

Adding to the shame of poverty: the public, politicians and the media

In visit after visit to some of Britain's most deprived areas, I came to see how urgently that life change was needed. In neighbourhoods blighted by worklessness – where gangs were prevalent, debt and drugs the norm, families broken down – those living there had one thing in common; they were for the most part dependent on the state for their daily needs. With income inequality under Labour the worst for a generation, whilst the middle class majority were aware of the problems in poor communities, they remained largely unaware of the true nature of life on some of our estates. For too long we let these problems be ghettoised as though they were a different country. Even now, for the most part they remain out of sight – meaning people are shocked when they are confronted with a TV programme such as 'Benefits Street'.

Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, speech reproduced in *The Spectator*, 23 January 2014

THERE ARE MANY PARALLELS between the present era, commencing with the 1984 Fowler welfare reforms that questioned whether all poverty was 'genuine', and the decades leading up to the Poor Law Reform Act in 1834, which sought to enforce distinctions between the 'impotent poor' (those too old, sick or young to work) who warranted assistance and the 'master evil', the 'able-bodied poor', who did not.¹ Well-intentioned reformers were, and are, apt to generalise from the particular and to underplay structural causes of poverty. In the earlier era, this was because theories of cyclical and structural causes of unemployment had yet to be systematically articulated.² Latterly, it seems to be because of the dominance of the work incentives paradigm based on rational economics and ideas of dependency derived from right of centre American opinionists, such as Lawrence Mead and Charles Murray. Either way, in both eras, politicians have

The denigration of people in poverty is not new. It has been evident since at least the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII when the Tudor state assumed *de facto* responsibility for the care of 'paupers', and the terms 'deserving' and 'undeserving' were coined. The words used have changed and the vehemence of the language has ebbed and flowed, but the divisive, self-justifying distinction between the workless, rogues, idlers and scroungers on the one hand and the hard-working, law-abiding, responsible, 'middle class', taxpayer has not. Robert Walker and Elaine Chase draw on their recent research to highlight how recent welfare reforms continue our long tradition of shaming people who live in poverty.

chosen highly targeted policies with strict conditions to deter 'abuse' and to 'encourage' work. Politically, such a policy stance chimes well with popular opinion and, in the era of the focus group, political campaigns can fine tune communication to appeal to the median voter. This is what New Labour governments did when they juxtaposed rights against responsibilities, the latter insinuating the 'irresponsible' benefit recipient. However, policies supported

by popular opinion are not necessarily appropriate, just, nor effective. Equally, such policies are hard to change in a democracy because they appeal to and benefit the majority: the Poor Law lasted until 1948 and beyond, despite growing consensus over many decades that it was profoundly dysfunctional.³ Drawing on the about to be published *Poverty and Shame* project, we argue here that, like the Poor Law, the current direction of welfare reform in Britain is severely dysfunctional and for similar reasons.

People in poverty typically feel deep shame as a consequence of being unable to live up to their own aspirations and to societal expectations for reasons of limited income. They are additionally shamed on a daily basis by the people they meet, in their dealings with officialdom and through the fall-out of political and media discourse. Shame, recognised by psychologists as the most invidious of the social emotions, undermines self-esteem and causes people to retreat socially, thereby lessening their social capital while reducing their sense of agency and personal efficacy. Rather than, as intended, distinguishing the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' through the institutional shaming of the 'workhouse test', the 1834 Poor Law had 'the perverse effect of stigmatising the entire body of the poor'.⁴ Likewise, the current language describing people in receipt of welfare, or neighbourhoods blighted by gangs, debt, drugs and worklessness, stigmatises all on low incomes, further demeaning their lives and undermining their sense of agency and self-respect. Inadvertently or otherwise, such language serves to keep people in poverty in place and supports the status quo of privilege by minimising demands for meaningful redistribution.

Poverty-related shame is structural

That people in poverty are stigmatised and feel shame is nothing new. Adam Smith recognised this to be so in 1776 and subsequent generations of scholars have revealed its varying manifestations in different eras. Moreover, such stigmatisation is not restricted to Britain. In 2000, the *Voices of the Poor* study, based on the experiences of 60,000 people in poverty in over 50 countries, exposed people feeling 'marked' by shabby clothing and ashamed at not being able adequately to feed their children or maintain personal hygiene.⁵

The *Poverty and Shame* research documents how people in settings as diverse as Beijing, Lahore, Oslo, Seoul, rural Uganda and India, as well as Britain, experience shame associated with poverty. Such shame adds to the pain of

poverty and has consequences as adverse as depression and attempted suicide. People in poverty emphasised how important it was to keep up appearances, to fulfil their obligations to family and community and, insofar as was possible, to appear 'normal'. The research describes parents in abject poverty in Uganda endeavouring to ensure that their children were turned out looking clean and tidy, the efforts of low-income parents in a prosperous Oslo suburb to ensure that their children did not stand out from anyone else's; and, in Britain, the symbolic importance of furniture polish and a haircut in portraying dignity over overt dependency.

But keeping up appearances sometimes led people into a charade, pretending that things were fine and concealing problems rather than attempting to tackle them, all the while living in constant fear of being found out. They often spoke of avoiding settings in which they might be 'outed' or otherwise shamed, such as family gatherings, community events or social outings. Some people had become so isolated that it was sometimes difficult to determine whether their social isolation was deliberate, a symptom of depression possibly triggered by poverty (or perhaps something else), a consequence of being shunned by other people, or a combination of all three.

The notion of being shunned by other people is consistent with the two components of shame identified by psychologists: shame is felt as a negative assessment of self, but is also imposed by others through their talk and behaviour. Shaming at the individual level is often an expression of contempt that may be unconscious or else deliberate and intended to hurt and/or encourage the person targeted to reform her or his ways. While structurally it is popularly believed that blaming and shaming can change behaviour for the better and foster social cohesion by encouraging adherence to social norms, the empirical evidence is clear that shame merely hurts and does not change behaviour, even if behavioural change were possible. In the case of poverty mainly caused by structural, rather than individual, factors, people in poverty are unable to change their situation however much they are shamed.

The repeated claim made by people in poverty that they are shunned and shamed by others is confirmed in the *Poverty and Shame* research by more affluent individuals living nearby who participated in group discussions in each of the countries. Despite cultural differences, they saw poverty and its causes similarly and admitted

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avoiding, and in some cases exploiting, people living in poverty. Moreover, poverty was generally conceptualised by the more affluent in absolute terms relating to the lack of resources necessary for survival: housing, clothing and food. Once they had engaged with the idea of relative poverty, respondents were prone to explain the causes of such poverty in terms of individual behaviour and weak character often, in the case of Britain, India, Pakistan and Uganda, using robust negative language, dismissing people in poverty as being lazy, inadequate and untrustworthy. In China and Norway, the use of stigmatising language was more muted and respondents juxtaposed structural accounts of the causes of poverty against the possibility of individual misfortune. Nevertheless, they identified for opprobrium the workshy and, in China, offenders receiving benefits, migrants and ‘beggars’ and, in Norway, those ‘exploiting’ the generous benefit system to support an alternative lifestyle. The concepts of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ emerged spontaneously, except in India and Uganda, where all people in poverty were generally believed to be undeserving.

Affluent respondents failed to recognise the importance that people in poverty attached to keeping up appearances, fulfilling their obligations to family and community and ensuring, insofar as they could, that their children did not have to endure the indignity of difference. These values tended to reinforce the belief that ‘the poor’ were profligate and wasted money on show, and prioritised short-term needs over saving or investing for their futures. Some of the more affluent confirmed that they avoided people in poverty, even members of their own family, since they were degrading and always seeking financial assistance. Many respondents in Britain and Norway reported never having visited low-income neighbourhoods, but gleaned their information exclusively via the media. In India, Pakistan and Uganda, rich and poor often lived in close proximity but this did not necessarily reduce stereotyping. Often people in poverty were employed as servants with social distance being carefully policed. Servants were allowed only in certain parts of the home and to do some things but not others, not least because they were considered both untrustworthy and dirty, with ‘filthy habits’. Social protection schemes, in India for example, were disliked by those who were better off because they provided an alternative source of income, pushed up wage costs and undermined the respect that servants accorded to their employers. In rural Uganda, the least well off were often not invited to important commu-

nity meetings because they were considered to have nothing worthwhile to say.

While people experiencing poverty seek social engagement and social acceptance, they often cannot afford the former and are not afforded the latter. Indeed, their attempts at engagement are often rejected and used as evidence to justify existing differentials: ‘the poor’ are poor because ‘they’ try to be like ‘us’.

Shame institutionalised as stigma

Stigma is the institutional equivalent of social shaming, but is typically divisive rather than cohesive in its outcome and often in its intent. It necessarily divides the eligible from the ineligible, the deserving from the undeserving. Stigma can be, and often is, evident in the framing, structure and delivery of welfare benefits. Framing relates to the objectives of policy, the way that policies are discussed and the causal logic that justifies a policy design. But while framing is the focus of this article, people in poverty are often most directly affected by the structure of policy and its delivery. Many studies in Britain, including the *Poverty and Shame* research, have documented the stigma of benefit receipt: the public confession of failure; the presumption of guilt; the standing in line; the jumping through hoops; the repeated filling of forms; the intrusion; the poor service; the sense of being dehumanised and treated merely as a number. The *Poverty and Shame* research found similar experiences abroad, sometimes more extreme (naming benefit recipients on public noticeboards in China, means-testing of the extended family in South Korea) and sometimes unintentional (in Norway, stages in a welfare-to-work programme constitute a ladder of shame because beneficiaries feel they have no control over their own progress towards work). Such experiences add to shame and further undermine self-esteem and self-confidence and thereby arguably lessen the chances of people escaping poverty. Again, this is consistent with experimental evidence concerning the negative consequences of shame and points to stigma undermining the effectiveness of anti-poverty policy.

The framing of policy is important because it provides the lens that defines the policy problem to be solved and the tenor of the debate that creates the environment in which the policy is embedded and delivered. In Britain, the policy problem is increasingly defined to be not poverty *per se* but welfare policies that are deemed to create dependency, worklessness, broken families, bad debts and ‘dysfunctional’

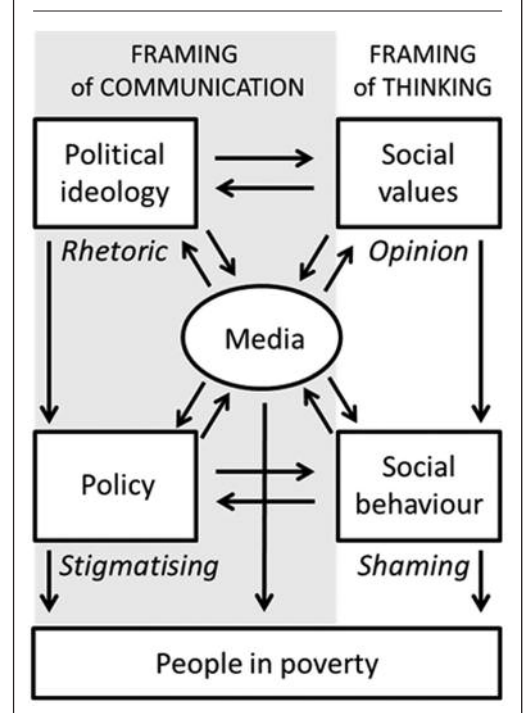
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communities. The quotation heading this article is merely a recent formulation of this belief structure, one that is not supported by convincing empirical evidence. It was the foundation of New Labour's welfare and activation policies, premised on the belief that social security 'encouraged dependency, lowered self-esteem and denied opportunity and responsibility in almost equal measure',⁶ leading to the moralistic tag-line of 'work for those who can, support for those who cannot'. It similarly provides the ideological foundations for universal credit, the flagship of current reform, that were never challenged by the opposition front bench during passage of the legislation. While the nominal target is the welfare system, the culprits in this discourse are the people in poverty who make use of the benefit system and are deemed to be further corrupted through doing so. As the 1834 Poor Law Act led to indiscriminate pauperisation, so this discourse eliminates even the distinction between deserving and undeserving; those who the Poor Law exempted, the 'impotent', are now subject to various tests of 'impotency', increased conditionality and to the attendant shame of such sanctions.

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In Britain, there is a close correspondence between this political framing discourse, grounded in ideology, and public opinion that reflects shared values and shapes personal behaviour. This correspondence is reflected, mediated and perhaps even facilitated by the popular press (see Figure 1). Baumberg and others have convincingly demonstrated, for example, that people's opinions are affected by reading negative stories in newspapers and moreover, that once changed, their new opinions become self-sustaining.⁷ People in poverty participating in the *Poverty and Shame* research were often pained by their condemnation in the popular press, while affluent respondents, though dismissing what they termed 'the gutter press', often justified their beliefs by reference to stories carried by tabloid newspapers that frequently equate poverty with benefit receipt. The British press competes for readership and often feeds off stories provided by politicians competing for votes. Politicians sound out public opinion, learn what will appeal to the electorate and either offer what the electorate wants or else package policies in ways that are likely to prove most palatable. The result of this triad of politics, media and public opinion over the last 30 years has been an iterative dynamic in which more abusive language and stricter conditionality become the foundation for the next phase of policy reform. Ideas and language once confined to the streets, the notion, for example, that

Figure 1: **Framing and shaming**



worklessness 'breeds' intergenerational poverty and creates a 'semi-permanent underclass', are now found in government reports.⁸

These reinforcing dynamics so prominent in Britain are, however, not found everywhere (see Figure 2). In Norway, where social solidarity and universal policies have pushed poverty to the margins of society and the public consciousness, poverty is used as a vehicle to criticise the inadequacies of policy in a press that serves as a noticeboard for individual and group opinion. Somewhat similarly, the traditional role of the media in India, dating to the British Raj, is to criticise government for being insufficiently generous in its anti-poverty policies. In the state-controlled press in China, government policies are lauded as a generous response to a difficult problem, while in Uganda the government-owned press seems to reflect the discriminatory attitudes of the affluent while avoiding any direct policy critique.

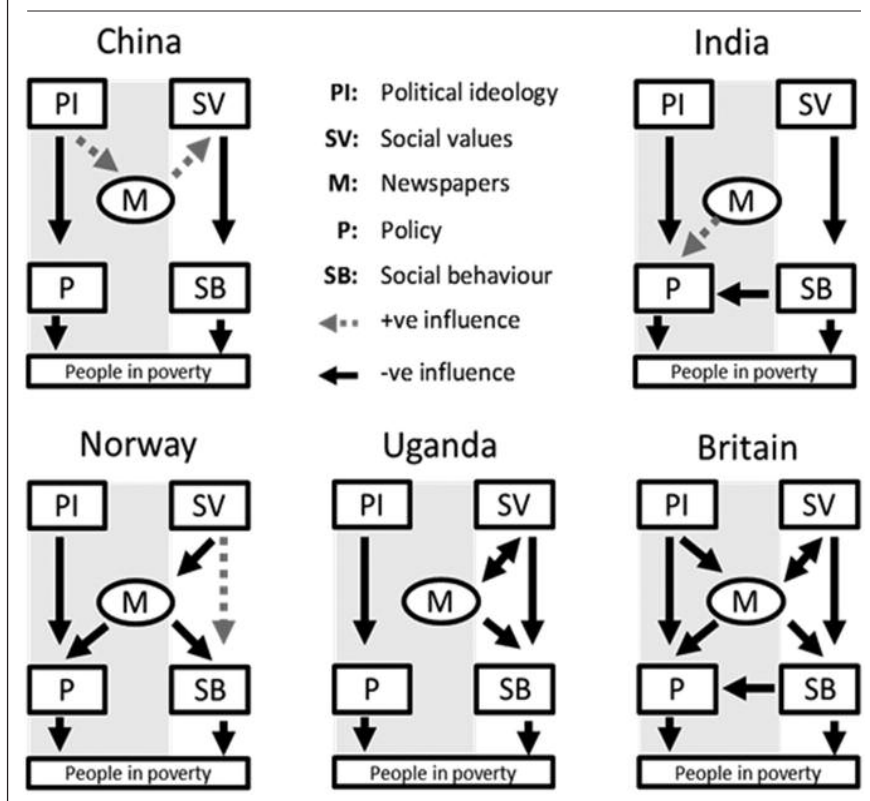
Nevertheless, despite these differences in the role played by the media, the vilification of people in poverty, if not always in public discourse then in private conversations and actual behaviour, is apparent in each country studied in the *Poverty and Shame* research. This finding demands further explanation, for it imposes a major constraint on attempts to reframe anti-poverty debates and introduce policies that are less stigmatising and therefore more effective. One credible possibility, consistent with sociological

theory, is that poverty-related shaming mirrors the work ethic employed as a mechanism of social control: work effort is encouraged by the threat of shame that is applied to those who fail economically, namely people who are poor and especially those who claim welfare benefits. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by authoritarian governments in China and previously in South Korea that have been able to impose this dynamic, making economic success a nationalistic goal and personal economic achievement a badge of citizenship. The World Values Survey reveals exceptionally strong public support for the work ethic in these two countries. But, while democratic governments may not be able to enforce an ideology in this way, substantial popular support for the work ethic suggests that they may not need to. This could be because the work ethic additionally serves to legitimate existing differentials, justifying why one person is rich while another is not; poverty is a just reward for not fulfilling one's duty to work or even a natural punishment for idleness. The same logic also provides the affluent public with an easy excuse for not supporting policies that redistribute more resources to people in poverty: they are undeserving.

The right to dignity

The above analysis may explain why people in poverty have been humiliated for 500 years or more, but it offers a bleak prognosis for progressive policy reform. There are, though, two indications that the framing of anti-poverty policies may be gently shifting at a global level. First, in 2012, the International Labour Organization adopted Recommendation 202, requesting that all signatory governments, Britain included, have 'respect for the rights and dignity of people covered by the social security guarantees'. Secondly, the World Bank, with an eye on the growing body of international law emanating from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, is asking, somewhat defensively: 'Is there added economic value in supporting human rights?' If, as the *Poverty and Shame* research suggests, shame-proofed discourse and policies that promote dignity rather than impose stigma are more effective because of their beneficial effects on personal efficacy, the answer may be 'yes'. Perhaps this argument, that promoting dignity saves money, will appeal to politicians and public alike. Maybe the British government will be influenced by shifting international opinion. Either way, the challenge is to reverse beliefs about poverty that, though demonstrably wrong, are etched into the human psyche and have long been fostered by British institutions. ■

Figure 2: Policy and media dynamics



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- 3 Some resettlement units, the vestiges of in-door relief, were not closed or privatised until the 1990s.
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