BSA 2017 Special Event:

Rethinking the Sociology of Stigma

# Organisers

Professor Imogen Tyler and Dr. Brigit McWade of Lancaster University.

# Format and length

3 hour panel

# Abstract

Erving Goffman’s Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity [1963] transformed understandings of the social function of stigma. However, the current geopolitical and theoretical context today is a very different one than that of the post-war society which confronted Goffman in the 1950s. In returning to Stigma, fifty years after its initial publication, we will consider in what ways a re-conceptualization of stigma can assist with illuminating pressing questions of social decomposition, inequality and injustice. This panel discussion will showcase current cutting-edge sociological research on stigma across different contexts in neoliberal Britain, from Roma communities to the criminal justice system, from welfare reform and austerity to new disability rights and mad pride activisms. Panel members will each briefly present on their work, leading into a critical discussion concerning the conceptualisation of ‘stigma’ in sociology.

# Participant Abstracts: (In order of surname)

**Aidan McGarry**: Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable Racism

Romaphobia is the hatred or fear of those individuals perceived as being Roma/Gypsy/Traveller which involves the negative ascription of group identity and can result in marginalization, persecution and violence (McGarry 2017). Roma communities across Europe are on the fringes of society and actively excluded by the nation and state through processes which stigmatize Romani group identity. Significantly, this paper argues that Roma are the ‘enemy within’ and used by nation and state-building agencies to promote ideas of the ‘exalted subject’ (Thobani 2007) as the benign and desirable citizen. This presentation outlines the impact of Romaphobia by examining housing segregation in two large Roma settlements in Slovakia and Macedonia. The physical separation of communities also fosters distrust and hostility between Roma and the majority; over time a lack of interaction fuels misunderstanding, stereotypes, and scapegoating. Symbolic boundaries between communities are mirrored in physical separation. The presentation concludes by highlighting attempts to foster Roma activism through Roma Pride parades across Europe which simultaneously celebrate Roma identity and challenge ideas of belonging and nationhood.

**Brigit McWade:** Madness, distress and refusing anti-stigma campaigns

Mental health anti-stigma campaigns imagine stigma as produced by “myths” about mental illness circulated within media-culture; myths which can be dissipated through the dissemination of “the facts”. Those who engage in anti-stigma work have a professional interest in promoting the tenets of liberal ‘psy’ discourse about mental health and illness: that mental health conditions are illnesses like any other, and that acceptance that one is ill and engagement with a regime of mental health treatments will result in the recovery of a former healthy self. Statistics like ‘1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem in any given year’ are central to high-profile campaigns that incite people to share their stories within a particular narrative framework as a primary mode of taboo-breaking. A counter narrative to this, proposed by mental health service-user/psychiatric survivor activists, is that ‘psy’ discourses are themselves stigmatizing and strongly implicated in the reproduction and entrenchment of social inequalities. Instead anti-anti-stigma activists draw attention to the epistemological and structural violence which underpins ‘psy’ discourses, the biomedical model of mental illness as individual deficit and neoliberal ideals of healthy, flexible ‘worker-citizens’. They recover their stories from co-option and call-out those behind anti-stigma campaigns as ‘sucking off the stigma’. This paper will consider the ways in which resistance to the inclusive politics of anti-stigma is challenging the ways in which mental health law, policy, services, professionals, patients and media medicalise, individualise and depoliticise madness and distress.

**Lisa Morriss**: Haunted Futures: Stigmatised motherhood

The paper will discuss the complex stigma faced by mothers who have had one or more children removed by the Family Court. Thus, these mothers do not have their children living with them and may not have any contact with them; for example, if the children have been adopted. These women live in ‘moral quarantine’; with the stigma and shame of being judged to be a profoundly flawed mother. The grief, trauma and loss they experience following the state authorised removal is complex: their child has not died but still exists elsewhere. In narrative interviews, the mothers describe how they live for the future when their child reaches adulthood and contacts them. They may buy Christmas and birthday presents and write letters to their child in preparation for this moment of reunification. Of course, this may not ever happen. In the paper, I will argue that the women exist in a haunted state of suspended motherhood.

**Kirsteen Paton (co-authors Gerry Mooney, Vicky McCall)**: Place revisited: class, stigma and urban restructuring in the case of Glasgow’s Commonwealth Games

In this paper we explore how class is reshaped and mediated by neoliberal urban restructuring, of which the processes of gentrification and territorial stigmatization form critical parts. We focus on the contemporary interrelation of class and urban restructuring by looking at the local lived experiences of the 2014 Commonwealth Games (CWG) in Glasgow’s East End. This high-profile regeneration effort in a deprived working-class neighbourhood reveals much about the functions of neoliberal financial capitalism, austerity and contemporary class formation. We show that gentrification and territorial stigmatization work in tandem within urban regeneration policy interventions as a punitive strategy for managing poor populations. This involves land value and (de)valuing of people and creates new localized class inequalities and insecurities. Our research highlights that in the face of national level cuts and commodification, residents’ local relations and support become essential social, economic and political resources. Yet, paradoxically, at the very same time, their local attachment to place is devalued, stigmatized and is at its most precarious. This exposes the coercive elements of the neoliberal class project; a distinct urban class inequality of our time and therefore, we suggest, a critical direction in class analysis.

**Tracy Shildrick**: Politics, policy and poverty propoganda

Over recent years poverty has re-emerged as a political and popular topic of conversation. This is, in part, due to the dramatic rise in the use of food banks and the emergence of so called ‘poverty porn’ (exemplified by programmes such as Benefit Steet). As the numbers of people in poverty increase, as a deliberate consequence of punitive policies and the impact of austerity measures, stigmatisation of those experiencing poverty or in receipt of welfare has also increased apace. This paper illustrates how sustained and critical work is being done by those in political power, with the aid of a right wing media, to manipulate and deliberately distort the terms of the discussion. Poverty and welfare receipt are now almost universally presented as social problems that are self-inflicted and important issues such as in-work poverty are rendered largely invisible and the voices of those experiencing poverty are rarely heard. This paper brings together empirical data collected with people experiencing poverty along with political and policy discussion to illustrate the huge disconnect between the lived realities of poverty and popular and political representations. Through the use of examples, this paper will show how the deployment of rare, fictitious and at times, downright fantastical examples can be ratcheted up at critical political moments in order to garner popular support for policies that are not only punitive and unfair but that also represent a sustained and brutal attack on working class lives and opportunities.

**Gareth Thomas**: Locating Down’s Syndrome: Stigma, Disability Publics, and Reproductive Medicine

In this paper, I examine how Down’s syndrome, a genetic condition, is configured in two separate spaces: the prenatal clinic and the public imaginary. I argue that in such spaces, framed by ‘motile’ moments, Down’s syndrome is enacted in two different and competing ways. In the public sphere, the condition is frequently sketched out as a life marked by dignity and worth as part of a ‘disability public’ (Ginsburg and Rapp 2015). Various forms of media and other outputs – autobiographies, blogs, websites, social networks, videos and television shows, activisms, art pieces and exhibitions, etc. – help to construct a ‘Down’s syndrome public’ in which new social imaginaries of difference are erected and that, in turn, constitute a location for alternative engagement. Yet, in the medical setting, where discourse shapes how people come to view bodily difference, Down’s syndrome is enacted subtly and, it seems, inadvertently as a negative outcome, showing how certain ways of being in the world are threatened, stigmatised, and denied. This paper, thus, by troubling the taken-for-granted category of a common yet complex condition, shows how ‘Down’s syndrome worlds’ are made both ‘inhabitable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ at different moments.

**Imogen Tyler**: Stigmacraft

Stigma (στίγμα) was a common Greek noun meaning mark, dot, or sign, from the verb στίζω (‘to puncture’). In Ancient Greece the word stigma was used to denote marks on the skin made by tattooing, which, as now, involved the use of needles and ink. However, to be marked with a stigma meant you had been tattooed as a punishment. To be stigmatised was to have a crime, written permanently upon your skin. Records of common stigmas include “Thief!” or "Stop me, I'm a runaway” tattooed across the face. These degrading punishments where reserved for non-citizens, such as slaves, captured enemy soldiers or other resident aliens in the Empire. The humiliating sentence of a stigma was frequently accompanied by deportation, often a period of forced exile to a labour camp. While the concept of stigma, retains traces of this history we don’t ordinarily think about stigmatization as practices of inscriptionor as ritualized forms of punishment. The aim of this paper is to consider the ways in which this geneology of stigma might inform our understanding of the social and political function of shaming punishments today. To this end, it proposes a new conceptual vocabulary of stigma which emphasises stigma as a mechanism of coercion, a system of valuation, a communicative terrain and a form of power-knowledge. This account of stigma focuses on the mechanisms, the mechanics, of stigma production, activation and mediation—practices that I term “stigmacraft”.