

Coping with Gendered Welfare Stigma: Exploring Everyday Accounts of Stigma and Resistance Strategies among Mothers Who Claim Social Security Benefits

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Drawing upon findings from a qualitative project exploring welfare stigma in the lives of women in Merseyside, this article examines experiences of stigma and resistance strategies among the mothers interviewed. The article provides insights into how gendered stigma manifests in the lives of mothers reliant on social security benefits in the present era of continued welfare reform. The mothers' experiences of stigma are argued to revolve around the devaluation of caring labour, the perception that benefits are undeserved and the notion of 'bad motherhood'. Furthermore, the article contributes to knowledge about stigma resistance strategies, including acknowledging the value of care and rejecting blaming narratives. Nonetheless, it is argued that owing to the power and pervasiveness of structurally-imposed stigma, individualised resistance strategies are limited and mothers must also engage in everyday stigma management techniques.

Keywords: Stigma, social security, gender, social reproduction, resistance.

Introduction

The relationship between welfare, paid employment and unpaid care is gendered (Lewis, 1997), and thus the longstanding stigma associated with social security reliance in market-oriented, 'liberal' welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990) such as Britain also manifests in gendered forms. Mothers claiming social security benefits have been persistently positioned in media and political discourse as irresponsible and undeserving, from the underclass debates of the 1990s (Mann and Roseneil, 1994), to the austerity era construction of the feckless 'welfare mother' (Evans, 2016: 439). Today, deservingness is increasingly tied to engagement in paid employment, while unpaid forms of reproductive and caring labour are devalued and stigmatised (Allen *et al.*, 2014; Evans, 2016; Patrick, 2017). Against a context of amplified stigma and unprecedented welfare reform, seeking insights from mothers who rely on state support is critical for further understanding how gendered stigma is experienced and challenged.

This article explores accounts of stigma and resistance in the lives of ten mothers who were interviewed as part of a wider qualitative project with sixteen women in Merseyside claiming means-tested and non-means-tested benefits. Firstly, the article explores literature and research on stigma and social security receipt, contextualising the research focus and highlighting the continued need to explore gendered stigma and resistance strategies.

This is followed by a section outlining the methodological approach, before a discussion of the empirical findings.

Theoretical and policy context

Popularised in twentieth century Sociology by Goffman (1963), the concept of stigma has witnessed a recent sociological revival and reconceptualisation. Departing from its hitherto 'individualistic, ahistorical and apolitical' usage (Tyler, 2020: 24), stigma has been redefined in structural terms as a productive form of classificatory power 'embedded within the social relations of capitalism' (Tyler, 2020: 9). By this definition, stigma is deliberately cultivated by powerful groups to retain and accumulate political and economic power, and thus reproduce inequalities (Link and Phelan, 2001; Tyler, 2020). This can be applied to the longstanding stigma of poverty and benefits receipt in Britain, allowing an understanding of how stigma is crafted and mobilised in the present era to legitimise unprecedented welfare reform.

During the last decade, the UK has witnessed an amplification of benefits stigma in the form of negative media portrayals, divisive political rhetoric and hardening public attitudes towards welfare expenditure and claimants themselves (Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Taylor-Gooby, 2015; Tyler, 2020). Notably, during this period, a hugely popular genre of documentary-style television programmes has emerged, termed 'poverty porn' by some, due to it focusing on people living in poverty and claiming benefits as a form of voyeuristic entertainment (Jensen, 2014). In conjunction with sensationalist tabloid stories, such programmes construct and reinforce classed and gendered stigma (Allen *et al.*, 2014) and thus function to 'embed new forms of commonsense about welfare and worklessness' (Jensen, 2014: 277), making punitive welfare reforms appear morally justifiable.

Concurrently, the UK social security system has undergone the most radical reforms since its inception, with an increased focus on 'responsibilising' claimants through intensified work-related conditionality and sanctions, which have been extended to include groups previously exempt, such as lone parents, the under-employed, those with young children, and disabled people (Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Webster, 2017; Grover, 2019). Such reforms disproportionately affect women (Women's Budget Group, 2018). Moreover, the increasing policy focus on paid employment devalues other essential forms of caring labour (Patrick, 2017), negating the constraints that caring responsibilities and childcare costs pose to finding and sustaining suitable employment (Millar and Ridge, 2009; Cain, 2016).

In this context, qualitative research has been crucial in bringing the experiences of marginalised groups to the forefront and highlighting the sharp contrast between stigmatising rhetoric and everyday realities (inter alia Hamilton, 2011; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Patrick, 2016; Shildrick, 2018). An important aspect of such research has been the emphasis on how stigmatised groups manage and resist stigma, including valuable insights about how mothers experience and cope with stigma (Hamilton, 2011; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). Indeed, rather than merely being 'passive recipients of stigma', scholars have pointed to the tendency of stigmatised groups to develop forms of agency and resistance using the resources available to them (Link and Phelan, 2001: 378; Lister, 2004; Tyler, 2020).

Contemporary stigma scholarship highlights the *continued* need to investigate how stigma is experienced and challenged, particularly in the current context of widening

inequalities, amplified stigma and ongoing welfare reform (Tyler, 2020). This research therefore contributes to existing knowledge by exploring the intersection of classed and gendered stigma among mothers who claim benefits, highlighting how stigma affects everyday lives. Furthermore, it adds understanding of stigma resistance and the possible limitations of micro-level resistance strategies.

Methods

This article reports findings from a wider qualitative study exploring the gendered dynamics of stigma in the lives of women engaged with the social security system. The study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with sixteen women, recruited via a gatekeeper organisation, a charity in Merseyside. This charity supports local women with counselling, self-development courses, group activities and practical help. This article presents findings from the ten mothers interviewed.

Participants were purposively sampled on the basis of identifying as female and relying on social security benefits for some or all of their income. This broad criteria was deliberate, owing to a desire to capture a range of women's experiences rather than those of a specific, already stigmatised group such as lone parents or recipients of a particular benefit. The participants therefore varied in circumstances and benefit claiming trajectories, with some claiming disability-related benefits, some in employment, and a mixture of mothers and women without children. The group comprised women from age twenty-two to seventy-seven, as although I had initially planned to restrict the age of participants to that of working-age owing to stronger associations with stigma (Baumberg *et al.*, 2012), the opportunity to hear the experiences of a seventy-seven-year-old woman who began claiming Unemployment Benefit in the 1980s presented itself. Such breadth added to the richness of the data and allowed an insight into the persistence of gendered stigma over time, as well as an opportunity to compare recent experiences with those from decades past.

Most participants were recruited at group activities at the organisation, with additional participants recruited with the help of centre staff. With funding from my University, I arranged one of the group activity days. Having anticipated difficulties recruiting from a supposedly 'hard-to-reach' group, I was struck by the eagerness of participants to share their experiences; virtually every woman who met the eligibility criteria wished to participate. This reflects an insight made by Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) in their research with people on low incomes. Interviews were audio-recorded, lasted between one and two hours and took place in a private room at the organisation.

My research began with the premise of exploring stigma – however, I did not wish to explicitly impose this theme in the interviews and steer the participants' responses, but let stigma emerge organically. I thus devised a loose topic guide that allowed an exploration of various aspects of the women's lives and benefit claiming experiences. The research followed the core principles of feminist research, including its underpinning aim to expose and challenge gendered inequalities and centre women's experiences (Doucet and Mauthner, 2007). The research was approved by the University of Liverpool's Committee on Research Ethics. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. The empirical findings are now discussed, looking first at experiences of stigmatisation. Participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms and are accompanied by ages in brackets.

Stigma: the devaluation of care and questions of good motherhood

Stigma manifested in the accounts of all of the mothers interviewed, both explicitly through direct experiences of stigmatisation, and more implicitly in the anticipation or suspicion of social disapproval. Like the 'social stigma' identified by Baumberg *et al.* (2012) in their study of benefits stigma, the stigma experienced by the mothers centred on the notion that they are undeserving of benefits. Furthermore, connected to the concept of undeservingness was the devaluation of their caring labour, coupled with their adequacy as mothers being called into question.

The perception of stigma due to lack of engagement in paid work was summarised by Norma (77), a mother of three:

[People think] you're getting this... and you're not working – you're not earning it... And I think that's a stigma that people... (long sigh) that people have.

The notion that mothers who rely on social security benefits do not earn or deserve the financial assistance they receive reflects the taken-for-granted nature of social reproduction; this 'life-making work' (Bhattacharya, 2020) is naturalised as something mothers do out of love and care within the private sphere, rather than a vital form of *work* within the capitalist economy (Wilson, 1977).

This was demonstrated by Natalie (31), a mother of four including a son with Autism. Natalie's account revealed experiences of judgement from her husband's parents about her not being engaged in paid employment, and also around their perception of her not doing 'enough' work around the house:

They told me... we'll always be disappointed in you for not having a job... there'll always be that resentment, as long as I don't have a job... Because they think I'm lazy... just this lazy mother, bad mother.

This judgement of laziness stemming from lack of engagement in formal employment reflects and epitomises the devaluation of caring labour, as despite the essential work she provides in taking care of her children, this remains unrecognised and invisible, and is thus not adequately recompensed economically. It also demonstrates a stark ignorance to her long-term mental health struggles, which constrain her ability to undertake domestic duties and engage in paid work. Such experiences of stigmatisation reflect and reinforce the divisive logic in the discourse around benefits, where claimants are pitted against the 'hardworking' majority, negating the value of equally essential forms of work (Patrick, 2017; Shildrick, 2018). Furthermore, this experience of stigmatisation echoes the contemporary construction of the 'welfare mother' as a 'lazy, feckless burden on the state' (Evans, 2016: 439), reinforcing the gendered moral standards that working-class mothers have long been subject to. The notion of 'bad motherhood' tied to the perceived inability to manage her home to a high standard reflects the responsibility placed on mothers for maintaining 'respectability' in working-class communities, where household cleanliness has long represented a visible signifier of good motherhood (Skeggs, 1997).

In addition, accounts of stigma drew upon stigmatising tropes of mothers having children to avoid formal employment and maximise benefit entitlement (Evans, 2016; Griffiths, 2017). Dawn (36), a single parent who has four children and is the primary

caregiver for her disabled step-son, has experienced derogatory remarks from her step-son's mother:

She basically accused me of using her son as a means to avoid getting a job.

This accusation echoes popular media representations of 'benefit mothers', where 'the mere presence of children has become suggestive of fecklessness and a reason for the avoidance of paid work' (Evans, 2016: 441). All of the mothers demonstrated an awareness of such stereotypes, with Natalie (31) commenting:

I have four kids, and to most people, that'll probably look like, "oh she's just done that, 'cos she's just like trynna get more money out of the benefits system" . . . because of all these people coming out [on television documentaries and tabloid articles] like, "I'll just have kids just to have money".

Natalie's account highlights the detrimental impact of stigmatising media portrayals on her outlook of how other people perceive her, demonstrating the insidiousness of classed and gendered stigma. Such representations cast doubt on her mothering abilities and her motivations for having children, causing Natalie to reassure me of her love for her children. Hence, again, stigma was strongly associated with the notion of being an inadequate mother. This was amplified among the lone parents interviewed, where single motherhood was highlighted as carrying a distinctive form of classed and gendered stigma. Lucy (44), a disabled mother of one, summarised this by saying:

It comes with its own stigma, doesn't it? People make assumptions about you as a person, they make assumptions about your intelligence and about what you should or shouldn't be doing as a person, and you're fighting two parents' battles in terms of bringing up the child as well – you're being mum and dad – and it's tough sometimes.

For Lucy, the stigmatisation of single motherhood was compounded by the difficulties of bringing up a child without additional support. Social isolation was commonly reported, especially among the single mothers, contributing to feelings of stigma and low self-worth. Another central aspect of the stigma Lucy emphasised was the prevalence of moral judgements about *what you should and shouldn't be doing*, which was widely reflected among the mothers interviewed, again echoing the persistent dichotomy of good or bad motherhood. This was supported by Donna's account of a conversation she had with a woman at a community-run social supermarket about her daughter attending dancing lessons:

She's like – "but you don't work, you can't afford to send her dancing . . . if you have to come here to buy your shopping, she shouldn't be going dancing". (Donna, 36).

Donna's experience reflects popular stigmatising discourses about the lifestyle choices and consumption habits of benefit recipients, where the ownership of so-called 'luxury' items denotes a lack of 'genuine need' and therefore a lack of deservingness (Baumberg *et al.*, 2012: 24). Such arguments have been persistently used to support claims

that the benefits system is overgenerous and vulnerable to exploitation, exemplified in the myth of the 1970s 'Welfare Queen' (Allen *et al.*, 2015), and "chav mum" (Tyler, 2008) more recently.

Resistance strategies

Rather than merely being straightforwardly imposed from above, stigma is understood as site of struggle and resistance (Link and Phelan, 2001; Tyler, 2020). This was evident in the accounts of the mothers interviewed, where, in the face of continual stigmatisation on multiple levels, they rejected stigma in various ways. One means by which stigma was refuted was through the recognition of the value and hard work of caring for children, as reflected by Donna (36):

If I had the choice I would be at work, but it's like having a full-time job anyway when you're a single mum. That's a job where you can't just leave at five o'clock, so it's like a twenty-four hour one!

This comparison between unpaid care and paid employment asserts the status of care as a valid form of work and thus shows resistance to dominant portrayals of mothers who claim benefits as passive and undeserving. This was reinforced by Lucy's observation that:

If they paid a mum for all the roles that they do . . . Mums would be on like £100,000 a year, for all of the . . . going to parents' evenings, school drop-offs . . . organising lunches . . . you know, but it's not a paid role and it's just taken for granted really, isn't it? (Lucy, 44).

This illustrates resistance to the economic and social devaluation of unpaid caring labour, and recognition of the deservingness of mothers to financial remuneration for their role, which is denied by the current social security system. The ability of the mothers to reject the dominant ideology imposed on them about their value, and instead rearticulate 'value' in their own alternative terms as a means of resistance, reflects the work of Skeggs (1997, 2011). Like the women in Skeggs' (1997) ethnographic research, the mothers I interviewed saw value in being able to spend more time with their children, unlike middle-class mothers in full-time employment. For instance, Tracy (41), a single mother of two young children at the time, transitioned from benefits into employment but found that in addition to it not being financially viable, it denied her of quality time with her children.

Countering gendered stigma also manifested in expressions of pride in their ability as mothers, reflecting findings from Shildrick and MacDonald (2013). Moreover, the mothers in the study showed resistance to judgements about their spending habits – for example, Donna (36) resisted judgements about sending her daughter dancing by commenting:

I don't feel, just because I'm on benefits, that me kids should miss out. You can't just turn round and say to your kids, oh, you can't go 'cos I don't work . . . she's not going abroad every month, it's just a dance lesson once a week.

Here, Donna directly refuted stigma by asserting her daughter's right to not be excluded on the basis of them living on a low income.

In addition to attempts to reject stigma by emphasising the importance of their role as mothers, and their pride at being 'good mothers', some participants also challenged stigma by acknowledging the structural barriers and difficulties they faced in terms of their health problems and financial struggles, which they believed went unacknowledged by those judging and stigmatising them. For instance, Norma (77), who experienced stigmatisation from an old acquaintance who often openly criticised '*people who scrounged off the dole*', commented:

But she'd never been in that situation, so she didn't know that you'd give the children a jam butty and you'd have a piece of dry bread.

Furthermore, many mothers interviewed expressed an acute awareness of the role of austerity and welfare reform in making their lives more challenging, and the function of the media in crafting and reproducing stigma, thus resisting dominant narratives of personal blame. Discussing the popular documentary-style television programme *Benefits Street*, Zoe (38) observed:

It was just like all these people on benefits sitting around, going out, getting their nails done, shoplifting, smoking drugs or on alcohol. So this made people assume that everyone on benefits lives their life like that. It didn't show . . . real life situations where people are on benefits and they can't make ends meet – they've got one loaf of bread and like eight kids in the house . . . a single parent or someone who's got like, some sort of disability. It just heightens the animosity that they ['hardworking' taxpayers] feel towards people on benefits.

This astuteness to the intentional cultivation of stigma through 'poverty porn' television echoes Tyler's (2020: 18) observation that 'people who are stigmatised are cognisant of the ways in which the 'stigma machines' in which they find themselves entangled have been *engineered*'. Understanding stigma as deliberately produced constitutes a form of resistance, as it allows stigmatising, blaming narratives to be challenged and rejected. This may also explain why the defensive strategy of 'othering' and distancing themselves from fellow claimants to assert their own deservingness (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013; Patrick, 2017) was relatively uncommon among the mothers interviewed.

The limits of resistance and everyday stigma management

Despite the mothers demonstrating resistance against classed and gendered stigma, this did not allow them to escape the power of stigma altogether. Indeed, even where participants fiercely rejected stigmatising ideas about benefit claimants and asserted their own value and worth, they simultaneously appeared to internalise stigma on a personal level. As Lucy (44) expressed:

[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? It's very difficult to be positive all the time, and especially when day-to-day, say people can't feed their families, mentally that will affect you as a mum – somebody who can't provide – you know . . . all sorts of stigmas, and you put those labels on yourself as well.

This observation reflects the insidiousness of stigma in ‘getting under the skin of those it subjugates’ (Tyler, 2020, p.7), despite evident attempts to resist it, due to the unequal power relations in the imposition of stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001). The internalisation of stigma related to discourses of good or bad motherhood was reflected in the mothers’ everyday strategies of stigma management. In response to or in anticipation of stigma, the mothers all placed great prominence on being able to provide for their children. For example, Lorraine (44) reflected:

I can’t remember the last time I bought myself clothes . . . but the kids these days are so horrible with one another – if you haven’t got the latest thing then you get skitted. You don’t want that for your kids, so you do go out and skint yourself just so . . . they fit in.

This perception of good motherhood tied to the consumption of branded goods for children in order to manage stigma and ensure children are shielded from poverty stigma mirrors earlier research (Hamilton, 2011) and was reflected across all of the interviews. Like the mothers in Hamilton’s (2011) research, whose efforts to avoid stigma paradoxically led to further stigmatisation, the pressure to manage stigma by prioritising their children’s needs often necessitated considerable self-sacrifice, worsening financial situations, humiliation and stigma. This catch-twenty-two contradiction was demonstrated by Donna’s account discussed earlier; in ensuring her daughter could pursue her dancing lessons, she faced judgement.

Furthermore, the realities of life on benefits, particularly in light of the last decade of welfare reform, meant that it was not always possible to provide for even the basic needs for their children, which led to further stigmatisation:

You know, going the food bank was one of the most humiliating things and I cried my heart out after, that’s when the kids were in bed. I just felt like I wasn’t able to be a proper parent ‘cos I wasn’t able to provide for my kids. But I will do whatever it takes to make sure my children are provided for, even if that means . . . humiliating myself (Dawn, 36).

Despite Dawn’s awareness of the failure of the state in providing a safety net for her family following her relationship breakdown, necessitating her food bank visit, this experience still evoked feelings of deep humiliation and inadequacy as a mother. This illustrates the power of classed and gendered stigma in casting moral blame on individuals rather than on structural inequalities. Similarly, Lucy (44) described:

We just can’t afford a football strip, so then [son’s name] gets ridiculed by his friends because he hasn’t got what they’ve all got, and then that reflects on you because you feel again, that you’re not providing. There’s worse things – he can live without a football strip, but it adds to it . . . from all these different angles, slowly people are picking and chipping and there’s not much left of you. You get it from the Jobcentre, from your assessments [for disability benefits] . . . you’re getting it from yourself. And so gradually, you just feel like you’re a big puddle on the floor.

This powerfully exemplifies the complex, dynamic and intersecting axes on which stigma operates in the lives of mothers who claim benefits, whereby, despite some resistance, not being financially able to protect children from poverty-related exclusion

seeps into self-perceptions, and compounds with institutional and social stigma to leave a person feeling, as Lucy put it, 'beaten'.

Conclusion

Stemming from longstanding prejudices towards the female poor, benefits stigma manifests in gendered forms in the lives of mothers and evokes unique forms of resistance. Using stigma as its central theoretical lens, this article has explored gendered experiences of stigma and resistance strategies among mothers who claim social security benefits. Findings from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten mothers revealed that their experiences of stigma centred around the notion that their benefits were unearned and undeserved owing to their lack of engagement in paid employment, thus negating the essential role of social reproduction and caring labour. Furthermore, the mothers' experiences demonstrated the power of the inherently divisive logic at play within the welfare austerity imaginary, whereby citizens are categorised according to exclusionary definitions of deservingness tied to a narrow understanding of 'hard work' that ignores and devalues unpaid care (Patrick, 2017). Through both their *direct* experiences of judgement and an acute awareness of how mothers who claim benefits are portrayed in the popular imaginary, the mothers' accounts revealed the painful experience of being on the receiving end of such powerful narratives, directed at them from multiple angles. The single parents in the study revealed particularly difficult experiences of stigma and moral judgements. In addition to positioning them as undeserving and devaluing their caring role, experiences of stigma were tied to discourses of good or bad motherhood, whereby their adequacy as mothers was continually called into question. The findings therefore contribute to knowledge about how classed and gendered stigma manifests in everyday lives in the current era.

Nonetheless, the findings detailed in this article also revealed the ability of stigmatised groups to resist and respond to the stigma they experience, thus adding to understandings of stigma resistance strategies. Resistance manifested in the production of alternative narratives about the value of motherhood, which to some degree countered the economic and social devaluation of care. Stigma was also refuted by casting blame towards structural inequalities and having an awareness, borne from lived experience, of the role of the state in producing stigma and worsening their everyday struggles. However, owing to the inherent power differentials at play in the production of stigma, resistance strategies did not always protect them from internalising stigmatising discourses. Ensuring children were provided for was essential in order to manage stigma related to 'bad motherhood' persistently seen in popular tropes of 'benefit mothers'. This often entailed considerable self-sacrifice and led to further stigma. This demonstrates the strength of the 'stigma machine' (Tyler, 2020) in directing attention and blame downwards towards individuals themselves and thus reproducing inequalities.

Overall, the findings presented contribute to knowledge about the operation of stigma in the current context of amplified stigma and ongoing welfare reform. Drawing on the invaluable expertise borne from the mothers' direct experiences of stigmatisation, the article builds on existing knowledge about how classed and gendered stigma manifests in everyday life. Moreover, it allows further understanding of how such stigma is resisted, as well as illuminating the power of structurally-determined stigma, limiting the impact of individualised resistance strategies in enabling mothers to reject stigma entirely.

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