

Stigmatising beliefs about people in poverty in cross-national perspective

LSE Sociology doctoral candidate, **Daniel McArthur**, describes his MSc research



Open any edition of the most widely read British newspapers and you will see viciously stigmatising stereotypes about those suffering the hardships of poverty. Editorials decry 'scroungers' and 'shirkers', and accompany reports on the supposed criminality, immorality, and benefit fraud of those living in deprived housing estates. Politicians from across the ideological spectrum characterise poverty as the result of the laziness or poor life choices of the poor, and use this to justify deep cuts to welfare. Support for spending on the poor and unemployed in the UK is at its lowest point since the early 1980s (Taylor-Gooby, 2013). The stigma associated with poverty reduces support for the welfare state, as well as contributing to the shaming and humiliation that people in poverty experience in interactions with neighbours, employers, and public services.

There is little evidence for most stigmatising stereotypes- so why are they so popular? There is a lot of research on the negative ways that people in poverty are portrayed in the media, but little research on who believes these stereotypes and why do they do so. To investigate these stigmatising beliefs I used public opinion data from the 2008 European Social Survey, a nationally representative survey which gave me data covering around 45,000 individuals in 25 European countries.

The figures below show the percentage of those who agree with stigmatising stereotypes about people in poverty in the 25 countries I studied. There is much variation, with 81.9% of Croatian respondents, and 77.1% of British respondents, against only 32.2% of Danish respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that '*many obtain benefits and services to which they are not entitled*'. Beliefs about the unemployed were less stigmatising, with 67.2% of Slovakian respondents against 18.3% of Danish respondents, or 15.9% of Swedish respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that '*most unemployed people do not really try to find a job*'. For both questions, significant minorities, and in many cases majorities, hold stigmatising beliefs. There is a clear pattern by country, with respondents from Eastern European countries holding the highest average levels of stigmatising beliefs, and Scandinavian countries the lowest.



I wanted to understand how these stigmatising beliefs depend on the information that people have about the social world. My starting assumption was that the more information individuals had about those in poverty, the less likely they would be to subscribe to inaccurate negative stereotypes about them. This information could come from personal experience of poverty, contact with those in poverty, or the media.

I used multi-level linear regression to assess the relationship between a variety of individual level and country level causes of stigmatising beliefs about people in poverty. All results below are controlling (adjusting) for the effects of a range of variables capturing demographic background and political attitudes.

Individuals who are currently unemployed, who thought they were likely to become unemployed and who are finding it very difficult to live on their present income have lower levels of stigmatising beliefs. However, individuals who had been unemployed at some time in the past for a period of 3 months or more had higher levels of stigmatising beliefs. Thus individuals who are currently experiencing financial hardship are less likely to hold stigmatising stereotypes while individuals who have escaped a period of poverty or financial hardship may be more susceptible to stereotypes attributing poverty to the problematic behaviour of the poor because of their own personal experience of having escaped poverty or hardship.

However, broader social context can affect the information that individuals receive about people in poverty. My models suggest that differences between countries are not simply due to demographic differences between the individuals that make them up. I investigated whether cross-national variation in welfare state provision might impact whether people in poverty are seen in a stigmatised way.

In countries where welfare systems are universal, rather than targeted at the poor, there is less public discussion about whether the poor are 'deserving' of benefits or not. When benefits systems are more generous, recipients can have lifestyles which are more similar to the majority than in countries where benefits are lower and are thus less likely to be seen as 'other' or outsiders (Larsen, 2008). Thus, in countries with benefits systems that are more universal, and more generous, people in poverty are likely to be seen in a more positive light, than where benefits systems are targeted and provide inadequate resources for a socially acceptable standard of living. This may explain the low levels of stigmatising beliefs in Scandinavia, and the higher levels in Eastern and Southern Europe, and possibly the UK.

There is evidence that the media can affect the attitudes that individuals hold towards the poor (Baumberg, Bell, and Gaffney, 2012). However, in the absence of detailed data on how people in poverty are presented in the media, it is difficult to distinguish the effects of the way the media is structured from other aspects of the political and institutional context of different countries. Nonetheless, a key conclusion of my research is that cross-national context provides a powerful way to get at the social and political structures that explain why people in poverty are treated worse in some contexts, and time periods, than others.

As Robert MacDonald, Tracy Shildrick, and Andy Furlong (2014) have noted, attempting to de-bunk stigmatising myths about people in poverty is rather like trying to shoot zombies- they keep getting up again! This is a lesson for those interested in ensuring that the worst off in our society get the social support, equal treatment, and respect they are entitled to. Combating stigmatising stereotypes cannot be achieved by de-bunking popular myths alone. Rather, academic attention should be paid to the social and political determinants of these beliefs that make them so prevalent and so hard to shift.

My PhD research investigates the relationship between economic inequality and the stigmatisation of people in poverty. To find out more please get in touch at d.mcarthur@lse.ac.uk.

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