

Young people, place-based stigma and resistance: A case study of Glasgow's East End

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Abstract

This article analyses working-class young people's perceptions of and resistance to place-based stigma, through a case study of a youth-led theatre project in the East End of Glasgow, UK. The impact of stigma on working-class communities is well-established; through the effects of poverty and inequality people *and* places are stigmatised. Although existing literature emphasises that we must recognise how working-class people construct alternative narratives, there is limited evidence on how people in neighbourhoods with high levels of poverty manage and resist stigma. There is a dearth of research on young people's resistance to stigma. This qualitative study found promising signs of young people's agency to resist place-based stigma by constructing alternative narratives. Through creative work, young people were able to convey powerful messages around poverty-related issues, making visible the effects of poverty on individuals and communities and encouraging empathy and understanding. However, it was also evident that individualistic understandings of poverty are so powerfully ingrained that these alternative narratives stopped short of an explicit recognition of structural causes of poverty. This article argues that viewing resistance as a *process* helps to identify possibilities for supporting young people to further develop critical consciousness, to confront stigmatising discourses in a way that exposes power relations, and to generate activism.

Keywords

class, poverty, power, resistance, stigma, youth

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis present an opportunity to rethink how we understand and respond to poverty. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic and lockdown measures exposed pre-existing inequalities in the UK, but also revealed

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how precarious much of the population is to hardship (Blundell et al., 2021; Bynner et al., 2022). Citizens who previously had little or no experience of poverty found themselves struggling to navigate a social security system which has been decimated from over a decade of austerity. Child poverty levels across the UK increased, though rates had been increasing for at least six years before the pandemic. In 2021, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimated that 31% of children in the UK were growing up in poverty, resulting in pressures on governments from politicians, charities, activists and academics to strengthen anti-poverty measures. Though Sumonja (2021) cautions us not to interpret governments' 'emergency Keynesianism' as a sign of neoliberalism dwindling, the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis has pushed poverty firmly onto the political and media agenda.

This renewed interest in the causes and consequences of poverty may also help us to confront the stigmatising discourses used to describe people and places experiencing deprivation. The language used to describe a problem is intrinsically significant in framing how it is understood and how it should be responded to. Recognising poverty as the result of macro political and economic contexts, as opposed to narratives which stigmatise people and places, involves exposing the unequal power relations at play (Lawler, 2005; Tyler, 2015). Yet given the impact of decades of highly individualistic framings of poverty and inequality – what Paton (2018) terms a 'neoliberal austerity logic' – this requires a significant shift in individual and collective mindsets. From decades of neoliberal reforms which decimated public services and exacerbated inequalities, areas with high poverty levels are stigmatised as 'problem places' (Paton, 2018). The poor are blamed for their own poverty and the deprivation of their neighbourhoods in a way that not only occludes but actively inverts the structural drivers at play (Wacquant, 2008). Our understanding of how working-class people living in areas of high deprivation manage stigma, and the extent to which they can and do resist it, is limited (Nayak, 2019). We also know little about the possibilities for young people in high-poverty neighbourhoods – who have grown up in this context of a neoliberal austerity logic – to recognise and challenge stigmatising discourses around poverty. This article seeks to redress this gap in the existing literature.

This article builds on work co-published by the author (Ward et al., 2022), which reported on qualitative research with a group of young people who were part of a youth theatre project in the East End of Glasgow. Young people were supported by skilled youth workers to devise and perform a play on a topic they felt strongly about: negative media portrayal of their neighbourhood. This study found that being involved in the project had a range of individual benefits for the young people but stopped short of its social justice potential because of inequalities in power relations between grassroots community organisations and public institutions. The study analyses the play as an example of young people resisting place-based stigma and presents two key arguments. Firstly, working-class youth are highly capable of recognising the impact of poverty on individuals and communities. They are equipped to present alternative discourses that aim to generate empathy and understanding around place-based stigma and poverty-related issues such as homelessness and addiction. That this was achieved through the medium of theatre is significant, not only as a reminder of the power of theatre to communicate radical, political ideas (Gallagher et al., 2023) but also as it reverses the

relations of cultural production which have shaped the emergence of ‘poverty porn’ in which working-class people and communities are stigmatised in the name of entertainment (Jensen, 2014; Tyler, 2013). Secondly, findings emphasise that resistance to stigma should be seen as a *process*, as although there was some evidence of young people’s recognition of the structural underpinnings of poverty, this was outweighed by a focus on individual attitudes and social norms.

The opening section reviews the existing literature on the stigmatisation of poverty, including examples of resistance to place-based stigma. I then introduce the case study of Glasgow’s East End and explain the methods used in the research, before presenting the findings.

Literature review

Stigma of poverty

There is an established body of literature on the stigmatisation of poverty which importantly redresses the ‘retreat from class’ within academia of the early 1990s (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Scholars such as Wacquant (2008), Tyler (2013) and Wacquant et al. (2014) build on Goffman’s (1963) theory of social stigma by demonstrating how particular groups are marginalised – on account of race, class and gender – and how this is lived and resisted. This work emphasises that although the role of the state has retreated insofar as welfare provision has been progressively stripped away, the state – with a complicit media – remains active in stigmatising poor people, constructing them as undeserving (Paton, 2018; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2013). Such studies are particularly important given the recent turn of much sociological work on class to questions of culture and consumption which do not pay sufficient attention to unequal power relations and exploitation (see Paton et al., 2017). The symbolic nature of class struggle is manifested through stereotypes about working-class people who are subject to narratives of ‘lack’ and welfare dependency, with little attention given to the structural drivers of poverty (Jensen, 2014; Lawler, 2005; Tyler, 2015). Stigmatisation occurs in the context of unequal power relations (Tyler & Slater, 2018), which are reinforced as the state draws upon such narratives to justify additional austerity measures, enacting symbolic violence towards vulnerable people and communities (Paton, 2018; Tyler, 2013).

The concept of territorial stigma is fundamental in understanding how places come to be stigmatised. Wacquant’s (2008, p. 169) work refers to the ‘powerful stigma attached to residence in the bounded and segregated places’ where ‘left behind’ populations most profoundly affected by deindustrialisation and the retreat of the welfare state are located. Urban restructuring plays a key role in perpetuating stigmatising narratives, as working-class neighbourhoods are represented as ‘problem places’, thus justifying state-led gentrification (Paton, 2018; Slater & Anderson, 2012). Policies and institutional practices, poor housing and lack of investment in the physical landscape of an area are the drivers of spatial stigma, but it is residents who come to embody what Contreras (2017) terms ‘blemished space’, as neighbourhoods are labelled and negatively stereotyped. Spatial stigma is thus a form of symbolic violence in which the poor are blamed for their poverty and the deprivation of their neighbourhoods. Although the media are often perpetrators

of spatial stigma, it is also enacted by service providers and people who live outside of 'problem' neighbourhoods, such as residents' family and friends (Halliday et al., 2021). This has material and psychological impacts for residents of stigmatised areas. Paton's (2014) study of gentrification in the Partick area of Glasgow found that working-class residents were 'simultaneously included and excluded'; invited to participate in cultural activities and to live and work in the area but without the economic means to meet the increased costs deriving from gentrification: 'nowhere was there an improvement to the labour market, earnings and material conditions of residents' (p. 183).

Wacquant's (2008) theory of advanced marginality reveals how residents cope with spatial stigma by assuming 'damaging internalised responses'. This was developed by Wacquant et al.'s (2014) identification of three strategies of resistance: studied indifference; defence of the area; and inversion of stigma. A systematic review conducted by Halliday et al. (2021) found varying strategies for coping with spatial stigma. In some examples, people cope by hiding where they come from, avoiding certain areas within their neighbourhood, or avoiding leaving their area, or through processes of 'othering', denigrating particular people and groups as the cause of the problem. Shildrick and MacDonald's (2013) study in the North-East of England found a denial of poverty amongst participants, including those who were clearly living in severe financial hardship, partly attributed to the 'shame' of being poor which derives from political and popular representations of the 'unrespectable' working class. This must be seen in the context of declining working-class consciousness – a consequence of deindustrialisation – in which stigmatising discourses may previously have been challenged. Within the context of advanced marginality (Wacquant, 2008), given the increasing shift to unregulated, low-paid and insecure work, trade unions and labour organisations are nowadays less able to provide the mechanisms for collective understanding and resistance, leaving a vacuum in which stigmatising discourses can take hold.

Resisting poverty-related stigma

Some studies have explored how different forms of stigma can be resisted, ranging from top-down anti-stigma campaigns to more grassroots examples. Top-down approaches tend to be underpinned by assumptions that stigma is a problem of social norms which can be challenged through education and generating empathy. Though the educational aspects of such campaigns are valuable, Tyler and Slater (2018, p. 729) argue that they neglect structural questions 'about the social and political function of stigma as a form of power'. Citing the example of the royal family fronting a campaign to challenge mental health stigma, they argue that portraying the problem as an illness which requires better understanding detracts from the structural factors underpinning the 'mental health crisis', such as austerity-driven funding cuts, neoliberal politics and the individualisation of both mental health and poverty.

There are, however, more grassroots examples which are attentive to structural inequalities, including examples of disability activism and body-positive feminism (Tyler & Slater, 2018), and football supporters protesting the stigmatising narratives in TV 'poverty porn' (Tyler, 2015). McKenzie (2018) describes examples of grassroots activism and increasing class consciousness through the fight against forced evictions in London, and

how working-class communities become empowered and politicised through campaigning. Working-class communities can and do challenge situations in which they are devalued and generate alternative values to those which are used to delegitimize them (Skeggs, 2011). Studies which focus on everyday interactions can capture how stigma is negotiated and resisted. Hicks and Lewis (2020, pp. 1371–1372) argue that:

. . . close attention to what might be thought of as micro-level interactions within a community are vital, not only because they indicate the ways in which stigma is both produced and maintained, but also because they show how people may take on and produce wider, powerful discourses concerning, for example, un/deserving welfare recipients.

Defending the interactionist approach against criticism that it neglects structural questions (see Tyler & Slater, 2018), Hicks and Lewis argue that they wish to avoid ‘what might be seen as something of a top-down, determinist account: in other words, seeing the state as producing stigma and imposing this on those with less power’ (p. 1372). Stigma can therefore be viewed as a ‘local resource to do things with’ as opposed to just a ‘label’.

In relation to spatial stigma, Halliday et al.’s (2021) study explains that resistance can be intentional or implicit and may be achieved through (re)claiming public spaces: residents making themselves visible rather than retreating into private space. Further, some residents resist spatial stigma by challenging the negative labelling of a neighbourhood and constructing positive narratives of a place by drawing attention to assets or indirectly challenging stigma through ‘good news stories’. Sometimes there are more direct challenges to spatial stigma involving campaigns to generate change. Halliday et al. (2021) note that active resistance is more prevalent where residents are already active in local community associations, suggesting that existing activist structures and a local history of social action are enablers of resistance to territorial stigma. Notably, working-class communities’ resistance to the impact of destructive socio-economic policies has, in some cases, taken the form of activist theatre. McDonnell (2020) recounts Sheffield’s tenants’ theatres in the 1980s, which were connected to broader campaigns around issues such as welfare and housing. Theatre performances contributed to community educational campaigns and helped strengthen local networks, resulting in successes such as Yorkshire Water reversing water charging policies which disproportionately harmed working-class people (p. 18).

However, the emotional and physical effort, time and resources needed to struggle against institutional power are clearly a barrier to resistance. McKenzie (2018, p. 84) explains that grassroots housing campaigns in London were eventually ‘suffocated’ by party politics and institutional processes: ‘political time moves slowly – it moves in parliaments and elections – but community time moves very differently. People who are fighting for their communities become very easily exhausted.’ Notwithstanding the constraints of institutional structures, McKenzie reminds us that we should value and measure the impact of grassroots anti-stigma campaigns on building solidarity: ‘class struggle is in itself resistance, and campaigns that start from local communities that build up a sense of collectivist ideas and actions are successes within themselves despite the outcome of the campaign’ (p. 85). Recognising resistance as something that is ‘piece-meal’

(Nayak, 2019), and a (sometimes long-term) *process*, can help to identify the effective building blocks in moving from small examples of resistance to a level of activism with the potential for more systemic change.

Youth resistance

There is a limited body of evidence on how young people are involved in resisting and challenging spatial stigma. This is particularly pertinent for young people who have grown up in post-industrial working-class communities and in the context of declining working-class consciousness. In a study of a post-industrial estate in South Wales, Elliott et al. (2020) describe how young people face ‘double discrimination’, experiencing high levels of poverty while also being perceived by older residents as embodying ‘trouble’ and ‘disorder’ – common labels used to denigrate working-class youth. Young people responded to stigma by challenging negative perceptions of youth and ‘developing a counternarrative of place, one which spoke back to perceived “outsiders” who “misrecognise” their place’ (Elliott et al., 2020, p. 159). However, the authors note that despite young people’s efforts to ‘change the story’ through action and activism, and some material changes to the physical landscape resulting from the project (which addressed a safety issue for the community), the structural causes of poverty and territorial stigma were not explicitly acknowledged:

Narratives of collective poverty were hidden, and whilst young people acknowledged the social and environmental scars of poverty, they did not articulate their everyday experiences in relation to the unjust structures reproducing inequality. (p. 169)

Due to the decline of solidaristic mechanisms and institutions, through which resistance to stigmatising narratives was facilitated by working-class consciousness, there are limited opportunities in contemporary neoliberal society for marginalised young people to confront systemic inequalities.

That said, it is possible to draw on learning from studies which demonstrate the potential of projects to support young people to challenge structural inequalities. Akom et al.’s (2016) study on a project tackling food provision and insecurity in East Oakland, California, emphasised the importance of youth leading the process of identifying areas for change and influencing decision-makers. The authors note that for youth to be active agents in achieving transformative change, there must be a pre-existing level of consciousness-raising. In this project, workshops training youth on theories of empowerment, structural racialisation and resistance helped young people acquire a grounding in the issues and intersections of disadvantage. In other projects, creative methods such as theatre are utilised. Wernick et al. (2014) describe a youth-led project in Michigan which focused on LGBTQQ¹ equality and rights in schools. Utilising theatre alongside other research methods, the project allowed marginalised voices to be heard with a view to creating institutional change. A theatre performance which included recommendations for change was followed by Q&A sessions with staff in which ‘youth primed adults for the long-term process of continuing to serve in the role of an ally to youth change agents’ (p. 56). Traditional power relations between youth

and adults were disrupted by creating a space for youth to represent themselves as experts in their lives, and to guide the process of change required at institutional level – within the school but also at state and national levels. Similarly, Gallagher et al. (2023) explain how a multi-generational audience responded to play entitled ‘Towards Youth’, performed by young people in Toronto, which illustrated the different political and economic crises young people must negotiate across the globe. The authors describe the formation of an ‘intergenerational polis’, with the theatre being a safe space for uncomfortable but important cross-generational dialogue. These examples offer learning for efforts to support youth to confront place-based stigma, including the importance of skilled and experienced facilitators, the value of consciousness-raising and creative methods, and the presence of people with decision-making abilities to listen and respond to young people’s concerns.

The next section outlines the Glasgow context, introduces the case study, and explains the methods used in the research.

Researching youth resistance to stigma in Glasgow’s East End

This article builds on existing research on poverty and stigma in Glasgow’s East End. From its apparent position as the ‘second city of Empire’, Glasgow’s socio-economic position declined rapidly through the processes of deindustrialisation in the latter half of the twentieth century, though poverty and severe inequality had always been prevalent (Webster et al., 2010). Today, Glasgow remains the most deprived city in Scotland, with 32% of the city’s children living in poverty in 2021–22 (Understanding Glasgow: the Glasgow Indicators Project, n.d.). The East End of the city has high levels of unemployment, significant health inequalities and lower life expectancy (García-Lamarca & Gray, 2021). In line with findings from elsewhere on spatial stigma, the socio-economic problems of the East End have often been constructed as the fault of those living there. Gray and Mooney (2011) explain that narratives of decline and decay and overt class prejudice were used to justify state-led urban regeneration policies which sought to ‘civilise’ the local population. The area has been subject to intensive urban regeneration in recent years, particularly in preparation for hosting the 2014 Commonwealth Games (CWG) (Mooney et al., 2015; Paton et al., 2017). Paton et al. (2017) sought to capture the voices and perspectives of local people navigating place-based stigma during the CWG. Though some residents had positive experiences, others emphasised disruption to their everyday lives and feelings of intimidation caused by ‘heavy securitisation’ (Mooney et al., 2015). There was evidence of the internalisation of stigma, as rumours of ‘no go areas’ (‘Red zones’) for athletes and visitors – which turned out to be without basis – took hold (Paton et al., 2017). For Paton (2018), residents’ overall positivity could be partly explained through a process of ‘impression management’. Residents sought to perform the ‘right’ identity in response to historical stigmatisation and resisted negative stereotypes by emphasising the area’s good points.

What is missing from this existing body of evidence on Glasgow’s East End is young people’s experiences of place-based stigma. This article draws on findings from a case study which formed part of a larger research programme with children

and young people in high-poverty neighbourhoods in the west of Scotland (Ward et al., 2019). In one neighbourhood in the East End, a youth theatre programme delivered by an active third sector organisation provides opportunities for young people to devise theatre productions which explore issues that are important to them. The research team working on the larger project became aware of the innovative work being done by this organisation, which offered a wide range of creative activities to engage with young people and develop their skills. The researchers were invited to include the project as part of their research and chose to focus largely on the theatre programme, because the latest play in production focused on an issue which had arisen frequently in research with young people and stakeholders – stigmatising narratives about the East End. Following on from other productions in which the young people selected topics meaningful to them, this play sought to challenge negative stereotypes about their neighbourhood and tackled different poverty-related issues including financial strain, homelessness and addiction. The youth organisation's approach was to support young people to lead the process, facilitated by a skilled youth worker with experience in the performance industry.

As the researchers were not involved in devising the play, this differs from other examples of arts-based research projects whereby researchers work with participants to develop a piece of work. Our role was to observe, encourage reflection amongst the young people, and capture some of the learning from this work. A total of 15 young people aged 12–19 years took part in the research (3 males and 12 females). Researchers conducted observations at the weekly sessions to capture the learning from the development of the latest production. Though we were observers, building rapport and trust with the young people and facilitators was crucial to the research process. The fieldwork took place between November 2018 and July 2019 and involved: observations of script development and rehearsals; attendance at a performance of the play in a city theatre; analysis of the final script; two follow-up sessions including a focus group with young people and a zine-making workshop with reflective discussion; and an interview with a senior stakeholder from the third sector organisation. The follow-up sessions focused on the young people's experiences of the project and did not specifically explore poverty or stigma, however poverty-related issues were addressed throughout the play and in the post-production discussions. The zine-making workshop, facilitated by a PhD co-researcher with expertise in this method, was particularly productive in encouraging contributions from those young people who were less vocal in other contexts. Zine-making offers participants a greater sense of agency in how and what to contribute during the research process (Biagoli et al., 2021), and young people enjoyed the creative and collaborative nature of the session. Transcripts, notes from observations and the play's script were then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). For this article, the data were analysed to explore how poverty was articulated and conceptualised by the young people, their recognition of place-based stigma, and the extent to which structural inequalities were understood and made visible.

The next section presents findings relating to young people's ability to recognise and resist poverty-related stigma. It will argue that resistance is best understood as a process, given the entrenched nature of individualistic understandings of poverty and the need for consciousness-raising around systemic inequalities.

Findings

Recognition of poverty and inequality

Devising the play – challenging negative perceptions of their neighbourhood. In a focus group reflecting on the experience of the production, the young people explained that they were motivated to design a play based on their local area due to awareness of the often-negative media portrayal of the East End. In an earlier article on this project, Ward et al. (2022) argue that the process of devising the play facilitated the development of critical consciousness amongst the group. The young people described the research process for the production, which began by talking about the ‘pros and cons’ of their neighbourhood as a group before carrying out research on media portrayal of the area:

James: We did a bit of research and got a few stories of what people said that they. . . like people living in The Bellgrove and stuff, and like the homeless and just people in general that live here.

The Bellgrove, a private hostel used to house vulnerable men, was notorious for sub-standard living conditions. Associated with violence, poverty and addiction, the building symbolised the most negative connotations of the East End. The prevalence of stories such as those about the Bellgrove and homelessness motivated the young people to construct a story of their neighbourhood which did not mask the reality of these social issues but placed them in a wider context of everyday life in the East End. They sought to challenge the poverty-related stigma attached to their neighbourhood and to create an alternative narrative based on their insights and experiences:

Emma: I enjoyed everything about [the play] and the fact that I could relate to others about how I felt about my. . . like how we feel about the area, and how we could look at the actual positives of living here.

James: We wanted to show this side and other people what the East End is about and what Gallowgate and Parkhead and Tollcross and everywhere really is, like how it is and how we see it as young people and how it is in our eyes. [. . .] we wanted to show that it is a good place and there’s good people in it and those who are a success.

Rather than first names, characters in the play were called different words which the young people believed to be relevant to the topic: ‘it was more feelings and places in the East End that we wanted to play’ (James). Some of the characters alluded to the less positive elements of their local area, either overtly through names such as ‘drugs’ (referring to high levels of addiction) and ‘neds’ (a derogatory term used in Scotland to stereotypically refer to working-class youth) or more subtly via characters named ‘dark’, ‘scared’ and ‘rain’. However, several focused on what the young people considered to be the positive aspects of their neighbourhood. These characters included ‘family’, ‘friends’, ‘hope’ and ‘cuppa’ (referring to the connective possibilities of everyday acts such as sharing a cup of tea). These characters thus embodied the complexities associated with the local area. As inhabitants of a neighbourhood which is frequently

stigmatised in public discourses, the ways in which the young people developed the play to recognise these challenges but also to articulate their pride in their local area can be seen as a form of resistance.

After several months of script development and rehearsals, the play was then performed (over two sessions on the same day) at a city centre theatre, to an audience of family members, friends, youth workers and other people working in the community (including the researchers). Though the audience was small, and this article will later discuss the need for alternative narratives such as these to reach larger sections of society, the audience was clearly engaged with the messages being communicated.

Financial insecurity. Several parts of the play drew attention to the strain of financial insecurity on communities. One scene depicts a mum (character name ‘family’) with her three children (‘child 1’, ‘child 2’ and ‘teenager’) on the way home from school. ‘Teenager’ and his mother have a heated discussion about him having to stay home to look after his younger sisters at the weekend so that his mother can go to work. This scene was very funny, and evidently relatable to many audience members given the reaction in the theatre to the family dynamics on show. ‘Teenager’ complains to his mother that being asked to give up his social life to babysit occurs too frequently, and he stresses: ‘I need a night off too’, emphasising the impact of informal caring responsibilities on this young person. It then becomes apparent that one of the children has ripped her tights and lost her blazer and is worried about her mother’s reaction, given the requirement to replace these. Additionally, the second child has lost her bus ticket. The impact of financial strain on the family going about their everyday lives is encapsulated by the quote from the mother explaining she does not have the money for a new bus ticket, resulting in the family having to walk home:

‘Naw I don’t have any change. And I need to buy her new tights and a new blazer. And you need money for lunch tomorrow! This is why I need to go to work, I don’t have a magic money tree, you know’.

The ‘magic money tree’ is a well-known Conservative narrative, normally used to attack Labour’s spending proposals or wider calls for better investment in public services. Former Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May used it to attack former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s spending commitments in the snap election of 2017, and this right-wing narrative played its part in convincing the public that a Labour government could not be trusted with the economy. As the young people had demonstrated awareness of the financial strain that working-class families exist under, the inclusion of this phrase could be interpreted as a broader awareness of the political decisions about how to spend (or not) the nation’s finances. Given that macroeconomics did not feature in our post-production discussions with young people, it is impossible to ascertain whether the use of that phrase was meant critically. It could instead highlight the extent to which neoliberal economic rationality has taken hold. However, by trying to generate empathy and understanding for a family struggling financially, the young people have perhaps taken tentative steps towards presenting an alternative narrative around poverty.

The young people drew on their lived experiences in various ways. Two participants reflected that by devising and performing this scene, they came to think differently about their own family dynamics: 'like kind of triggering my memory to what me and my wee brother are like towards my mum' (James). Another participant, Katie, explained that she could relate to the character that she played: 'that week I had lost my bus pass and my mum had to buy me a whole new one'. Interestingly, the participants did not mention financial insecurity in relation to their own families. However, it was clear from the limited time spent with the young people that financial insecurity was an issue, and that they were grappling with the limitations in the job opportunities open to them. Like other deindustrialised areas and reflecting a decline in opportunities for young people as generational inequality becomes ever apparent (Bessant et al., 2017), the options available to them seemed restricted to low-wage, precarious employment. Thus, the young people easily recognised the impact of poverty on individuals and communities, and through the play were able to draw attention to the material realities for people living in high-poverty neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, the young people talked about the importance of family and friendships, emphasising a sense of community in the East End, in line with findings from MacDonald et al. (2005) on residents of high-poverty neighbourhoods placing strong value on social networks.

Homelessness and addiction. The play tackled more overt representations of poverty, such as homelessness and addiction. An early scene depicts characters asking for 'spare change', and the character names in this scene include 'Drugs' and 'Dark', alluding to high levels of addiction and homelessness in the neighbourhood. This scene was powerful and was written and acted by the young people with evident compassion for those experiencing homelessness and addiction. In a focus group discussion, one participant emphasised that assumptions should not be made as to why someone may have become homeless:

James: You don't know where somebody's come from, and what their background was. For all we know, the homeless guy sitting in the middle of the town could have had a great and a brilliant job, and he just kind of lost it all and didn't know where to go.

Although the notion of someone 'losing it all' indicates an individualistic outlook on the causes of homelessness, and a sense of the 'deserving' homeless person worthy of our understanding, this quote illustrates young people's awareness of the precarity of people's lives. It makes visible the vulnerability of working-class people to problems such as homelessness and encourages the audience to be critical of assumptions and stereotypes. Similarly, referring to another part of the play, one participant talked of writing a scene which demonstrated that people with addictions should be treated with empathy rather than judgement:

David: There was the part where we said about people, how they were still kind, and they had grandkids, but they were addicted to alcohol and drugs and gambling. And like they've still got a family and all that, and that's what motivated them [to tackle their addiction].

This response could be described as an example of struggling against classification (Skeggs, 2004), resisting the label of ‘addict’ by emphasising the personal qualities and human connections behind the label. By performing such scenes, these social problems were made visible in a way that encouraged the audience to challenge their own assumptions.

There were various references in the play’s scenes to structural inequalities and unequal power relations, even if these were implicit in the most part. In one scene, a tour group sightseeing in Glasgow gets lost and accidentally ends up outside the infamous Bellgrove Hotel mentioned earlier. As the tourists assume the building is a landmark, the tour guide announces, ‘According to Google, it’s owned by a millionaire!’ Like the ‘family’ scene, the scripting was amusing and generated laughs from the audience while communicating a serious message. The aforementioned quote alludes to the fact that some people profit from poverty and stigma: indeed, the property magnate owners of this hotel received £1.5 million per year in housing benefit despite appalling conditions and a lack of support for inhabitants struggling with addiction and mental health issues (Paterson, 2021). Although recent developments brought the building into public control,² the example of the Bellgrove Hotel symbolises the worst effects of the privatisation of care for vulnerable citizens. For over three decades, by giving funding to these private property owners, the state absolved themselves of the responsibility to provide adequate housing and care. It has been suggested that this was motivated by the state’s desire ‘to keep its most embarrassing citizens away from polite society’ (McKenna, 2014). While the people who resided in the Bellgrove have been stigmatised on account of their extreme poverty and addictions, those who profit from their circumstances are rarely afforded the same level of scrutiny. Indeed, the invisibility of ownership and profit helps to conceal the structural violence experienced by the most vulnerable.

Limits of resistance in austerity Britain?

The previous section illustrates how the young people drew upon their lived experiences and further developed critical consciousness by challenging stigmatised narratives about their neighbourhood and some of its inhabitants. Though this is indicative of the collective construction of an alternative narrative, it is important to recognise the limitations. This section presents findings which suggest that young people’s recognition of some of the structural causes and consequences of poverty were often outweighed by a focus on individual attitudes and social norms.

Challenging homelessness: whose responsibility? One of the play’s scenes depicts characters walking past homeless people on the street, ostensibly ignoring them. The sense that a lack of awareness or individual selfishness is a fundamental problem relating to homelessness is emphasised by the plea of one of the characters, ‘Hope’, to her fellow citizens to: ‘Open your eyes! Think of someone other than yourself for a change!’ Like most examples of anti-stigma campaigns (Tyler & Slater, 2018), this was an attempt to generate empathy, a sense that the situation could be improved for homeless people if society were to be more understanding and empathetic. The young people intentionally included powerful stories to influence the audience and to try to create change at the level of micro

interactions. James explained that they wanted to encourage people to not only think but to behave differently towards the homeless:

. . . go and help them, go and try and take them to a homeless shelter, give them. . . just buy a wee tea for them, buy a wee bag of chips or anything, like just any spare change or anything, just like help them out and make sure they feel that they should be just a normal person.

The premise is that by educating people and generating empathy around issues such as homelessness, individual kindness and positive relationships will make a difference. This is symbolised by a scene which focuses on the power of a cup of tea in promoting a sense of togetherness and community: 'It brings together people of different classes, it makes us feel equal (Cuppa).' The naming of class is interesting; it is acknowledged but via an outlook which suggests that positive interactions and relationships can help people's sense of self and support them to 'feel equal', without explicitly acknowledging class structures and power differentials which create and reinforce material inequality. There is an emphasis on change, but at the level of individual and social norms.

This focus on what individuals can do in response to poverty was echoed in discussions after the performance. The young people told us that audience members responded very positively to the play and explained that a community worker had later reflected on giving food to a homeless person on their way home that evening. Furthermore, one participant reflected on his voluntary experience supporting homeless people:

David: I used to do this thing where you'd give them teas and coffees. I don't know what it was called, but I don't like when people mistreat people [. . .] I usually give them money if I can, and it's just, the way [others] treat them. They're just like me and you.

Though this quote focuses on the behaviour of individuals towards other people, and does not explicitly account for structural inequalities, it is an example of how working-class people support those with higher levels of poverty in subtle ways, even if they themselves do not have a lot of money and resources. This participant is a young person on a low income, but he speaks of volunteering and giving money to support homeless people. What is not made explicit is that this informal support is made necessary because of the failure of the state to look after its most vulnerable citizens. The dominant neoliberal austerity logic is powerful enough to limit young people's resistance to the level of the interpersonal.

Urban restructuring and public sector cuts. Another structural factor not overtly acknowledged in the play or in post-production reflections was the effects of urban restructuring on the neighbourhood. In the scene depicting the lost tourist group which accidentally ended up outside the homeless hostel, the tour guide announced that the next stop was the 'Tollcross swimming pool'. The swimming pool had been upgraded to the cost of £14 million (mostly borne by Glasgow City Council) in advance of Glasgow hosting the 2014 Commonwealth Games. Indeed, this was one of many examples of huge investment in sporting facilities, particularly in the East End, which also saw the Emirates Arena and the Sir Chris Hoy Velodrome in Parkhead built, costing £116 million. As

noted earlier, questions have been raised as to what benefits hosting the Games gave to local communities. Batchelor et al. (2017) found that local people are often financially excluded from these venues, indicating a legacy of limited value for communities for whom heavy securitisation during the Games became the norm (Mooney et al., 2015). Though the rumours of ‘no go areas’ for local people proved to be unfounded, there is an interesting parallel in the young people’s decision to include the ‘lost tourist group’ scene in the play. Parts of the East End – away from the shiny new purpose-built buildings – are represented as somewhere non-residents would not deliberately visit, reinforcing a sense of inferiority. The young people involved in the project did not seem to access any of the sporting facilities themselves, nor did the researchers find much evidence of local working-class young people utilising the facilities more generally.

Furthermore, the researchers found that young people faced barriers to accessing even the existing council-run sporting facilities. The youth organisation which runs the theatre project organises various other activities, including football on council-run pitches. On a winter evening in 2019, the researchers visited the football project, where hot food was served to offer young people a meal alongside an activity to engage in. However, dozens of young people were squeezed into one football pitch while several others lay empty, and it became apparent that this was due to funding restrictions – only one set of floodlights could be turned on. This issue was explored in an interview with a stakeholder from the third-sector organisation, who explained that Glasgow Life³ had advised the organisation that there was not enough money to provide more lighting:

Nicole: And their response was the ten pounds an hour doesn’t cover the electricity – ‘we are not a charity; Glasgow Life is not a charity’. But in actual fact, Glasgow Life is the charitable arm of Glasgow City Council. And so, it’s then just reinforcing that issue of, you know, negative relationships between centres and actually the communities who [they] are supposed to be serving.

The case study organisation operates in a challenging context. It supports young people living in high-poverty areas of Glasgow in a range of ways, including offering a variety of wellbeing-related activities. As shown in this article, such activities have the potential to encourage the development of critical consciousness, and to challenge place-based stigma. However, working-class young people face a range of barriers directly linked to the entrenchment of a neoliberal austerity logic (Paton, 2018). They have grown up in the context of public sector cuts and processes of urban restructuring in which they are marginalised. This is the overarching context in which projects like the theatre programme operate, but this also affects the mindset of young people. Thus, it is of little surprise that dominant discourses regarding the individualisation of poverty constrain the potential for resistance.

Discussion

This article has examined how a group of working-class young people in Glasgow’s East End were supported to devise and perform a play about their local area, a creative endeavour which challenged negative stereotypes and represented resistance to long-standing place-based stigma. It was clear that young people are aware of and affected by

stigmatising narratives about their neighbourhood and wanted to present an alternative narrative. They sought to educate the audience that their neighbourhood is unfairly stigmatised and that there are positives about living there, in line with findings from Nayak (2019, p. 933) that residents are ‘architects of place, scripting, and re-scripting it in everyday encounters’. Analysis of the play and participants’ reflections revealed that a key objective was to generate empathy and understanding around a range of poverty-related issues. They tried to encourage the audience not to judge people on account of circumstances such as homelessness or addiction, with the inherent assumption that shifting attitudes would help people in poverty to feel less marginalised. Despite growing up experiencing significant socio-economic inequalities, the young people demonstrated agency by challenging dominant, stigmatising representations of their neighbourhood and the people who live there. This contrasts with ‘poverty porn’ programmes like *Benefits Street* and *The Scheme* (Jensen, 2014), where poverty is represented as the failure of individuals and communities who are denigrated in the name of entertainment. Importantly, being led by working-class young people with lived experience of negotiating place-based stigma differentiates projects like the one in this study from top-down anti-stigma campaigns (Tyler & Slater, 2018). Like working-class football supporters in Middlesbrough protesting *Benefits Street* (Nayak, 2019), this is an important form of working-class resistance via cultural activities. Though the young people in this study did not articulate class specifically, their struggles against classification (Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2015) are unambiguous. The study highlighted the potential of the theatre, often considered to be domain of the middle classes, not only to engender empathy but to stimulate critical thinking about power inequalities which harm working-class communities (Gallagher et al., 2023).

Whilst it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of the young people’s work in putting forward an alternative narrative, findings also demonstrated that while the script challenged judgements around poverty-related issues, the structural causes of poverty were not directly grappled with. The anti-stigma messages in the play were largely focused on the level of social norms. There was, for example, no reference to economic factors such as a lack of well-paid employment opportunities or suitable social security provision, the most powerful factors which keep people in poverty. Similarly, in discussing poverty-related issues such as homelessness and addiction, suggested responses focused on the need for empathy and individual generosity as opposed to calls for better funding for addiction services or a robust government response to the housing crisis. Given dominant discourses regarding the individualisation of poverty, and the power of the neoliberal austerity logic (Paton, 2018), this is perhaps unsurprising. Young people’s views of the world around them are heavily shaped by the material conditions in which they live their lives, and correspondingly their ability to visualise alternatives to dominant, stigmatising narratives is somewhat constrained. However, as Nayak (2019) posits, resistance is often piecemeal and emergent, so resisting place-based stigma is best understood as a process. For emerging examples of resistance to have the potential to strongly challenge structural inequalities, it is crucial to capture and understand the processes around these.

The challenge lies in moving further than this empathy-inducing approach to something that might lead to a collective response. It is possible to identify two key enablers

for this. The first is the need for a well-funded and secure youth work sector. Given how powerfully ingrained individualistic understandings of poverty are, skilled youth and community work is a crucial element in helping young people to develop critical consciousness and to support them towards a position of activism which challenges structural inequalities (Ward et al., 2022). Emancipatory youth work offers the potential for moving anti-stigma work to a place that is more critical of the structural causes of poverty. This is, however, undermined by the precarious nature of the youth work sector itself, revealing the interlocking cycle of austerity which constrains anti-poverty efforts both materially and symbolically. This emphasises the importance of local and national governments (both Scottish and UK) making political and policy choices which will improve the lives of young people. Young people in high-poverty areas need well-funded youth services, and while investment in new sports facilities such as those in the East End of Glasgow may have some community benefits, it is crucial to target public spending where it is most needed.

Secondly, the audience for such ‘narratives of resistance’ as described in this article needs to be broader in scope. The anti-stigma messages in the play provide an important counter to stigmatising narratives in ‘poverty porn’ TV shows, or newspaper coverage of welfare claimants or disadvantaged communities which frame poverty as the fault of individuals and communities. Whilst audience reception of the play was beyond the scope of the planned study, the data that we did gather on this pointed to the effectiveness of the play’s messages in prompting critical reflection amongst audience members.⁴ Yet 6.5 million viewers watched *Benefits Street*, while the power of the theatre to communicate alternative political messages is inherently limited given its narrower scope. It is therefore vital to consider how to raise the profile of these alternative narratives. The absence of children and young people’s voices and participation in decision-making is a longstanding problem, with recent calls for new approaches to ensure young people’s participation is meaningful rather than tokenistic (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). While it is positive that the Scottish Government have committed to entrenching children’s rights and participation, rhetoric and policy have yet to be matched by progress on the ground. Efforts to facilitate young people’s meaningful participation in decision-making should be prioritised in relation to tackling poverty. These efforts should seek to harness and develop young people’s critical consciousness, and ensure their voices reach the right audiences.

Strengthening grassroots collective action which tackles the poverty-related issues that the young people in this study deemed important is crucial, particularly given the lack of an alternative vision from opposition parliamentary parties in the UK. Such is the entrenchment of neoliberalism, the Conservatives’ ‘magic money tree’ analogy regarding public spending was recently borrowed by Labour leader Keir Starmer in his attempt to show Labour as the stable party which would not upset the status quo (Ryan, 2022). Though Scotland’s devolved government is less hard-line neoliberal and has implemented some anti-poverty measures to mitigate the welfare cuts imposed by Westminster, public services face ongoing cuts and working-class communities struggle increasingly with cost-of-living crises. Through participation in groups such as Living Rent and Better than Zero and climate justice activism, young people in Glasgow and beyond are driving forward an important alternative vision to the status

quo. In Glasgow's East End, anti-poverty messages like those displayed by Middlesborough fan group Red Faction regarding *Benefits Street* (Nayak, 2019) are combined with food bank drives and fundraising activities as part of the Green Brigade's⁵ anti-poverty work (Newlands, 2022). These are examples of grassroots work in local communities, which are often youth-led. However, to maximise youth participation we need to better understand the enablers and barriers in moving from individual critical consciousness around poverty to direct activism which challenges power structures, as well as how grassroots activism can be sustained over time in the context of neoliberalism. Research mapping the personal and collective journeys of activists in working-class communities, done in collaboration with grassroots organisations to strengthen existing activism, would be a valuable first step.

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Notes

1. The term as used in the study.
2. In April 2021, it was announced that the hostel had been purchased by Wheatley Group, the parent company of the city's biggest social landlord, GHA, with funding from Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Government.
3. The charitable organisation that delivers cultural, sporting and learning activities for Glasgow City Council.
4. Future work should seek to capture this following the approach of Gallagher et al. (2023), ideally led by young people.
5. A Celtic F.C. supporters' group

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