REPORT | STIGMA POWER AND POVERTY

Poverty stigma: a glue that holds poverty in place

Poverty stigma exacerbates shamefully high rates of poverty in the UK. It can affect health as much as trying to survive on a low income. How do we combat it?

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Executive summary

The UK is one of the wealthiest nations in the world, but 'since the 1980s there has been an unprecedented rise in poverty' in Britain, 'which has never been reversed' and 'current levels of poverty are around 50% higher than in the 1970s' (JRF, 2024a).

These poverty statistics are shocking, shameful. Yet we know that poverty in the UK is a political choice. Poverty is an outcome of policies that have been deliberately designed.

Alongside critically examining the political decisions and policies that have led us to the current crisis, we need to understand why such high and deep levels of poverty are deemed socially and politically acceptable. This includes scrutinizing the ways in which the stigmatisation of people living in poverty, and the associated stigmatisation of benefits and welfare systems that ostensibly exist to support people in hard times, helps make poverty palatable.[1]

JRF's current focus on poverty stigma (Campbell, 2023) has grown out of decades-long programmes of participation and advocacy work with organisations that are led by, and/or centre the voices and experiences of people and communities with lived experiences of poverty. In this work, themes of stigma and shame are repeatedly highlighted across all poverty areas.

In short, listening to what people with current lived experience of poverty prioritise in terms of action, underscores the extent to which the stigma associated with poverty, and the lack of dignity, self-worth and feelings of shame it can give rise to, can be as devastating and debilitating as material want.

"Stigma entrenches people in poverty in ways that are underestimated and poorly understood. It is dangerous and, at its worst, can kill."

Stigma Free Futures Design team member

"I've realised how serious and damaging stigma is. We need to do something to change it and give people the tools to challenge it."

Steve, Stigma Free Futures Design team

This emphasis on stigma is also reflected in social science research where the shame of poverty, and the pain of this shame, is highlighted as one of the most detrimental and disabling impacts of living in poverty (Lister, 2004; Walker, 2014; Bray et al. 2019; Tyler, 2020).

In 2022, JRF invested in a Stigma Free Futures Design team with the aim of:

- deepening JRF's and wider public understanding of poverty stigma, including the role stigma plays in normalising and exacerbating poverty
- designing actions to address and mitigate the causes and effects of poverty stigma.

This report shares the learning from Phase 1 of our work (2022-23), which aimed to develop a deeper understanding of what we mean when we talk about poverty stigma. In what follows we offer a redefinition of poverty stigma and its role in making poverty socially acceptable. This understanding of poverty stigma builds on our work together as a team, on decades of participation and advocacy work including social policy co-design work, and on academic research evidence.

We believe that poverty and poverty stigma are inextricably entangled social problems that reinforce and feed each other.

We believe that poverty and poverty stigma need to be tackled simultaneously. Anti-poverty work needs to be anti-stigma work at its roots and in every branch of collective action towards ending poverty in the UK.

We believe that designing stigma out of systems of welfare and support is integral to the fight for economic justice and economic security (Cooke, 2023).

We believe that stigma is a powerful glue that holds poverty in place, enabling and exacerbating inequalities of wealth, health and opportunity. Loosening the grip of stigma is a key lever of wider progressive social change.

Effective action on poverty stigma needs to be intersectional, collective and participatory.

Recommendations:

- Reframe poverty as an issue of economic injustice, and in relation to wealth inequality, and take an intersectional approach to addressing it.
- Develop rights-based understandings and approaches to poverty mitigation.
- Reject the stigmatising classification of disabled people and those with unpaid caring responsibilities as ‘economically inactive’.
- Combat rising in-work poverty by challenging the stigmatisation of low-paid work as 'low skilled', and by campaigning for real living wages, pay equity and maximum wage ratios.
- Destigmatise policy design and service delivery through the creation of anti-stigma poverty strategies and training tools for the public, third and charitable sectors.
- Work with journalists, artists, creative practitioners, community activists and people with lived experience to create images and stories which challenge stigmatising poverty narratives.

1. Stigma Free Futures Design team

Our team is comprised of a core group of 10 people with lived and learnt knowledge of poverty and poverty stigma.[1] We are from a range of class, ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds. Our team includes individuals with current and previous experiences of living in poverty, individuals with lived experiences of racism, with disabilities, who grew up in the care-system, and with experiences of gender and/or sexuality-based oppression and discrimination.

In our day jobs, we work in a range of sectors including a housing association, local government, the care sector, arts and youth work, health and disability charities, and academia.

In our professional and volunteer roles we variously work with children and young people living in poverty, care-experienced communities, asylum-seeker, refugee and migrant communities, disabled people and disability activist groups, and other grassroots, community and activist groups.

We share a commitment to fighting poverty and economic injustice and a belief that to abolish poverty we need to abolish poverty stigma.

'Poverty stigma' is a ‘wicked social problem’, by which we mean it is highly complex, difficult to define and challenging to solve.

In 1904, when Joseph Rowntree set up the trusts that bear his name, his aim was to ‘search out the underlying causes of weakness or evil in the community’, those ‘social evils’ he described as ‘great scourges of humanity’ (Watts and Lloyd, 2008). However, engaging with communities has taught us that many approaches to solving these ‘social evils’ actually ‘reinforce stigma, and perpetuate the divide between people in poverty and people employed by the services, or charities, working to end it’ (Watts and Lloyd, 2008).

In developing a way of working together as a team, we wanted from the outset to model approaches that both acknowledged our diversity as a group and put into practice the kinds of methods we believe are required to address a problem as complex and multifaceted as poverty stigma. Learning from movements such as ATD Fourth World (https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/) and Poverty Truth, (https://povertytruthnetwork.org/) we came to define this approach as coalitional.

Coalitional ways of working must include people with current experiences of poverty, but in ways that move beyond tokenistic or extractive forms of ‘lived experience’ or ‘service user’ inclusion. Coalitional working disrupts the dichotomy of top-down versus bottom-up approaches by acknowledging that all forms of expertise are required to remedy poverty and

poverty stigma. Coalitions function through listening relationships and hold spaces for members to lean into tensions and disputes.

Throughout our work together we have sought to embrace difference and disagreement, ‘merging knowledge’ (Bray, 2019) into new forms of collective intelligence. We call this ‘the power of we’ (Redeyefeenix, Stigma Free Futures, 2024). Coalitions are not fixed entities but are movements concerned with the development of practices that can sustain change (Prasad, 2021; Chaźez, 2013). Learnings from the process we undertook can be found in the report, Collective intelligence has the power to change systems Unlocking Systems Change: Unleashing the power of collective intelligence ′ (Campbell, 2024).

2. Rethinking poverty stigma

Stigma as a practice

At the first 2-day retreat, we began to define what poverty stigma is. This initial work involved self-reflection and group work that was at times painful. Our personal reflections on experiences of being stigmatised, and recalling them together, provoked feelings of shame and other 'bad feelings' including rage, fear, anger, despair and sadness. We leant into these feelings.

"Shame makes people want to hide it, I want to scream that 'I'm not ashamed, it's not me, it's not my fault, it's the system, why should I feel shame?'"

Nasrat, Stigma Free Futures Design team.

"You soak up the stigma, the negativity and stereotypes and all things people say about us … this becomes your inner monologue."

Steve

"We internalise stigma and let it keep us down."

Steve

Shame is an intensely powerful, negative and disabling emotion that can arise from experiences of being stigmatised. When stigma is internalised as shame or other 'bad' feelings, it scars people, it festers, and it can be reawakened, even a long time after people move out of or away from the situation or condition that initially provoked the stigmatising response (Mills, 2018; Tyler, 2020).

"If you experience poverty stigma in childhood or adolescence, you continue to re-live it. It changes you forever, it lives inside you, you feel it, but it is also difficult to communicate in words, as you might not have had the words to describe it at the time. It is difficult to translate, and the feelings can be re-triggered when you later experience or witness stigma as an adult."

Heather, Stigma Free Futures Design team.

Stigma and shame are often conflated. The 2 terms overlap in everyday usage, with 'shaming' or 'being shamed' often used to describe instances of being stigmatised. At the same time in undertaking, as China described, a ‘critical and systemic analysis of stigma’, we wanted to try and untangle the emotions, the feelings and their impact, from the actions that provoked them.

The word stigma describes the practices and experiences through which ‘degrading marks are affixed to particular bodies, people, conditions and places’, practices and experiences through

which people are othered, devalued and dehumanised in their exchanges with others (Tyler, 2020). Stigma is something which is done *to* people. Stigma describes **acts of harm**.

We focused on stigma as an active practice, asking, 'Who stigmatised us? Where did that stigma come from? Why were we made to feel ashamed?'

Our initial working definition of stigma as harmful practices was in many ways a classic one. Erving Goffman (1963, 1986), for example, argued that people acquire stigma in their exchanges with other people, 'be this a look, a glance, a comment or a more overt form of discrimination such as name-calling' (Tyler, 2000). In Goffman's definition, stigma is understood as a 'socially conditioned response to somebody who is perceived to deviate from accepted social norms, standards and/or ideals' (Tyler, 2000).

This practice-focused definition underscores that the conditions that provoke a stigmatised response are not 'natural' or unchanging but are historically and socially specific. Therefore, who or what is stigmatised changes and can be changed. This led us to the question: why, if stigma can be challenged and changed, have we been so unsuccessful in shifting the dial on poverty stigma. To explore this further we considered some previous anti-stigma campaigns.

Anti-stigma campaigns

Many charitable organisations and public health campaigns have attempted to combat the stigma associated with specific health and/or social conditions. We examined some of these campaigns together and found that they have tended to focus on:

- Over-coming barriers to seeking help.
- Changing public attitudes and behaviour towards 'the stigmatised' through, for example, programmes of public education (Tyler and Slater, 2018).

We believe that awareness-raising and education are an important part of the tool kit required to combat poverty stigma.

"We need to raise consciousness and awareness to help people deal with stigma… help people in poverty to challenge stigma so that they feel able to come together and have confidence to do so."

Patrick, Stigma Free Futures Design team.

At the same time, we felt wary about campaigns that focus on reducing stigma ‘as if it's not just the means but also the end’.

"To me, this seems like an attempt to make people feel less bad about being poor instead of dismantling the systems that produce and profit from poverty."

China, Stigma Free Futures Design team.

To take one example, in the UK there have been several high-profile anti-stigma campaigns around mental health stigma, such as the initiative Heads Together (https://www.headstogether.org.uk/about/). These frequently lead with an emphasis on disclosure, 'talking about' mental distress, as a first step towards overcoming barriers to seeking help. However, while these kinds of campaigns have arguably helped destigmatise mental health conditions, they have been less successful in addressing either:

- The drivers of (increasing) levels of mental distress (which often include factors such as racism and poverty.
- Structural barriers, including inequalities of access to adequate help or support.

For example, there are multiple correlations between poverty, low-income, mental distress and mental and physical ill-health (Mallorie, 2024; JRF b 2024). Poverty causes mental distress. Poverty makes people unwell. The absence of adequately resourced mental health services in the UK impacts most profoundly on those who are less able to advocate for treatment, and/or unable to pay for private treatment or support. Further, as the campaign group Psychologists Against Austerity (https://www.psychchange.org/psychologists-against-austerity.html) has

shown, cuts to services have been toxic for people's well-being and mental health, see also Shrecker and Bambra (2015).

The limitations of (some) previous anti-stigma campaigns taught us that a focus on consciousness-raising, awareness, and/or education will be limited in its impacts, if action doesn't simultaneously address the underlying drivers (or social determinants) (https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on) of a given stigmatised condition. In other words, you can't focus on stigma in isolation; it is necessary to understand the root causes of the problem or condition that provokes stigma. Stigma is entangled with the specific social, economic and political conditions in which it arises.

Stigma as power

Since the 1990s, definitions of stigma have been significantly expanded through a focus on the role played by stigma in the 'exploitation, control or exclusion of others' (Bonnington and Rose, 2014; Parker and Aggleton, 2003; Link and Phelan 2001, 2014; Tyler, 2020). This has seen a new focus on:

- How stigma is exercised both within face-to-face social interactions and within the wider network of relationships between people, communities, organisations, media culture and the state.

- Where stigmatising attitudes originate, and how stigma circulates within society, for example, how it is invoked and provoked in political speech and newspaper headlines, and seeps into everyday social settings.
- The ways in which stigma intersects with and amplifies existing inequalities, for example inequalities associated with class, disabilities, race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality or citizenship status.
- How stigma is embedded in social and institutional experiences and systems, for example, the ways in which some forms of stigma, such as misogyny and/or racism or ableism, can pervade multiple aspects and arms of organisational work (Casey, 2023).
- How stigmatisation takes shape and hold in specific contexts, times and places, including how the stigmatisation of particular groups, such as transgender people, asylum-seekers, benefit recipients, disabled people, or single parents (mainly mothers), intensifies in different phases of government policy and news media cycles.

Resisting stigma

Mid-way through our first year of work, we commissioned the sociologist Imogen Tyler to produce the literature review, 'What has worked (and what hasn't) in anti-stigma activism?' (2023), focusing on how different groups and communities have resisted stigma. Concentrating on social movements from the 1960s onwards, we purposefully asked her not to limit this review to campaigns that self-described as 'anti-stigma'. This broad and wide review

included anti-racist movements, such as the civil rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, disability rights movement, feminist and queer movements for equality and liberation, as well as campaigns against the stigma of specific health conditions, such as HIV and AIDS.

One powerful movement we discussed was ACT UP: AIDS coalition to unleash power (https://www.met.police.uk/cy-GB/heddluoedd/metropolitan-police/areas/about-us/about-the-met/bcr/baroness-casey-review/), formed in the US in 1987 by diverse non-partisan queer community groups 'united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis'. The primary aims of ACT UP were to gain access to medical treatments and to campaign for coordinated national policies to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Deploying the symbol/slogan 'Silence = Death', ACT UP both countered homophobic political and media representations of HIV/AIDS, while simultaneously pressuring for access to drugs, treatment, care and welfare. ACT UP met our definition of a coalitional anti-stigma movement. Grounded in queer pride, it fought drivers, causes, symptoms and barriers together, and in doing so, contested the stigma of the virus and the stigma faced by the queer communities that were (initially) disproportionally impacted by it.

Health and social movements like ACT UP taught us that stigma is 'never passively accepted by those it is impressed upon' (Tyler, 2020). On the contrary, across history, experiences of being stigmatised, dehumanised, and othered have been mobilised by grassroots communities

as a unifying base for social action. We explored this together:

“The first step to resisting stigma is to know it’s not your fault, that it is caused by things beyond you, that you are not alone and that we can stand up against it.”

Steve

"Shame, this is the system, shaming people, using shame to keep people quiet, prevent people from sharing things. If we can enable people to share, then stigma (and poverty) can be turned into a shared cause for action."

"You know you can get out of it if you know it’s not you and that it is them making you feel like that. It’s like a bad relationship, you can see how it limits you."

"Stigma divides people, and works like a form of coercive control… working to destigmatise poverty [is an] important strategy to build solidarity and collectively mobilise to tackle poverty."

Nasrat

"Stigma is a form of power characterised by both coercion and resistance as people seek to defend themselves against shaming judgements and the psychological and material impacts of those judgements."

Imogen, Stigma Free Futures Design team.

However, thinking through the lens of common cause and resistance also clarified for us why poverty stigma is a particularly difficult problem to solve. For unlike social movements that build on shared identities, poverty is not an identity nor is it a condition that people living in or with it can easily embrace or reclaim.

“Other identities cross over with poverty, intersect with poverty and can make you more vulnerable to poverty, but poverty itself is rarely seen as common ground.”

Hal, Stigma Free Futures Design team

"Disability, mental illness, race, LGBTQ+, these are stigmatised, but can be reclaimed because people can become proud of these things through social movements, but poverty is an inherently undesirable state."

"Poverty, many people still reject the label and distance themselves. People just don’t coalesce around that which they find shameful."

Heather

Poverty is a state you find yourself in against your will. Poverty is a situation that you want to get out of as quickly as possible. People move in and out of poverty. Poverty cuts across very

different groups and communities: children, pensioners, disabled people, single mums, carers, the unemployed and the underpaid. Poverty and poverty stigma always intersect with other forms of social stigma, such as classism, racism, homophobia, ableism.

“You can’t separate poverty out from other forms of oppression.”

Nkechi, Stigma Free Futures Design team

This insight is essential for understanding both the ways in which poverty disproportionately affects particular groups (JRF, 2024a), and the multiple ways in which different forms of stigma can work together to reinforce social hierarchies and asymmetries of power, wealth and privilege.

"It is crucial for us to take an intersectional lens, a focus on other identity/issue-based issues needs to ensure it doesn't further the exclusion of those from a lower socio-economic background in its activities and vice versa (like white-led mental health movements.)"

China

Dismantling poverty stigma will require an intersectional social movement that pivots not on identities, but on common causes, namely the systems of social and economic injustice that underpin poverty. While poverty might be a difficult cause to organise around, as the shared condition of so many facing inequality, injustice and oppression in our society, might it

nevertheless be mobilised to create solidarities between grassroots communities, organisations and movements?

3. Applying a stigma-free lens to address poverty

Reframing poverty as economic injustice

Poverty stigma leads to rich people feeling like they have a right to keep their wealth whilst people in poverty need to be kept poor to teach them to behave better. Individuals are told to change, which means the real drivers do not get addressed. Stigma excuses people with power from having to act, and enables them to shrug off responsibility.;

"Focusing the blame on individuals normalises inequality, makes it acceptable; 'we don't have to act'. There is a lack of accountability for those perpetuating poverty."

Nasrat

While it is challenging to organise around poverty as the basis for a common movement for social and economic justice, we did find historical precedents for grassroots anti-poverty movements that embraced an anti-stigma ethos. For example, The Poor People's Campaign (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poor_People%27s_Campaign) initiated by Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Christian_Leadership_Conference) (SCLC) in 1968 were a notable attempt to produce a coalitional intersectional rights-based movement against poverty in the US.

A recent UK example of this kind of rights-based movement against poverty is the Right to Food Campaign (https://www.ianbyrne.org/righttofood) initiated by Liverpool MP Ian Byrne. This coalitional movement seeks to challenge poverty and the associated stigma through a combination of grassroots action and the creation of legal frameworks that enshrine the right to food in UK law.

Another rights-based example is the recent use of the term 'povertyism' by the UN, which attempts to align poverty with other forms of status discrimination (such as racism, sexism, ableism) as a vehicle for the creation of anti-discrimination frameworks to 'prohibit discrimination on grounds of socioeconomic disadvantage' (De Schutter, 2022; Bennett, 2023). By stressing the right to live a life free of poverty and poverty stigma, and by reframing poverty as economic injustice, these approaches challenge the individualising 'feckless poor' narratives that feed poverty stigma, directing responsibility for poverty away from individuals and families, upwards, towards governments and policy regimes.

Wealth inequality

Given poverty is a consequence of the uneven distribution of wealth and resources in our society, the kind of 'wealth inequality' framings of poverty advocated by organisations such as the Equality Trust, (https://equalitytrust.org.uk/) may also help combat poverty stigma. Notably, as we enter a period of peak inequality (Dorling, 2018), wealth inequality framings are currently gaining ground, for example, the current campaigning work of 'inequality economist' Gary Stevenson.

"What if it was a requirement that every communication about poverty data produced by organisations and charities, such as JRF, had to be framed in relationship to income and wealth distribution data?"

Hal

How, for example, would public perceptions of poverty change if reports and headlines about poverty data were framed in relationship to increases on wealth inequality? We believe that wealth inequality framings of poverty have the potential to transform public understanding of the drivers and causes of poverty in the UK, and would help shift the dial on poverty stigma. New work on the relationship between extreme wealth and extreme poverty is being actively explored by JRF work as part of their Emerging Futures programme

(https://www.jrf.org.uk/wealth-funding-and-investment-practice) of work.

Recommendation 1: reframe poverty as an issue of economic injustice and in relation to wealth inequality.

Recommendation 2: develop rights-based understandings and approaches to poverty mitigation.

Stigma and low-paid work

Poverty in the UK is increasingly an outcome of low-paid and insecure work. Low-paid work is frequently stigmatised as 'low-skilled'. We believe that the stigmatisation of some forms of work functions to keep labour costs low in ways that are directly contributing to the current poverty and cost-of-living crisis. It is notable that people from racially minoritised backgrounds, in particular people of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, African, Caribbean and Chinese heritage, are disproportionately represented in both poverty statistics (Matejik and Earwaker, 2022) and in poorly paid and undervalued work (Debbie-Weekes Bernard, 2017). This undervalued work includes paid work in caring sectors, in which women and people from racially minoritised backgrounds are significantly over-represented.

Activists and scholars have long emphasised the ways in which the low-paid and unpaid work of care (The Care Collective, 2020) intersects with other structural forms of oppression and

discrimination, particularly racism and sexism (Women's Budget Group; The Care Collective, 2020; Kenway, 2023).

A more sustained focus on 'work and worth' would allow us to ascertain how stigma is entangled with the political economy of labour markets, and in particular how stigma functions to devalue particular forms of work, especially the work of care (The Care Collective, 2020). New collaborative research, such as that being undertaken by JRF Trustee Hilary Cottam on what 'a good working life looks like' in the context of 'how we create new forms of care and connection in our lives and communities', is an integral part of this process of destigmatisation and revaluation (Cottam, 2020).

Recommendation 3: combat rising in-work poverty by challenging the stigmatisation of low-paid work as 'low skilled', and by campaigning for real living wages, pay equity and maximum wage ratios.

Decoupling work and worth

Destigmatising poverty includes recognising and valuing everybody's social contributions. This will not be possible without changing how we think about what Beverly Skeggs (2011) terms 'person value' more broadly. Poverty and poverty stigma particularly impact those limited in their ability to undertake paid work due, for example, to caring responsibilities (Thompson et

al., 2023), or are unable to work due to ill-health, disability or indeed, with the rising retirement age, life stage.

We believe that:

"No-one is a burden or should be defined by their relationship or ability to work. We need to decouple work and worth. Work does not equal worth."

Heather

“We have value in the world beyond our socio-economic status.”

Hal

Imagining and practising alternative forms of economics is central to changing opinions on poverty and poverty stigma, as is being variously explored by organisations such as Doughnut Economics Action Lab, (https://doughnuteconomics.org/about-doughnut-economics) The New Economy Coalition, (https://neweconomy.net/about/) the Solidarity Economy Association (https://www.solidarityeconomy.coop/about-us) and more.

Recommendation 4: reject the stigmatising classification of disabled people and those with unpaid caring responsibilities as ‘economically inactive’.

Stigma and welfare

The stigma associated with seeking and/or being in receipt of 'relief', whether that 'aid' takes the form of government benefits or charitable gifts, has been a central feature of welfare provision in the UK for at least 500 hundred years (Walker and Chase, 2013). These connections are very well-evidenced, and it was particularly notable that the roll-out of dramatic government reforms and cuts to the UK welfare and benefits system from 2010 (dubbed 'austerity'), was accompanied by a notable intensification in welfare stigma, with unprecedented levels of stigma directed towards benefits claimants (Taylor-Gooby, 2013; Patrick, 2017; Spicker, 2020; O'Hara, 2020). Indeed, 'for several years, the menace of welfare-dependent people was maintained as rolling news by politicians, government officials, think tanks, media executives, journalists and television producers' (Tyler, 2020).

The production of top-down stigma narratives is a tried and tested method for generating and maintaining public support for punitive measures and cuts. As Tom O'Grady (2022) argues, our current political system is paralysed by this narrative and 'public opinion has remained stubbornly negative' towards benefit and welfare policies designed to reduce poverty'. Such is the grip of this stigma framing, and the purported fear of public attitudes, that politicians and those involved in the delivery of services (sometimes inadvertently) reinforce this narrative.

"Narratives used across public services have the potential to reinforce stigma, and perpetuate the divide between people in poverty and people employed by the services working to end it. Examples include talk of 'tackling' or 'combating' public spending on Universal Credit, and discussions about 'frontline' services, words with connotations of battles and confrontation pit public service workers 'against' people trying to access services, reinforcing an already unequal power dynamic."

Stigma Free Futures Design team member blog (https://www.jrf.org.uk/on-the-frontline-of-poverty-how-public-services-reinforce-stigma), 2023

The violent effect of stigma in the benefits system is well-documented. For example, on disability benefits stigma: Benstead, 2019; Ryan, 2020; Mills and Pring, 2023.

Stigma is also present within the third sector and within the charitable systems of support that have proliferated since 2010 to plug the gaps as state safety-nets have failed, including foodbanks and other emergency forms of aid (Garthwaite, 2016). Often despite their best efforts, charitable forms of giving are grounded in the same moral distinctions - between deserving and undeserving people, on which tax-funded benefit systems pivot.

"Stigma is a powerful method of control, allowing charities and services to gatekeep their resources more easily."

From a group discussion

One of our team, who works for a housing association, discussed how stigma operates in third sector organisations, in terms of both how judgments are made in face-to-face interactions, and more broadly in terms of how bureaucratic language is employed as a distancing and dehumanising device. As she reflected:

"Technical language alienates people who use services, such as housing associations building 'units' rather than homes, and the DWP referring to people as 'claimants'. Removing the 'human' element dehumanises and disguises the impact that policies and services have on the people they affect and creates an environment in which people feel disempowered. This harm can cause irreparable damage to people's self-esteem, sense of identity and mental health, and add to the trauma already caused by poverty. People's trust in public services is damaged, and they are less inclined to seek help in future as a result."

Stigma Free Futures Design team member

This is evidenced in research commissioned by Turn2us (Baumberg et al., 2020) which 'suggests that stigma is playing a role in explaining non-take-up of benefits and tax credits, with around 1 in 4 respondents to the MORI survey giving at least one stigma-related reason for delaying or not claiming'.

We believe that:

- Welfare stigma is a central means through which governments have won public consent for attacks on social provisions.
- Welfare stigma is cultivated and employed as a mechanism for rationing relief (JRF, 2023).
- Welfare stigma prevents people from accessing the support that they need.

What can we do to dismantle welfare stigma?

Ensuring that learning from those with lived experience of poverty is incorporated into the design of service delivery is a crucial first step in destigmatising and re-humanising services.

We need to build on existing examples of ‘what works’ in the development of organisational, local, regional and national anti-stigma poverty strategies. This includes the co-creation of training tools to support organizations to destigmatise service delivery and policies across the public, third and charitable sectors.

Recommendation 5: destigmatise policies and service delivery through the co-creation of anti-stigma training tools and anti-stigma poverty strategies across the public, third and charitable sectors.

Words and images matter

A central challenge when addressing poverty stigma is how to represent the everyday struggles of getting by on a low income in ways that don't dehumanise and 'other' people.

"The language we use and don't use when talking about poverty matters profoundly."

Patrick

Narratives about poverty include both the words, graphics and visual images that organisations use when communicating and sharing poverty data and research. For example, overreliance on statistical evidence has been criticised for reinforcing **us** and **them** distinctions in ways that distance us from the human impacts of poverty.

Poverty stigma functions on different scales and across multiple sites, for example, in interactions with frontline services, but also in the media and in online contexts.

- Face-to-face: people living in poverty frequently state that they have been stigmatised in their interactions with government agencies, health, housing and charitable services.
- At a distance: people living in poverty describe the negative impact of navigating stigmatising depictions of benefit and welfare recipients as lazy, feckless scroungers in political speech, newspapers, on television and social media.

The powerful narrative that poverty is caused by personal flaws or 'bad life decisions' rather than policy choices or economic inequality has become ‘deeply embedded in the public consciousness with serious ramifications for how financially vulnerable people are seen, spoken about and treated’ (O’Hara, 2020). In this way, the stigmatising framings of poverty enable unjust and punitive policies to be implemented. These framings shape and inform how we interact with each other in our everyday lives.

"People in poverty themselves and those who consider themselves allies also reproduce this stigma."

Nkechi

“We are all creators and perpetrators of stigma.”

Steve

How poverty is socially and culturally framed and storied shapes both people's lived experiences of poverty and what the public believe are the causes of poverty (Brook, 2019). Getting this wrong can feed **poverty denialism**, namely the belief that if people in the UK are experiencing poverty they must be individually to blame (Shildrick, 2018). We reflected as a team on the power of stigmatising framings of poverty, what work these framings do, and how we can resist these powerful narratives.

"Stigma breeds in the shadows but it also breeds on the front pages of newspapers and in political speeches. We need a critical and systemic analysis of stigma – rather than approaches that are tokenistic. Rather than 'tell us your story', we need to find ways to use the power of stories that expose how stigma is embedded within systems, and we also have to ask what is the stigma the cover story for? What does it distract us away from?"

China

Public opinion and perceptions are not fixed. We can all help reduce poverty stigma.

"We have it within our power to resist reproducing stigmatising narratives. The public isn't a static entity. A 'public' doesn't exist until you create it, it is produced through what people read/watch/do. Action on stigma can create new 'publics' that see and think differently."

Imogen

To combat poverty stigma, we need to change the story on poverty by developing coalitional working between those who craft the stories, images and narratives, and anti-poverty activists.

“We need to speak to the people who constantly battle it, give them the tools to tackle it.”

Steve

Recommendation 6: work with journalists, artists, creative practitioners to co-produce images and stories which challenge stigmatising poverty narratives.

4. Conclusion and next phase

In our work we have examined both the causes and consequences of poverty stigma. We've summarised our key learnings as:

- Stigma isn't a 'natural outcome' of poverty. Stigma is **socially produced**.
- Stigma is **manufactured** by the powerful, including politicians, journalists, television producers.
- Stigma **frames** public perceptions about the causes of poverty, shifting blame away from the systems that created it onto individuals.
- Stigma **shapes** how people living in poverty are represented and how people experience poverty.
- Stigma is **designed** into systems and programmes of welfare and support, and functions as both a deterrent to seeking help and a tool for rationing resources.
- Stigma seeps into everyday interactions, and for those on the receiving end, the psychological impact can be as devastating as the struggle involved in surviving on a low-income.

We have learnt that stigma not only causes harm to individuals, but is a **structural component** of the unequal and unjust social and economic structures from which poverty results.

“Stigma is the machinery of inequality.”

Imogen

Poverty stigma is a barrier to seeking help. Feeling ashamed of being poor, and the ever-present anxiety of being stigmatised, anticipating stigma, stops you seeking help and support. The gnawing anxiety that your lack of resources will be 'exposed' to others in everyday encounters, for example, in the school classroom or playground, at the supermarket till, in the workplace, or in your interactions with frontline workers and services, including welfare and benefits agencies, housing agencies or health professionals.

Poverty stigma causes mental distress. It entrenches feelings of a lack of agency, powerlessness, hopelessness and despair, and exacerbates anxiety and depression. The harms of poverty stigma can be traumatising and long lasting. For example, childhood experiences of being shamed and feeling ashamed can be difficult to process and recover from.

Poverty stigma leads to social isolation. People living in poverty may go to great lengths to conceal from others the scale of the difficulties they are facing, and shield themselves from social interactions that might expose their problems.

Poverty stigma is cumulative. It wears down people's self-esteem and self-worth over time. It makes people lose their confidence, it narrows people’s horizons, and diminishes their hope for a better future.

Poverty stigma includes self-stigma. Feeling that your inability to get yourself out of poverty is a consequence of your own inadequacy or failings.

Poverty stigma is a social form of control.

Poverty stigma is used as tool for rationing resources. Even organisations and services set up to help people living in poverty may (purposefully or inadvertently) reproduce the stigma that keeps poverty in place.

Poverty stigma intersects with other forms of social stigma, discrimination and oppression . Racism, sexism, class, gender, disability and citizenship status.

Poverty stigma is a form of devaluation. It devalues people, it devalues (some) forms of paid and unpaid work, and those unable to work. Combatting stigma requires **practices of revaluation**. Stigma lives and breathes through our values, its power shrivels when we practice alternative values.

Stigma makes poverty socially acceptable. It constitutes a major barrier to achieving greater economic justice and economic security (Cooke, 2023).

Poverty stigma is a powerful glue that holds poverty in place. Enabling and exacerbating inequalities of wealth, health and opportunity.

Poverty stigma is entangled with and supports prevailing economic logic and polices. For example the that have dominated British government economic policies since the 1980s, the period in which poverty dramatically rose in the UK have led to the periodic intensification of stigma against particular groups, such as benefit claimants (Hall and O'Shea, 2013; JRF, 2024a). Ending stigma requires economic systems policies and practices that work for the majority of people and not against them, like those being developed by the Pathfinders' organisations that JRF currently resources.

Poverty stigma is a wicked social problem and tackling stigma requires an intersectional coalitional approach at the levels of individuals, communities, institutions and society as a whole.

Stigma Free Futures, the next phase of our work

We began this briefing by emphasising what we know from JRF data, which is that the UK is in a poverty crisis. Effective action on poverty and poverty stigma needs to be intersectional, coalitional and participatory. These are our key findings:

- Poverty and poverty stigma are inextricably entangled social problems that reinforce and feed each other.

- Poverty and poverty stigma are inseparable and need to be tackled simultaneously. Anti-poverty work needs to be anti-stigma work at its roots and in every branch of collective action towards ending poverty in the UK.
- Designing stigma out of social systems of welfare and support is integral to the fight for economic justice and economic security (Cooke, 2023).
- Stigma is a powerful glue that holds poverty in place, enabling and exacerbating inequalities of wealth, health and opportunity. Loosening the grip of stigma is key lever of wider progressive social change.

Our redefinition of stigma in Phase 1 of our work is the platform from which we are now designing Phase 2 (2024-25). As we work towards stigma free futures, Phase 2 will focus on 3 key areas of action:

1. Creating tools that can support organisations to design stigma out of policies and services.
2. Building communities of action to test these tools.
3. Commissioning creative projects with people on the receiving end of stigma to produce ‘anti-stigma’ image and story banks for journalists, news and charitable organisations.

Note

1. The stigma of poverty includes being labelled as 'poor'. While we use the term ‘poverty’ in this report, we want to emphasise that poverty is a condition of economic injustice. People are not poor, rather millions are forced to live in poverty because they are being failed by the state, by government policies and by welfare systems.

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