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State of the Art
What Can Welfare Stigma Do?

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In this 'state of the art' review, we draw on the Irish and UK context to ask 'what can welfare stigma do?' Our question provokes thinking about welfare stigma not as an inevitable 'cost' of the structure of welfare provision, but as something that does socio-political work and which may be deliberately mobilised to do so. This, we argue, is a particularly pertinent question to ask in the Irish and UK contexts, bound together by some shared liberal welfare regime characteristics that are particularly associated with welfare stigma and by the effects of a period of austerity capitalism that continues to re-shape the meaning and experience of welfare. Yet, going beyond welfare stigma as inherently negative, we highlight a limited literature on resistance that suggests the potentialities of welfare stigma in the service of positive social change toward a new welfare imaginary.

Keywords: Welfare stigma, resistance, Ireland, UK, austerity capitalism.

Introduction

'Welfare stigma' has been defined as 'the negative socio-physiological consequences or 'psychic costs' of being on welfare' (Besley and Coate, 1992: 167). Structural definitions have also drawn attention to stigma as "an administrative technique" (Pinker, 1970: 16), conceived of as "the commonest form of violence in democratic societies" (Pinker, 1970: 17) that is imposed by design, not by accident. In this article, we align more closely with the latter conception. Though it has a long history that ebbed and flowed in social policy and sociological research (Spicker, 2011), a recent resurgence of literature on welfare stigma demonstrates a distancing of welfare from its post-war Beveridgian collectivist ideals. Driven by a critical political economy approach notable in work by Jensen and Tyler (2015), Scambler (2018), Tyler and Slater (2018), and Tyler (2020) amongst others, this work offers a structural mode of understanding welfare stigma as 'stigma power' (Tyler, 2020) that has deep connections with welfare residualisation. Influenced by this approach, in this 'state of the art' review we offer a reading of the literature that prises open a new way of thinking about the dynamics of welfare stigma by asking 'what can welfare stigma do?' We use the contexts of Ireland and the UK which, as broadly liberal welfare states, generate particularly salient conditions for the manifestation of welfare stigma and are a useful conduit to unpack the possibilities of what this might mean.

Our aim is to acknowledge but go beyond the mere cataloguing of individualised notions of 'costs' in expressing yet more abhorrence to what we acknowledge and agree to be a form of 'social abuse' (Wright *et al.*, 2020). Rather, by asking 'what *can* welfare

stigma do', we draw attention to the actual and potential doings of welfare stigma. Our question implies that the 'costs' of welfare stigma are not simply inevitable 'effects' whose impact is confined to and stops at individual psychic hardship only. Instead, our question provokes thinking about welfare stigma as a means and a process whose effect ripples beyond and works through the individual to 'do' the disciplinary work of power and capital. Furthermore, our question opens up, rather than forecloses, political possibilities. Contrary to a monolithic bleakness understandably associated with the individual 'psychic costs' of welfare stigma and debates about how welfare stigma can be used to craft 'gritty citizens' (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020) in the service of austerity capitalism, we argue that there is room for welfare stigma to be mobilised to 'do' work that entails more radical political potentialities which, in turn, poses an agenda for further research on what welfare stigma does.

As a state of the art review, our approach is based on the selection of literature pertinent to welfare stigma in the Irish and UK contexts which has emerged in the last decade; a decade which heavily bears the imprint and continuing impact of austerity in both jurisdictions. To begin, we set the scene for examining welfare stigma in these contexts, highlighting the need to centre power and the recent welfare reform trajectories under austerity capitalism in both countries in our analysis. As befits our critical approach, we deploy a framework to survey our selection of literature that aims to capture the totality of what welfare stigma can do: by looking at how welfare stigma is *experienced*, how it is crafted and *(re)produced* and how welfare is and can be *resisted*. These three areas comprise the main subsequent sections of the article. Our framework thus engages with welfare stigma a form of structural violence but also pushes the question of what welfare stigma can do to consider how it can be mobilised as a form of resistance; a question we suggest remains largely unanswered and forms the basis for a future research agenda on welfare stigma, which is addressed in a final discussion section.

What can welfare stigma do: setting a context for Ireland and the UK from welfare to austerity capitalism

Welfare stigma and what it 'can do' is neither exclusively universal nor local. We can comprehend welfare stigma in general terms and as something that forms of welfare in any particular context have the potential to generate, yet its expression and manifestation is tied to experiences of 'being on welfare' specific to time and place. As Baumberg (2016: 2) puts it, welfare stigma 'seems to be an endemic feature of most social security systems . . . that develops into epidemics in particular circumstances'. The particular circumstances we highlight in relation to the UK and Ireland are not simply the familiar territory of the institutional and normative logics associated with greater likelihood of welfare stigma in the liberal world of welfare capitalism, but also the shift over time from welfare to austerity capitalism. This is a transition that highlights the increasing salience of welfare stigma as a form of power associated with punitive forms of neoliberalism that seek to reshape the welfare state in the service of capital.

Ireland and the UK's broadly liberal location within the worlds of welfare capitalism alerts us to particular institutional and normative features that make them more likely to generate welfare stigma in comparison to other European welfare states, where conditions are more likely to close it down. As classically expressed by Esping-Andersen (1990: 48, 49), 'means-tested assistance, modest universal transfers, or modest social insurance plans

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predominate', whilst 'liberal work ethic norms' limit welfare by enforcing strict entitlements rules and drive people to work. The stage is set for social dualisms that heighten the idea of 'us' and 'them' (Hills, 2015): the self-reliant individual who makes their way according to the market, versus the 'work shy' welfare scrounger who is held under suspicion (Roosma *et al*., 2016). This lies in contrast to the norms and design of the social democratic and corporatist welfare regimes that generate social relations based on an 'equality of status' (Esping-Andersen, 1990: 46) in the former and reciprocity in the latter. Differing work ethics also predominate, with work valued as a form of inclusion and a form of reciprocity in social democratic and corporatist regimes respectively.

These differences that set Ireland and the UK apart and which are more strongly associated with welfare stigma are substantiated by a relatively long but rather fragmented tradition of researching public support for welfare according to welfare regime type. This demonstrates more limited support and solidarity in liberal welfare states in contrast to social democratic and corporatist welfare contexts (Svallfors, 1997; Jæger, 2006; Larsen, 2008). While this research tradition has been mainly quantitative, more recent qualitative research unpacks the norms by which people justify welfare and distribution, with need as a redistributive principle predominating in liberal welfare contexts, contrasting with a greater preference for equity in conservative welfare states and equality in social democratic welfare states (Taylor-Gooby *et al*., 2019; Laenen *et al*., 2020).

While welfare stigma may thus be well grounded in the institutional and normative logics of the liberal welfare regime and form the basis for looking at Ireland and the UK together, welfare institutionalism has tended to ignore issues of power and agency, particularly in how theory has developed since Esping-Andersen's work (Kemeny, 1995). Drawing out the implications of different welfare regimes for the lived experience, (re)production and resistance to stigma thus suffers from this same lacuna. Here an understanding of the (re)production of welfare stigma as a form of power itself and how that form and experience of power has escalated under recent conditions of austerity capitalism, which has changed the relationship between welfare and capitalism where a reconfigured state is better 'put to work for capital' (Garrett, 2019: 190) to the cost of welfare and social solidarity is an important factor and a key focus for our discussion, as is agency in the form of resistance.

This chimes with research that draws out the punitive and disciplinary aspects of contemporary neoliberalism, where neoliberalism itself can be considered a manifestation of the power of capital, and the punitive application of the work ethic in this context (Davies, 2016; Sage, 2019; Whelan, 2020; Boland and Griffin, 2021). Such dynamics of contemporary neoliberalism have ramped up ideas of welfare and welfare recipients as a burden and failing to conform with heightened features of individualism and responsibility which, in the process, sets those in receipt of welfare for exploitation through workfare and other forms of precarious labour. And while the influence of neoliberalism is something all welfare states have had to grapple with in recent decades, its imprint is borne more heavily in already liberal contexts, in particular the UK (Taylor-Gooby *et al*., 2019).

While we know something more of the UK picture from its inclusion in the aforementioned qualitative research (Taylor-Gooby *et al*., Laenen *et al*., 2020), less is known about the Irish context where it tends only to be included in large scale quantitative studies where findings frequently suggest it sits relatively close to the UK. As is the case with all actual welfare states, neither are pure types (of the liberal welfare regime), but they are bound by their geographical proximity and their shared history. They also stand out for

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their high use of means testing and their 'modest' flat rate benefits, which are strikingly less generous in the UK (Dukelow and Heins, 2017). Regarding workfare and conditionality, both have been on a path that has ramped up conditionality since the late 2000s and early 2010s but from different starting points (Dukelow and Kennett, 2018). As for their longer policy trajectory, the UK has become less and less attached to its Beveridgean post-war roots, and any features of collectivism and universalism (Williams, 1989) that might have dampened down welfare stigma have been eroded. Neoliberalisation and neo-liberal austerity has taken greater hold (Farnsworth, 2021) and with it the ramping up of conditions for welfare stigma. By contrast, Ireland has been depicted as saying a 'long hello' to Beveridge (McCashin, 2019) which points to the fact that Beveridgean principles have become more influential over time. However, that should not detract from the fact that means testing is still a major feature of how welfare is designed for working-age adults, and its predominance has grown over the last decade (Dukelow, 2021). Neoliberalism, while it might be articulated less 'zealously' in the Irish context, is nevertheless also an influential feature and source of power; strengthened during Ireland's period of austerity (Dukelow, 2015; Dukelow and Kennett, 2018). These points set the context for the generation of welfare stigma, and in the UK and Irish contexts in their trajectory from welfare to austerity capitalism. What we now turn to is the question of 'what can welfare stigma do' more substantively by addressing it in its totality within the three key areas of experience, (re)production and resistance.

Lived experiences: stigma in the context of welfare recipiency

Qualitative work on the lived experience of welfare stigma has revealed the multifaceted ways in which welfare stigma 'gets under the skin' (Tyler, 2020: 7). The UK has seen an abundance of recent contributions. In longitudinal work conducted by Patrick and published over a number of years (2016, 2017), lived experiences of stigma are starkly illustrated and respondents identified the administration of welfare benefits as demeaning and degrading, describing being looked down on and made to feel powerless and these sentiments are, in part, echoed in other work emanating from the UK (Garthwaite, 2015, 2016; Hudson *et al*., 2016; Wincup and Monaghan, 2016; Wright and Patrick, 2019; Redman, 2020, 2021). The 'costs' here are obvious. What welfare stigma 'can do' is inflict psychic hardship, amounting to a form of 'social abuse' (Wright *et al*., 2020). Our point is that some aspects of these 'costs', however, have socio-political effects. Self-blame and internalisation of shame is a frequent finding within the literature across different groups who experience welfare stigma (Garthwaite, 2015; Patrick, 2016; Pemberton *et al*., 2016; Jun, 2019), meaning shame is not directed 'upstream' (Hudson *et al*., 2016) both towards the structural sources of the need underpinning receipt of welfare in the first place (e.g. unemployment and poverty) and the sources of welfare stigma itself.

Garthwaite (2016), who conducted an ethnographic study by volunteering and conducting interviews at two food banks in the UK, for example, found that the fear of being stigmatised at these sites is very real, with some participants admitting having considered not going and others remaining very self-conscious throughout the experience. In almost all cases Garthwaite (2016) reports that this was because the people in question did not want to be seen as, or made to feel as though they were, 'scroungers'. This exemplifies the aforementioned 'us' and 'them' dynamic. While the welfare stigma seen here may 'cost' individuals access to provisions, there is also a literature (see Chase and

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Walker, 2013; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Patrick, 2016; Pemberton *et al*., 2016; Jun, 2019) on lived experience which takes account of intersectionalities (e.g. people with disabilities, lone parents); highlighting how the engagement of some claimants' in 'othering' demonstrates that the 'costs' of welfare stigmas can extend beyond individual psychic harm and can be social and political in their effects.

'Othering' can be defined as a discursive practice that uses the difference of others to affirm one's own identity to reduce stigma and which differentiates between in- and out-groups (Jun, 2019). Patrick (2016, 2017) has addressed this phenomenon directly and has conceptualised the engagement in these practices as a form of 'citizenship from below'. She argues that othering amongst welfare recipients can be understood in the light of what are seen as scarce resources with individuals essentially competing by emphasising the deservingness of their own entitlement while simultaneously undermining that of others. This suggests that 'othering' forms the basis of attempting to survive in a welfare space that is constituted in a language of scarcity and need or neediness. More importantly, Patrick (2016: 256) notes the political implications of othering:

> As the 'othered' also 'other', the framing consensus on 'welfare' is further embedded and strengthened, in ways that reduce scope for an alternative narrative or solidaristic challenge to the status quo.

What welfare stigma 'can do' through 'othering', then, is erode actual or potential solidarities with others, impeding political possibilities and this is also borne out, though to a lesser extent, in the literature on lived experiences of welfare recipiency in Ireland.

While in an Irish context, there has been recent and ongoing scholarship surrounding welfare recipiency and welfare conditionality in particular (e.g. McGann and Murphy, 2021), there has, until recently, been a lacuna with respect to research which specifically seeks to illustrate lived experience while demonstrating the centrality of stigma within this. However, some work which addresses this has emerged and this similarly finds evidence of self-blame and othering (Kerrins, 2016; Whelan, 2020, 2021). For example, Boland and Griffin (2015, 2021), in articulating a sociology of unemployment, have produced some work that describes the experiences of those seeking social assistance. In doing so, they re-imagine being unemployed as a liminal or transitionary 'limbo' like experience with Jobseekers Benefit or Jobseekers Allowance constituting an 'ungenerous gift' that lacks beneficence and in fact comes with considerable social 'costs'. Outside the realm of formal welfare, in Kerrins' (2016) study, which focused on the experiences of those in receipt of One Parent Family Payment (OPFP), there is also some evidence of stigma arising within the everyday lives of persons. Interviewees themselves identified stigma as a significant factor when going beyond the state for support through charity. While not addressed directly in the research, the 'us' and 'them' divide was evident as per findings from the UK: many of the interviewees were at pains to distance themselves from any potential 'scrounger' narrative, which again shows how stigmatising discourses surrounding welfare recipiency are taken up by those in receipt of welfare (Kerrins, 2016).

Taken together, this body of work demonstrates a still emerging and growing interest in lived experience in the context of welfare recipiency in Ireland and the UK and in experiences that may be characterised, in part, by aspects of stigma. It highlights how welfare stigma can produce psychic and social harms that have socio-political

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implications. Welfare stigma can depoliticise the structural genesis of social problems and rob solidaristic capacities, ultimately working to cement austerity capitalism. Given then, that welfare stigma can 'do' disciplinary work that services power and capital, inquiry about how discourses that elicit welfare stigma are propagated more publicly is necessary.

The (re)production of stigma: (re)framing in a welfare context

'What can welfare stigma do' can be asked from the viewpoint of power. If welfare stigma can maintain socio-economic and political arrangements, then it is understandable why stigmatisation may indeed constitute a 'policy strategy' (Jun, 2019: 14). What efforts then, have been mobilised to ensure that welfare stigma is crafted to 'do' governance and discipline for power and capital?

While welfare stigma may be 'channelled through benefit sanctions' and the administration of welfare itself (Redman, 2020: 84), in the UK, broader framing and reframing processes have tended to escalate the already divisive features of welfare within liberal welfare contexts. In an example of the perpetuation of a particular type of welfare 'common sense', in the UK, the voyeuristic genre of television referred to as 'poverty porn' offers a 'soft' but nevertheless insidious form of framing which is packaged as entertainment and is arguably edited in a way that deliberately portrays those on camera as 'scroungers' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016; Paterson *et al*., 2016). An exemplar of work that has explored the effects of this phenomenon is Paterson, Coffey-Glover and Peplow's (2016) analysis of the reactions of members of the public to the programme *Benefits Street*. Ultimately, they concluded that *Benefits Street* is not just an entertainment programme but functions as a site for ideological construction, effectively (re)producing stigma by perpetuating negative evaluations and stereotypes about benefit claimants. While programmes such as *Benefits Street* do the ideological work of framing welfare and welfare recipients in a predominantly negative way, there have been other examples of programming and film which offer a counternarrative and a resistance of sorts (see *Growing Up Poor: Breadline Kids: Dispatches* and the film, *'I, Daniel Blake'* directed by Ken Loach). However, work on the effect and efficacy of these counter-offerings remains to be completed while programmes like *Benefits Street* appear ubiquitous with the latter serving as only one example of its type (see *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole* and *On Benefits and Proud* for other examples). Coupled with this is a style of tabloid newspaper coverage that disproportionally covers stories relating to benefit 'cheats' and 'scroungers' and presents them as commonplace (Byrne and McEnhill, 2014). This cultural crafting of a stigmatising welfare discourse through popular media is accompanied and compounded by political crafting. Taking this up, Patrick and Reeves (2021) in discussing what they term the 'legacy of an ideology' point to the framing effects of both political rhetoric and policy. The negative effects of how welfare or benefits are spoken about by prominent politicians on those receiving it are acknowledged in the broad literature as being pervasive (Patrick, 2016, 2017; Crossley, 2018).

While perhaps not as prominent, Ireland is not recused from this type of welfare framing and reframing, either at the level of politics or in popular discourse (Boland and Griffin, 2021). An exemplar of this process, and one which has been attended to in the literature (see Devereux and Power, 2019; Power *et al*., 2022), is found in the '*Welfare Cheats Cheat us all*' campaign run by the Department of Social Protection. Launched in

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2017 the campaign was billed as a 'hard hitting' effort to combat welfare fraud, implicitly framing such fraud as ubiquitous. It consisted of a series of newspaper and radio ads as well as press releases and public billboards and claimed anti-fraud measures taken in 2016 had saved over €500 million in expenditure (Department of Social Protection, 2017). It also encouraged people to report suspected fraud via a dedicated phone line or confidential email address.

The campaign was spearheaded by the then Minister for Social Protection, Leo Varadkar who, at the time, was involved in a leadership contest within his own centre-right political party (Fine Gael). In this context, there has been some suggestion that the campaign functioned more as an ideological exercise or framing operation than as a genuine attempt to prevent welfare fraud (Devereux and Power, 2019). The overall tone of the campaign was particularly divisive. From the point of power, it exemplifies a more explicit 'doing' of welfare stigma, functioning to mitigate against solidarities by essentially 'pitting neighbour against neighbour' and inviting people to closely scrutinise those in receipt of welfare, the implication being that they cannot be trusted (Devereux and Power, 2019; Power *et al*., 2022). If discourses which give rise to welfare stigma can be culturally and politically crafted in a way that propagates social harm and which can be 'taken-up' by claimants themselves, one of the most important questions that remain revolves around the extent to which resistance to welfare stigma is possible.

Resisting welfare stigma

Does welfare stigma necessarily and inherently maintain austerity capitalism? Or can welfare stigma itself be a springboard for resistance? Foucault has argued that wherever there is power there is resistance (Peterie *et al*., 2019), yet Kent (2016: 125) notes that while the psychosocial effects of the contexts of welfare stigma are well understood, 'less is known about mechanisms for countering the impact of shame and shaming on individuals'. In thinking about the question of 'resisting' welfare stigma, there is no universal definition of resistance though typologies do exist, suggesting different levels of resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). In the literature on welfare stigma resistance is deployed interpretively and not defined. Patrick (2016: 254) refers to 'limited forms of resistance' while Wright *et al*. (2020: 290) refer to 'active resistance'. Different literatures (e.g. citizenship, see Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020; Marxist, see Redman, 2021) in this area work with different ideals and conceptions of resistance.

What complicates it further is that government policy also has purchase on defining the parameters of resistance through the concept of 'resilience'. Itself open to contested definitions, resilience generally refers to 'the extent to which, and way in which, people respond to and overcome unanticipated setbacks, shocks or adversity' (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020: 8). Donoghue and Edmiston (2020: 10) highlight how the fashioning of 'resilience' within welfare policy has become part of the 'governing agenda of UK social policy'.

Jun (2019) interprets some lone mothers' othering of those who they believed were 'milking the system' as a form of 'resistance' and argues that this in turn is a form of coping. This interpretation is in one way understandable as such othering has been interpreted as a way of mitigating and shielding the self from personally felt stigma, shame and stigmatisation (Chase and Walker, 2013; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Patrick, 2016; Pemberton *et al*., 2016; Jun, 2019). Yet, if this is resistance to welfare stigma, this is not exactly a

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hopeful note. Othering depends on the denigration of others between people who, in actuality, live in parallel circumstances (Chase and Walker, 2013). This latter point is also highlighted by Redman (2021), who draws on the notion of 'everyday resistance' to highlight the way in which unemployed male claimants in the UK use what are called 'everyday weapons' and covert struggles in their subversion of welfare conditionality and activation policies (see also Jordan, 2022). Such struggles however are a form of individualised self-help, rather than methods of system transformation. Indeed, some of the men's tactics (e.g. selling drugs) constitute a form of 'lateral exploitation of other socially proximate individuals' (Redman, 2021: 13). In this way, Redman (2021: 13) shows how some resistance practices 'reproduce the 'dog-eat-dog competition' typical of social relations in capitalist societies.'

Research in the Irish and UK context highlights other forms of resistance where the goal is to alleviate individual hardship. Claimants withhold information about their claimant status or engage in 'fitting in' to avoid stigmatisation (Patrick, 2016; Jun, 2019; Whelan, 2021). The aforementioned 'everyday weapons' (Redman, 2021) include subversions such as using emotional control to avoid sanctions by work coaches in the face of their provoking behaviour (Formby, 2017; Wright *et al*., 2020; Redman, 2021), using deception (Wright *et al*., 2020; Redman, 2021) and/or expressing frustration, anger and hostility toward welfare staff (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020; Redman, 2021). Alternatively, rather than enacting resistance through interaction with the welfare system, individuals may disengage and withdraw from the process or receiving benefits itself (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020; Wright *et al*., 2020).

While individuals use these aforementioned strategies to regain a sense of *personal* control (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020) or as coping methods, such strategies do not challenge the legitimacy of austerity capitalism and the welfare ideologies that craft stigma themselves (Patrick, 2016; Formby, 2017) and thus work to destabilise more organised or collective acts of resistance such as strikes (Redman, 2021).

Yet, resistance that challenges welfare ideologies does exist, even amongst those who still feel personal stigma and shame (Pemberton *et al*., 2016; see also Evans, 2022). Patrick (2016) found that some single mothers may challenge the view that they are getting money for no work by showing that single parenthood is, in fact, hard work (see also Finn and Murphy, 2022). Claimants also point out that fraud occurs right across different sectors of society and, in the cases for welfare fraud, is small (Patrick, 2016).

What enables individuals and/or groups to engage in the resistance practices they do? This is a key question that should drive further research. The literature does indicate, for example, that individuals' *capacity* for resistance is moderated through power relations (Peterie *et al*., 2019). Moreover, individuals are more likely to withdraw from and resist compliance with welfare services when other means of financial or material support is available to them, such as familial support and/or engagement in criminal activity (Donoghue and Edmiston, 2020; Wright *et al*., 2020; Redman, 2021). These forms of resistance are *material* ones (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004).

Such research highlights how the access to social and economic resources can buffer against punitive forms of welfare conditionality. Indeed, we know from earlier research on resistance to welfare stigma in different contexts that *location matters*, be it differential proximities to geographical, social, political or discursive locations (McCormack, 2004). Individuals who experience less stigmatisation and who are distant and less exposed to agents who may circulate welfare stigma discourses are more likely to understand their

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positions in sociological, rather than individualistic terms (McCormack, 2004). Geography here matters and what blends into social proximities to those in similar situations – for example, areas with high concentrations of poverty, where a sense of shared identity is more likely (McCormack, 2004).

As McCorkel (1998) has theorised in relation to total institutions, resistance requires the facilitation or production of 'critical space', be it physical, cognitive or discursive space where alternative meanings can be shared. Writing about a different topic, Hollander (2002: 490) found that 'resistance is more common in contexts where those who are disadvantaged by existing hierarchical structures can interact freely'. Here, there is an absence of research which explores how such 'critical space' may be created and navigated towards new imaginaries, but resistance to welfare stigma in this regard has been the product of specific initiatives. Kent (2016) reports on a participatory action research project involving the holding of 'community conversations' to give a voice to those on low incomes from Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. While othering was evident among participants, with internalised shame isolating some individuals from others, this was broken down through the sharing of stories about their circumstances and participants felt more enabled to link the source of welfare stigma to structural factors (Kent, 2016).

The emotional dynamics of welfare stigma here are pertinent for this discussion. Kent (2016) draws upon Scheff's (2003: 258) psychosocial theorisation that giving voice to experiences and circumstances that are deemed shameful 'may be the glue that holds relationships and societies together, just as unacknowledged shame is the force that blows them apart'. It is here where the question of what welfare stigma 'can do' draws us into thinking about the mobilising possibilities of welfare stigma towards social change. Welfare stigma and internalised shame is associated with the splintering of solidarities and critical consciousness, yet Kent's (2016) research draws attention to how *acknowledging* stigma and shame-based stories can mobilise the opposite. Similarly, Tyler (2020: 212), whose work on 'stigma power' has 'personal motivations' based on her own stigma experiences, tells the story of Stephanie, whose shame led her to self-mutilation and suicidal thoughts. Stephanie's experience led her to develop an understanding of the structural basis of welfare stigma; thus Tyler (2020: 18) concludes that 'people's experiences of being stigmatised are a critical source of 'sociological imagination'' since 'people who are stigmatised are cognisant of the ways in which the 'stigma machines' in which they find themselves enabled have been engineered'.

Tyler's (2020: 240) argument that the stigmatising eye of others 'makes us wakeful' and acts as a 'resource for resistance' is not entirely supported by the aforementioned literature (Kent, 2016; Patrick, 2016; Jun, 2019) and is not in line with the sociological literature on stigma and shame which argues that it is *acknowledging* vulnerabilities and not merely *experiencing* stigmatisation and shame that produces both solidarities (Scheff, 2006) and the linking of stigma and shame to its structural sources (Scheff, 2006; Turner, 2007). Is it here where the 'productive force' (Tyler, 2020: 239) of 'stigma power' can be inverted? Not as a weapon of power but a challenge to it? Indeed, it is clear that Stephanie was open to Tyler (2020: 1-7) about her stigma feelings. This same psychosocially orientated perspective also argues that those who *repress* or deny shame are more likely to blame other social categories for what are really structural problems (Scheff, 2006; Turner, 2007), consistent with the dynamics of 'othering' by some benefit claimants (Kent, 2016; Patrick, 2016; Jun, 2019). While those who engage in 'othering' are certainly

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cognisant of and/or have experienced *stigmatisation* from others (Chase and Walker, 2013; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Pemberton *et al*., 2016; Formby, 2017; Jun, 2019) it is not entirely clear from this literature whether 'othering' does ameliorate feelings of shame, or merely represses it.

Discussion and future directions

From here we can pull together some questions and suggest some avenues of further research. Questions about what constitutes resistance are important, given that some forms of resistance could be interpreted as ironic evidence of the success of governance efforts – under the guise of 'resilience' – to instil subjectivities that align to the very ideological values and the work and legacies of austerity capitalism we would otherwise hope they could erode. Important as these questions are, debating what modes of resistances actually are, in our view, is less helpful than understanding the pathways to them. Future research could explore different conditions, constellations of circumstances, forms of capital and proximities to locations (geographical, social and discursive) that moderate and influence the adoption of these various resistance practices and discourses, including material, symbolic and politically or identity-based resistance. The latter closely aligns with our own approach where resistance is both to the social, political and economic conditions themselves, but also to the legitimacy of labels (e.g. 'scrounger') which function as forms of social control. It is through the imposition of such labels where stigma and shame arise and where the 'fingertips of society' (Goffman, 1963: 71) work with and through the inner world to do socio-political work for the outer world.

As we suggested, there is potential for resistance in this shame. We wonder about the potential of 'stigma power' from below. How can shared vulnerability be utilised as a source of stigma power? Here, welfare stigma might be put to a different kind of mobilising power and crafting, through the knitting together of shared experience towards political resistance. How can we envision 'critical space' (McCorkel, 1998) where shared vulnerability and radical potentialities can emerge? Where do initiatives such as Scottish Social Security Experience Panels (Scottish Government, 2020) or campaigns and research by the third sector (e.g. Baumberg *et al*., 2012) fit in in this regard? These questions can be aided by a research agenda that gives concern to pathways to resistance, which we might add, would also benefit from comparative approaches across welfare regimes, contrasting spaces and pathways within the Irish and UK contexts with elsewhere. Further questions needing unpacking include the relationship between unacknowledged and internalised shame with various modes of resistance, such as othering. Does the sharing of welfare stigma-based stories and feelings open up the sociological imagination, or are close proximities to critical perspectives sufficient? And if they are, to what extent is personal stigma and the impact of stigmatisation neutralised when structural or more critical discourses are taken up?

Perhaps the question needs to be reversed. Our point is that social policy research and critical political economy approaches might well seek insights from other perspectives such as the psychosocial literature (Scheff, 2006; Turner, 2007) which, supported from some limited studies and tentative interpretive insights (Kent, 2016; Tyler, 2020), suggests it is the 'working through' of welfare stigma and shame and the stories upon which these

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are based that facilitates the opening of the sociological imagination and not necessarily the other way around. If these tentative findings and theoretical learnings are correct, it appears the irony of welfare stigma is that, when given the space to be acknowledged through open and shared vulnerability, it is as powerful collectively and critically mobilising as it is divisive and demoralising. Such practices have been foundational to feminist and LGBT activism where stigma and shame have not been barriers to, but rather, key avenues for political mobilisation (Britt and Heise, 2000).

Conclusion

What can welfare stigma do? The 'psychic costs' of welfare stigma and the background 'need' or institutional context upon which claims are made in the first place (e.g. unemployment, poverty, disability) is consistently documented. In asking 'what *can* welfare stigma do', and unpacking this question with reference to Ireland and the UK where we have suggested it is particularly germane to do so, we have drawn attention to how the 'psychic costs' are not neutral, but socio-political, but in ways not necessarily inherently negative. The costs of welfare stigma are part of a process of cultural and political crafting in the service of power and austerity capitalism, but the way these costs are interpreted has social and political effects – namely, they (re)produce the very ideological norms of that power and erode actual or potential solidarities and critical consciousness. Welfare stigma maims bodies and psyches to 'do' the work of power and austerity capitalism through self-discipline, self-blame and through monitoring and governance over others in the form of 'othering'.

The emotions of welfare stigma, that is, the 'colloquialisms of shame' (Chase and Walker, 2013), are emotions that are ordinarily felt and conceived as untouched by political forces since their emergence from within makes them feel natural (Boler, 1999) and not as part of a long history of ideological crafting (Spicker, 2011). Yet, 'shame', as Chase and Walker (2013: 740) point out, 'is almost always co-constructed' and so, though it may be crafted by those above, so too can its interpretation be by those in receipt of it.

What can welfare stigma do? While its elimination is an ideal and the 'shame-proofing' of public services is necessary, we argue that the productive power of stigma and shame need not be always conceptualised as an oppressive top-down infliction that shatters solidarities but a bottom-up resource toward positive social change. While welfare stigma can be crafted towards oppressive ends, there is an empirical suggestion (Kent, 2016; Tyler, 2020) and theoretical basis (Scheff, 2006; Turner, 2007) to argue that the condition of stigma and shame as a conduit for the deployment and maintenance of austerity capitalism can also simultaneously be a condition of resistance to it. What is lacking is a more thorough theorising of how this resistance can be made possible, backed up with a research agenda that explores the *pathways to resistances* and how stigma and shame moderate and are moderated by these paths. We suggest an approach that conceives how welfare stigma can 'do' a different kind of socio-political work, one that is generative of a new welfare imaginary that recognises mutual vulnerability and solidarity and recalls some of the elements of collectivism that underpinned Beveridge's project.

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