

Welfare stigma in a social democratic welfare regime during a decade of national public debate: production, contestation and continuities

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to investigate how welfare stigma is produced and counteracted in the public sphere in a social democratic welfare regime. The Norwegian case represents a generous welfare state that historically has been thought to lessen and avoid stigma connected to welfare benefits. While studies have identified a hardening anti-welfare consensus and stigma production in liberal welfare regimes, we know less about how the connection between welfare benefits, stigma production and resistance has played out in the recent developments in the social democratic welfare regime context. Public debates give access to a dynamic political battleground where different actors participate, and we analyse six welfare-related national debates covered in Norwegian newspapers between 2010 and 2019. We identify key stakeholders, symbolic boundaries used to distinguish deserving from undeserving recipients, and we discuss the outcomes and wider functions of these debates. The debates contain moral aspects of welfare and allegations of fraud by recipients in general as well as by targeted groups such as Somali single mothers, refugees and young adults. We find that stigmatizing framings known from other national contexts also enter the Norwegian debates and illustrate how welfare stigma production plays a role in promoting more selective welfare policies.



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Introduction

Historically, ‘welfare stigma’, understood as negative attitudes and socio-psychological consequences of receiving welfare benefits, has been

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embedded in the design of welfare states (Pinker 1971). Welfare stigma may reduce the number of recipients, make them feel inferior and on a macro-level change laws and restrict rights. It is a barrier to accessing social services and a cause of degradation and rejection (Bauman 1998; Pinker 1971). Perspectives on welfare stigma range from viewed as an unavoidable and even necessary dimension of welfare benefits to a variable phenomenon that can and should be avoided as far as possible (Baumberg 2016: 181). Welfare stigma is shown to be embedded in social structures of class, gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and (dis)ablism and is central for the moral and political economy of welfare states (Dukelow *et al.* 2022).

While we know much about individuals' and groups' experiences of welfare stigma, including the psychological effects and coping mechanisms, the process of producing and resisting stigma at macro levels in society has been less thoroughly explored (Bolton *et al.* 2022; Martin *et al.* 2022; Tyler and Slater 2018). Welfare regime theory has discussed the relation between regime institutional design and stigma production (Esping-Andersen 1990; Rothstein 1998; Larsen 2008a; Larsen and Dejgaard 2013). This literature claim that high degrees of universal schemes, as we find most strongly in the social democratic welfare regimes, effectively prevents stigmatization and negative attitudes against welfare claimants and dependents. Generous benefits and universal rights were meant to lessen welfare stigma related to poor relief (Esping-Andersen 1985). The liberal welfare regimes, on the other hand, are characterized by preference for market solutions, minimum state intervention and means-tested programmes, all assets that are linked to welfare stigma (Titmuss 1969; Esping-Andersen 1990). Welfare benefits are thought harmful, contagious and produce dependency (e.g. Bolton *et al.* 2022; Capucha *et al.* 2014; Jensen and Tyler 2015; Morris 2018). Recent empirical studies have identified a hardening anti-welfare consensus and documented effects of welfare stigma production in liberal welfare regime contexts (Bolton *et al.* 2022; Martin *et al.* 2022; Tyler 2020); as well as outline of de-stigmatization processes and strategies in such contexts (Lamont 2018). However, we know less about how the connection between welfare benefits and stigma production and resistance has played out in the recent developments of social democratic welfare regime contexts (see however Dencker-Larsen and Lundberg 2016; Esmark and Schoop 2017), as the social democratic welfare regimes, too, are changing (Greve 2022). There is a need for more knowledge on when, how and by whom welfare stigma is produced and resistance to stigma in different national contexts.

In this article our contribution is to explore how welfare stigma is produced and contested in a Scandinavian welfare state context, historically characterized by high degree of coverage of citizens and universal rights. Since the late 1990s, welfare benefits in Norway have become more conditional with enforcement of an activation approach towards people not working (Ellingsæter *et al.* 2020). The decade 2010–2019 was marked by growing economic inequalities, and there was also a development towards more conservative policy and neo-liberal ideas. At the beginning of the decade, the ‘red-green coalition’ government started its second term, as it held office from 2005 to 2013, then three different coalition governments led by the Conservative Party held office for two terms (2013–2021). The Progress Party (FRP), who is considered to the right of the Conservative Party, came into power for the first time, and was part of these governments from 2013 to 2020. Norway was less affected by the general economic crisis in the 2000s than other European countries. However, the context of crisis gave momentum for setting the expenditure of welfare benefits on the agenda. There has been increased focus on the importance of making it pay to work, with cuts in benefits as a result. Norway has as the rest of Europe, experienced increased migration, and demographic changes towards a more elderly population. These, often presented as crises, give rise to discussions of worthiness and solidarity, who deserve welfare state support and who do not (Koos 2019; Van Oorschot 2000, 2006).

We will explore how welfare stigma was produced and resisted in public debates in Norway from 2010 to 2019. Public debates on welfare benefits with national scope in Norwegian paper media in the 2010s is chosen as our data source. The debates start by an event reported in media, a column or a political stunt that receives the attention of national media. Afterwards other actors respond or are interviewed. That such debates emerge indicate that the issues debated are disputed and considered important at the time. This data material provides access to the opinions of a wide variety of actors (media, politicians, labour unions, employers and representatives from the civic sphere). To explore such public debates over a decade gives us access to data on how welfare benefits were discussed and what we will call ‘the welfare stigma climate’ in Norway of this decade.

Understanding production and resistance of welfare stigma

In his classic on stigma, Goffman understands stigma as the situation of an individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance. Goffman

acknowledged that stigma was defined by greater structures and a way society controls people's behaviour (Goffman 1963: 11). His contribution was, however, to offer a vocabulary for understanding the micro interactional, relational aspects of stigma. He differed between three types: abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character and tribal stigma as race, nation and religion (Goffman 1963: 14). Welfare stigma can be related to all these types and a combination of them, has long historical roots and is connected to the division between the worthy and unworthy poor (Spincker 1984).

There is a huge literature on how stigma related to welfare benefits is experienced and resisted on an individual level and related to structural relations as race, gender, ethnicity, class and (dis-)ablism (e.g. Dukelow *et al.* 2022, Scambler 2020, Spincker 1984). Welfare stigma is dynamic, located and varies depending on social audience, situation and life story (Lundberg and Syltevik 2016; Rogers-Dillon 1995). Welfare stigma has been found to have deep roots in norms of reciprocity and different categories of recipients may also be subject to different stereotypes (Schofield *et al.* 2022). In addition, structural conditions (such as the economy, demographic changes and unemployment), institutional factors in the history and character of national welfare schemes are factors that may impact whether and how stigma is attached to welfare benefits. In the welfare regime literature, there is a discussion on the connection between the institutional logics of welfare regimes and welfare attitudes and stigma (Larsen 2008a; Larsen and Dejgaard 2013; Rothstein 1998). The argument is that in liberal welfare regimes, as so few benefits from the welfare state, it becomes easy to picture them as deplorable poor that there is little reason to support. The generosity of welfare schemes in the Scandinavian welfare regime, on the other hand, makes it less relevant to make distinctions between those who receive benefits and those who does not (Rothstein 1998: 180; Esping-Andersen 1990: 28). However, the social democratic welfare regimes, too, are based on a strong work ethic and accordingly strong norms for providing for oneself by paid work (Ellingsæter *et al.* 2020). Studies have also shown criteria for deservingness to go across welfare regimes (e.g. Larsen 2008a, Van Oorschot 2006).

We will focus on the production and resistance towards stigma in the public sphere and are inspired by new scholarship on stigma addressing its political aspects and how it is counteracted. The politics of stigma have been the focus on recent work on stigma (Bolton *et al.* 2022, Link and Phelan 2014; Scambler 2020; Tyler 2020; Tyler and Slater 2018). The context for this perspective is the austerity policy in Britain and Ireland in

the 2010s and its devastating effects on individuals and neighbourhoods. Tyler and Slater (2018) understand stigma as a part of a political and cultural economy and suggest that we question how stigma is produced, by whom and why. Her point is that stigmatization is practised and experienced in everyday life but intertwined in capitalist structures of exploitation, dominance and social control (Tyler 2020: 17). To better understand how stigma functions as a power relation in the interaction between people, society, media and the state and as a driving force producing social inequality, Tyler (2020) offers concepts as stigma machines, stigma power, stigma craft and stigma optics. Stigma machine is the whole body of involved actors, institutions and workings of stigma production. Stigma power is ways to exploit, control and exclude others based on for example class, gender, race and/or sexuality. Stigma craft is actions to make people feel that to welfare benefits is not deserved and the spread of anti-welfare attitudes, while stigma optics refers to a transformation of the way to see poverty or social suffering, hardening people's feelings to the suffering around them (Tyler 2020: 188). All these concepts may be used to understand production of stigma across national contexts.

There are few contributions theorizing resistance against stigma in context. An exception is the work by Lamont and co-workers on how neo-liberalism promotes growing recognition gaps in the United States, Brazil and Israel (Lamont and Mizrachi 2011, Lamont 2016, Lamont 2018). They focus on how resistance to stigma is constrained by institutions, national ideologies, cultural repertoires and contexts. They use the concept of symbolic boundaries, to address the 'work' individuals and groups do to define themselves and others, and 'the kind of typification system or interference, concerning similarities and differences that groups mobilize to define who they are' (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 171). Symbolic boundaries are 'conceptual distinctions we make to categorize objects, people, practices' (Lamont 1992: 9). Such distinctions are made to categorize people and practices over time and space, identify people, attitudes and behaviours with which they associate or do not wish to be associated. In relation to welfare stigma, this approach can be used to address how actors delineate between who deserve support and not, based on cultural resources and the structural conditions in which they find themselves.

Data and methods

Our data come from Norwegian public debates covered in newspapers in the 2010s. We identified our cases by using A-tekst – a media database

with an archive of full texts from over 300 Norwegian newspapers. Our criteria were that a debate should be initiated by a person or organization to which other actors reacted, that the debate received national coverage and that the use of welfare benefits was questioned and debated. To identify debates that met these criteria, we started by using broad search words as Nav (the Norwegian welfare and work bureaucracy), allowance, welfare policy, workfare policy to gain an impression of possible debates in the 2010s. Assessing the result of these searches we refined our search words. We ended with six media debates for further analysis. The cases, the search keywords, content and when the search was done, are presented in [Table 1](#) (see below).

The cases cover debates about various groups, different types of benefits and different stakeholders. They vary in scope and quantity from the broad scope of what we call ‘the welfare trap debate’ to the more limited scope of the young people on benefits campaign. They also vary regarding who participate from many different actors participating in the welfare scrounger’s confession debate to the politicians’ domination of the welfare trap debate. They all got national interest and concerned issues that were highly contested at this time.

Research has shown that media representations impact people’s attitudes, and how media representations can shape, perpetuate as well as reduce stigma (see for example Eberl *et al.* 2018 about the impact of the media discourse on immigration). As a public arena for discussions of welfare policy, the media are important because they represent a public perspective on issues of which people often have no first-hand experience (Baumberg 2016). Receipt of welfare benefits is invisible, and because people often do not share such information outside their inner circle, public debates may be a major source of insight into how others view the uptake of such benefits (Gubrium 2015).

Because A-tekst is a database for paper media (with some digital media included), our view is restricted to what is presented there. There are many references to other media as television, radio and social media in the data material, but what we see of such media is limited to what is represented in the database. However, paper or digital newspapers remained a main resource for news for the Norwegian public in this period. A strength of using this material is the opportunity the database provides for systematic searches for articles over time. For these reasons we find these debates well suited to give insight into the symbolic boundaries, stereotypes and discourses on which the actors draw.

**Table 1.** The media debate cases – summary of content and some general traits.

Media case	Date of publication and number of newspaper articles	Groups concerned	Initiator of the debate	Actors involved	Consequences/outcomes
The 'welfare trap'	December 2010–January 2011; 35 Downloaded; 15.09.2020	All – the welfare system as a whole	The National Trade Organization (NHO)	NHO, The government, politicians in the opposition, Largest Labour Union (LO) and commentators	High profile debate. Succeeded in setting the public agenda
Somali 'false' single mothers	August 2010–March 2017. 24 Downloaded. 14.09.2020; 15.09.2020	Somali single mothers	Kadra Yusuf (Journalist/columnist)	Somali community, NAV officials, politicians, researchers, commentators and individuals	Polarization of standpoints. Somali mothers framed as a problematic immigrant group – followed by actions by state authorities
A 'welfare scrounger's' confession	March 2012–September 2013; 38 Downloaded 1.11.2018 13.12.2019	Welfare benefits recipients	Vegard Skjervheim (welfare recipient)	Policy makers, columnists, commentators, researchers, employees in NAV	General disapproval
Refugees and the 'gold chair' to the welfare state	December 2015; 12 articles. Downloaded 1.11.2018	Refugees	Sylvi Listhaug (State Secretary for the Progress Party)	Politicians, commentators (editorials), experts on law and rhetoric politicians	General disapproval of the rhetoric; political agreement for stricter immigration policies
Young people on benefits	January 2017; 7 articles. Downloaded 1.11.2018	Young people – social assistance	The Progress Party's youth organization	Individuals with benefits, politicians	General disapproval of rhetoric
Work clearance allowance cuts	Autumn 2019; 28 articles. Downloaded 14.11.2019	Young people with AAP	Heidi Nordby Lunde, Member of Parliament, Conservative Party	Politicians, organization for AAP recipients, Young disabled people's organization, labour union representatives, people with AAP, researchers, and experts	High profile opposition/confrontation. General disapproval in media; led to modification of proposed welfare cuts

To analyse the cases, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the media accounts to search out underlying themes in the material (Bryman 2012: 557). First, we registered the main content of the articles, described the actors represented, the themes covered and portrayals of social benefits and recipients. We also made a short narrative of each media debate; how did it start and what were the main content and outcome of the debates? Then, secondly, we looked for answers to our main research questions and used the concept of symbolic boundaries to address how the actors drew the line between deserving and undeserving recipients in the production of and resistance towards welfare stigma. We use the vocabulary suggested by Tyler as sensitizing concepts for addressing the production of stigma. We also situate our analysis within the scholarship on comparative welfare state research (Esping-Andersen 1990; Rothstein 1998; Larsen 2008a). Third, the media debates were compared to identify differences and similarities and address what characterized the production of welfare stigma in media debates in Norway in the 2010s.

The 'welfare trap' – the Norwegian Trade Organization sets the agenda

In December 2010, the General Director of the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO), Kristin Skogen Lund, introduced 'The welfare trap' as the main theme for the annual conference of the largest trade organization in Norway. The message was illustrated by a comfortable red chair nearly caught in a mousetrap. NHO is the largest employer organization in Norway and a key player in the institutionalized collaboration between employers, unions and government. The annual NHO conference is an important national event where top-level politicians and other elite members of Norwegian society are present. The conference was held at the new Opera building in Oslo and attended by 1300 participants. As usual, it received extensive coverage in the mainstream Norwegian media.

NHO described the welfare system as failing to make work pay, with the consequence that a large portion of the population remained outside the labour market (Lund 2010). There had been 'too much focus on securing income and too little focus on getting people into work' (our translation). The symbolic boundaries were drawn between the majority inside the labour market and the large number of people outside it. The latter group was reported to

consist of about 700,000 people. The message was that the welfare state was too generous. The proposed solutions involved making work pay by cutting welfare benefits, using the tax system to give incentives to work and making employers hire people with challenges (named as people with 'holes in their CVs'). Of particular concern were the situation of those 'falling out of school', and who ended up as young recipients of disability allowance.

The professional resources used to push this message illustrate the crafting, power and political dimensions of stigma. Still, strong opposition was mobilized against the initiative. The main opponents were from the red-green government (Labour Party, Centre Party and Socialist Left Party) incumbent at the time and the labour unions suggesting alternative symbolic boundaries of the problem. These actors argued that NHO was painting the situation black by exaggerating the numbers of people outside the labour market and downplaying that the participation rates in the labour market were high compared with those in other OECD countries. The red-green government and unions attributed the problem of people without work to the attitudes of employers and the demands of the labour market. The problem was not welfare benefits. The existence of these (as the sickness benefit scheme) were rather the prerequisite for the high employment rates, claimed Roger Bjørnstad, chief economist in LO (The largest union for employees in Norway) (Githmark 2010a). The 'inequality trap' that would result from right-wing policies, was the real threat to the welfare state, these actors argued (Bård Vegard Solhjell, deputy leader Socialist Left Party, Githmark 2010b). The leader of the main labour union organization, Flåten (LO), reacted directly to the issue of welfare stigma when he asked NHO not to make welfare recipients into scapegoats by presenting a scary image (Brox and Kristjansen 2011). Welfare stigma was implicitly linked to all who had benefits and who did not have paid work. The debate has resemblance with the concept of 'welfare dependency', most effectively used in US welfare debates in the 1980s (see Fraser and Gordon 1994; Murray 1984).

The numbers quoted of those 'standing outside' was shown to be biased (Bjørnstad and Hornburg 2011; Rønning and Kristiansen 2011). However, the main message that welfare benefits were too generous was placed high on the public agenda and was important throughout the decade that followed. The importance of getting more people into work received broad political support.

Somali ('false') single mothers – accusations of tribal welfare fraud

The next debate activated discourses of gender and race, targeting a particular group of migrant women. In a newspaper comment, Kadra Yusuf, a commentator, and Norwegian media journalist with Somali origins herself, claimed that Somali women divorce under Norwegian law just to receive welfare benefits (Yusuf 2010). The headline was 'The welfare state divides us'. Her intention was to criticize the Norwegian welfare system for encouraging couples to divorce. However, the debate became centred on welfare fraud. Her comment was followed on the same day by interviews with Magne Fladby, Director of Control NAV (The Norwegian Welfare Bureaucracy), who confirmed that they knew about the risk of fraud among Somali mothers. The newspaper comment and this confirmation from NAV spread widely in the Norwegian media.

Several people criticized Yusuf's framing of the problem the days that follow. A Somali community leader, Bashe Musse, warned against stigmatization of the whole group. He accused Yusuf of spreading opinions without real knowledge of the situation of Somalis. He welcomed a general debate about welfare fraud but warned against attacking a particular ethnic group. He claimed that Somali women was worthy recipients and pointed to the difficult situation faced by Somali couples in Norway, giving them a high probability of divorce (Helmert 2010; Sperstad 2010). On the other hand, Amal Aden, another active correspondent with Somali origins, supported Yusuf and wrote that Somalis should face the reality, that too generous welfare support and drug abuse (khat) were problems for the group, and work together to do something about it. The red-green government and NAV responded that they did not single out Somalis but focused their attention and controls on single parents on social benefits in general.

The situation of Somali single mothers continued to play a role in the media in the following months. Those arguing against connecting fraud with Somalis pointed to discrimination in the labour market, lack of qualifications and their difficulties in finding work and a stable income. Several reacted to experiences of stigma. Qadijo Ibrahim, a woman of Somali origin, addressed the negative attitudes and stereotypes directly: 'I know that many Norwegians look upon us with distrust, [considering] that we don't want to work, are breeding machines, and just receive

allowances and benefits. But it is not like that; we wish for work more than anything, but do not get work' (Our translation, Andresen 2011).

The debate was followed by very firm action by state institutions. On the 9th of March 2011, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation announced that the police had acted against several Somali households in Oslo that were suspected of welfare fraud. In the media, headlines such as *100 Somali women had children with their ex-husband* were typical. The debate was taken to the Norwegian Parliament. On the 12th of April, Robert Eriksson, representing the Progress Party (then in opposition), asked how the Minister would encourage Somali immigrants to cease being passive recipients. He ended by stating that 'there is a need for new and stronger approaches'. The following year, activity requirements in the benefit scheme for single parents were strengthened (NOU 2017: 191).

The debate is an example of how accusations of fraud or people receiving welfare benefits to which they are not entitled, received huge attention in the media. This case provides ample opportunities to discuss how welfare stigma is produced based on stereotypes related to race and gender, and to establish the difficulties of resistance and boundary work to counter the image of fraud. First, in contrast to the 'welfare trap' case, it is interesting to note the relative absence of alternative supporting voices from organizations and movements outside the Somali group. Welfare fraud is something that 'all' oppose, making counter-argument difficult. Second, the debate shows that new discussions are related to previous discourses. Somalis was already a stigmatized group in Norway. Furthermore, negative images of single mothers and allowances in Norway have a long history. The situation of Somali women fitted into these earlier discussions and was also related to international discussions on single mothers and dependency, in its most explicit discourse framed as 'welfare queens', intersecting race and gender (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Gilens 1999). To be a worthy recipient, a person must desire paid work, and care for children is not considered to be work in the Norwegian context. Here, a particular group of single mothers was singled out as not wanting to work and cheating the system through fake divorces. The case also shows that this is felt and experienced by those who are targeted. Third, even if resistance to such generalizations is varied and nuanced, the main narrative proves strong. The gendered and raced image of the Somalian women exploiting the welfare system has strong stigma power.

A 'welfare scrounger's' confession – Problematic self-presentation

During the spring of 2012, a news article quoted a couple of young interviewees that it was common to prefer receiving benefits from the Norwegian welfare bureaucracy (NAV) after mandatory schooling rather than work. This was labelled 'Naving' ('wellfaring'), a word that was quickly adopted as a common word in the Norwegian language. This concept, even if introduced for young people without work, soon became used for all kind of benefits from the Norwegian welfare system. This image fitted perfectly with our next case. The young white male Vegard Skjerveheim (2012a) posted the article 'A 'welfare scrounger's' confession', that became the most cited article ever in *Dagbladet* (a major tabloid Norwegian national newspaper) until then with over 180,000 citations. Skjerveheim presented himself as a healthy young man who should have no difficulty finding a job. However, he wrote, and several others found themselves in a situation without a job, no clearly defined plans for finding one, and little responsibility for an abstraction such as the welfare state budget. The problem was finding work with meaning. He found no lasting meaning in either services or in manual work. From early childhood, he and others in his situation had been told that they had every opportunity, and when this was not so, they were not satisfied with mundane ordinary jobs. He briefly presented this as the reason for a mental breakdown. The piece ended with the following statement:

When I am a NAV recipient, it is not something I wish to be. It is due to lack of motivation and energy. What then is more natural than working for better opportunities, when we live in a welfare society and the possibility lies there? (Our translation)

In this way he tried to explain his lack of motivation, and aspirations for something better, and present it as legitimate reasons for support from the welfare state.

Politicians from across the entire political spectrum were outraged and called for action. His use of the word 'scrounger' with quotation marks was questioned; he was a scrounger by not having a job, being a public burden, and without value because he did no productive work. In short, the welfare state was not for achieving one's dreams, as he seemed to believe. A few discussed how young people could strike a better balance between ambitions and opportunities. However, the

debate focused on the unacceptability of him getting welfare benefits, and how it represented a threat to the legitimacy of the welfare state. A member of parliament (from the Centre Party) wrote a letter to NAV and the police accusing him of fraud. Several days later, Skjervheim responded to the accusations by providing detailed information about his health situation and the mental problems that qualified him for social benefits (Skjervheim 2012b). In Goffman's terms (1963), he is not offered to pass in relation to stigma but must reveal the discreditable attributes of mental problems to the public to be considered eligible for benefits.

This case is illustrative in many ways. First, it is a very rare example in Norway of an individual seeking acceptance for receiving benefits without emphasizing health reasons. He challenges all norms and symbolic boundaries in presenting himself as a worthy recipient. He demands work with meaning, has higher expectations, and gives an impression of voluntariness in relation to his situation. His attempt of understanding his breakdown in terms of upbringing, the discrepancy between expectations and possibilities, and the generational aspects of his argument are outside the frame of proper presentation of self in relation to benefits. Skjervheim is understood in the frame of welfare fraud and gains little support. This resembles welfare debates in Denmark in the 2010s (e.g. on 'Lazy Robert' and 'Poor Carina'; see Hedegaard 2014; Dencker-Larsen and Lundberg 2016), and established welfare images in UK in the 1970s (Golding & Middleton 1982). Second, it is also an example of the need for a diagnosis. There must be a health issue that hinders employment, and mental problems are anyhow in a grey zone. Third, the example also illustrates consensus and eagerness across the political spectrum to state the need for legal regulation and enforcement of duties for young people on benefits.

The 'gold chair to the welfare state' – symbolic battles of immigration politics

In the context of the large number of refugees coming to Europe and Norway in 2015, welfare-related costs were set on the public agenda. At the time, the new Secretary for Migration and Integration, Sylvi Listhaug from the Progress Party, introduced new restrictions in migration policy, making it more difficult to obtain permanent residence in Norway. When presenting the new policy, she stated: 'The most important factor for good integration is that the migrant wants to be

integrated. One cannot be carried into Norway in a gold chair. There must be consequences, and this is what we do with this proposal' (Haugan 2015a). The symbolic boundary drawn was between those immigrants who do not show the will to be integrated into society and those who do. To be considered a migrant with the right will was presented as learning Norwegian, having good knowledge about Norway, having a job with sufficient income, and having a place to live. Apart from that, there was no explicit framing of good, non-needy migrants. She also referred to 'unnecessary' asylum seekers who are unworthy of support from the Norwegian welfare state. The symbolic boundaries drawn here were related to whether migration is necessary or the result of voluntary choices by the migrants. The framing is connected to UK and international discussions on welfare tourism (see Morris 2018; Tyler 2020).

This rhetoric, representing stigma power craft with clear political dimensions, led to a huge political controversy and guided other parties to react. Listhaug's words fell just after photographs of refugee children dying in the Mediterranean Sea were highlighted in national media and frequently shared in social media. The Christian Democratic Party (a supporting party of the right-wing government) considered the propositions just but highlighted the importance of helping people in need and Norway's international obligations. Karin Andersen, Socialist Left Party MP in the opposition, was furious: 'That Listhaug think that to flee from war and distress is to be carried on a gold chair, shows how unfit she is to be the one handling the refugee crisis' (Haugan 2015b). The Organization for Asylum Seekers (Organisasjon for Asylsøkere) considered the demands unrealistic and claimed that this would hamper integration rather than improve it. Those who protested referred to the structural factors affecting integration and the underlying false premise of lack of will.

Listhaug defended her use of words (Haugan 2015b). She said that her reference to a 'gold chair' was just a way to highlight the responsibilities of migrants. She stated that she took the criticism very calmly. 'In the end, it depends on the migrants' own efforts to be integrated into society. It must be okay to use such expressions'. She also took comfort in the support she received from social media, which according to her was overflowing with support with statements as 'Love this lady' and 'Congratulations'.

The conclusion of the debate was that the rhetoric was deemed unnecessary and tasteless by most participants. However, the result was

broad political agreement that the integration policy ought to be stricter, and a majority in parliament voted for the new rules, with some exceptions. The headlines of some editorials are illustrative: ‘The content is better than the rhetoric’ (Trønderavisa 2015). ‘Good content, bad style’ (VG editorial 2015).

The young people on benefits campaign – stigma craft and resistance

In the next debate, young people with welfare benefits are the targeted group, a group that has shown to be seen as less worthy than other groups across different welfare state contexts (Larsen 2008b). During the first week of 2017, the Progress Party’s youth organization, launched a social media campaign focusing on young people on social assistance (the most means-tested benefit in Norway) and their responsibilities. The campaign, an illustration of use of stigma power, craft and optics, contains a photo of a young man in a white shirt and tie sleeping on a sofa with a half-eaten burger on his chest. The image is accompanied by the headline ‘Duties to young people in the welfare office’. The campaign was related to a new bill implemented on the first of January 2017, with new rules which required all social assistance recipients under the age of 30 years to work to receive financial support. The bill was framed and justified by arguments related to help and care. In contrast, this social media campaign was loaded with moral accusations that young people were lazy. The campaign was characterized in the media as an example of mixed messages from the government (Dagbladet 2017).

Several young people on welfare benefits responded to the campaign and questioned the symbolic boundaries presented. They felt offended by the message of the image and referred to themselves as worthy recipients (Eriksen 2017). They used symbolic boundaries linked to the discourses of necessity rather than will, and for example explained how health problems, often invisible to others, affected their lives and made it impossible to work (Blix 2017).

The Progress Party’s youth organization (FRPU) defended their use of photo. The picture was not meant to label youth as lazy, they claimed. They returned to the original framing of the new law. The duty to work was meant as help, and: ‘one of the reasons we choose this picture was that the main disservice we could do for young people is to say that is okay to lie on the couch all day demanding social benefits’ (Christensen 2017). Berg Edseth (deputy leader FRPU Oslo) drew finer

symbolic boundaries when he wrote: ‘Dear all of you who have chronic diseases that hinder you from having a job. Don’t feel harassed’. The target was the others, for whom this was for their own good: ‘You force them out of the door and help them out into the labour market. People who live on public support can get a job and the feeling of contributing to society’ (Edseth 2017).

The campaign was condemned and received little support. The image and message represented excessive use of stigma optics to be considered fair. Compared with the events described so far, this incident mobilized more people with benefits to react to the stigmatization. However, the policy change was passed by parliament with activation policy as the justification.

Work clearance allowance – battles and organizing against benefit cutbacks

The government introduced several benefit cuts in the national budget in the autumn of 2019. One of them was a reduction in benefits for those under 25 years in the work clearance allowance (AAP). The AAP benefit was introduced in 2010 as a new benefit covering people with health issues and reduced ability to work. The benefit was intended to ensure an income until they were ‘cleared’ for either work or a disability pension. The reduction of the AAP for those under 25 years was framed not as a cut, but as a redistribution of funding for activities to assist young people into work. The argument for the reduction was that youths received less if they were studying, training for a job, or had support from other welfare programmes. Incentives were therefore framed necessary. It should not pay to have AAP. Heidi Nordby Lunde, a conservative member of the Norwegian Parliament, became a reference point in the debate that followed. She was interviewed in *Dagsnytt 18* (11 October 2019) after posting support for the change on her Facebook account. Using stigma optics, she claimed that the benefit for those under 30 years mainly went to people with low self-esteem, coping problems and minor mental challenges, and that the policy ought to change to avoid that young people ended in a poverty trap.

These claims were met with strong resistance from a broad range of actors. After six years with a conservative government and the implementation of several welfare cuts, the opposition was concerned about income security. The leader of the Labour Party, Jonas Gahr Støre, accused the Conservative Party of not recognizing the health problems of the group

and indirectly of accusing recipients of receiving unjustified support. He referred to the health requirements in the law as considerable and just. The Labour Party wanted to give more people the opportunity to work, and shared that goal with the government, but would not cut income support (Gilbrant 2019). The deputy leader in one of the unions for employees (Norsk tjenestemannslag NAV) also emphasized the illness of the young recipients of AAP. 'This is not 19-year-olds playing computer games but often very ill people who shall have their ability to work assessed. Cuts in support will make this more difficult' (Sæther 2019). Several young people on AAP were interviewed. They presented themselves as worthy recipients by outlining their (often invisible) health problems, argued against viewing their situation as a choice, and claimed that they were depicted as lazy and met with distrust (Danielsen 2019). They accused the government of making the situation of persons with health issues difficult. All recipients are collectively punished for the eventual fraud of the few. In this media debate, there are several references to a culture of welfare stigma and shame that has developed, worsening the situation for people on benefits.

A difference in this debate from that surrounding the young people on benefits campaign and the welfare scrounger's case earlier in the decade, is that people on AAP had organized a year before. The allowance had been cut from four to three years in 2018, and an organization was formally established on the 12th of June 2019. The organization has over 1700 paying members and 19,000 followers of its Facebook group, showing the potential for de-stigmatization using social media (for another example of this, see Meese *et al.* 2020). The leader of the organization, Elisabeth Thorsen, a former NAV employee with her own health problems was very active also in this debate. She expressed harsh criticism of the NAV system and its ability to provide the support and help needed by people being assessed for either work or the disability pension (Thorsen 2019a, 2019b).

The symbolic boundaries that define the unworthy recipients are the same as in the other cases. The unworthy are those who lack the will and not ability, who are lazy and not sufficiently unwell, with risk of being trapped in the welfare system. The recipients that respond address the difficulties of presenting themselves as worthy to the public. One is particularly detailed about this: 'Is it ok to smile? To have a good time when you have a good day? Can you be happy?' The problems are invisible, often varying, and they refer to a culture where living on benefits is questioned and met with distrust.

Discussion

These cases were intensive, national major debates on welfare benefits in Norway in the 2010s. They targeted a variety of groups and questioned their legitimacy to support from the welfare state. The social boundaries used to negotiate welfare stigma on the Norwegian 'welfare battlefield' varied from vague (in the welfare trap case), to specific with references to a lack of will, laziness and fraud in the welfare scoundrel case and gendered and racial stereotypes in the Somali single mother's case. Although variation, in all debates discourses of welfare stigma were activated and reproduced. They were all based on the claim that too many receive benefits, and in most of the cases, there is discourses of suspicion of fraud and all show an implicit distrust of recipients. The welfare climate of the decade shows that many questions about welfare benefits are contested. The welfare common sense (Jensen and Tyler 2015) is that too many have welfare benefits, that they are too generous and that the welfare system is not sustainable in the future. There is need of more incentives to work. Our empirical analysis also shows how welfare stigma is linked to other social divisions as race, gender, class, ethnicity and (dis)ability. These social structures of inequality serve to empower welfare stigma. While stigma is attached to all with benefits, there is a particular stigma attached to young people with benefits (a targeted group across all welfare regimes; Larsen 2008b), migrant women and people with mental health problems. The welfare stigma production is linked to larger public debates in this decade about the transition to adulthood, migration and the economy. The debates also use discourses that resembles international, framings (e.g. Fraser and Gordon 1994; Gilens 1999; Hedegaard 2014; Morris 2018; Murray 1984; Tyler 2020).

Regarding resistance against welfare stigma, our analyses show that the symbolic boundaries activated by actors to argue for the worthiness of their claims were related to the involuntary character of their situation. The actors show how they adapt to the norms of wanting to work, how their situation makes this impossible and how they fulfil the requirements for needing help and contribute to society. Lamont (2018) emphasized that identities and boundaries are not cognitive phenomena located in people's heads but embedded in institutions and structures. She suggests that de-stigmatization is achieved when people instead connect private troubles to public issues. Such structural reasons for people's troubles are made by some politicians and organizations. However, in the ideological climate in the Norwegian public sphere at the start of the

decade, it seemed outside the frame to question activation policy. Lamont (2018) frame organizing as important for de-stigmatization and refer to the Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matters and the Me-Too-movement. The effect of organizing was also evident in our empirical material, and here we find a development during the decade. At the end of the 2010s, we saw increasing collective resistance from groups affected by welfare cuts. And through the decade, depending on the framing of issues, strong and powerful resistance lead by labour unions and left-wing political parties was mobilized for defending major social security arrangements.

We find that the production of stigma in these debates resembles those found in the context of liberal welfare regimes (Bolton *et al.* 2022; Martin *et al.* 2022; Tyler 2020). We see for instance, how powerful actors are represented as initiators, and the intensity of the debates illustrate the power of welfare stigma. We observe that the Norwegian right-wing parties, together with other actors mobilizing for market liberalism, played major roles in shaping the accusatory narratives in this decade. In four of the debates, organizations or representatives from these parties took the initiative. In the Somali case, they entered the debate by taking the case to parliament after the police action. Here, we see indications that the production of moral allegations and stigma power were used to legitimize policy changes. This can be seen as signs that populism and neo-liberal values gained influence in Norway, as they did across Europe (Capucha *et al.* 2014; Morris 2018; Tyler 2020). The institutional logic of the Scandinavian welfare regime is not unaffected by this development.

The vocabulary suggested by Tyler to address the production of stigma is clearly applicable for understanding how the stigma machine in the Norwegian version works. The Norwegian version seems more subtle, yet just as likely to arise both as self-stigma of those that feel accused of the immoral receipt of welfare and as stigma from the wider social environment in the form of internalization and acceptance of the moral allegations made in public debates. Such distorted views of the problems of benefit recipients, has the potential to clear the ground for political change as cutbacks in welfare benefits, also in a Scandinavian welfare state context.

On the other hand, our empirical findings on stigma power in the Norwegian version also shows that it was based on 'gentler' means. The legitimacy of the most disrespectful rhetoric was questioned by most participants, and there are not so many explicit characteristics of unworthy recipients. What is most criticized is the welfare system, that

is too generous. The core value of the duty to work and to contribute in this way to society, are shared along the political spectre. The historically deep-rooted discourse on underserving recipients in the welfare state was activated in all debates, and all political parties seemed eager to signal their disapproval of welfare fraud and support of activation policies.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how welfare stigma is produced and contested in a Scandinavian welfare state context, historically characterized by high degree of coverage of citizens and universal rights. Theoretically and analytically, we have put together a framework inspired by both classical and newer sociological work on stigma, combined with insights from welfare regime theory and comparative welfare research. Linking these frameworks enabled us to analyse the complex interplay between production and resistance of welfare stigma in public debates with an eye to contextual variation.

Empirically, we have provided insight into how welfare stigma has been produced, mirrored, modified and countered in public debates on welfare benefits in Norway in the 2010s. From our cases, we see how stigmatizing framings and discursive framings known from other national contexts also enter the Norwegian debates, and that the production as well as a contestation of welfare stigma are subjected to variation over time. Our analysis illustrates the importance of the context for understanding the functions, potential and limitations of welfare stigma as a political tool for social control. While the literature on welfare regimes emphasize that the universal character of the social democratic welfare states provides immunity of welfare stigma, our analysis demonstrates active production of welfare stigma within the social democratic regime context. In the observed period, we find the same tendencies to problematize welfare benefits as found in liberal welfare states in the 2010s, however the stigma optics and the harshness of the debates are somewhat milder in the Norwegian context than, e.g. in austerity UK. As we have argued in the discussion, this kind of stigma production has been a force within recent developments in the Norwegian welfare state. Changes of direction towards more selective welfare policies and increased levels of inequality may also fuel the stigma machine.

Finally, the analysis actualizes the public debates as an important battleground where different paths of institutional and social change are at stake. For future studies, we welcome more comparative research on

welfare stigma across different national contexts, in particular research that investigate relations between production and resistance of welfare stigma in the intersection between public debate, media and other institutions such as national policy and politics, local community arenas and in the welfare services.

Disclosure statement

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