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Drugs and the dangerous poor: exploring the policy construction- response nexus

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'Dangerous Classes' – 'Dangerous places'

- Historically, the idea of 'dangerous classes' emerges at times of economic and social upheaval
- In periods of crisis and austerity, less tolerance of difference; increased fear and loathing of drug users
- Equally, certain spaces (inner cities, ghettos, banlieues) defined as dangerous because of the types of people who gather there – often immigrant communities, 'drug addicts', homeless people.
- **Territorial stigmatisation** - public representation of criminalised youth - the conflation of the intersection of age, gender, class and/or ethnicity with aggression and violence

Schmidt: Ideational Power

- The capacity of actors to influence others normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements (such as discourse, practices, symbols, myths, narratives, collective memories, stories, frames, norms, grammars, models and identities).
- Carstensen & Schmidt, (2016) suggest three different types of ideational power:
 - **power through ideas:** the capacity of actors to persuade others to accept and adopt their views through the use of ideational elements
 - **power over ideas:** the imposition of ideas and the power to resist the inclusion of alternative ideas into the policymaking arena
 - **power in ideas:** the establishing of hegemony or institutions imposing constraints on what ideas are considered.

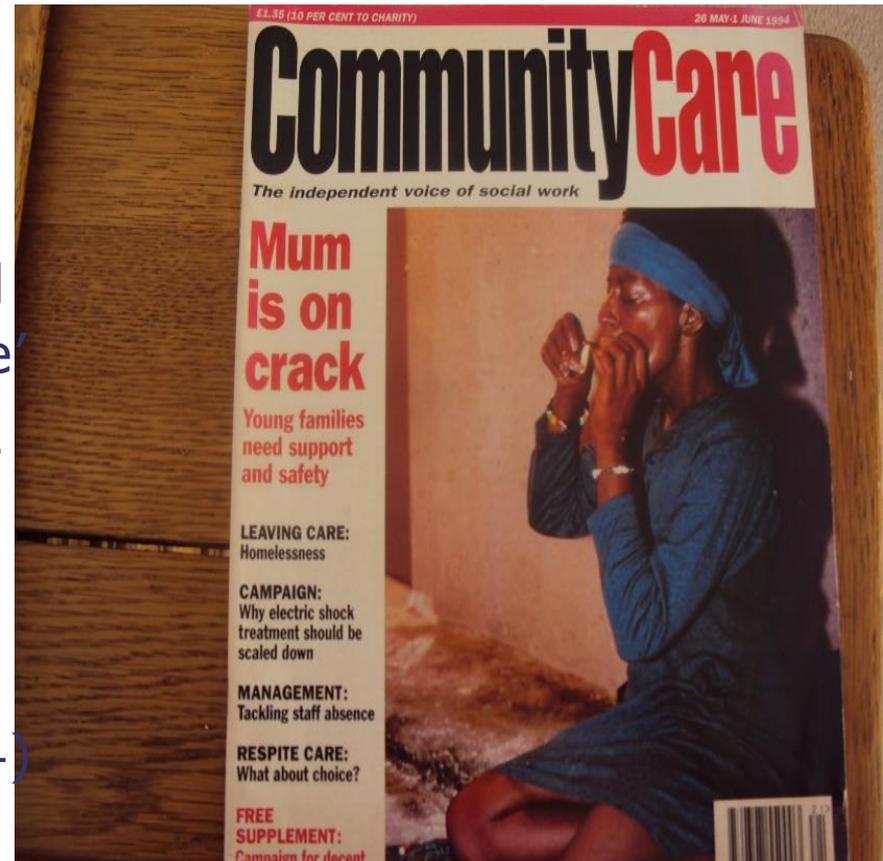
Bacchi: WPR

Bacchi (2009, 2012) 'what is the problem represented to be' ('WPR') approach to policy analysis:

1. Critical review of key policy themes relating to drugs and the poor
2. identify key assumptions in discourses
3. assess the socially harmful impacts of this policy framing.

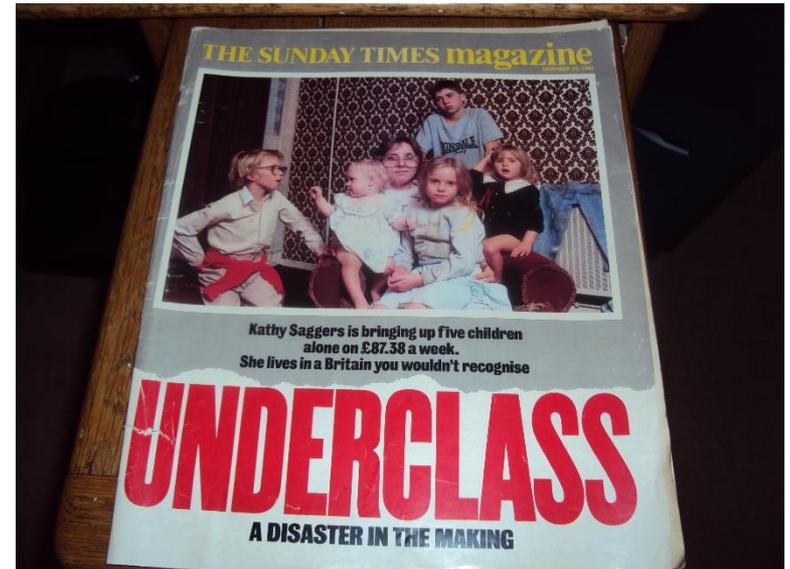
Case study: Poverty, drugs (and alcohol) in English-speaking countries over recent decades

- criminalisation of the poor as a dangerous class since the 1990s
- the concept of 'the underclass' (Murray 1990) comes into social policy debates as part of a radical Right critique of the 'welfare state'
- Poor blamed for social problems - constructed as unemployable - dependent on welfare and drugs
- focus on the pathologies of the welfare poor Wacquant (2009:84) such as the image of 'the welfare queen' who spends her assistance cheque high on drugs and liquor neglecting her children



Poverty propaganda

- Shildrick (2018:2-6) poverty propaganda – deliberately crafted myths and misrepresentations about poverty and those who experience the conditions.
- Poverty 'demonised to such a degree that its real causes and consequences are barely discussed'.
- poverty presented as a personal failure - resolved by individual determination and hard work.
- used to justify punitive policies against the poor



Translating ideas into policy

- In UK under 'New Labour' (1997-2010) and then Coalition and Conservative governments (2010 +) dangerous drugs became associated with deprived communities and heavy drinking with public nuisance as well as domestic violence and other problematic behaviours
- Seen to be concentrated among a distinctive group of **'troubled families'** and welfare claimants seen as a burden on social services and cost to the state
- Drug-taking seen as one small part of a complex of problems concentrated in one strata of society, a facet of intergenerational poverty and explained in moralistic terms. This group are condemned as a burden on society.

Distortion of evidence

- Troubled Families programme 'relied on dirty data, deceitful practices and dubious claims throughout' (Crossley p180).
- Evaluation report found 93% of the so-called troubled families had no adults clinically diagnosed as being dependent on alcohol or non prescription drugs (Crossley p153)
- Black Inquiry – research on benefit claimants 2008-2010 found:
 - 1 in 15 is dependent on drugs such as heroin or crack cocaine' **[14 out of 15 are not!]**
 - 1 in 25 suffering from alcohol dependency **[24 out of 25 are not!]**
- Goulden (2013) (JRF) estimated that:
 - 0.9% of adults are problem drug users
 - 3.8% are dependent on alcohol
 - 7% of people on benefits problem drug users
 - 4% of people on benefits dependent on alcohol.

Danger and safety: evidence from community studies

- Differentiation between internal and external views of dangerous areas.
- Residents report liking their area, the friendliness, the greeting in the street, the informal support networks especially among women and migrant communities in the area. (O’Gorman et al, 2014; 2016)
- People aware of being othered (see Goffman) but rather than passive agents internalising stigma (as per Wacquant and Bordieu) working class communities, (supported by community development) engaged in active resistance and emancipatory politics.

Dangerous places

- Drug-related violence in neighbourhoods represented as an individualistic and pharmonic phenomenon leading to more law enforcement, more punitive welfare policies
- Yet, the drugs economy in the neighbourhood is intricately linked to the increase in drug use in the general population; the extent of joblessness; and the cuts in welfare supports.
 - The young fellas are really just full of fear running around, it's sad. Like on the outside its 'scumbag coke dealers' but they're just afraid scared little boys out there trying to make a name for themselves fuelled up by fear.

Conclusion – from risk to danger

- In recent years, social and addiction policies have drawn a stark distinction between the deserving and the undeserving,
- Use of extreme examples to create scapegoats based on stereotypes of dangerous people who are irresponsible and a burden on the hard-working moral majority.
- poverty and other associated disadvantages are increasingly constructed as individual behaviours.
- drug and alcohol use by those in poverty is understood as being problematic - one of the key causes of poverty.

Overarching paradigms

- These problematisation and use of ideas to frame perceptions and policies are set in wider overarching paradigms of social, economic and political arrangements.
- Three models are considered: welfare state, neoliberal and populist
- In UK, and arguably in other countries, there has been a shift over time from welfare state to malign or benign neoliberalism to the current situation of populism.
- Is it possible to locate ideas about drug use and associated policies within these three models?

- The argument here is that framings of the poor and of drug users are located within overarching paradigms that reflect dominant ideas and institutions and economic and social policies and different constellations of power.
- The social and health policies which followed prioritise social control; target individuals and groups, subject them to assessments, involving surveillance and monitoring.
- Important is the desire to cut costs by reducing overall expenditure and cutting service provision – the dominant goal in the era of austerity.

Overarching paradigms	Welfare state 1945-1979	Neo-liberalism 1979-2008	Populism 2008 to present
Perception of drug users	Deviant sick	Irresponsible Unhealthy life styles Acquisitive crime Public nuisance User /dealer divide	Outsiders Welfare dependent or criminal Sub-human Racist categories xenophobia
Perception of the poor	Contempt inadequate small residual group	Poor choices lack of education under socialised	The poor as a whole associated with drugs drink obesity disability mental illness
Policy response	Medicine Social work	Multi agency Partnerships aim at remedies	Police or welfare agencies aim at elimination or exclusion
Links between drug use and working class and poor	Little awareness Bohemians Middle class or occasional odd ball	Heroin and opioid epidemics in deprived former manufacturing places/ rust belt Former working class	Use of drugs less common among the poor Poor unfairly stereotyped to justify cuts in public expenditure ordinary people v drug users
Main drugs	marijuana LSD	Heroin cocaine	Synthetic drugs Polysubstance use
Key terms	Need harm	Risk and lifestyles concentrated risk – social and spatial – in low income groups and areas	Danger Threat Poisoning social relations
Economy and politics	Steady growth Trade unions, social democratic or Labour Parties	Boom years consumer capitalism globalisation Market dominance Decline of trade unions	recession Austerity Protectionism Collapse of centre parties