

A Multi-Dimensional View of Stigma Experienced by Lone Parents in Irish Homeless and Employment Services

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This critical and empirical article explores contemporary reproduction, experience, and responses to stigma in welfare delivery in Ireland. Combining qualitative data about lone parents (n22) gathered through two different research projects in 2017 and 2018 allows us to interrogate stigma in a multi-dimensional way and as an overarching experience as an ongoing project of neo liberalism. We analyse our findings using Baumberg’s (2016) typology of stigma which differentiates claim making stigma from personal and societal stigma, applying the framework to empirical data concerning lone parents’ recent experiences of Irish labour activation and homeless support services. We find that while behavioural conditionality necessarily frames this experience and constrains claimants, it is not totalising. We conclude by using Tyler’s concept of stigmcraft to situate the context of stigma as part of the political economy of welfare.

Keywords: Lone parents, stigma, Ireland, gender, homelessness.

Introduction

The eightieth anniversary of the Beveridge Report, which influenced the development of the Irish welfare state, prompts us to recall the male breadwinner nature of the policy assumptions underpinning its analysis and how unequipped the welfare state was to deal with the longstanding social risks associated with female lone parenthood. This article seeks to enrich and enhance the current welfare state debate by injecting new energy and new insights into lone parents’ lived experience of welfare in Ireland.

All welfare systems make relief for the poor conditional upon certain behaviours and incorporate stigma as a mechanism governing access to relief and demarcating the deserving – undeserving poor (Valentin and Harris, 2014; Wright, 2016). They reserve specific stigmatising practices for lone parents (Lavee, 2017; Millar and Crosse, 2018; Samzelius, 2020) and Ireland is no exception. Tyler’s (2020) concept of stigmcraft draws attention to the ways in which devaluations of identities are produced through social and political mechanisms and inscribed upon bodies for particular purposes. In doing so it connects cultural norms and values to historical and contemporary political practices, discourses, and institutions. While stigma is deeply embedded in the ‘stigmcraft’ (Tyler, 2020) of the Irish state and media, contemporary Irish discourse nonetheless lacks the open hostility toward welfare claimants evident within UK counterparts (Murphy, 2020).

Yet we see a clear strain of stigma based on the ‘culturalisation of poverty’ (Tyler, 2013: 162) thesis animated by fears of worklessness, welfare dependency and parental moral irresponsibility.

The perceived irresponsibility and dependency of unemployed people and lone parents were used to articulate blame downwards in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash (O’Flynn *et al.*, 2014), and in political and media rhetoric during the implementation of the *Pathways to Work labour market activation strategy* (DEASP, 2012) and its controversial social welfare reforms. Boland and Griffin (2016a) highlight that increased obligations to obtain paid employment render the receipt of jobseeker payments as an ‘ungenerous gift’, reminding jobseekers of their devalued identity. Gaffney and Millar’s (2020) analysis of anti-fraud policy documents construct stigmatising caricatures of claimants. A similar misrepresentation of fraud is found in Devereux and Power’s (2019) study on the Irish government’s 2017 ‘Welfare cheats cheat us all’ campaign. The tropes of worklessness, dependency, irresponsibility as well as suspicions of fraud are generative of the pliable contemporary distinctions between deserving – undeserving which welfare claimants have little control over.

Stigmatisation refers to the recognition by stigmatised groups and/or individuals that others will devalue their identities due to their receipt of benefits. The multi-dimensional layers of stigma are drawn out by Baumberg’s (2016) conceptualisation of stigma as made up of societal, claims and personal stigma. Societal ‘stigmatisation’ is the perception that other people will devalue your identity. Claims stigma denotes a filtering of this wider stigmatisation into the process of accessing welfare benefits and the everyday interactions with social welfare services. Personal stigma refers to an individual’s internalisation of shame and stigma as they come to feel that their own identity is devalued due to their claiming of welfare. This multi-dimensional approach offers the distinct categories we apply in different ways to lone parent participants across the different welfare policies, while their intersections within and across the policy spheres can help reveal an overarching experience of stigma (Patrick, 2016: 247). We draw on ‘stigmcraft’ (Tyler, 2020) to understand these multidimensional and overarching experiences as situated within historical and ongoing political projects inscribing devalued identities through the championing of cultural assumptions regarding individual (ir)responsibility, dependency, and failure. Our analysis also draws on Tyler to make sense of the agency we find in our data and to understand how stigma interacts with possibilities of agency – within, against and beyond ‘stigmcraft’ (Tyler, 2020),

We utilise empirical data from two qualitative research projects capturing the lived experience of behavioural conditionality in social security and housing policy respectively and add to emerging literature that examines the multidimensional experiences of lone parents (Murphy, 2020; Samzelius, 2020). The first study is a PhD research project exploring through semi structured interviews, with a subset of eleven female lone parents, the experiences and street-level interactions among jobseekers, social welfare offices and caseworkers. The second study is a 2017 qualitative study with ten homeless families who were accommodated in the first Family Hub, a new form of institutionalised congregated accommodation for homeless families (Hearne and Murphy, 2017). The study captured how the lived experience of lone parent families is impacted by a set of complex conditions around benefit receipt alongside an emerging behavioural conditionality in housing policy. Repeated and regular visits to the families’ accommodation allowed a deeper engagement by the participants in the process of knowledge creation. Combining the qualitative data

from these two research projects presents the opportunity to explore stigma in both a multi-dimensional way as well as in its overarching experience. The data was synthesised by sharing the coding use in the original analysis. Then using agreed themes informed by the conceptual framework we compared findings and analysed them through the conceptual framework, integrating the data to further interpret the results. We proceed by briefly contextualising contemporary welfare policies: we then present first our data, before concluding by discussing the implications of this multi-dimensional view of stigma.

Contemporary policy

Ireland has been described as a laggard or late moderniser in relation to activation and welfare conditionality but has always had policies and practices that required the working class to seek and accept offers of work (Murphy, 2020). Conditionality shifted from 2010 to a more active and conditional regime that includes a focus on changing expectations and behaviours of income support claimants. Since 2012, a work-first activation policy *Pathways to Work* requires some lone parents with children aged seven and over to participate in activation regimes and requires lone parents with children aged fourteen to seek and accept full-time employment. These changes recategorised lone parents whose youngest child is fourteen or older as jobseekers (DEASP, 2012)

While the seeds were set in the 1980's decision to underinvest in social housing and replace it with housing subsidies for private sector rental housing, it was only after austerity that a relatively new phenomenon of family and lone parent homelessness emerged, with two thirds of homeless families headed by lone parents. From 2014 such families were largely housed in emergency hotel accommodation but in 2017 a new institutional response emerged, Family Hubs, congregated settings where family members shared one bedroom and then shared cooking, bathroom, and laundry facilities with other families. As elsewhere homeless families experienced pressure to change expectations about the desirability of life-long social housing and to adapt their behaviour to source insecure private sector accommodation, with hub accommodation implicitly and explicitly conditional on appropriate house searching (Samzelius, 2020, Samzelius and Cohen, 2020). Hence during 2017/2018, the time period of our research, lone parents found themselves in a more conditional welfare regime and in a social housing regime dominated by private rental provision. Our interest is in how stigma plays a role in enabling, legitimising, and reinforcing such inadequate policies.

We now use Baumberg's three criteria of societal, claims and personal stigma to analyse the integrated data from the two research projects, labour market and homelessness. we first outline claims stigma, then personal and societal level stigma.

Social welfare, homelessness, lone parents and stigma in contemporary Ireland

Claims stigma

For welfare claimants, everyday welfare office engagements with caseworkers and other staff are permeated with, and shaped by, stigma (Baumberg, 2016; Patrick, 2016). To access social welfare payments and labour activation supports lone parents must navigate interactions steeped in casual iterations of socio-historically produced gendered

discrimination and stigma. The experience of welfare stigma is felt as a process of judgement and dehumanisation (Whelan, 2021) in which personal agency and circumstances are not considered. Lone parents felt looked down upon and under constant scrutiny which are the common experiences of welfare offices (Baumberg, 2016; Patrick, 2016). It was underpinned by a sense of being trapped due to the economic necessity of welfare payments for week-to-week survival. As one participant Kathi noted: 'nobody leaves this office happy'. These experiences take on gendered contortions for lone parents since it is their roles, activities and work as mothers which is erased due to its perceived irrelevance against the necessity of finding paid employment. The stigma gaze is refined further to the category of female lone parent itself through invasions of privacy regarding status, past and current relationships and living arrangements. Such invasions are often grounded in the moralising judgements about sexuality, blame and responsibility:

I hate going down to the place ... it was like they looked at you as if there was, that ya were a young girl having a baby ... (Kathi)

They're just appalling ... her [the welfare officer] starting point was defensive, she was like, 'Well, did you know your partner was going to leave?' like, 'Had you been having rows? Were you getting on?', She was firmly trying to establish whether it was a spurious claim or not. (Alexia)

One welfare officer had the nerve to tell me that I got myself pregnant ... (Nadine)
... she [welfare inspector during house call] asked me why I left my husband, why didn't I just stay with him because I was financially better off. I looked at her and I said, 'Because he tried to kill me.' She went, 'Oh, anything else ... Then, she was, 'Well, I can leave if you like, if you're not happy about this.' She goes 'But I'll come back tomorrow or the next day.' (Sinead)

Homeless families' feelings of stigma are reinforced and deepened by the search for private rental accommodation through the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). The claim making process of the HAP puts the onus on the claimant to find her own housing as part of the process of the claim for HAP. Claim making requires they compete in a private rental sector housing market where they suffer a structural exclusion and where they experience and feel multiple forms of discrimination. The over-whelming majority of female lone parents identified a double and triple aspect of stigmatisation, discriminated against within the private rental sector for being single mothers, homeless and poor. In addition, one-third of heads of homeless families are migrant or ethnic minorities. Claimants are asked by landlords if they were single, about their income and capacity to pay, if they were in relationships, all of which makes them feel helpless, powerless, and deeply stigmatised. Many understand they are 'last in the queue' with little hope of scaling the first hurdle in the claim for HAP.

I am up against professionals and I don't stand a chance in getting it (Linda).

The very few replies from my emails I do receive are asking for current work reference and landlord reference. The trouble is I do not have a landlord reference as I ran into rent arrears in my last home. I do not have a current work reference either as I am not working. I feel like I am at a loss trying to find a home for my kids and I simply do not have what they are looking for. I am literally finding it impossible. I am trying so hard ... I feel like I am getting nowhere (Chloe)

Having described how welfare and housing interactions can operate as conduits for stigmatising lone parent identities we now turn to outlining the extent stigma is internalised as a personal failure.

Personal stigma

Boland and Griffin (2015) conceptualise job-seeking as a form of liminality in which repeated failures within the job market must be overcome. In doing so it produces a sense of fatalism and resignation to one's own position. Compounded by such 'failures' the stigmatising interactions of welfare offices and wider society leads to the internalisation of negative self-images as a form of personal stigma (Baumberg, 2016; Boland and Griffin, 2016b; Whelan, 2021). The experiences articulated by lone parents continually underscored a sense of frustration at feeling trapped by welfare engagements. Interactions which paid little heed to their circumstances and responsibilities, while also ignoring their knowledge and expertise about their own situations, offered little feasible hope of exit from welfare. Lone parents were also acutely aware of their own disadvantages within the labour market in which absences of educational credentials limited the types of employment available, while caring responsibilities impeded opportunities to take up work. However, individuals and groups can experience claims stigma and identify wider societal views about the shame of welfare without internalising these views (Baumberg, 2016). There was little personal stigma displayed by lone parent jobseekers as they resisted the internalisation of shame through a range of tactics. Overwhelmingly, lone parents drew on their role as mothers and primary caregivers to their children to articulate their own sense of responsible behaviour:

they'd [Caseworkers] be kinda looking at ya as if to say well that's not a job whereas it is a job as realistically my understanding ... is that it's a twenty-four hour job because when you have children and when you're running a house there's so many jobs that need to be done ... (Emily)

it comes back to that idea that care work and raising children isn't valued ... the amount of work and effort that goes into it when you are a parent on your own isn't acknowledged. (Sinead)

Circumventing stigmatised identities often involves a form of othering welfare claimants deemed as less deserving. By distancing themselves from such identities and their perceived immoral attributes, claimants can assert their own moral entitlement and 'deservingness' to fortify themselves against stigma (Patrick, 2016). A minority of lone parents utilised such tactics by establishing their own entitlement against the perceived illegitimacy of non-nationals receiving welfare as well as othering other lone parents:

I'm not racist, I'm not against any other people but I have found it very difficult to understand the fact that non-national people seem to get a lot more from the government and from social welfare than people in the country ... (Emily)

I do know girls that have had young ones, that have had a baby, just for the money ... (Jessica)

Despite these instances it was more common for lone parents to reject the underlying demarcation between deserving and undeserving within the stigmatisation of welfare claimants as 'dependents' and 'scroungers':

they're blaming the most helpless in the, the people that need the most help ... instead of the big fat cats that don't need the help but keep take, take, taking, and it drives me mental, I get really angry about it like and that's why I'm like people on welfare aren't living the high life, so what if they go on a holiday? Are they not allowed to go on a holiday? (Kathi)

Society's traditional shame on poverty and claiming benefits leads to othering and forms of negative self-image where stigma is perpetuated (Wright, 2016; Tyler, 2020). In particular the stigma experienced by homeless lone parents leads to feelings of motherhood under pressure or failed motherhood (Samzelius, 2020). Hearne and Murphy (2017) question the use of congregated settings for homeless families. Increased institutionalisation leads to loss of personal autonomy when rules and regulations are required to enable up to fifty families to live in one building with shared facilities and little options for a private family life. This shift means unintended consequences for personal autonomy of the homeless residents and issues of hidden conditionality and surveillance. While congregated living as a form of therapeutic confinement is an improvement over the coercive confinement of mother and baby homes and Magdalene Laundries of the past (Luddy, 2011), it is nonetheless an eroding of personal dignity and parental efficacy and reinforces personal stigma and feels of worthlessness. As Lewis *et al.* (1997: 11) observe, such conditions and arguments associated with them underestimate 'alternative value systems that give priority to emotional satisfaction and care'. They also neglect the psychosocial impact of insecure housing associated with insecurity and lack of capacity to plan and control life (Hearne and Murphy, 2017), building up to severe ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991). Eventually societal stigma becomes personal stigma as the general stress of living in congregated settings, coping with poverty, and pressure to find private sector accommodation combine to augment the personal sense of stigma associated with failing to provide, as mothers, for their children. This impacts on mental health and leads to increased use of different forms of medication including anti-depressants.

When I came here first I was much happier. Spending time here takes something away from you. I'm just fed up (visibly upset, crying – pointing to her head) ... now I don't want to talk to people anymore ... I just want to be on my own ... it's the system ... what is it like that your children remind you to 'sign out' when you leave this place in the morning – what kind of life is that? (Karina)

Some families here have been to thirty-five viewings. What does that do to your self-esteem? They have learned not to tell the kids until they have the keys in their hand ... it's just knock back after knock back for them (Key Worker supporting families in Family Hub)

While claims stigma appear ubiquitous across the data the extent to which stigma becomes personalised varies as some participants articulate defensive tactics against it. Nonetheless, as the next section outlines, lone parents are acutely aware of wider stigmatisation toward them.

Societal stigma

While research on social welfare stigma is well developed elsewhere (Patrick, 2016; McGann *et al.*, 2020) it is only beginning to emerge in Ireland (Boland and Griffin, 2016a; Whelan, 2021). This emerging field coincides with an intensifying political and media rhetoric about welfare claimants since the introduction to the activation policy *Pathways to Work in 2012*. The introduction of increased conditionality and sanctions under the *Pathways* reforms emphasised the remedial benefits of work alongside media reports decrying welfare dependency (Boland *et al.*, 2015). Former Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, was explicit in stating that his government worked for ‘people who get up early in the morning’ (Bardon, 2017). The irresponsibility and deceit of welfare claimants took centre stage during the 2017 government campaign ‘Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All’ inviting the public to report suspected welfare fraud via a free telephone hotline. This welfare stigma intersects with traditional patriarchal stigma about sexual activity and the place of women traversing the historical institutionalisation of female lone parents in Ireland through Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries into the contemporary provision of public services. Lone parents were acutely aware of the intersection of these stigmas in wider society:

I feel my parenting is checked all the time ... I got a warning ... it feels like an institution instead of a home ... our parenting is questioned in front of our children ... they are taking the parenting role off the parent ... when someone speaks down to you like this, you feel you are on the bottom. (Various parents)

We’re on social, you know you hear a lot on the media you know lone parents they’re only having the kids just to get money off the social ... (Jessica)

... we’re classified as single parents with disruptive children. We fall into the poverty category, all this kind of thing, purely by the use of the words ‘Single with children.’ (Alexia)

For me and my two kids I only get two-twenty euro a week ... it doesn’t go a long way, people think oh you’re on social welfare like we’re paying taxes, you’re scroungers ... (Anne)

... I get paid through the bank cos that means I don’t have to go and stand in that queue for people to say oh look that one collecting single mothers ... (Kathi)

Societal ‘stigmatisation’ is the perception that other people will devalue your identity. Lone parents do not have to perceive this reality, they observe it in political discourse. Families opting to wait for public housing find themselves the focus of national blame games where homelessness is reconstructed, not as a problem of housing supply, but one of demand (Wright, 2012), and in the process the identity of lone parents is devalued. National policy requires that claimants are forced to shift their expectations away from what might be reasonable (an affordable public home with life-time tenure), to what is unreasonable (an unaffordable insecure home). Families who resist changing expectations find themselves stigmatised in national discourse as they become ‘the problem’, which further reinforces societal stigmatisation. Examples of such ‘gaming’ families are usually

based on anecdotal accounts of complex family situations but, over time, such myths become 'evidence'. As an opposition politician interviewed for the research explained:

The HAP introduction – was done in a way to keep people off the social housing waiting lists, so that they don't expect to get social housing. It is, trying to remove the aspiration of social housing as legitimate (Policy Maker)

Public discourse blames and shames. The CEO of Dublin City Council described compassionate homeless services as 'a magnet' (Keegan, 2019). Families refusing to alter their expectation of lifetime security of tenure are accused of 'refusing reasonable offers', 'wanting too much', and 'having too much choice'. HAP is pushed as the only option for social housing, and by implication, support for emergency accommodation is conditional on the families accepting private sector housing.

Families living in hotels and other emergency accommodation may be 'gaming the system' by declaring themselves homeless to jump up the housing waiting list. Government may have 'unwittingly' encouraged people to exploit the housing allocations system by prioritising 'self-declared homelessness' in the allocation of social housing, (Conor Skehan 2018¹ chairperson of the National Housing Agency reported to the 2017 Parliamentary Housing Committee (Ireland, 2017)).

Stigma impacts on possibilities of agency – which takes place within, against and beyond 'stigmcraft' (Tyler, 2020). A silence is inflicted within welfare and homeless services where claimants have little genuine input in the construction of plans while their circumstances and responsibilities are ignored. Nonetheless welfare claimants and their advocates do respond to this 'stigmcraft' and are agentic (Wright, 2012). In welfare offices claimants turned their silence against the process through individualised dramaturgical performances of 'the good jobseeker' as well as the self-sabotage of job searching. Although recognising both claims and wider stigma against them, lone parents rejected the internalisation of personal stigma by articulating their positions as responsible mothers.

Not all public discourse is against lone parents and research participants actively engaged with public discourse welcoming positive current affairs and broadsheet coverage and debating policy options. In the homeless research an opportunity was offered to participants to voluntarily engage in 'participatory action research' with the view to getting their voice heard and influencing policy. This included participation in policy dialogue with policy influencers: one participant subsequently took part in a video advocating action on homelessness and went on to participate in protests against homelessness.

Having presented the data outlining the multidimensional experiences of stigma for lone parents accessing activation and homeless support services we now turn to discussing the overarching experience as part of a neoliberal stigmcraft (Tyler, 2020).

Discussion: Claim, personal and societal stigma across social security and homelessness

In contemporary times oppression is harnessed to new ends required by the production of inequalities under neoliberal capitalism. The physical concentration of stigma is diffused across the landscape soaking into the social fabric and re-emerging in the ontological

insecurity of neoliberalism's losers as they struggle to survive weekly and/or provide a home (Giddens, 1991). Neoliberalism cultivates the 'responsibilisation' of subjects (Rose and Miller, 1992) where an emphasis on self-reliance and self-sufficiency flattens structural inequalities. It denotes what Reeves and Loopstra (2017) describe as being 'set up to fail' through repeated practices of futile searching. We found that in both of our cases (activation and homelessness), the process through which lone parents are required to engage is unlikely to work: they will not find decent full-time work, they will not find affordable tenured housing, rather they suffer the type of 'purgatorial liminality in which repeated failures must be overcome' (Boland and Griffin, 2015).

At the same time, the weaponisation of stigma and shame cultivates a societal blame (Scambler, 2018) permitting the scapegoating of particular groups (O'Flynn *et al.*, 2014). In this way dependent lone parents are constructed and stigmatised as problem families (Hearne and Murphy, 2017; Flanagan, 2018). This societal undervaluing interacts with the personal shame and stigma and undermining of parental pride in the day-to-day life in emergency accommodation and Family Hubs and the stigmatised processes of claim making for housing supports. The new conditional welfare regime in Ireland is described as modest, the discourse appears more paternalistic than punitive in approach and more about engagement than coercion. Yet here too lone parents are enmeshed in malleable contours of stigma in which the suspicion of fraud animating Irish social welfare entwine with historical gender oppressions about problematic women. At a societal level, lone parents who meet and who deviate from policy expectations are publicly scorned. In the case of employment, lone parents are problematised as working part-time and 'nesting' on in-work benefits, and in the case of homelessness, lone parents who prioritise the security of tenure embedded in social housing are accused of 'gaming' the system (Murphy, 2020). The net effect is to produce ontological uncertainty and a structural violence made tangible in the increase in suicides of welfare dependent lone mothers in Ireland in recent years (Murphy, 2020).

Tyler (2020) notes that social scientific research too often adopts an overly individualistic focus toward stigma, which detaches stigma from its use as a tool for exclusion, exploitation, and domination. Stigma projects in welfare and homeless responses in contemporary times must be contextualised in a twenty-first century context of globalisation and financialised capital where the responsible individual is required to be entrepreneurial in resolving their own poverty or homelessness, amidst practices of activation, individualisation and responsibilisation. These are internationalised patterns mediated by the particular political economy and patterns of national stratification, which while once dominated by class, are now more intersectional and racialised (Samzelius, 2020). In this way our findings are not exceptional but empirically demonstrate how in Ireland contemporary stigma works to conceal the failings of neoliberal capitalism by shaming the perceived moral irresponsibility and failures of its losers. On the eightieth anniversary of the Beveridge Report, this analysis enriches welfare state debate, challenging policy to face up to the reality of stigmata and the experience it produces.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/families-in-emergency-housing-may-be-gaming-the-system-1.3342289>

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