

# Passing Stigma: Negotiations of Welfare Categories as Street Level Governmentality

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*Stigma is not the automatic outcome of power differentials, but a distinctive moral inscription generated through cultural evaluations and governmental processes. Research on welfare recipients records how the unemployed displace stigma onto other welfare recipients, positioning other(ed) claimants as the ‘real unemployed’ or ‘scroungers’. Theoretically we adapt Butler’s analysis of the psychic processes whereby subjects are formed by disavowal of discourses which abjectify them. Arguably, this is functional for the governmentalising processes of generating jobseeking, with a latent function of reinforcing activation policies. Drawing on qualitative interviews, we trace how Irish individuals negotiate the stigma attributed to or foisted upon Welfare claimants, in welfare offices and informal social interactions and in job interviews – how they attempt to ‘pass’ as good JobSeekers and pass stigma on to others. Curiously, many welfare claimants suggest governmental interventions for distinguishing and discriminating between the deserving and undeserving adopting the stigmatising perspective.*

**Keywords:** Stigma, passing, street level, governmentality, welfare claimants.

## Introduction

‘Passing stigma’ is a phrase adopted here to interrogate two elements of sociological research on the experiences of the unemployed: passing as a ‘good worker’ and passing on an implied stigma to those who are ‘not a good worker’. Passing as a ‘good worker’ often involves passing moralising judgements which stigmatise *others* as ‘welfare spongers’ in a familiar distinction between deserving and undeserving recipients. This dynamic is a commonplace finding of qualitative research; as claimants pass through the welfare office, moving from education or employment to being jobseekers, subject to governance and moral judgement, they often adopt and adapt discourses which stigmatise them. While resistance to stigma does occur, it is the exception rather than the rule – usually stigma is passed on to others by welfare claimants who seek to ‘pass’ as workers. We suggest that welfare offices and social policy cultivate a latent governance through stigmatisation, both to discourage reliance on welfare entitlements and motivate jobseekers to accept any employment.

Detailed interpretation of the mechanisms of stigmatisation within welfare systems, from claiming processes to jobseeking conditionality and the continuous threat of sanctions and suspicion of fraud have been explored elsewhere (Boland and Griffin, 2021). Whether these are culturally fostered or an explicit political project cannot be resolved here. Here we examine thirty-three qualitative interviews with jobseekers, thirteen of which were then repeated after an interval of six months, to contribute to the wider sociological re-engagement with the concept of stigma, taken beyond interactional theories of impression management to observe the institutional and organisational operation of 'stigmatisation'. Broadly, we adopt Foucauldian 'governmentality studies' as a sociological approach to examining how organisations and institutions (re)constitute subjectivities (Dean, 2010). Avoiding two simplifications of this approach we neither idealise the unemployed as resistant to governmentalising power nor posit them as 'docile subjects': instead, we adapt Judith Butler's insights to interrogate how the articulation of stigmatising discourses is negotiated by welfare claimants who reconstitute themselves as 'jobseekers' by contrast to stigmatised, imaginary, others.

Alongside concepts like 'socialisation' and 'prejudice', the sociological idea of 'stigma' circulates widely within modern society, a concept typically 'passed around' as a critique of negative processes of shaming and marginalisation. Indeed, contemporary policy projects occasionally attempt to 'de-stigmatise' elements of society – for instance, mental illness or alternative sexualities (Tyler and Slater, 2018). Prominently, Tyler's *Stigma* (2020) criticised Goffman's overly interpersonal account of stigma as the 'management of spoiled identity' through 'impression management' to highlight the institutional mobilisation of stigma as a mode of governing and marginalising. This re-politicisation of stigma emphasises how individuals and social movements highlight and resist 'stigma power'.

Research with the unemployed has consistently encountered the stigmatising potentials of the claiming experience (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992). More recently, Baumberg (2016) differentiated between types of stigma; from personal shame to anticipated social disapproval to stigmatisation through the processes of claiming welfare benefits. Redman (2020) argues that conditionality is a modality of stigmatisation, with sanctions as a weapon of disgust, used to send social signals regarding work. Fletcher and Wright (2018) suggest that harsh conditionality and the threat of sanctions are not merely punitive, but by deterrence and surveillance functionally reinforce work-first policies reflecting creeping authoritarianism in governmentality.

Herein, we examine how stigma is experienced, interpreted and passed on: welfare claimants recognise the 'stigmatising' potentials of unemployment, but negotiate it through cultural narratives. Moreover, we suggest that 'passing stigma' has a latent governmentalising effect, re-constituting the unemployed as active jobseekers.

### Theorising stigmatisation(s)

Many of our interviewees spontaneously raised the issue of stigmatisation – in the process of claiming, the architecture and atmosphere of street-level bureaucracy and how they were treated by welfare officers, especially in regard to activation and conditionality (Brodkin, 2015). These interviews were concerned primarily with the experience of welfare being made conditional on job-seeking behaviour. Yet, stigma persistently arose, suggesting that the challenge of negotiating stigma was intrinsic to the experience of welfare, even reproduced by mandatory monitoring and re-skilling; activation processes

ostensibly designed to reconnect the unemployed to the labour market also operated to render receiving welfare stigmatising – even for fully compliant claimants.

We argue these processes are not simply forms of administrative categorisation, but culturally charged assessments of individuals, as tests of their deservingness of welfare (Whelan, 2021a). Indeed, this was how our interviewees interpreted them. Strikingly, the initial assessment of eligibility was highlighted as an especially anxiety-ridden test of moral worth. Repeatedly, moral rather than administrative categorisations emerged, not just factual accuracy, but personal honesty, not just fulfilment of requirements but earnest conduct. Beyond mere compliance, moral integrity was implicitly tested by the welfare office.

These processes reflect the moralisation of economic life in modernity from the work-ethic to conceptions of the deserving poor: as Anderson (2022) argues, commitment to work as intrinsically valuable and the market as an arbiter of worth has emphasised autonomy and entrepreneurial subjectivities, which reconcile workers to structural inequality. These historical ideas are complex hybrids but have predominately religious origins; the endorsement of work as a fulfilment of divine purpose and use of ‘God-given’ talents, and the condemnation of idleness as inherently sinful. Historical ideas about the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor resound here, persisting in contemporary welfare systems (Whelan, 2021b). Claiming welfare is variously stigmatised as slothful torpor, as excessive pride in refusing humble work and the suspicion of avarice via fraud.

‘Welfare’ in the form of cash transfers, which are described both as ‘benefits’ and ‘entitlements’ or more neutrally as ‘payments’, has cultural resonances. While political and policy critiques are constantly contested, one-way payments are economically understood as a ‘debt’ – and etymologically, debt and sin are nigh-identical. Furthermore, welfare payments are positioned as ‘investments’ in the recipient, who is obliged to pursue not simple repayment through taxes, but a whole career of self-entrepreneurship (Stimilli, 2017). ‘Welfare benefits’ are not gifts but investments made on trust that the recipient really will seek work, accept any employment and conduct themselves as a ‘good worker’. Expressions of this Christian inheritance which moralises work are to be found very widely; it is most evident in the US, where Jobclubs explicitly draw on religious language and metaphors, but also in the ‘religious spirit’ of capitalism (Purser and Hennigan, 2018), where jobseekers are broadly rendered as entrepreneurs of the self or business solutions (Gershon, 2019).

Such ideas permeate contemporary culture (Beder, 2000), circulating clearly in media and social policy, but equally visible in the very processes of claiming welfare (Devereux and Power, 2019; Gaffney and Millar, 2019; Whelan, 2021a). These moralising ideas have been translated into policy imperatives – particularly by the work of Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead, who propounded ‘welfare dependency’ and the ‘underclass’ not just as cultural categories but problems to be addressed by politics (Boland and Griffin, 2021). Such moralising discourses do not simply serve to condemn welfare claimants and celebrate workers; they offer means of self-justification through personal dedication and self-sacrifice, the possibility of passing as a good worker and passing stigma on to others.

‘Passing stigma’ on to imaginary others is a quotidian mode of ‘passing’ as a good worker which permeates contemporary culture. However, for individuals temporarily out of work this is a vital issue; the processes of welfare activation put them ‘to the test’ (Hansen, 2019), to determine their deservingness of support, through individual meetings with ‘case officers’ and ‘job-search’ reviews wherein the unemployed must prove their efforts to find work. Our respondents were in the midst of this ordeal, subjected to the trial of presenting

themselves as a good jobseeker both to the welfare officers and the labour market, and they unanimously attempted to 'pass' for good workers, disavowing stigma even within the setting of the qualitative interview. While as interviewers we were explicitly sympathetic to their situation and known critics of activation in media contributions, nonetheless, the interview form – culturally akin to a confession or interrogation – seemed to provoke the necessity of negotiating the shadow of stigma. Simultaneously, interviews equally create places for reflection or critique of the system. Instead of taking social 'performance' in a Goffmanian dramaturgical lens which separates the actor from their self-presentation, we follow Butler's critique (1989), which insists that performative acts reconstitute subjects. Effectively, by rejecting stigmatisation of unemployment and claiming valorised identities of good workers and jobseekers, individuals come to acquire this subjectivity with its work-discipline and entrepreneurial character; furthermore, the rearticulation of stigma against others can become a constitutive element of their identity.

Butler's nuanced understanding of subject-formation enables us to imagine how passing stigma governmentalises jobseekers: 'social categories signify subordination and existence at once' (1997: 20). The ideal-subject position of worker in modern society makes ambiguous and indefinite demands of individuals. Crucially, Butler argues subjectivity is constituted through the threat of abjection, the condemnation of the "welfare-scrouter" produces the diligent job-seeker, 'a radical refusal to identify suggests that on some level an identification has already taken place, an identification has been made and disavowed' (1997: 149). Our respondents repeatedly distinguished themselves from imaginary others, claiming essential difference, which reflects the subjective threat of facing oneself as an 'other'. Furthermore, this links moralising culture with disciplinary power; '... one makes of oneself an object for reflection; in the course of producing one's own alterity, one becomes established as a reflexive being, one who can take oneself as an object' (1997: 22). Butler's account illuminates the process of explaining oneself to welfare officers or CV writing for the labour market: a process of internalising governmentalising perspectives on oneself. Thus, the stigma of welfare is not simply a passing embarrassment of momentary shame, but an ordeal of self-formation through refusing and excising any vision of the self as anything other than a worker.

In 'Giving an Account of Oneself' (2001) Butler suggests that explaining oneself is not a neutral narrative, but occurs under power-relations and can be self-transforming. This leads both to ethical caution around qualitative interviewing which calls on the unemployed to account for themselves, but also to recognise that there is a notable frequency with which jobseekers are required to explain themselves, to the office, to others, to themselves and that this self-accounting might re-constitute their subjectivity.

Curiously, our respondents frequently expressed the perspective of the system, justifying monitoring, conditionality or sanctions for others. This involved adopting paternalistic discourses – 'individuals need guiding', or the logic of economic incentives – 'rewards and punishments' were taken as necessary to motivate others (Hansen, 2019). These discourses justify activation within social policy and diffuse throughout welfare offices. Taking on the subject-position of the administrators of welfare, perhaps while demanding care or dignity for themselves, individuals endorsed the judgemental or even callous punishment of others. For instance, some of our respondents suggested creating two queues – one for ex-workers and another for those who had 'never worked a day in their lives'. Advocating a harsh system was part of their self-presentation as real workers, yet seldom sustained over a longer period of unemployment – several interviewees

Table 1 Details of Interviewees

Interviewees: N = 33	Categories	Numbers
Age	Youth (18-30)	12
	Other (31-66)	21
Gender	Male	16
	Female	17
Frequency	Single	20
	Repeat	13
Location	Rural	8
	Urban	25
PES service	Intreo	15
	JobPath	18
Welfare payment	Jobseekers Allowance	25
	Jobseekers Benefit	8

repudiated their earlier endorsement of harsher conditionality in their repeat interview. Nevertheless, the idea that there were ‘others’ who justified this harsh approach persisted, almost as a corollary of the assertion of the deservingness of the self.

### Empirical report

Our research concerns unemployed Irish people, defined as a transitional population, moving through applying for Jobseekers Benefit or Allowance, seeking work and eventually leaving the category of unemployed. These processes occur at welfare offices, re-styled as *Intreo* offices since 2011, wherein welfare claims are evaluated and jobseeking efforts are monitored, with training and coaching offered on a variety of courses. Since 2012 penalty sanctions, reduced welfare payments for any non-compliance, have been introduced and been applied increasingly frequently, despite consistently falling unemployment. Furthermore, Irish activation services have been privatised under JobPath from 2016, and the interviews analysed herein (N=33) reflect the experiences of jobseekers under this ‘out-sourced’ Public Employment Service which tended to implement strict conditionality and sanction more frequently. Interviews were semi-structured, with questions focused on the experience of becoming redundant, applying for welfare payments, activation processes, job-seeking and handling long periods of unemployment, often over twelve months, and in some cases several years. Table 1 outlines the composition of the sample.

Beyond basic personal characteristics, this table indicates the type of welfare payment and whether the interview was single or repeated; a methodological challenge as many participants in the study found work during the period. Repeat interviews were intended to capture the impact of activation: ideas, beliefs, opinions and subjectivities are not permanently fixed, but are changeable over time or in response to particular events or interventions (Jupp, 2006:164). While in-depth qualitative interviews facilitate a deep level of subjective understanding, this may be temporally fixed. Repeat interviews are an effective means of countering this temporal fixity and of capturing changes and

developments in understanding – the quotes hereafter are drawn principally from those who were both repeat interviewed and enrolled in JobPath. All interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo.

Empirically, our respondents were profoundly ambivalent, ‘passing stigma’ in two ways. Firstly, they performatively asserted their bona fides as workers temporarily unemployed and deserving support. This frequently involved describing their efforts in job seeking, training and education or, alternatively, descriptions of dedication and diligence while working in the past were offered. These forms of self-presentation were consistent with prevalent discourses of active labour market policy, recapitulating the self-representations which they offered to case-officers to demonstrate that they were ‘actively seeking work’. Secondly, they described ‘others’, pictured in disparaging terms which highlighted imagined laziness and general undeservingness. These narratives drew upon anti-welfare stereotypes, such as the young man spending his welfare benefits on alcohol or drugs, the young woman with many children who ‘chose’ a life on welfare (Nayak and Kehily, 2014) or the ‘abjectified’ (Tyler, 2020) other who is surly, ill-mannered and prone to violence (Jensen and Tyler, 2015). For many interviewees, these imaginary ‘others’ served as a form of justification for these conditionality sanctions with the caveat that these measures are misdirected when applied to themselves, the deserving work-ready, active job-seekers.

### Positive self-presentation

Interviewees most frequently claimed ‘deservingness’ by discussing their work history; many described their dedication to previous jobs:

...the longest I've been unemployed in the last thirty years would have been maybe two months and now this year so I suppose maybe they know that I'm not (long pause) you know skimming jobs hopping from one job to another because I was fifteen years in the last job I was God em six years in the previous job and I think I was eight years in the job before that do you know what I mean like any job that I had I was there for years (F:59)

This narrative highlighted less the importance of the job itself, but the sheer dedication to work as a personal ethic of diligence. This participant also described at length their feelings of despair that went along with being out of work for a long time and recalled vividly the friendship and camaraderie that she enjoyed in all her previous jobs. As mode of passing as deserving an individual's work history was a key narrative source, with participants frequently recounting their proficiency in past jobs, their history of work and ‘paying their dues’.

Where participants did not have a history of work they instead made reference to their skills and education acquired through effort and ingenuity:

Well, like I said to him I said I haven't done all these qualifications to sit on the dole like (F.43)

I'm fairly highly skilled and I do want a job like you know, like I think they don't realise that I'm trying to get a job myself I'm not content to sit on the dole. (M.49)

This presentation evokes an entrepreneurial self who has put considerable time and effort into making themselves employable, by investing in themselves – and in stark contradistinction to the imagined other who is content to sit on the dole.

Depicting the self as an active jobseeker was relatively ubiquitous, and our respondents often demonstrated deservingness by describing their diligent efforts at job searching.

I mean like she did say that I am one of her more em proficient clients that I do apply for a lot of jobs (F.47)

... from June to September I must have sent out about 400, 500 cv's (M.29)

Herein participants adapted institutional definitions of proficient and worthy active labour market subjects, disavowing any idleness. By emphasising their extensive efforts to find work they demonstrated that they are not content with unemployment nor experiencing personal decline. This also serves to illustrate that the labour market and broader economic circumstances are to blame for their unemployment rather than themselves. Nevertheless, this expression of willingness and activity is defensively premised on the assumption that inactive claimants are somehow culpable for their current unemployment, hinted in the first quote which positioned the interviewee as a more proficient client. Even while avowing the frustration of continued lack of success, claiming constant efforts was key to passing stigma.

A further related discursive formation which was evident in the data was that of participants describing their willingness to do any type of work.

I worked for twenty years I've applied to clean people's toilets I've applied to clean people's fucking garages you know what I mean (F.38)

I've no problem cleaning up toilets or cleaning up puke (F.38)

I would apply for anything but I was going predominantly for the likes of even for the likes of McDonalds, kitchen porter, Deli staff hey I know none of them are greatly paid (F.38)

A common criticism of jobseekers is that they are overly 'choosy' (Dunn, 2014) in the types of jobs that they apply for. Accusations of being 'work-shy' or 'jobs snobs' (Marston, 2008) suggest that many unemployed people are not applying for the jobs that are available as they feel some types of work are beneath them, a rhetorical trope which is implicitly countered when participants described their readiness to undertake unpleasant types of work for low pay.

### **Negative depiction of 'others'**

The social welfare office is a site of complex institutional interactions where the status of being unemployed is both enacted and maintained. It is a site which enacts 'divestment passages' (Ezzy, 1993: 49) which bestow lower status on people, characterised by stigma, shame and embarrassment. Visiting the social welfare office was experienced by some

interviewees as a form of 'dirty work' where they felt the necessity to manage the 'claims stigma' (Baumberg, 2016) of being in a social welfare office and being categorised identically to the 'other'. This was reflected in discursive strategies of 'passing stigma' onwards via negative portrayals of some users of the social welfare office and by extension to emphasise how much they themselves differed from them.

... sometimes you just don't feel like you belong there because you just know that the girl that's beside you that's twenty-one with three children em that is probably waiting on a house somewhere wants to be there' (F.38).

The denigration of an imaginary 'welfare queen' or the 'chav mum' has had broad usage across wider mediascapes when talking about unemployment (Nayak and Kehily, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). The disparaging figure of the young mother who is gaming the system and draws welfare as a strategic choice is presented here in stark juxtaposition to the participant who feels that she doesn't 'belong there'. Additional negative or even 'abject' figures of the drug abuser or the aggressive and potentially violent 'scumbag' were evoked by our respondents:

I'm standing with people and some of them I can look at them and I can tell that you know they're probably heroin addicts (M.41)

There are people who go in looking for fights who you know ... eh (pause) um (emphatically) scumbags! ... there's a scummy element of people who (long pause) you know (long pause) ... the kind of people who kinda say (gruff voice) "what are you looking at?" ... you know what I mean? (M.30)

Frequently, types of people were described who posed an implied threat to welfare officers, with sympathy to the difficulties they faced in having to deal with them. Revealingly this indicates that the respondents often identified more with the welfare officers than they did with other unemployed people, implicitly internalising the perspective of the system. Furthermore, these others were often imagined as refusing to fulfil their expected role as active welfare subjects:

If you actually asked them are you looking for work like they won't say it to the guy behind the counter but if I said it to them they'd say no I'm fuckin not you know that's what you'd be hearing (M.41)

This practice of creating symbolic distance between the deserving self and the undeserving 'other' informs a surprisingly prevalent idea that there should be some kind of two-track system in social welfare provision which separates the deserving and the undeserving:

The way I look at it is they are trying to put everybody in the one pot (M.23)

It kind of bothers me sometimes that I'm in there and I feel that I'm kind of lumped in with everybody else (M.29)



It's just this kind of non-division I suppose between how you treat the people who are actively trying to look for work and the people who aren't (M.41)

Herein, institutionalised criteria for deserving welfare are asserted, and these stigmatised 'others' are set apart and marked as difficult cases who warrant not only social and moral opprobrium but the rigours of conditionality. One evident product of the contemporary welfare discourse is the suspicion that others 'have it easy' and even that the people who are incorrigibly unemployed are not being subjected to the same levels of rigorous scrutiny. This in turn serves to further turn people against these imputed others and to foster a sense of resentment as these are 'truly' unemployed or 'unemployable' people, or in one sarcastic phrase 'the non-working classes'.

I just think like that they should be hassling them when there's no more that I can do (F.38)

I could tell you from working in the pub I know lads who are sitting on the dole twenty years and have never gone looking for work you know they get rent supplements food supplements electricity supplements, free travel you know, none of their benefits are being cut but I'm being threatened with all of mine being cut (M.29)

These respondents are deliberately presenting themselves as being distant from this problematic category and thus characterised as deserving. These can be described as a 'defensive form of citizenship' (Patrick, 2016: 246) because as an unemployed person there are questions regarding their commitment to the prevailing norms of citizenry which are closely bound with participation in the formal labour market. Further, Patrick (2016) describes this process as a double form of othering as the people who engage in it do so as a form of response to them being subjected to othering and do so as a reactive strategy which aims to exclude themselves from the dominant negative stereotypes and discursive formations pertaining to being unemployed. By 'passing stigma' participants give salience to and performatively strengthen these negative discourses – just as the poor tend to deny their poverty and blame others for their poverty (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013); thus, these discursive formations are 'reified rather than resisted' (Gustafson, 2011: 3).

To conclude in a balanced fashion, it is worth noting that many respondents also evidenced sympathy and even solidarity with other welfare claimants, but generally restricted this to such others who met the imagined criteria of deservingness – as they did themselves. Some 'resistance' to governmentality is in evidence, though strikingly Finn's (2019) study of welfare activation explicitly sought to examine anti-work attitudes but principally found negotiated accommodations with official policy or culturally dominant valorisation of work.

## **Conclusion**

Qualitative interview methods contribute to our understanding of the experience of unemployment, and within the context of wider studies from social policy to ethnographies of welfare offices, allow an interrogation of how the welfare state forms its subjects. This can be styled as governmentality, taking into account the specific focus on activation, conditionality and sanctions within the contemporary scene in Ireland, the UK and

beyond (Dwyer, 2019). We argue that governmentality cultivates stigmatising processes – from monitoring to threats, shaping the lives of jobseekers so that they become adept in ‘passing stigma’, passing for ‘good workers’ despite being temporarily unemployed, and passing moral judgements on stigmatised ‘others’ – usually imagined, and if actually ever identified, probably equally inclined to pass the stigma right back or onwards, to others again. Rather than ‘merely discursive’, these processes form subjectivity; dispositions, decisions, actions – forming an economic ethic of hard-work, job-readiness and entrepreneurial selfhood.

Economic discourses position unemployment as a ‘labour market transition’; contemporary welfare policy tends to govern it as such, demarking the period of joblessness as a mere hiatus, not really part of personal identity, which is resolutely that of a worker. Partially this is performed through the valorisation of work, with emphasis on training, career re-orientation and so forth. However, the ‘transitional’ phase of unemployment also involves claiming welfare benefits while disavowing and stigmatising the ‘other’ of the shirker or sponger and other abject imaginaries. Where unemployment is prolonged or chronic, this involves a persistent and recursive process of encountering suspicion and stigma, performing the identity of the good worker, and passing stigmatisation on to others. Facing abjection yet claiming subjecthood reconstitutes the jobseeker according to governmental priorities – thus, stigma is not incidental, but intrinsic to the processes of welfare activation.

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