Housing WORKS

Poverty Porn and Housing
How we produce Housing and Neighbourhood Stigma

> *Dr Dallas Rogers discusses his recent tenant-led research project and the SoundMinds radio project. Specifically, he talks about a recent episode on 'Poverty Porn: How Journalists, Audiences and Researchers Produce Stigma.'*

You might not expect this story to start with the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), a much-celebrated multicultural Australian public broadcaster; however, SBS recently produced two shows about social housing communities that have been labelled 'poverty porn'.

> **Poverty porn is a term that emerged out of international development studies... to critique the use of media representations that exploit the lives of poor people in order to generate sympathy and donations.**

The first is *Housos,* a satirical comedy about life on a fictitious public housing estate (Arthurson et al. 2014). The second is *Struggle Street,* the documentary that got the Mayor of Blacktown in Western Sydney, Steven Bali, so worked up he came up with a unique form of political protest (ABC 2015) where he sent a fleet of garbage trucks to block the entrance of SBS's headquarters. His protest was concerning the way in which the documentary represented life in a low-income suburb in his electorate, a suburb with a large proportion of public and social housing.

Mayor Bali thought the television program was "a pile of garbage" (ABC 2015) but it is not just television producers that are responsible for the rise of poverty porn.

Poverty porn

Poverty porn has recently been used to describe television programs that represent the lives of poor people for entertainment – *Housos* (Australia), *Struggle Street* (Australia) and *Benefit Street* (UK) among them.

Poverty porn is a term that emerged out of international development studies. It was initially conceived to critique the use of media representations that exploit the lives of poor people in order to generate sympathy and donations. More recently, it has been used to talk about television programs that focus on low-income housing neighbourhoods in Australia and the UK (Rogers et al. 2016).

The producers of poverty porn often respond to criticism by using one of two justifications for their programs: they say that, by exposing the hardships of poor people, these programs might generate sympathy for these communities. Alternatively, they claim to be showcasing the resilience and resourcefulness of poor people (ABC 2015).

The polarising debate about poverty porn – which pits exploiting the poor on one side and empowering the poor

Struggle Street family as featured on SBS

on the other – does not capture the complex ways in which narratives about poverty and place are created.

The role of academic research

It is a mistake to view 'the media' as solely responsible for the representations of people and neighbourhoods they produce.

Many sociologists and geographers are critical of the idea that social science research is an impartial, objective science that can be detached from the social world we are researching (Rogers et al. 2013; Slater 2014; Warr 2005). Social researchers and the organisations that fund their research are not separate from the media's production of entertainment or news stories about low income people and places. Rather, the research process and research data itself can feed into processes that produce stigma.

For example, the latest release of unemployment statistics for a particular low income suburb might contribute to the production of news stories about poor places and poor people. More problematically, these statistics and news stories also inform the televised portrayals of poverty we see on television.

Struggle Street family as featured on SBS

> We need more research that reflects on the way people and place stigma narratives are produced.

The role of academic funding

It is often the case that researchers who are working with low income housing communities are required to recount and construct familiar narratives about low-income people and neighbourhoods to secure research funding. These funding grant narratives require researchers to focus on deficits. The researchers, much like journalists and television producers, regularly cite demographic features – such as high levels of unemployment and incarceration or low average incomes for a suburb – as evidence of people and place poverty and, therefore, as a rationale for needing the research funding.

Slater's (2014) scholarship is, therefore, refreshingly critical. He argues this type of research provides "the evidence base" that appeases funding bodies while "buffering politicians and their audiences from viable alternatives and inoculating them against the critique of" other types of scholarship (p.955).

Research methodologies that generate more data about deficits might be more likely to secure grants and other funding success, however, the findings are not always used to effectively address poverty. The data might also feed into processes that produce people and neighbourhood stigma.

We need more research that reflects on the way people and place stigma narratives are produced. We also need to hear

more from the communities themselves, on their own terms, about their very diverse housing experiences. Think about what a documentary about living in social housing would look like if it were produced entirely by tenants.

Researching People and Place Stigma

Reflecting on our own research practices should be a key concern for housing and urban scholars. A good starting point for addressing people and place stigma is to challenge the idea that researchers or policy makers are the experts of low income communities.

> Think about what a documentary about living in social housing would look like if it were produced entirely by tenants.

Digital media is a key medium through which distinctions of class and neighbourhood stigma are shaped, imposed and reproduced. One of the reasons we developed the SoundMinds Radio project was to create a digital media space within which researchers could critically reflect on their own research practice.

SoundMinds Radio is a research communication project that broadcasts a weekly radio show. The Community Broadcasting Foundation of Australia funds the project as an academic and community radio partnership.

For a recent SoundMinds Radio episode on *Poverty Porn: How Journalists, Audiences And Researchers Produce Stigma,* we

Paul Fenech, star of the satirical comedy Housos *on SBS*

References:

- Arthurson, K., M. Darcy and D. Rogers (2014). '*Televised territorial stigma: how social housing tenants experience the fictional media representation of estates in Australia*' *Environment and Planning A 46(6): 1334 – 1350.* Available at: http://dallasrogers.live

- Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC: 2015). SBS accused of 'poverty porn' documentary series. Reporter, Emma Alberici. Broadcast 05/05/2015. Available at: http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2015/s4230260.htm

- Rogers, D., Darcy, M., & Arthurson, K., (2016) 'Researching territorial stigma with social housing tenants: Tenant-led digital media production about people and place in' (ed) Kirkness, P., and Tijé-Dra, A., *Negative Neighbourhood Reputation and Place Attachment: Conceptual Approaches, Policy Responses and Resistance to Territorial Stigmatisation.* Ashgate. Available at: http://dallasrogers.live

- Rogers, D., K. Arthurson and M. Darcy (2013). 'Disadvantaged Citizens as Co-Researchers in Media Analysis: Action Research Utilising Mobile Phone and Video Diaries.' *SAGE Research Methods Cases.* SAGE Publications. London, United Kingdom. Available at: http://dallasrogers.live

- Slater, T. (2014). 'The Myth of "Broken Britain": Welfare Reform and the Production of Ignorance.' *Antipode 46(4): 948-969.*

- Wacquant, L. (2008). 'Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality.' *Cambridge, Polity.*

- Warr D. (2005) 'Social networks in a discredited neighbourhood.' *Journal of Sociology 41: 285-308.*

interviewed Melbourne University's Associate Professor Deb Warr about territorial stigma. Dr Warr locates her research in the space between the poverty narratives that are produced by outsiders and the insider stories that are produced by those who are experiencing housing poverty.

I have also conducted tenant-led digital storytelling research (Arthurson et al. 2014; Rogers et al. 2013; Rogers et al. 2016). A key observation is, when researchers are prepared to step back from controlling the research process, tenants and local community organisations are not only willing to initiate their own projects but they produced more complete and effective counter-cultural media products when freed from academic framing and constraints.

As the French sociologist Professor Loïc Wacquant (2008) reminds us, the social exclusion of public and social tenants extends well beyond the individual tenant and the housing management arena.

Tenants have long been excluded from the research processes that define the 'problems' with disadvantaged people and places. They have been excluded from producing counter-narratives to challenge negative portrayals of themselves and places they live. But perhaps the biggest failure is that tenants continue to be excluded from the policy discussions about how solutions should be framed and implemented.

Researchers and policymakers need to pay more attention to the relationships between poverty data, public policy, and the production of people and neighbourhood stigma.

Dr Dallas Rogers' scholarship investigates the relationships between housing poverty and wealth. He has undertaken a critical analysis of Australian urbanism through fine-grained empirical research with low income urban citizenries, as well as super-rich transnational property investors and their agents. He has a particular interest in public and social housing management, urban redevelopment and resident participation.

Dallas' current research interests focus on a relational examination of housing poverty and wealth in globalising cities; foreign investment and the changing nature of Asia-Australia economic, technology and cultural relations; and the intersection between democracy, private sector development and state intervention.

■ *Go to the following website to listen to the SoundMinds podcast – 'Poverty Porn: How Journalists, Audiences & Researchers Produce Stigma' – www.soundminds.com.au/povertyporn*