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Introduction: Interrogating Welfare Stigma

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Recent years have seen increased attention given to welfare stigma in the related domains of social policy and sociological scholarship. Theoretically, this marks the revival of a concept with a long history that has ebbed and flowed in social policy and sociological research (Pinker, 1970; Spicker, 1984; Goffman, 1990 [1963]; Page, 2015 [1984]; Scambler, 2019; Tyler, 2020). This revival is undoubtedly related to the welfare reforms that have unfolded in the 'hostile decade' (Farnsworth and Irving, 2021) of welfare austerity. Yet Pinker's (1970) earlier contribution reminds us that stigma is a habitual technique for rationing 'scarce' welfare resources, remarking that it is the most common expression of coercion and violence in democratic societies. In this themed section we approach welfare stigma not as a discrete crisis-related component of welfare states, but as something that requires deeper interrogation. Stigma is therefore conceptualised here as a potent force continually informing welfare state practices that discipline and divide in complex ways, construing and determining who does not (but also who does) deserve welfare. In other words, as this themed section suggests, stigma is central to both the moral and political economy of welfare states, and to how welfare resources and welfare recipients are construed and contested. Moreover, current debates about re-imagining welfare should arguably be at the centre of these debates, as they are prompted by so many concerns. These include the ongoing violent legacies of austerity and neo-liberal inspired welfare reforms; reflections on the 80th anniversary of the Beveridge report and thinking about the possibilities and opportunities for progressive welfare reform post-pandemic; and the need to challenge welfare stigma, while also asking 'what does welfare stigma do?'

Empirically, research on welfare stigma has tended to focus heavily on the experience of stigma and on interpersonal relations. This approach has merit in policy environments that often denigrate the importance and status of lived experience and the 'psychic life' (Mills, 2018), and also because it can highlight the very nuanced and specific ways in which stigma is manifest in contemporary neoliberal psycho-politics. Yet, to understand stigma in discreet ways potentially risks splintering the idea of welfare stigma into many different types specific to particular groups and particular areas of the welfare state and welfare discourses. As a counter to this, recent work by Tyler (2018; 2020) conceptualising 'stigma craft' and 'stigma power' invokes the multi-dimensional historical, political and economic deployments of stigma as a structural phenomenon. Tyler (2013: 4) also reminds us of the importance of attending to the 'practices through which individuals and

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groups resist, reconfigure and revolt against their abject subjectification'. Taking up these structural and agentic dimensions of stigma and looking at the terrain of social policy, the treatment of stigma in this issue comes with a concern to understand and interrogate stigma in its *totality* in the context of the welfare state. This themed section therefore explores how stigma is (re)produced, experienced and resisted as three dimensions of the operation of welfare stigma. It presents a collection of articles that variously investigate these dimensions of welfare stigma in the Irish and UK welfare state contexts.

Ireland and the UK are chosen not only because these are countries with significant recent experience of welfare reform and welfare austerity; they also share a liberal welfare state heritage as well as particular iterations of illiberalism (Dukelow and Kennett, 2018). That shared liberal heritage is inflected in deep historical dynamics of deservedness and thus habituated practices associated with welfare stigma in how their welfare states and welfare institutions are designed, operate and bear particular values. Yet, despite these shared tendencies, Ireland and the UK are rarely examined together. While not offering directly comparative articles this themed section does provide an opportunity to examine welfare stigma across a range of sites and social groups in neighbouring welfare states and so goes beyond the confines of a single country context or jurisdictionally bounded welfare state type. The articles variously concentrate on how stigma is (re)produced, experienced and resisted, including how these dimensions of stigma overlap and draw out issues of class, gender and disability: in particular, in the context of the discreet and divisive ways stigma is deployed. They therefore build upon significant contributions by social policy scholars in the UK context – including work by Ben Baumberg (2016), Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler (2015) and Ruth Patrick (2017) to mention a few – along with more recent work in an Irish context, which includes contributions by Joe Whelan (2021) and Philip Finn (2021). Building on these foundations the articles in this themed section offer a rich vein of original qualitative research. While not privileging any particular tradition of critical theory, all articles have a critical orientation and, by gazing upward and outward, prise open the production of welfare stigma and examine the experience of stigma in ways that acknowledge the importance of agency as well as the more conventional structural treatment of stigma. In addition, by looking specifically look at how welfare stigma is resisted and struggled against, the themed section aims to challenge the production of welfare stigma and contribute to an agenda of re-imagining welfare.

The themed section begins with a state of the art review by Robert Bolton, Joe Whelan and Fiona Dukelow. This presents the aforementioned framework for examining welfare stigma in its totality – namely, examining how it is a phenomenon with several dimensions involving its (re)production, experience and resistance – and asks 'what does welfare stigma do?' in each instance. It unpacks this question with reference to research in the Irish and UK contexts over the last decade. Focusing in particular on resistance, it finds that this is still somewhat of a 'black box' in our interrogation of stigma. Questions of what resistance is and how it can be an effective counter to the (re)production and experience of stigma remain open. Some of these questions are taken up in the remaining articles; nevertheless, the research findings and reflections they evoke suggest that the nature and efficacy of stigma resistance remains a pressing avenue for further research. This stems from the limitations of typical expressions of resistance against the weight of stigma power or the force of welfare stigma as a form of violence and coercion, and where it seems the temporary and divisive welfare measures instituted during the Covid crisis in both countries (Hick and Murphy, 2021) offer only minimal reprieve.

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Martin Power, Eoin Devereaux and Majka Ryan's article offers some insights into the production of welfare stigma in the Irish context through the example of an anti-welfare fraud campaign run by the Department of Social Protection in 2017. Using state documents, principally those obtained through Freedom of Information processes and campaign materials, it goes behind the scenes and beyond the more typical analysis of political and media discourse to look at how welfare stigma can be understood as a political project. Looking closely at how the campaign was crafted, this contribution gives solid expression to Tyler's (2020) notion of 'stigma craft'. This includes revealing deliberations between department officials, politicians and advertising consultants on the efficacy of particular phrases and idioms – such as 'welfare fraud' versus 'welfare cheat' – and the devising of particular advertisements styled on TV game shows as a design to test people's knowledge of social welfare rules and regulations. Strategies, in other words, to demarcate between deserving and undeserving welfare recipients. While the article dismantles the notion of pervasive welfare fraud, it clearly shows how welfare stigma is produced by associating claiming welfare in itself with suspicion and undeservedness; and the role of a neoliberal-influenced consultocracy in crafting this.

Moving from production to reproduction, Tom Boland, Kenny Doyle and Ray Griffin's article interrogates the experience and reproduction of stigma by focusing specifically on how welfare claimants who are unemployed 'pass' stigma onto others. This contribution therefore demonstrates how welfare recipients often do the work on the ground of generating distinctions concerning deservingness. This stems, in turn, from how the top-down production of welfare stigma cultivates the identity of the good worker (or good job seeker, even) against the other of the welfare scrounger. This, they argue, with reference to recent reforms in the Irish context, is an effect of governing via activation and conditionality rather than the receipt of welfare per se – thus invoking a moral economy which involves not simply testing compliance but also moral worth. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1997) work on disavowal, their interviews with the unemployed demonstrate processes of self-formation that involve the refusal of any traces of identity that are not about work and being a worker; part of which involves the 'passing on' of stigma to others. In short, these dynamics of the (re)production and experience of welfare stigma as disavowal show us how, in the context of recent Irish welfare reforms at least, welfare stigma serves as a form of governmentality that rationalises reforms amongst those who experience their most powerful, coercive and violent effects.

In contrast to Boland *et al*.'s account of the centrality of work in the reproduction of stigma through mechanisms of disavowal, Uisce Jordan's article, based on interviews with seventeen men claiming incapacity related benefits in the UK, looks at how voluntary work, if performed autonomously, constitutes a form of belonging and solidarity; acting as an antidote to the passing on of stigma. Moving the terrain of the themed section into dimensions of the experience and resistance of welfare stigma, Jordan suggests that for the men involved in her research, based in Liverpool, engaging in voluntary work constituted a form of everyday resistance following Scott's (1990) conceptualisation of 'ordinary' forms of resistance. Jordan's research demonstrates an acute awareness of the production of stigma as a political project amongst her interviewees, particularly in terms of how it suits austerity. However, rather than internalising the divisive dynamics of this project, Jordan's research suggests that voluntary work enabled forms of resistance and fostered bonds of empathy and solidarity with other marginalised groups through this work.

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Themes of gender and resistance are also central to the two remaining articles. Philip Finn and Mary P. Murphy examine the experience of welfare stigma amongst lone mothers in the Irish welfare context whilst Nancy Evan's article looks at the experience of mothers claiming various social security benefits in the UK. Finn and Murphy's work, which is based on interviews with women included in two separate research projects, focuses on the stigmatising effects of behavioural conditionality introduced in lone parent welfare reforms (which ends unconditional welfare supports for lone mothers once their youngest child reaches seven years of age) and in housing reforms (where provision of accommodation is associated with appropriate house searching). Again, their research demonstrates the political project of welfare stigma: whereby the production of stigma is used to enable, legitimise and reinforce these policy reforms. The gendered nature of these reforms rests upon the devaluation of care as work; something which is acutely experienced during the claims making process and particularly corrosive with regard to the lack of housing which is experienced as a sense of failure to provide a secure family life. Central to the mothers' struggle against internalising such stigma is the articulation of an alternative care ethic and of care as responsible behaviour. Yet there are traces of othering 'other' welfare claimants, including other lone mothers, present in Finn and Murphy's research, which is used as a mechanism to reject stigma.

Similar themes about the gendered nature of welfare stigma are evident in Evan's article, where the mothers interviewed speak of an acute sense of being judged as undeserving of benefits, of the devaluation of care labour, and of 'bad motherhood' for being without a job. Against this backdrop Evans (2022) explores how mothers reject and resist stigma. As with Finn and Murphy's research, this revolves around articulating the value of care and 'good motherhood': but, unlike some of their research findings, it does not involve any expression of othering. In the context of Evans' research at least it seems that the more extreme vilification of welfare claimants found in UK media and popular culture has had the effect of exposing how intentional this effort at cultivating stigma is, thereby instigating greater efforts to reject and resist stigmatisation (which includes not passing it on to others). Yet Evans also ponders the efficacy of such alternative expressions of identity as stigma resistance, which predominantly occur at the micro level. This she attributes to the power differentials between the production and experience of stigma, so clearly expressed by one of her interviewees:

> [Being aware of structural inequality] doesn't change how you feel, though. Even if you're aware of it, negativity is more powerful than positivity, isn't it? . . . .slowly people are picking and chipping and there's not much left of you. . . . And so gradually, you just feel like you're a big puddle on the floor'
>
> (Evans, this themed section).

This brings us full circle with respect to the issues and questions about resistance raised in the state of the art review; and, more generally, raises the question of how welfare stigma can be attacked as a 'giant evil' – to invoke Beveridge's language – in the early 21st century. Any re-imagining of welfare needs to take seriously the challenge of understanding welfare stigma in its totality and tackling its production as a form of power with violent effects.

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