
Televised territorial stigma: how social housing tenants experience the fictional media representation of estates in Australia

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Abstract. This paper explores the issue of territorial stigmatisation through tenant-driven research chronicling the experiences of social housing tenants as they examined and reflected upon the Australian television series *Housos*. The television series aired on an independent, part publicly funded, television station in 2011 and depicts the lifestyles of fictional tenant characters on an imaginary social housing estate. The series presents satirical and exaggerated parodies about everyday life on the estate, drawing on a range of stereotypes of social housing tenants. Tenants are 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 are dysfunctional. Public tenants are far from passive victims of stigmatisation and conducted the analysis presented in this study. They reveal a sophisticated understanding of how stigma operates through the media, various agencies, and the nonresident community. While economic and political forces, and changing modes for governing poverty, have resulted in geographical confinement of residents on estates, tenants reflected on their own ‘real-life’ experiences and provide accounts of deliberate and self-conscious use of ‘negative’ social status to produce positive collective identities. Alternatively, nontenant participants repeated common prejudices about public housing, and reflected on their belief that the system was not effectively preventing welfare cheats and ‘bludgers’ from loafing at their (taxpayers’) expense.

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

Introduction

In early 2011 social housing tenants in Western Sydney approached their local member of parliament requesting his support to ban the Australian television comedy series *Housos*, which at the time was still in production (Aston, 2011). Subsequently, Richard Amery MP presented a petition with thousands of residents’ signatures to New South Wales Parliament in April 2011 (Molitorisz, 2011; *The Age* 2011). Nevertheless, from October 2011 the nine-part series of *Housos* commenced screening on SBS Television, an independent, part publicly funded, free-to-air station, which aims to reflect the multicultural nature of Australian society. Social housing tenants’ opposition to the show resulted from an incident in February 2011 when the tabloid TV current affairs programme *A Current Affair* apparently ‘mistook’ *Housos* for reality TV and ran a highly critical story about the “Housing Commission uncensored”, damning “The new reality TV show targeting Australia’s poorest residents” (Crikey, 2011;

Molitorisz, 2011). In response, SBS television 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 the fictitious ‘Sunnyvale’ social housing estate. It is a highly embellished representation of Australian social housing estates as lawless zones where people act outside of the law and common norms of society. In this depiction ‘housos’ is a proxy for an ‘underclass’ that is explicitly spatialised through clearly recognisable signifiers which identify residents of specific urban spaces. The show draws on an established fan base built up by the writer/director/producer Paul Fenech in previous comedy programmes *Swift and Shift* and *Fat Pizza* that use a similar shock comedy formula. On the spectrum of Australian television programming *Housos* pushes the boundaries of mainstream televised comedy and attracts a relatively small, but devoted, audience following.

Three key subject–concept relationships dominate the construction of the houso in the show. These are the housos’ relationships to employment, criminal activity, and drug use (Superchoc Productions, 2011). The depictions of the social housing tenants draw on a number of dominant 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, along with highly dysfunctional families and relationships. ‘Slapstick’ humour is used to deal with a different theme within the three subject–concept relationships in each episode. 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 in a bodyboard. The latter scenario makes reference to a highly publicised real-life Australian case which dominated the media for some months. The final episode of the first series concerns plans for redeveloping Sunnyvale estate whereby the social housing tenants facing relocation to other neighbourhoods organise various forms of resistance (to view the show see YouTube, 2011).

In this paper we report on the findings of a collaborative study conducted with social housing residents in Sydney and Adelaide. The research sought to explore and theorise the issue of territorial stigmatisation through chronicling the experiences of tenants themselves as they examined and reflected upon the television programme *Housos*. The following section only briefly reviews the concept of territorial stigmatisation and summarises some of its effects, given that the introduction to this theme edition has already discussed this concept more generally. The next section then explores how the media contributes to territorial stigmatisation through formation of images of class. The later sections outline the data-collection methods and report on the study findings.

Territorial stigma and its effects

Goffman’s (1986) seminal work on this topic grouped stigma into three categories of abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigma (race, nation, and religion). From Goffman’s perspective stigma arises through negative labelling and stereotyping of people who are depicted as possessing discrediting attributes, which leads to a ‘spoiled identity’. 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 ‘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. Place and person become intertwined in negative representations although these may well conflict with their own realities. 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 associated not just with the neighbourhoods but also with the individual persons who live there.

The consequences of experiencing the effects of ‘territorial stigma’ are dire and can include but are not limited to: discrimination by employers on the basis of postcode, address, or other spatial markers (Bradbury and Chalmers, 2003; Palmer et al, 2004; Ziersch and Arthurson, 2005); changes to the nature and quality of service provision (Hastings, 2009); the selling off of social housing to the private market to promote mixed communities that results in reductions in overall stock of social housing (Arthurson, 2012a; Darcy, 2010); and impacts on residents’ health and well-being and mental health in particular (Kelaher et al 2010). In Australia Warr draws particular attention to the role of television and other media whose “negative ... attention amplifies and cements the quotidian prejudices that are experienced by people living in ‘discredited’ neighbourhoods”, and concludes that, while global economic forces and government policy intervention are important mediators of territorial stigma, the “unwarranted and unsympathetic attitudes and actions of outsiders ... are key contributors to the difficulties of those living in stigmatised neighbourhoods” (Warr, 2005a, page 19).

Media, representations of class, and territorial stigmatisation of social housing residents

Bourdieu (1986) argues that social order is inscribed through ‘cultural products’. These products include education, language, and, of particular relevance for this paper, the media. The way cultural products work is through the interplay between structure and agency and framing and reworking, symbolically and materially, alliances over culture. This leads to an unconscious sense or often acceptance of social differences and one’s place in society both in a social (and in the case of *Housos*, a geographical/spatial) sense. *Housos* joins a growing list of television programmes whose central themes rework conventional concepts of class distinction, such as another highly popular Australian comedy programme *Kath and Kim* (Davis, 2008). Other programmes in this genre that attempt to portray a ‘postindustrial underclass’ include the UK-produced *Shameless* (Creeber, 2009). Recent UK work on cultural representations of class drawing on Bourdieu (1986) has identified the dominant contemporary depictions of the working class in the media as based on ridicule, disgust (Lawler, 2005), and mockery (Raisborough and Adams, 2008) claiming that disgust is winning out (Lawler, 2005, page 443). These representations of the working classes are used as part of the processes of maintaining middle-class distinction, authority, and security (Skeggs, 2011).

Promotional materials provided by the producers of *Housos* include a satirical ‘dictionary definition’ of a houso that points towards similar class distinctions and derogatory representations of social housing tenants.

houso [how-zo], Informal: Often Disparaging.

noun: 1. an uneducated person who lives in social housing. 2. a bigot or reactionary, especially from the urban working class. Adjective: 3. Also, Housoish, narrow, prejudiced, or reactionary: a Houso attitude (Superchoc Productions, 2011).

The term ‘houso’ has long been in common use amongst Australian social housing tenants signifying identification with a common community experience. While it doubtless has wider currency and forms part of stigmatising language used by nonhousos, in the above ‘definition’ it appears unequivocally pejorative, albeit used satirically. In the Australian context the use of this term as the title of the programme immediately identifies a subject associated with very specific and well-defined urban spatial localities, evoking well-rehearsed and exaggerated stereotypes and popular perceptions concerning a jobless underclass.

The media is a key medium through which distinctions of class and territorial stigma are shaped, imposed, and reproduced (Blokland, 2008; Devereux et al, 2011; Palmer et al, 2004). Electronic media is easily accessible with 24-hour Internet and television availability so its

realm is pervasive. In Australia and elsewhere Arthurson (2012b) and others (Devereux et al, 2011; Hastings, 2004; Jacobs et al, 2011) have shown that:

“The media has played an active role in supporting and embellishing pathological depictions of social housing estates as sites of disorder and crime, drawing on explanations that cite individual agency and behaviour as the problems” (Arthurson, 2012b, page 101).

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 localities in fact are, or are not, rundown and dangerous places, and their populations comprised essentially of minorities and poor people, “the prejudicial belief that they are suffices to set off socially noxious consequences” (Wacquant, 2007, page 68).

Research from Australia and internationally also explores the disjunction that often exists between media representations of estates and the lived experience of residents (Arthurson, 2004; Hastings, 2004; 2009). Lapeyronnie (2008), for instance, identified the tension between internal self-perceptions of the French banlieue experience and external images. Residents of stigmatised places bemoan the fact that others and the media, in particular news and current affairs programmes, stigmatise their neighbourhoods and occupants, often without even having visited there or knowing the people (Hastings, 2004; Kelaher et al, 2010; Warr, 2005a). An alternative standpoint is that the media needs to be recruited to challenge negative perceptions of estates (Jacobs et al, 2011).

Despite the early publicity that suggested otherwise, *Housos* is a fictional representation of a social housing estate and its residents, which raises numerous questions about its contribution or otherwise to territorial stigmatisation. How might a parody such as this play into the reproduction or diminution of class differences and territorial stigma? As film theorists pose the question: is there a philosophical utility to film, television, and other media that could challenge, or even change in some cases, people’s thoughts and behaviour? (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2009; Homer, 2005). Some commentators contend that film can be strategically deployed to address stigma, such as when the author explicitly and overtly writes the script to challenge prejudice (see, for instance, Ritterfeld and Jin, 2006). We wondered whether *Housos* might have the potential to break down stereotypes by its very overplaying of them, or whether the depictions in fact tarnished the images of social housing estates and their residents. Nevertheless, as social scientists who do not belong to this stigmatised group we recognised that the lived experiences of those being stigmatised may well reflect very different personal perspectives to our own. Thus, the research commenced from acknowledging the importance of directly involving those being stigmatised and experiencing territorial stigma of place in all phases of the study design, implementation, and analysis.

The *Housos* study

This research formed part of a larger Australian Research Council funded Linkage project “Residents’ Voices” (Darcy and Gwyther, 2012). The 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. 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 (figure 1).⁽¹⁾

This was followed by hosting discussions with a panel of experts comprised of social housing tenants (including some who had raised concerns about the programme; see figure 2). 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

⁽¹⁾The greater metropolitan area of Sydney has a population of around 4.6 million people with large social housing estates located within the inner city, the middle-ring suburbs, and on the outer fringe.



Figure 1. [In colour online.] Screening of the first episode of *Housos* at an inner-city housing estate in Sydney.



Figure 2. [In colour online.] Tenants commenting on *Housos* the television show.

‘reinforce the stigma attached to social housing’ (Residents’ Voices, 2011). The discussion and question and answer (Q&A) session that followed resulted in a group of tenants (hereafter ‘discussants’) developing a set of research questions to further investigate this issue. The themes of the questions encompassed: 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; 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 nine-week season of *Housos*. Two active tenants, Ross Smith from Central Sydney and Peter Butler from Western Sydney, 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 nontenant viewers of the show (hereafter 'viewers') to participate in the research. Each week the nineteen 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 or recording an audio or video diary. The audio and video diaries were often recorded on a mobile phone while the written diaries were sent by e-mail.

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

Table 1. Nonidentified participants.

Participant group	Identifier code	Spatial code	Sex
Panel discussion and Q&A	discussant		
Nontenant viewers (regional)	viewer	A1 and A5	0 female/2 male
Nontenant viewers (Greater Sydney)	viewer	A2–A4	0 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 tenant-academic research team wanted the analytical framework to enable social housing tenants' access to specific tools, including media and research resources. This was, firstly, in order to contest derogatory and stigmatised narratives of social housing estates that so often go unmediated and unchallenged, especially by tenants (Hastings, 2004; Warr, 2005b). Secondly, we wanted to enable participants to identify any counternarratives that emerged. The tenant members of the research team accordingly informed the selection of a theoretical framework for the analysis. Peter Butler, one of the tenant-researchers managing the study, remarked in the Q&A session (Residents' Voices, 2011) about *Housos* that:

“It strikes me that the programme is a bit like a mirror. And it depends who's holding the mirror and which direction it's pointing towards ... I think all this show does, it reflects back a lot of the stereotypes that the public already has about people who live in social housing and it provides a convenient, sort of, stereotype or image up there on the screen, to help the public dump all their negative perceptions on these characters” (discussant).

The academic researchers on the team felt that it was important not to impose an analysis onto tenants. Thus 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 participants' contributions including tenant and nontenant diaries.

Some tenant researchers worried that *Housos* might provide a symbolic vehicle that will organise representations of Australian social housing tenants' experience well into the future, so they wanted the voices of tenants' to be heard in response to the show. Hence in the

presentation of findings which follows we have provided extensive quotes as representative of some of the key themes that emerged from the qualitative material—especially from the focus group—in order to convey these voices as directly as possible.

Findings

All of the participant groups used the show as a reference point to discuss real political and social issues around territorial stigmatisation and media representations of class based on their own experiences. They moved between discussing the imaginary characters and events in *Housos* to real-life social housing communities and policies. A number of dominant themes emerged that included: concerns about feelings of being confined through real-life situations of experiencing territorial stigmatisation; in turn that stigmatisation can lead to self-limiting behaviours; the symbiosis between housing estates and goals; regulated spaces of housos or housos ‘the game’; and distinctions made between ‘them’ (mainly social housing tenants) and ‘us’ (nonsocial housing tenants).

Feelings of being trapped and confined by territorial stigmatisation (branding) of neighbourhood

Tenants expressed mixed views about whether *Housos* informs negative public perceptions or if indeed the highly exaggerated caricatures work to reinforce and further stigmatise estates from outsiders’ viewpoints. As one panel discussant suggested, “I don’t think [it reinforces stigma]. It’s so exaggerated nobody in their right mind would believe it” (discussant). Nevertheless, many other social housing tenants were affronted by these perceptions and felt they had derogatory effects on their self-confidence and self-esteem:

“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 [*Housos*], 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 [in the ‘real world’]” (discussant).

“I saw demonization, bad demonization ... the people living in this area suffer because of a perception, because of a stereotype generated through the media. The perception is the damaging thing, not the reality” (discussant).

“An example was I was invited to somebody who’s quite wealthy. Actually, she’s a lady about my age and she had a friend; she’s also well educated and everything. This lady, we started talking, everything was fine. Then when I said where I was from—where I lived—it was frozen. The whole thing froze. Very strange, but it was a palpable thing ... there is this perception of Redfern and Waterloo and some of the other areas that most people who live there behave like what you see on television, when the media goes out and actually films the bad things. They don’t come around and film Redfern Park, for instance. It’s just always the negative” (tenant F2).

Consideration of Goffman’s conceptualisation of stigma (as explained by Ruetter et al, 2009, page 297) as the discrepancy between “virtual (social) identity” or how others perceive you, and “actual (personal) identity” or how you characterise yourself is pertinent here. These statements illustrate how tenants need to manage the discrepancy between the virtual identities others have constructed about them (as in *Housos*) with their actual lived experiences. As they went about their daily lives tenants felt that they needed wherever possible to challenge these opinions that were based on how others perceived them to be by virtue of where they live:

“I used to be very shy about saying I live in Redfern and I’m not anymore. I’m not, because I’m looking at it as a challenge to these other people” (tenant F2).

“why I got involved in this—was to challenge those public stereotypes. For a lot of reasons, but one is that it’s like a chain around people’s lives that pulls them back, because you’ve got all this public stigma that you’re battling against when you step outside your

designated zone. So that's one part of what this is about. So in this programme that's put on TV, it just heightened all of those public images" (tenant F1).

Other comments further supported the notion of geographical confinement or territorial constraint through which social housing neighbourhoods confine and constrain those within. In some instances respondents talked about residents rarely venturing outside of their immediate neighbourhoods:

"Exposed to that particular perception in that video, in the area they're in, if they're in there long enough, they believe that is their area. They own the area and that's it. So therefore it becomes them, or they become the area and vice-versa. I believe that it's exactly the same with every other niche of society When you look at that, these people stay in their section and they tend to not want to get out of it, because they're familiar with it and they feel safe. It's a matter of accepting something that you are familiar with, I believe. I don't know. I could be wrong. Then if you get the idea to get out of it, you have a lot of trouble because you—say, for instance, living in Redfern, I've experienced it myself" (tenant F2).

"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. Both those things help people to stay there. That in itself though had limits—people's experiences in life. There are a lot of young people—let's take my personal example. I deliberately used to take my granddaughter out all over the place; to the city and sport and do a whole load of things, to expand her horizon. But I know most of her mates at school didn't have that experience. So you had kids who had never, ever, ever been on a train to the city. Now, it's not that difficult to hop on a train from that village to the sea, but some of these families had never, ever done that. So they've grown up—if you think about the psychological impact, the very limited life experience that you have as a result of that and so on—so you can actually drill down and analyse how that works in people's lives" (tenant F1).

Stigmatisation can lead to self-limiting behaviours

In turn, it was felt that these feelings of territorial constraint and awareness of knowing how to survive in stigmatised neighbourhoods could lead to self-limiting aspirations and behaviours for residents. This effect of stigma on eroding self-agency and limiting how residents imagine their opportunity horizons has been highlighted in other Australian studies (Arthurson, 2012b):

"It's an accumulated sort of installation almost. This is what is expected of you, so you will conform to what's expected of you. If you dare to break out of it—you're not allowed to break out, but if you should attempt to break out of the pre-determined mould, you're branded as a rebel, an outsider, a troublemaker. Kids go to school, for example, and their parents are part of the process too. 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 F1).

"The other two thirds, you know, are people that are more quieten down, and live really decent lives actually. They're workers, they look after their children, they plan for the future and their children, you know, don't get involved in the things that go on around here. But that's hard too, because if you don't get involved, they'll involve you anyway. Whether you like it or not, you're part of it" (tenant B3).

"There's one guy—classic example—in the riots he was in the thick of it. He got into a lot of trouble and all this [Pacific Islander] guy. Then he somehow connected up with [Charlie Pasquale's] programme [*Living on the Streets*]. He's come in as a bit sulky. He ended up becoming a youth worker for Charlie Pasquale's programme. This kid is held

up as the shining example. He's our success story. He's here. He gets to sit on panels and talk about his experience. Part of the thing for discourse said is, well see; if he can do it, you can do it. You don't have to stay there; you can do it. I think this happens with blacks in the ghettos and whatever. But there's only allowed to be a handful of these people" (tenant F1).

These accounts of the experience and pattern of expected behaviour illustrate how territorial stigma conveys to residents what is possible or not, and is internalised. This resonates with Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* and the subtle ways that social context structures peoples' perceptions and propensities to think and act in certain ways—through common codes of understanding “the spaces of lifestyles, is constructed” (Bourdieu, 1984, page 170). The key contribution to this theorising from the current study findings is through the tenant-driven nature of the research.

Symbiosis between ‘gaol’ and ‘ghetto’

The notion of territorial constraint is built upon by other participant discourses which explicitly suggested that Australian social housing neighbourhoods have become prison-like, restraining those within the estates. Acknowledging the dangers of loosely applied international comparison, and in the absence of a US-like racial dimension, much of the residents' discourses resonated with Wacquant's thesis of a contemporary interconnection between ghetto (or poverty neighbourhood) and prison and the symbolic taint attached to this linking. Social housing residents themselves sometimes refer to their estates as ghettos:

“The people in ‘The Block’ are nearly all the same type; it's a ghetto in other words, in a lost sense. But yes I do think that, ah, that they feel a sense of ownership and the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know. They know how to work, not do they know how to work the system outside of the ghetto, but they also know how and feel safe because they know to handle it inside the ghetto (tenant D2).

The findings of the current study support the notion that in contemporary society the penal management system, through the post-Keynesian state, is increasingly being substituted for the social welfare system as an organising structure to treat poverty (in a spatial sense) and manage ‘dishonoured groups’ (Wacquant, 2009a). In this sense the ghetto or poor neighbourhood has become more like a prison in the way that broader structural factors construct, organise, and manage it, and the people residing there.

“My kids went through a lot of bad stuff when they were younger, but my son told me, like, he reached a certain point, um, when he had to go to court, and the magistrate spoke to him about his life, and like what he'd been doing, his record, and something inside him triggered a response and he started to think ‘do I want to spend the rest of my life like this? Going nowhere.’ And he'd seen some of his friends just endlessly in the cycle through gaol and what not. And he thought, ‘no I don't!’” (tenant B1).

In Australia important parallels can be drawn with American cities whereby the previous social mix within social housing has been reduced and homogenised, fuelled over past decades by steadily falling public spending, stringent welfare-to-work provisions, and active removal of working tenants from social housing under ‘renewable lease’ provisions (Arthurson, 2012a). This has made contemporary social housing estates more demonstrably akin to the social composition of ghetto and prison, dominated as the latter is by people who have experienced high unemployment, low education, and poverty. The net effect, just as Wacquant (2001) describes the US situation, is that public housing estates increasingly resemble and operate like “houses of detention”:

“Well I personally think typically resourceful, due the time on their hands and the time to think things out. And um, I suppose if four or five blokes are sitting around doing nothing, then they can come up with different ideas that can be very resourceful. I harken

back to people in gaol, you know, and some of the things they come up with. Because basically they have got time on their hands and they're mixing with this element, these types of people" (tenant D2).

"It was really a full-on crime scene and the whole way of life was just really different. It was survival of the fittest. Everyone was into crime and everything. You had to be really tough to survive and also you had to be very aware of things like how to behave, who to make friends with, how to talk, how to conduct yourself, the image. That's why I used that idea before of a shell. You have to project a tough image. This is a little tiny woman, but no one would take her on because they know you don't tangle with her. She had friends as well who'd protect her and so on, but she knew how to handle yourself. You have to become tough to survive" (tenant F3).

"[another tenant continued] you're talking about 'you have to know how to behave and you have to', it sounds like you're talking about a gaol. It's exactly how you have [to behave] in gaol. It's exactly how people who've been in gaol talk about their experiences in gaol They've come out of gaol and they've behaved in the community like they did in gaol, and so you have to—I've seen them walking around. It's this tough guy thing" (tenant F1).

Tenants also talked about the way this interrelationship between prison and social housing neighbourhood is managed and maintained in practical terms through social institutions and urban, social, and other policies that discipline and punish stigmatised populations, such as social housing tenants:

"The police really regard everybody as a criminal. You know, you could be the most innocent walking into the police station and they'll treat you like a criminal. The relationship is very bad, in housing and the police, because the police don't have respect. Everybody, no matter who you are, if you show respect, you know, you're going to be respectful back. But the police are disrespectful" (tenant B3).

"The picture you've drawn is of a tenant—their sole function in life is to either—justification of the surrounding ring of bureaucracies, agencies and employees and departments" (tenant F1).

Regulated spaces, or, 'housos: the game'

The main storylines in *Housos* primarily follow interactions between the housos and various government agencies. As mentioned above, the police force figures prominently in the show, as does Centrelink (government agency responsible for social security payments), child protection, local government (planning), and of course housing managers. In the highly irreverent spirit of the parody, representatives of these agencies usually appear self-interested, if not corrupt, bumbling, and incompetent. They constantly scrutinise and frequently interrogate the housos in unsuccessful efforts to catch them defrauding the system or prove them guilty of other crimes.

After watching these episodes, nontenant study participants 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 enforce moving from welfare benefits into employment:

"Well they're got to try something different, because what they are doing at the moment is not really working. It all seems to be a bit of a shit fight, they've got all these people on the dole with no money, with nothing better to do than steal fire trucks and doing stupid stuff. So, they're gotta try and do something different" (viewer A1) [authors' note: the fire truck theft was fictional, forming part of the plot of an episode].

“I can pretty much, some probably 50% of housing commission [social housing] people are pretty similar to what’s on the programme ... the government should look into it, as they have done lately, to get a lot of people. Because they have been on there; I see grandfathers, father, sons, all the way through they just, all on the dole; all housos” (viewer A5).

Social housing tenant participants on the other hand, took up this theme of the show to reflect on the highly regulated features of life on the estate, and on the disempowering, or even infantile nature of these relationships. Interactions with housing managers were characterised by tenant participants as particularly controlling:

“Yeah, the human services. So you’re totally surrounded by all these agencies, so it’s usually agency as parent. So you can’t move anywhere without somebody—this is your life; everyone’s got a piece of the pie. You can’t do a thing. They do have this attitude that they own you” (tenant F4).

“It’s territorial authoritarianism—housing authorities thinking they can control who *talks* to ‘*their*’ tenants” (tenant F1).

However, tenants also commented 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’, which as a winner could support a positive self-image. They remarked how in the programme, the housos always ‘win’ at the expense of frustrated authorities:

“They’re [authorities] all either incompetent, self-interested, or corrupt. That’s the way in which, even though the housos’ characters are pretty offensive, they get a bit of your sympathy because they’re actually beating these fools” (tenant F4).

Tenant participants did not seek to deny or disown illicit activity, except to point out that it was the practice of a minority, and even then was usually intermittent:

“When we talk about how to survive in an area like this, people go in and out of different situations. So sometimes things are not so too bad and other times they’re pretty desperate.

And they just can’t see a way to survive, so they might do a bit of scabbing, but it’s not all the time; just when it’s required” (tenant B1).

We were struck by how much this metaphor of ‘housos as game playing’, as interpreted by the social housing participants, resonated with the Bourdieusian concept of ‘the game’ and of the self produced in conditions that are not of its own making. Specifically, Bourdieu’s (1987) idea of fields as social arenas defined by the resources at stake and within which struggles over access to them occurs. Value accrual for Bourdieu [as explicated by Skeggs (2010, page 501)] is a strategic imperative of ‘playing the game’, “a structuring mechanism organized into a habitus generated from birth through access and inclusion to and from fields for exchange and thus possibilities for accumulating value.” The reflections of tenant participants on their own game playing included several accounts of deliberate and self-conscious use of ‘negative’ social status (that was not of their own making) to produce positive collective identity and access to valued cultural goods, including higher education:

“Territorial stigma is an interesting term, but I have to say I’ve used that to my advantage. If I look at my daughter, for example, when we were fundraising for her expensive New York education, it was all done on the premise of, here is this poor, single-parent child, raised in the notorious Northcott who’s managed to pull herself up by her socks and get herself to New York to get educated. That was our whole fundraising—was based on that whole—and it worked. If we’d just said, she’s always been a good kid and I’m a good mother and can you give her some money to get her to New York, no one would have given us a cent. So in some ways it’s actually to our advantage to have that” (tenant F3).

There was also attention in tenants' responses to the idea that the social political system existed to protect the interests of the middle class and that groups such as the *Housos* threatened to disrupt their authority and security.

“There's this idea about a game. So at the level of the *Housos* programme the tenants are playing a game with the authority figures, the cops and whatever; Housing and Centrelink and those sort of people. It's like both sides know that they're in a game. There are certain rules about how you play it and all that kind of stuff ... having this subversive attacks on the system and what they can get away with and all that sort of stuff. So that's at a level of the local estate, but if you take that scenario up to the broader political level, what we're saying now is that, that same game is played out right across the system. 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. You've got all these other people who are the subversives who might challenge that” (tenant F1).

Them and us

Other instances were cited of how the negative stereotyping and highlighting of symbolic differences in culture or values of the *Housos* was set up in opposition to 'mainstream' citizenry.

“But what's behind it [*Housos*], I think, is quite accurate; that's this portrayal of, or sense of, 'them and us'. So, to me, that's what it's [*Housos*] about. The police represent 'them' the 'authority' and 'society'” (tenant B1).

When reviewing the video diaries, focus group members identified this schism in the discourse of nontenant participants and pointed out that it can sometimes similarly be observed in the way tenants talk about each other:

“It's also interesting that they all say 'them'. It's never 'us'. It's always them. They're the ones that shouldn't be living next door to each other, so even the tenants themselves are never inclusive of them. It's always this other part of the tenant body, never their part of the tenant body that is—there's no one actually coming out, yeah, well, we all contribute to this” (tenant F3).

Once again, however, social housing participants suggested ways that these supposed differences were translated into a resource for self-defence and collective identity:

“at the moment, I've got my granddaughter living with me. She's 15 and she's been watching some of the DVDs, so I asked her what she thought of them and she said it was really great. She thought it was really hilarious and she actually saw it as a positive thing, because for the young it's not a stigma. But for some young people anyway, they identify with this tough guy image that 'we are the rulers of the roost' sort of thing. Those people out there are too scared to even come into our space. This image is putting up this image of us as being really tough and we like that. We like to feel we're strong and we're in control and people are afraid of us. We want them to feel that so we can get away with things and do what we want and all that sort of stuff” (tenant F1).

This latter comment returns us to the questions of territory and place. All participants freely identified places in their city that the fictional Sunnyvale estate referred to, and linked living in these places with particular social characteristics and behaviours. Nontenant participants' responses, as outlined below, generally reflected shared meanings about what social housing tenants are (and nontenants are not) and often reiterated commonly held ideas about concentrated poverty:

“In their own little place they can get away with whatever they want. They don't have to do anything. They're all mates, you know, you've got your bullies, you've got your no bullies,

your got everything else; it's a little community you know. That's what they've grown up with and many of them have been there that long, that's all they know" (viewer A5).

"They try and get a job for as long as it takes to get the employment agency off their back so they can get back on the dole" (viewer A1).

"It's probably all they know because it's all they've ever known, and half their parents it's all they've ever known too" (viewer A5).

As other studies have highlighted "working class-ness forms the constitutive outside to middle class existence" (Lawler, 2005, page 431), social identity is symbolically represented through difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, (often people in the class strata below) which represents the greatest threat (Bourdieu, 1984, page 479).

Alternatively tenant participants 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 than say somebody in private [housing], we're quick to help one another. We'll go out of our way really quickly, I think we have more communication than 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 B3).

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? If they are in their little group they really help each other out as best they can. And you don't really want to cross them, because they can, there's a lot of them and they can get quite nasty" (viewer A5).

"Do you know what, despite all the screaming and yelling, they were actually all pretty supportive of each other, and help each other out where possible. Which I quite liked" (viewer A3).

A focus group participant reinforced these observations with an account of her own neighbourhood:

"Certainly where I live, we have the community centre which is totally run by tenant volunteers, who will sit around and backstab the hell out of each other all day long, and say the nastiest things and have the pettiest fights. But if someone from the outside—it's got that whole family thing—whereas if an outsider comes in to say something bad about one of them, they'll all rally together against the outsider" (tenant F3).

The plan to redevelop Sunnyvale refers to similar projects across Australia, as in many other countries to relocate social housing tenants to 'mixed income' neighbourhoods, which will not carry the stigma associated with large concentrated estates (see Arthurson, 2012b; Joseph, 2008). Focus group participants explored this proposition as part of their wider analysis of territorial stigma, leading to the following highly instructive exchange:

Tenant F1: "Is it better to be stigmatised within a place?"

Tenant F3: "I would think so, because you can just say, it's all about us, them, whereas if you were by yourself, that's definitely personal. That's about you. It's very individual."

Tenant F1: "In one way, you have a defensive subculture in a mass whereas the individual scattered out into an area of perceived advantage becomes the local eccentric, nut, object of finger pointing and sniggering behind back doors where they have no defence mechanism by association with people in a similar boat."

The suggestion here and indeed in other Australian studies (Arthurson, 2012b; Darcy, 2012; Ruming et al, 2004) is that stigma based on place or territory may be offset by the mutual support and potential solidarity that tenants can offer each other. It would appear that, at

least in the Australian context, residents of stigmatised communities are frequently prepared to defend them against external critics, while remaining sensitive to representation of their communities as 'excluded' or somehow 'other'.

Conclusion

Since its original broadcast, *Housos* has become an 'underground hit'. The programme was recently transformed into a live theatrical show staged at the 2012 Sydney comedy festival and a feature-length *Housos* movie was released in late 2012. This has occurred in part because it eschews typical standards and trends in mainstream Australian television. Slapstick comedy based on drug abuse and social security fraud committed by public tenants may be 'politically incorrect', but it clearly strikes a chord with existing popular discourse surrounding public housing neighbourhoods. Australian urban historian Birdsall-Jones distinguishes stigmatisation, where "areas of deprivation are created in the mind" from ghettoisation, where they are created in space (2013, page 316):

"there exists in people's minds the conceptual city that, in addition to its attractions, contains those dark spaces where the good people ought not to go" (page 324).

However, the two are closely entwined as this binarisation of urban space allows a simplified understanding of the factors which produce poverty and bring poor people to live in certain places so that the problem is not the factors underlying the formation of a disadvantaged (and possibly unruly) neighbourhood, instead "the problem becomes the neighborhood itself" (page 324).

When reflecting on the show in video diaries or discussing it in focus groups, participants in this study invariably acknowledged its exaggerated stereotyping before going on to link the characters and situations to their own lived experience, or in the case of nonpublic tenants to their firmly held beliefs about the character and lifestyles of public tenants.

In commencing the study, both the academic and resident researchers were responding to Warr's (2005a; 2005b) concern that media attention to stigmatised neighbourhoods almost invariably reinforced negative stereotypes with severe material consequences for residents. However, while Warr's comments relate primarily to news and current affairs media, *Housos* is clearly fictional, and police and housing managers are targeted by its satire along with tenants. Thus we were open to the possibility that such a satirical and lampooning representation might have the effect of highlighting the processes of stereotyping and stigma themselves, and thus produce a more reflexive, even self-critical, response in the audience. We also sought to better understand the meaning that residents attached to media stereotypes of themselves and their stigmatised neighbourhoods. The deliberately highly exaggerated characters and scenarios in *Housos* provided an excellent vehicle for resident researchers on the team to explore their own reactions to being represented in this way.

As reported above, as the study progressed, participants' viewing diaries and focus group discussions tended to quickly move away from reference to the individual characters and specific plot lines in the episodes. Both resident and nonresident participants immediately recognised, and reflected in their comments, on the spatialised nature of stigma directed at public tenants. Most interestingly, though, both groups identified both negative and positive aspects of the spatial identification and segregation of poor people.

In many respects the views expressed by social housing tenant participants supported Wacquant's (2001) arguments that social housing neighbourhoods have become prison-like in both a symbolic and a material sense. Economic and political forces and changing modes for governing poverty have resulted in geographical confinement or territorial constraint of residents on estates. The territorial stigma attached to this linking between estates and prisons confines and constrains in a concrete geographical sense. Tenants voiced some of the obvious signifiers of this situation pointing to judgments made about their worth and potential and

the territorial taint attached to places they inhabit. This has material consequences as feelings of confinement, and awareness of knowing how to survive in stigmatised neighbourhoods, in some cases led to self-limiting aspirations and behaviours. Often, for instance, people chose to stay within the estate boundaries where it felt safe and familiar rather than venturing outside of their neighbourhood.

Tenant participants also related to the representation of agencies, such as the police force and welfare organisations, constantly scrutinising and interrogating the housos. This resonated with the ways that agencies control the spaces that study participants occupy. Tenants frequently referred to real discrimination and social barriers that make life harder and also to the effects of housing management such as more targeted housing allocation policies as adding to negative stereotypes and reinforcing territorial constraints.

However, tenants were not mere victims of territorial stigma, or the encompassing negative stereotypes and highlighting of difference imposed by 'mainstream' citizenry in programmes such as *Housos*. They remarked on how the episodic structure of *Housos* sets up a weekly problem of economic survival as a contest against the system or a game needing to be played, whereby the housos always 'win' at the expense of frustrated police and other authority figures. On one level these unorthodox portrayals supported a positive self-image for tenants through providing a resource for self-defence, identity, and even material success and winning, despite system constraints. 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. For some the homogeneity of disadvantage on estates underwrites community solidarity and can be a source of strength and pride.

While for nontenant participants, being asked to respond to the programme appeared at one level simply to provide an opportunity to restate common prejudices about social housing, and their belief that the system was not effectively preventing welfare cheats and 'bludgers' from loafing at their (taxpayers') expense, this group also reflected a complex, sometimes even contradictory, position on the spatial aspects of these issues. They applauded the efforts of authorities to disperse public tenants away from concentrated neighbourhoods, while making it very clear they would not like to have any public housing in their own street—and in response to the final episode of the series they admired the community solidarity of tenants defending their stigmatised living spaces from redevelopment. However, the dominant theme of nontenant reflection on *Housos* was one of self-confirmation and highlighting of difference—that 'I am not like that because I am responsible and work hard and pay my mortgage, and people like me should not have to mix with or live near people like that.' Ironically, when reviewing the video diaries for the final focus groups of this project with the tenant researchers it was impossible to distinguish tenants from nontenants on the basis of speech/accent, dress, or behaviour. Tenants and academic researchers alike noted how similar the respondents appeared and sounded in nearly everything but their view of housing estates.

Finally, it is important to return to the fact that this study was initiated by public tenants who also contributed massively to the analysis presented above. Their intention was to explore the relationship between media representations and subjective experiences of stigmatised neighbourhoods. In conducting the study in this reflexive and participatory way we have tested the limits of our method, but also revealed a far more complex and subtle understanding of both the impacts and the uses of territorial stigma on the part of both residents and nonresidents. Public tenants are far from passive victims of stigmatisation. In this study they revealed a sophisticated understanding of how it operates through the

media, various agencies and the nonresident community—and also of how it impacts their lives.

In this spirit the last word is given to of one of the tenant participants:

“I’m a bit perplexed, this particular show was just ridiculous, you know, and as I maintain it was the silliest of the lot. So who was the joke on? Well I would like to think the viewers, who were silly enough to watch it” (tenant D1).

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