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Feral families, troubled families: The spectre of the underclass in New Zealand

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Abstract

This article reports on an investigation of media representations of 'feral families' and the 'underclass' over a period of intense welfare reform in New Zealand, which includes significant income maintenance reform and targeted interventions to reduce family violence. The use of emotionally charged and stigmatising language to characterise people and groups may be interpreted as media framing and reveals some elements of an enduring moral panic. While media stories engender a wide range of audience responses, analysis of the content of both news stories and commentary suggests some support for sanctions aimed at control of the poor. An unsympathetic focus on the struggles of poor parents and their children invokes stigma and fear of unruly populations. The portrayal of poor families, particularly Māori families, as a 'feral' underclass, is highly stigmatising and may reduce public empathy with advocacy about child welfare.

Keywords: media framing; families; underclass; poverty; moral panics; stigma

Introduction

Since 2011 there has been a focus on intense welfare reform in New Zealand. At the same time child poverty and child welfare in general have been potent political issues, not just in New Zealand but in many developed countries. Over this time there has been a noticeable trend towards moral framing of poverty accompanied by public support for sanctions applied to those in receipt of state benefits. Public comment invokes the spectre of the underclass and an alarming focus on beneficiaries' reproduction and child-rearing. The moral framing solidifies the debates around moral regulation and punishment, rather than wellbeing and welfare. This is achieved by invoking stigmatising spectres of problematic groups. Stigma, Tyler (2014) argues, is central in 'producing economic and social inequalities' but she suggests that its role has been

obscured ‘because bodies of research pertaining to specific stigmatized statuses have generally developed in separate domains’, citing Hatzenbuehler, Phelan and Link (2013: 813). Stigma is well theorised in critical disability studies (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012), health inequalities (Link, Phelan, & Hatzenbuehler, 2014) and mental health (Scambler, 2009, for example) but Tyler suggests that stigmatising discourses contribute to the manufacture of inequalities. Blame is a powerful weapon with which to empower political disengagement with causes and focus on characteristics of victims. Stigma leads and intensifies the othering of people who are poor, side-stepping structural explanations of violence and neglect. In Warner’s incisive exploration of media coverage of the case of the death of “Baby P” (2013a: 225) for example, it is noted that in the furore that followed his tragic death “the newspapers, particularly right-leaning ones, were able to tap into powerful and familiar political discourses on poverty, dependency and the welfare state”, again leaving questions about family violence largely unaddressed. This present article provides examples of similar discourse in New Zealand where highly negative attitudes to welfare support, especially income maintenance, are promoted through a hostile discourse of ‘feral families’ and the ‘underclass’.

Parallels can be drawn with the extreme class hostility discourse that accompanied welfare reform in the UK and the responses to the British riots in August 2011. The spectre of ‘ferals’ emerged during this period with a focus on blaming ‘problem families’ for society’s problems. The ‘Troubled Families’ programme was launched by the British government in November 2011 (for a detailed discussion see Crossley, 2014). This programme aims to change the repeating generational patterns of poor parenting, abuse, violence, drug use, anti-social behaviour and crime in the most troubled families in the UK with the main stated purpose being to reduce cost to the state: “Troubled families are defined as those that have problems and cause problems to the community around them, putting high costs on the public sector” (GovtUK, 2014). The aim is to “get 120,000 troubled families in England turn their lives around by 2015 and in particular to get children back into school; reduce youth crime and anti-social behaviour; put adults on a path back to work and reduce the high costs these families place on the public sector each year” (GovtUk, np 2014). This programme is carried on against a backdrop of welfare reform including draconian new policies and sanctions.

In New Zealand a similar political environment prevails, with a shift from broad universal social welfare policies toward targeting and a more authoritarian approach. The mood is characterised by sharp changes in welfare provisions: a decreased the range of the types of benefit available, increased work-testing for both single parents and those with disabilities, the introduction of new ‘social obligations’ for parents who need benefits, along with financial sanctions for non-compliance (New Zealand Government, 2012a). Keddell (2014) notes that concurrently child welfare systems changes include the creation of a new national information-sharing database for identifying and tracking ‘vulnerable’ children, the creation of ‘Children’s teams’ which meet to make plans for at-risk children, increased accountability for professionals working with families to prevent abuse, and increased sanctions for people found to either have not reported abuse, or been the perpetrators of abuse (Ministry of Social Development, 2012). Keddell (2014) cites Brown in exploring how the use of such language as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘troubled’ “shapes the ways in which we manage and classify people, justify state intervention in citizens’ lives, allocate resources in society and define our social obligations” (Brown, 2011: 313). Families which face multiple challenges will often have members labelled ‘hard to reach’ (Duvnjak & Fraser, 2013: 168) those with “low (and devalued) social status” subject to many forms of social exclusion.

This article explores the relationship between the media role in helping to bolster fear and anxiety about the presence and impact of ‘dangerous’ and welfare-dependent families and communities. The social anxiety engendered is contiguous with the neoliberal state project of cutting benefits to many vulnerable people on quasi-moral grounds. The framing of an underclass discourse aids the New Zealand government’s social policy direction by posing an extreme image of a highly negatively portrayed and often racialised group in the public consciousness. In introducing the ‘troubled families’ story to a New Zealand audience columnist Dita De Boni wrote “where social services, the police and many others are involved with a family, it doesn't seem to prevent a big tragedy occurring - even when the family is known to be a wellspring of trouble” . Furthermore she notes “an ex-crime reporter once told me that police had told her that in any given community, there will be a handful of families that cause the majority of trouble - and cost to the taxpayer” (De Boni, 12/12/11) . She then mentions five cases of child abuse, all involving Māori families with the inevitable links to prison and welfare histories.

A possible consequence of the establishment of such framing is that it then becomes more palatable to suggest more draconian measures to cut benefit spending, leading to greater social exclusion and further stigmatisation.

Method

Two research procedures supported the development of this paper: first a literature review was undertaken of recent research and conceptual theoretical work on media framing and moral panics relating to poverty and poor communities, and second, a qualitative textual analysis was undertaken of material gathered on poverty in the New Zealand mass media and related newspaper, radio and TV, letters to the editor and comments on line in media outlets. The analysis then prompted a return to the literature to explore recent theorisation of stigma which provides a useful frame for understanding the feral families discourse.

The initial aim of the study had been to simply explore the media stories related the 'ferals' discourse perpetuated by columnist Michael Laws over the period 2008-2011. However an initial media scan of news stories, opinion columns, editorials, features and some cartoons appearing during the period 2006-2012 revealed numerous references to the 'underclass' so an expanded search was undertaken. A larger study was undertaken by (Beddoe & Toki, 2012) which explored the use of the term 'underclass' and found 721 media items collected from the period 2006 – 2012 that included the term 'underclass'. Some material will be drawn from that larger study. Relevant items were selected for analysis on the basis that they have tended to portray moral decline, welfare-dependency, the fecundity of the poor and criminality as features of a social underclass. The analysis of text items was conducted using NVivo10 (QSR) to store and code articles, including the sets of comments made by members of the public. The analysis employed an approach to coding 'moral talk' advocated by Lee and Ungar (1989) and used by Warner (2013a, b). Lee and Ungar (1998: 691) outline three levels of analysis of moral discourse "(1) by the sides taken in the dispute, topics introduced, the 'voice' of the moraliser, and key words used, (2) by the 'stances' moral claims-makers take[...], and (3) by the claims-making appeal made by moral rhetoric, whether to logic, feeling rules, or other claims".

Discourse analysis differs from content analysis in that it explores and attempts to explain the motivations underpinning a particular stance taken on a issue (see for example, Proudfoot and Habibis, 2013). In this case, in relation to

articles and opinion pieces I was also interested in the on-line public comments where these were available. Thus an original text is considered not just as an isolated expression but one that invites social interactions. Of note of course is the fact that in many cases communication is one way. The author's article is fixed in the moment of publication; the comments however may be made for some days after until closed off by the editor. It is rare for authors to wade in and respond - rather the interactions take place between the commentators. Thus the original claims have added voice, their stance is established and other often anonymous voices will join the debate. In the case of the 'feral families' discourse the claims maker set the moral tone, elicited the emotional reactions desired. The comments which follow include rebuttals, appeals to logic or empathy and, in some cases, an intensification of the original claims.

There are limitations to a study such as this. Insufficient time and resource was available to adequately explore radio and television broadcasts, or a broad range of journalistic blogs. It is also important to recognise the limitations of textual analysis because it doesn't always explain how audiences engage with texts. We know from previous research (see Kitzinger, 2004 for example) that such audiences do not engage uncritically with media stories. Nevertheless media do shape the language and emotion in highly morally charged discourses, provide the venue for claims-makers to set the tone and Kitzinger has asserted: "We may not always be able to predict audience responses, but it would be quite wrong to dismiss textual analysis as completely out of touch with the real sites of meaning creation" (2004: 191). In the case of many of the very polemical opinion pieces, readers were able to comment on stories and these have been captured and coded.

Welfare reform in Aotearoa New Zealand

This is the beginning of what will be a complete overhaul of an outdated welfare system that has for too long kept New Zealanders and their children trapped in a life of limited choices. (Smith, Manawatu Standard, 2-9-11. 'Kids victims of 'brown underclass').

This article, which describes several responses to a child poverty report "Every Child Counts" (Henare, Puckey & Nicholson, 2011), invokes the 'underclass' discourse and provides a useful example to herald a very brief discussion of welfare reforms in New Zealand (see O'Brien, 2011 for a fuller discussion). While the report referred to drew attention to the growing disparities between Māori and Pasifika and other groups across health, education and welfare, the political message within claims that a "combination of high dependency on

welfare benefits, high rates of single parenthood” kept Māori and Pasifika families trapped in poverty. ‘Children were not victims of structural oppression but “of the brown underclass”. Thus the framing is there in the headline; and in the body the immediate moral linking to ‘welfare dependency’ stakes the moral claim firmly in the ground. “NZ's brown poverty ‘a timebomb’ ” was the headline in the New Zealand Herald on the same day (Tahana, 2/9/11, NZ Herald). The report of course is a carefully constructed example of policy advocacy, but many readers of the newspapers would be unlikely to read the report especially since it is not properly named in the articles and typically in New Zealand mass media there is no link to the website. In the other articles which respond to this report the headlines are similar and the welfare discourse emerges via an observable focus quoting percentages of Māori and Pasifika people on benefits rather than addressing the economic issues.

Over the last six years a series of welfare reforms have promoted greater state surveillance and control of those receiving welfare benefits while reducing the safety-net afforded by both income maintenance and social housing. The Future Focus policy introduced in 2010 is a welfare to work approach that requires sole parents on the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) to be in part-time work once the youngest child turns six (Ministry of Social Development, 2010). The process of returning to work is managed by WINZ staff and failure to oblige incurs sanctions that are outlined in the Social Security (New Work Tests, Incentives, and Obligations) Amendment Act 2010.

Further reforms in 2012 included the revamping of the benefit system which involved the reduction of categories from 16 to 4 categories namely the Jobseeker Support, Sole Parent Support, Supported Living Payment, and Youth Payment and Young Parent Payment. Sole parents on the DPB who decide to have another child while on DPB will be required to return to work after the child’s first birthday (Ministry of Social Development, 2012). From July 2013, beneficiaries will be required to enrol their early childhood children with a general practitioner and must complete a core Well Child / Tamariki Ora health check process, children aged three must attend 15 hours a week of early childhood education and children aged from five years must attend school (Ministry of Social Development, 2012). Failure to comply will result in three warnings after which if not heeded, a 50 per cent cut to the benefit will incur (Ministry of Social Development, 2012). Accompanying these changes is a raft of policies designed to nudge claimants towards desirable behaviours, for

example mentoring, parenting and budgeting assistance. One policy that caused much critical comment was that mothers on the benefit and their daughters will be offered contraceptive help to prevent pregnancies that may lead to their having to leave the work-force (Trevett, 2012; Radio New Zealand, 2012). Thus attention is focused on greater surveillance on the private behaviours of welfare claimants.

Media framing of poverty and welfare

Van Gorp (2007: 73) describes the frame as a “persuasive invitation [...] to read a news story in a particular way, so that a specific definition of an event, the causal and treatment responsibility for a societal topic, and a moral judgment of a person come more easily across the receiver’s mind”. Framing thus enables news media to emphasise particular perspectives in choosing to “manipulate salience by directing people’s attention to certain ideas while ignoring others” (Kendall, 2011: 5). Iyengar (1990: 21) identified two distinct types of news stories of poverty in the US: one in which poverty is presented primarily as a social outcome and a second type where poverty is explored via a presentation of the personal experiences of individuals. Episodic reporting reports a particular incident in a specific time frame, whereas in thematic reporting, the author/presenter attempts to link the incident to broader issues and problems. Episodic reporting is most frequent and tends to frame incidents in terms of individual agency or localised responsibility and can thus promote a moral explanation of behaviour (Entman, 1993). Thematic frames are less common and tend to locate a story in some kind of explanatory structural framework of wider social concerns and responsibilities. In this way stories of child poverty or family violence can be framed as individual incidents with a basis in morality /criminality or linked to poverty and alienation. This is not a recent phenomenon, for example Kendall (2011) reports a newspaper story from 1872 where a child’s death at the hands of her mother was linked to poverty and her husband’s alcohol abuse (pp.85-86). Poverty is often framed in ways that represent it as being an individualised rather than a structural, collective issue; presenting the poor as responsible for their own problems (Bullock, Fraser Wyche & Williams 2001; Sotirovic, 2009). In New Zealand stories about child poverty for example can attribute responsibility to individual actions or attributes or they can make structural links to phenomena which affect many people and communities, for example family violence, child abuse and neglect, unemployment and affordable housing shortages.

Representation of poverty in the news media has long encouraged a moral discourse. Welfare panics for many decades have focused on women, as ‘lone’ or single mothers, feeding into concerns about illegitimacy as a source of social dysfunction (Thompson, 1998: 89). Welfare ‘cheats’ are often seen as the ‘unworthy poor’ and beneficiaries in general are subject to far greater levels of social and institutional surveillance (Henman & Marston, 2008: 193-195). In addition there are frequent calls to examine the workless families who “are culpable for fostering and passing on to their working age children cultures of worklessness” where three generations might have never worked, an idea frequently promulgated by the architects of welfare reform despite the lack of empirical evidence (Macdonald, Shildrick & Furlong, 2014; Wiggan, 2012). Rhetorical devices like the ‘three generations in one family who have never worked’ employ “reasoning devices that draw on causal attributions” (Bullock et al., 2001: 233) and the in “a quest for a catchy phrase, welfare mothers became ‘welfare queens’...welfare recipients became ‘welfare freeloaders’ hiding the reality of illiteracy, abuse, illnesses, and addictions” (Sotirovic, 2000: 272).

The ability of the public to comment on stories in media means that those engaged in reading and viewing media stories are perhaps even less passive recipients (Kitzinger, 2004) and may apply their own filters. Gamson’s (1992) constructionist approach stresses the importance of the audience’s engagement in interpreting the discourses present in media texts and staking their own position. Gamson suggested that where the received wisdom, the cultural strategies employed by audiences, are comprised of for example ‘common knowledge’ and ‘common sense’ may be more impacted by framing, while those with ‘personal or vicarious experiential knowledge’ are more likely to discount or ignore frames (Sotirovic, 2000: 274). This is significant in the application of moral claims to explanations of poverty and family violence and is nowhere more apparent than when reading the public commentary on newspaper websites.

Feral families and the “brown underclass” in New Zealand

We know them when we see them – hoods up, trousers halfway down to their knees, swaggering along the pavement in small groups, playing loud music on their phones, swearing, spitting. These are the

children Michael Gove described in September as the “educational underclass” (Taylor, 2012).

Taylor’s article from the *Telegraph* in the UK discusses the political response to the riots of 2011 in English cities but could be written anywhere. The underclass is a “class of unemployed, unemployables, and underemployed who are more and more hopelessly set apart from the nation at large and do not share in its life, its ambitions and its achievements” (Myrdal, 1963: 10). The underclass discourse can evoke both sympathy for those socially excluded from the pleasures and abundance of the nation’s life that the rest of society shares and fear and disgust for those ‘othered’ by social exclusion. It has been noted in the UK as elsewhere that in the ‘age of austerity’ a common element of the discourse is the labelling of feral families and feckless parents “as scapegoats for moral and economic decline” (Jensen & Tyler, 2012: np). A tendency to look for "identifiable victims and blameable villains" is a prominent theme in the search for the means to impose social order in times of anxiety and uncertainty (Holloway & Jefferson 1997: 265) and splits in the interests of the working poor and those in receipt of benefits. Impoverishment is the source of many recurring moral panics around the ‘dysfunctional poor’, and frequently over time the ‘underclass’ concept (Macnicol, 1987) emerges which is then used to separate the ‘working class’ from the very poor and to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving poor (p. 299).

The roots of the underclass discourse, are in the 18th century and periodic revival of the concept has been on-going for the past 100 years or more (Macnicol, 1987). Macnicol (1987) notes that the term underclass has been used by both the left and right to denote the impact of prolonged structural inequality over this entire period. Macnicol explains that the term was very strongly linked to more biological explanations of poverty-low intelligence, bad genetic history and so forth and the rise of the eugenics movement. The common elements of the usage of the term ‘underclass’ across time are: firstly, an artificial administrative (and moral) distinction between those who have contact with state agencies such as social welfare and those who do not; secondly an association with the matter of intergenerational transmission (either by heredity or socialisation), and third, an identification of certain behavioural traits as ‘anti-social,’ grouping together very different behaviours and characteristics into the same category . Its use as a framing device tends to support the claims of those who want to reduce welfare spending (p. 316). In New Zealand a columnist and former politician Michael Laws has led the

charge for the underclass discourse, with this passage where the staccato listing of verbs generates emotional intensity:

The children of welfare are now legion, and they are destined for the same lifestyle as their, usually, solo parent. They smoke, drink, drug, crime, victim, bash like no other group in the country. And then they breed some more. (Laws, 27/12/08)

The simultaneous development of social policy addressing welfare reform and child abuse has brought the issue of child poverty and neglect into significant public attention over the past five years. The Every Child Counts report referred to above reveals some highly disturbing statistics: New Zealand ranked 28th out of 30 OECD nations for child outcomes and just over half of the 200000 New Zealand children living below the poverty line are Māori (59,651) and Pasifika (44,120). Minister for Social Development Paula Bennett said she was "acutely aware" of the problem of vulnerable New Zealand children growing in deprived areas. "Children who live in poverty are likely to come from benefit dependent homes," she said. (Tahana, NZ Herald 2-9-11). Unfortunately it is a short leap from a sympathetic portrayal of Māori children as disproportionately poor to the "feral families" discourse. Numerous examples can be found of the linking of articles and opinion pieces on either welfare reform or child abuse to the idea of the feckless, intergenerational work-shy and morally deviant underclass. In a comment piece entitled, 'Inevitable boy born bad' Michael Laws (2012) establishes his special role as a significant claims-maker for the underclass argument:

It has been an especial task of mine over the past decade to introduce readers, listeners and TV viewers to that sub-species of humanity with which we co-exist - the ferals. These evolutionary antisocials have created their own nihilist culture and provide 90 per cent of this country's social problems. They have core characteristics that distinguish them: poor education, transience, a dependence upon drink and/or drugs, a criminal history, a welfare lifestyle and they are disproportionately Māori. The latter is important to note because that culture does provide a tolerance other cultures do not.

One of the major mechanisms which facilitates the leap from a sympathetic portrayal of social inequalities to the trope of feral families is the sanitised device of 'troubled families' where the framing of the political discourse links poverty to moral issues of child well-being and fecundity. It has its roots in the old moral panic about 'welfare mothers' who are perceived to have children simply to collect more money from the state and thus posing a threat to the

future of the nuclear family (Cohen, 2002), Lone motherhood (especially racialised lone motherhood) is also framed occasionally as ‘the way it works in those families,’ or in ‘black communities’ (Duncan et al, 1999; Bullock et al, 2001).

The social policy direction in New Zealand clearly demonstrates this association of child abuse and welfare beneficiary status (rather than gendered family violence and structural inequalities), and is often focused on Māori as this article reports, where the Minister of Social Development apparently goes straight from child abuse to welfare claimant status in a single bound:

Bennett [Minister of Social Development] said around 55 per cent of substantiated child abuse cases were in Māori families. "If we only thought it was a Māori problem, we wouldn't be addressing the other 50 (sic) per cent," she told TV3's Firstline programme. "So it's not just a Māori problem, it's a New Zealand problem, and they are not the only ones that abuse their children but they are disproportionately high for the percentage of the population." Teenage parents were the most vulnerable group, Bennett said. About 4500 babies were born every year to teenagers receiving a benefit and 45 per cent would have another child while still on a benefit, she said (Chapman & Levy, Stuff, 26/7/11).

In the local manifestation of moral framing of the poor, ‘welfare-dependent families’ have been labelled ‘feral’ and while I do not claim this thinking is widespread beyond the indignant denizens of the comment threads and talkback radio, the use of these devices in major newspapers and online comments on articles suggests an underclass discourse remains potent. An odd example of this appearing in ordinary reportage is found in an article published only two weeks after the death of the Kahui twins, under the heading “Taxpayers shell out for Kahuis” in which residents of two family homes were listed along with their occupations and the reporter’s estimate of the value of benefits and subsidies for which the family was eligible (NZ Herald, 27/6/2006).

The solicitation of unsympathetic opinions and invocation of the spectre of eugenics, the companion of the underclass claims is documented by Macnicol (1987) and present in New Zealand in the present decade. Laws (3/6/12) makes this explicit here in an article entitled “Laws: Pay them, sterilise them, but don't let them have kids”:

They are an untamed, untrained underclass that manage to combine transience, welfare dependence, criminal activity, violence – and a

remarkable reliance upon alcohol and/or drugs. ...Ferals are disproportionately Māori but they are not exclusively so ...The fact so many ferals are also Māori deeply unsettles the politically correct and policy-makers. It seems there is something within the culture that creates them, other than socio-economic consideration.

This was sustained for over a year:

Sterilise them. Failing that, pay them not to breed. Stop them from ever having children. The truth is that hundreds and very possibly thousands of New Zealand women are not equipped to be mothers. They have neither the intellect, the empathy nor the responsibility to ever be anything other than they are. But we let them. And if they have no firm prospects in life – neither ambition nor aspiration – we financially entice them into maternity (Laws, 22/4/12).

The moral rhetoric was often repeated in comments on other stories,

When is something going to be done about this feral breed?
(Comment on Coddington, 4/3/12)

Such commentary is also found on articles which attempt to engender a positive discussion of how to address child poverty. Allen Freeth wrote sympathetically in the New Zealand Herald about ‘[t]he sad business of child poverty’ (Freeth, 6/5/13). Freeth, a corporate leader, argued that “Kiwi business leaders will be forced to get involved in the affairs of their communities, nation and its people. We will not be able to ignore coming generations who will seek to influence through their internet power”. A storm of comments followed:

Stop rewarding people at 15 and 16 for getting pregnant. A benefit for life and they pop out kids with no idea how to care for them or feed them....these little kids are often seen as an income stream by way of benefit for the lazy (Comment on Freeth, 6/5/13).

The above comment is typical of a raft of similar examples which draw on themes of infestation and the need to address via draconian eradication measures:

A quarter of all Kiwi children are raised in families...where cigarettes, alcohol, gambling and drugs come first. Three generations of state sponsored dysfunction has made these families a costly blight on the working/middle class...Is it time for a few draconian laws to clean the gutters and reduce the pests? (Comment on De Boni, 2012).

Why were these so called parents not charged with failing to provide the necessaries of life? I suppose they will continue to breed like rabbits. If they ill-treated an animal they can be prohibited from

owning another for sometimes years. What price human life?
(Comment on Coddington, 4/3/12).

Conclusions

While the anonymity of the comment features in on-line news encourages wild assertions and intemperate language there is some evidence of a split in views about the causes of child poverty in New Zealand. In a study of public attitudes in 80% percent of those surveyed agreed child poverty is a problem (MMR Research, 2014). The study found that opinion was evenly divided on the primary cause of child poverty in New Zealand with 40% attributing it to economic factors including unemployment, low wages and rising living costs while 40% attributed it to bad parenting. Other causes were systemic failures and lack of government support (12%), uneducated parents (9%) and people having too many children for them to support (8%) (MMR Research, 2014: 1). There are moderate views found in the commentary on stories, typified by this example:

Yes, parents should be responsible. If you can't afford to have children don't. ...But not all parents are irresponsible and many things can go wrong in a person's life: redundancy, greedy finance companies, sickness or injury, divorce, insurance companies that won't pay up what was expected, problems with addictions, the list is endless (Comment on Freeth, 6/5/13).

Finally views were located that utilised a class perspective avoiding the blaming and shaming ascription to 'poor parenting' which typify responses to article on child poverty, in this case reapplying 'feral' to a different target:

The main problem is that over the last generation we have returned to a feral system of deregulated capitalism, in other words a dog eats dog society....The sole purpose of the moralizing is to bolster up the prejudices and misdirected anger of the middle class, who are also under increasing pressure, to turn on the less well off (Comment on Freeth, 6/5/13).

However the overwhelming story was one of blame and shame; there are damaged children and welfare cheats and "[t]hese tropes located poverty as an outcome of a certain kind of childhood and parenting, and hence were able to discount economic, political, and institutional structures as causal" (Ortiz & Briggs, 2003: 41). What stands out in these local responses to very sad stories of child poverty and even child abuse and neglect is the manifestation of bitterness and the failure to see families from the broad collectivist perspective that has traditionally underpinned the welfare state. The very nature of such response

suggests a breakdown in the civilising processes of the post-war social contract and a decrease in mutual identification of need and support. Rohloff and Wright (2010: 412) draw on Elias (2000) to explain the

decrease in mutual identification between the ‘folk devils’ and the ‘rest of us’ [...] During such times of crisis (moral panics), we may also witness changes in modes of knowledge: a shift from increasing levels of detachment towards increasing levels of involvement, with a corresponding increasing susceptibility to ‘wish fantasies’ about means to alleviate the ‘crisis’.

While it would be reasonable to assume that most citizens would not support extreme forms of eugenics in response to a child welfare ‘crisis’, there is significant divide between explanations for poverty despite the broad understanding of the role of economic factors reported above (MMR Research, 2014). The feral families claim may assist the role played by stigma in underpinning social policy direction. Hatzenbuehler et al. (2013) for example discuss the relationship between stigmatising discourses and health and social policy leverage –the use of rewards and sanctions to enforce behaviours. Stigma both underpins this and reinforces it. So in the case of poverty and multiple ‘spoiled’ statuses - race, low SES, low educational achievement , sanctions and other coercive reward / punishment schemes both play on the stereotyping (an individual has ABC characteristics therefore they will likely not exhibit positive behaviours XYZ) and reinforce stigma via the surveillance and judgment applied in the application of such leverage. Thus the motivations underlying stigma, to suppress, exclude and punish are all neatly assuaged. Nowhere better illustrates this than the policy to offer free contraception to beneficiary women and their daughters, a nudge of epic Victorian era moralistic proportions (Trevett, 2012; Radio New Zealand, 2012). A woman who claims benefits is assumed to have problems managing her fertility (moralising stigma) and must be controlled. The stigmatising nudge applies also to her daughters who are automatically assigned with a status of troublesome fecundity. The punishment element is awaiting any future pregnancies with the threat of increasing sanctions. That some public sentiment supports this directly as desirable is indicates in many references to ‘breeding like rabbits’ and the like in the comments sections explored above.

In pursuing policies such as these governments completely ignore what is known from the growing empirical knowledge of the intensive impacts of stigma as contributing and even producing inequality (Hatzenbeuler, 2013).

Policy advisors and politicians, influenced by a low level of understanding of human behaviour, do appear to favour the 'nudge' in the current environment. Human behaviour is believed to be able to be controlled with simple reward and punishment regimes. Not only do such approaches deepen and extend stigma but they add heft to increased intensities of blaming and shaming when people don't simply acquiesce.

Taylor-Gooby (2013: 40) exploring the stigmatisation of the poor argues that welfare reform works with “the grain of public opinion by defining claimants primarily as dependents and deepening the moral division between claimants and those in paid work”. Approaches to shift public opinion may need to stress reciprocity between those on benefits and others; recognition of the actual or potential contributions to society of stigmatised groups; reducing divisions between those seen as dependent and low paid workers and examining the role of institutions that can help to prevent the intensification of social divisions. In this latter approach, news media might take a more balanced view and avoid the ‘clickbait’ stories that promote stigma, racism and intense vilification of parts of our society.

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