to stimulate discussion within an interview or focus group, to investigate the symbolic meaning people place on different artefacts, to analyse human behaviour within a social setting or to better understand the subjective *point of view* of a research participant.

Since the development of 'observational' research, researchers have used research diaries as a type of 'external memory' to record a range of data:

- *information* obtained by observation, interviews and informal conversations;
- *additional 'found items'*, such as photographs, letters and so on;
- *contextual information* about the ways these data were collected;
- *reflections* on research methods;
- *ideas and plans for subsequent research steps*. (Altrichter & Holly, 2005, p. 24)

One of the methodological problems that arise when an academic records the observational data in a research diary is that the researcher interprets the information through his or her own research lens. In some studies, the researcher is somewhat removed from participants' experiences and the observational data, and this might enable the researcher to critically investigate the data from a specific theoretical or 'objective' position. Alternatively, the PAR approach supports research participants to set their own research questions, to interpret their own experiences and observational data and then to decide what further action they should take. In adopting this methodology, 'objectivity', distance and interpretation would work to undermine their reported experiences and observations. In turn, this might presuppose their next actions in ways that are incompatible with PAR.

One way to avoid this methodological problem is to ask participants to record their own observations directly in a research diary and to reflect on these observations over the course of the study. In some studies that use participant-recorded research diaries, the researchers claim that this creates a 'recall bias' within the participants' recorded responses (Gunthert & Wenzel, 2011). Recall bias refers to how a participant recalls different memories, behaviours, moods or feelings within the diary in ways that are subjective rather than 'objective'. However, the term 'bias' implies that one 'subjective' response is presented at the expense of another, possibly more valid, response. In AR the way participants recall different memories, behaviours, moods or feelings is not considered a 'bias'. Instead, the diary entries represent different subjective descriptions about how a particular issue or topic relates to a participant's lived experiences, and these diary entries can highlight similarities and differences between participants' reported experiences. In our study, we were explicitly aiming to record 'subjective' responses.

In the expert panel discussion and Q&A, tenants expressed interest in understanding how different people extrapolate meaning from a programme such as *Housos*. Therefore, the PAR study focused on how tenant and non-tenant viewers interpreted *Housos*, and how these descriptions of the programme related to the tenants' day-to-day real-life experiences – in particular, the research team was interested in exploring any differences between various participants' reported views and experiences.

To collect this type of subjective participant-recorded data, the tenant co-researchers – Ross and Peter – recruited tenants from their local area in NSW to participate in the study. The tenant–academic PAR team then recruited tenants from SA and also non-tenant viewers of the programme (hereafter 'viewers') to participate in the next stage of the PAR. Collectively, the tenant–academic PAR team recruited 19 participants including (1) residents of a number of inner city and suburban estates in NSW and SA, (2) community workers who work on social housing estates and (3) self-nominated viewers of the television programme (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Non-identified participants.

| Participant group | Identifier code | Spatial code | Sex |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Panel discussion and Q&A | Discussant | – | – |
| Non-tenant viewers (Regional) | Viewer | A1 & A5 | 0 female/2 male |
| Non-tenant viewers (Greater Sydney) | Viewer | A2-A4 | 1 female/2 male |
| Western Sydney tenants | Tenant | B1-B5 | 1 female/4 male |
| Central Sydney tenants | Tenant | C1-C4 | 2 female/2 male |
| Adelaide tenants | Tenant | D1-D3 | 1 female/2 male |
| Community workers (Greater Sydney) | CW | E4-E5 | 2 female/0 male |
| Focus group | Tenant | F1-F4 | 2 female/2 male |

The Residents' Voices team made arrangements for the University of Western Sydney to obtain authorised copies of Housos to comply with copyright law. This action is a critical aspect of research involving this type of media analysis. The tenant–academic PAR team watched Housos over the 9-week first season and formulated a set of semi-structured research questions that corresponded to each episode. The Residents' Voices team sent the 19 participants a copy of each episode of Housos over 9 weeks via mail with the corresponding sets of research questions.

Participants watched each week's episode in their own time and were asked to respond to the research questions by keeping an informal audio, video or written diary. The videos also captured participants' physical responses and other audio or visual clues – such as facial expressions – when they were discussing an episode of Housos. The audio and video diaries were often recorded on a mobile phone, while the written diaries were submitted by email. The tenant–academic PAR team asked participants to send their mobile phone videos, audio recordings or emails to the Residents' Voices team through a file-sharing platform. A file-sharing platform is a digital storage and distribution computer program through which a collection of people can upload and download (audio, video, image and word) computer files. In keeping with university ethics requirements, the Residents' Voices team managed the postage, collection, collation and storage of the research materials and the audio, video and written diaries.

We wanted tenants to take the leading role in first deciding what observational data the research team would collect and second how it would be analysed. Therefore, rather than the tenant–academic PAR team keeping a research diary, participants were asked to record their own observations and answers to the research questions. In the next section, we describe how a focus group that brought tenant ‘experts’ together was used to interpret the research data.

Focus Groups: Verifying the Research Findings with the Tenant ‘Experts’

The academic researchers on the PAR team felt that it was important not to impose an analysis onto tenants. Thus, a final focus group was used to conclude the study whereby the two tenant–researchers, a tenant community worker and tenant participant from the study reviewed and interpreted the study data. These data included the tenant and non-tenant audio, video and email diaries and a video recording of the initial expert panel discussion and the Q&A session.

Focus groups are a qualitative research method in which participants are brought together in a formal group setting and asked, either individually or collectively, about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a research question, product, concept, idea or process. Focus groups are typically facilitated by a researcher(s), and the questions are constructed to encourage inter-group dialogue and discussion. Creating a dialogical space whereby the participants feel safe and free to talk with other group members is an important consideration for the researcher(s).

Focus groups provide a venue to explore the everyday experiences of daily life. In comparison to individual interviews, focus groups allow a group dynamic to develop over time, whereby members of the group build on each other's contributions, challenge one another and try to convince others of their view.

Cameron (2010) argues that focus groups are an ideal method for investigating ‘the multiple meanings that people attribute to places, relationships, processes and events ... thereby providing important insights into the practice of knowledge production’ (p.

86). The success of a focus group is contingent on the ability of the researcher to facilitate the group effectively, to draw out the full range of views present in the group (Cameron, 2000). Therefore, one of the limitations of focus groups is the requirement of a competent group facilitator.

Similar to the 'recall bias' critique that has been levelled at research diaries, focus groups have been criticised for creating a reactive research setting and for a reliance on a researcher 'observer' to interpret and record the results of the session. Cameron notes that there can be a tendency of groups to move towards agreement, sometimes called groupthink, rather than disagreement and discussion. This is also a limitation of focus groups.

The researcher must ensure there is space for disagreement in the group setting. When the focus group has a set of collective rather than individual research questions directed to each participant in turn, the session facilitator must ensure that every participant's voice is heard.

In our study, rather than the general *modus operandi* of seeking to draw out the full range of views from the group to allow the academic researchers to interpret or analyse these responses as data, the PAR research team asked focus group members to interpret and analyse the audio, visual and written data. As a process for facilitating PAR, our focus groups did not require academic researchers to interpret or analyse any data, and therefore addressed a central critique of using the focus group method.

To prepare for the focus group, the Residents' Voices team collated

- The mobile phone video and audio diaries and the email diaries,
- The video of the expert panel discussion and Q&A session.

These audio/visual data were de-identified (while names were removed, video material still contained visual images of the participants, and this is a limitation of video diaries) and consolidated as a single 'movie' file on a digital video disc (DVD). The email diaries were de-identified and printed out in booklet form. These data were circulated to the participants 2 weeks before the focus group. Participants were asked to review these

materials before the focus group. Participants were required to return the DVD and email booklet and to sign a confidentiality agreement at the focus group.

There were seven participants in the 2.5-h focus group, which was audio recorded and transcribed. The focus group included the two tenant–researchers, Peter and Ross, a tenant community worker, a tenant involved in the boarder study that had completed a research diary and the three authors as members of the Residents' Voices team.

The three Residents' Voices team members each facilitated a 45-min session of the focus group. We commenced with a 25-min screening of a sample of tenant and non-tenant video diaries to establish the context for the session. We also had the full suite of audio, video and written diaries available for reference.

While there was a set of semi-structured focus group questions to guide the focus group, following the screening of the sample video diaries, the group discussion turned very quickly to developing a set of key research themes and observations. While a Residents' Voices team member provided prompts to some participants, the discussion largely progressed organically.

Between each 45-min session, the group took a break. When we resumed, the Residents' Voices facilitator refocused the group with a set observations from the last session and theoretical observation from the literature.

Returning to the central ethos of AR, in this cycle of the AR process, the PAR research team was keen to allow the focus group participants to interpret the results and to suggest ways that the results could be distributed to produce positive social change.

At the conclusion of the focus group, we had undertaken a thematic analysis of the tenant and non-tenant diaries and developed a set of broad tenant-driven research findings. The two tenant–researchers felt that it was important to disseminate the research in both academic and print media publications. In the first instance, they asked the Residents' Voices team to join them in writing up the research for presentation at an academic conference. Soon after, we wrote up the study collaboratively and presented it at the Australasian Housing Researchers Conference (Rogers, Darcy, Butler, & Smith, 2012). One of the tenants also produced a number of publications for tenant newsletters

and industry journals from this study. Additionally, the Residents' Voices team prepared an academic article for publication (Arthurson et al., in press).

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- Within action research, why is it important that the disadvantaged groups are central to framing research questions and analysing the data?
- Within action research, what is the relationship between the researchers and the research participants? How is this relationship different to other research methods?
- How is the 'value' and 'utility' of the knowledge that is generated through action research tested? Who should define and measure knowledge 'value' and 'utility'?
- What are the limitations of 'action', 'observational' and 'focus group' research?
- What are the ethical issues that a research institution, such as a university, is required to manage?

Further Reading

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