

Stigma and the frontline worker: disarming stigma traps

Simone Hellenen

(with River Újhadbor, Andy Guise, and Lotte Elton - Dan Bleksley, Martin Burrows, Martin McCusker, Matt and Jess Turtle)



Stigma and discrimination and its homeless and health system contexts in south London: an ethnographic case study

Background

Limited progress to address stigma

Stigma and homelessness in England from the Vagrancy Act to 2003

**Can you spare 20p for a cup of tea?
How about £10 for a bag of heroin?
Or £12 for a rock of crack?**

**The money you give to those who beg may help keep them on the streets. It may even help to buy the drugs that kill them.
Put your spare change where it counts instead. Thames Reach Bondway – Ending street homelessness.**



Reckoning with our role in the perpetuation of stigma

'Individualistic framing of homelessness is dominant, but also that this cultural model faces no opposition. So, we [charities and the media] not only tell stories reinforcing individual choice as a primary force in homelessness, we also fail to describe the systemic causes of the problem or its consequences for society' (Crisis, 2018 p.71).

Strategies (arguably) against stigma in the homelessness sector England

Places of Change (2005-8)

Personalisation (~2009)

GROW (from 2008) employment opportunities in homelessness services

Repealing Legislation (~2008) Vagrancy Act 1824

Introducing lived experience roles (Peer: navigators ,advocates, researchers)

Addressing language (e.g service users - people with experience of. Lived Experience ...)

Changing narratives (e.g '2 paychecks away from homelessness')

More?

More recently: progress with Shelter and backsliding into stigma with Conservative Home Secretary

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Shelter England 'Made in Social Housing' 2024 Campaign
https://england.shelter.org.uk/support_us/campaigns/made_in_social_housing

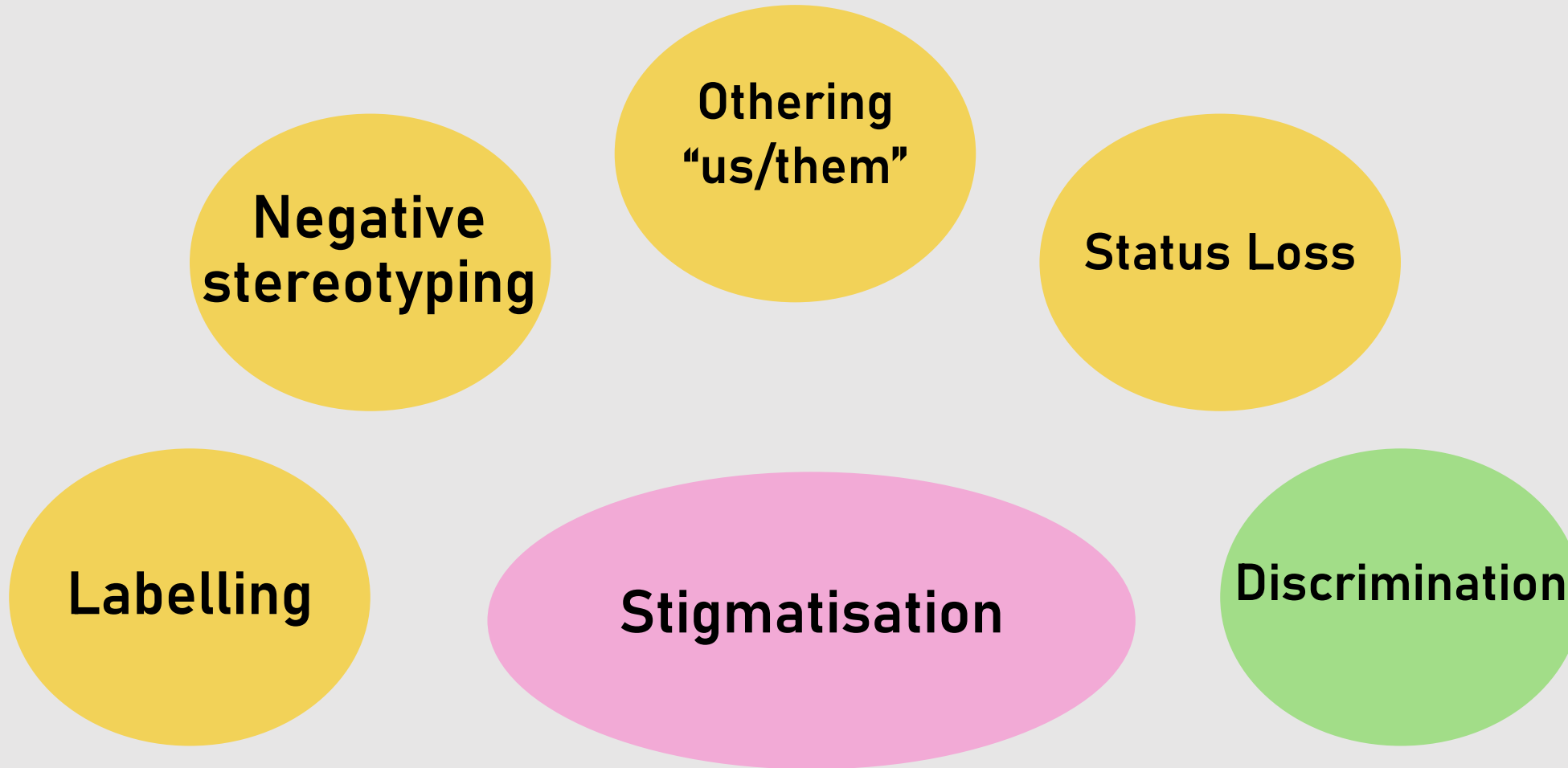


Ex Conservative Home Secretary posts: "living on the streets as a lifestyle choice" [@SullaBravaman] X. 4th November 2023

Breaking down stigma

- Stigma are the 'marks' that are attached to particular people, conditions and places ... (Goffman, 1963)
- it is a 'dehumanising force' that deflates the targets sense of self (Tyler, 2020)
- ... 'symbolic power' which 'is the capacity to impose on others a legitimized vision of the social world...' (Link, 2014)

Stigmatisation



Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. (2014). Stigma power. *Social science & medicine*, 103, 24-32.

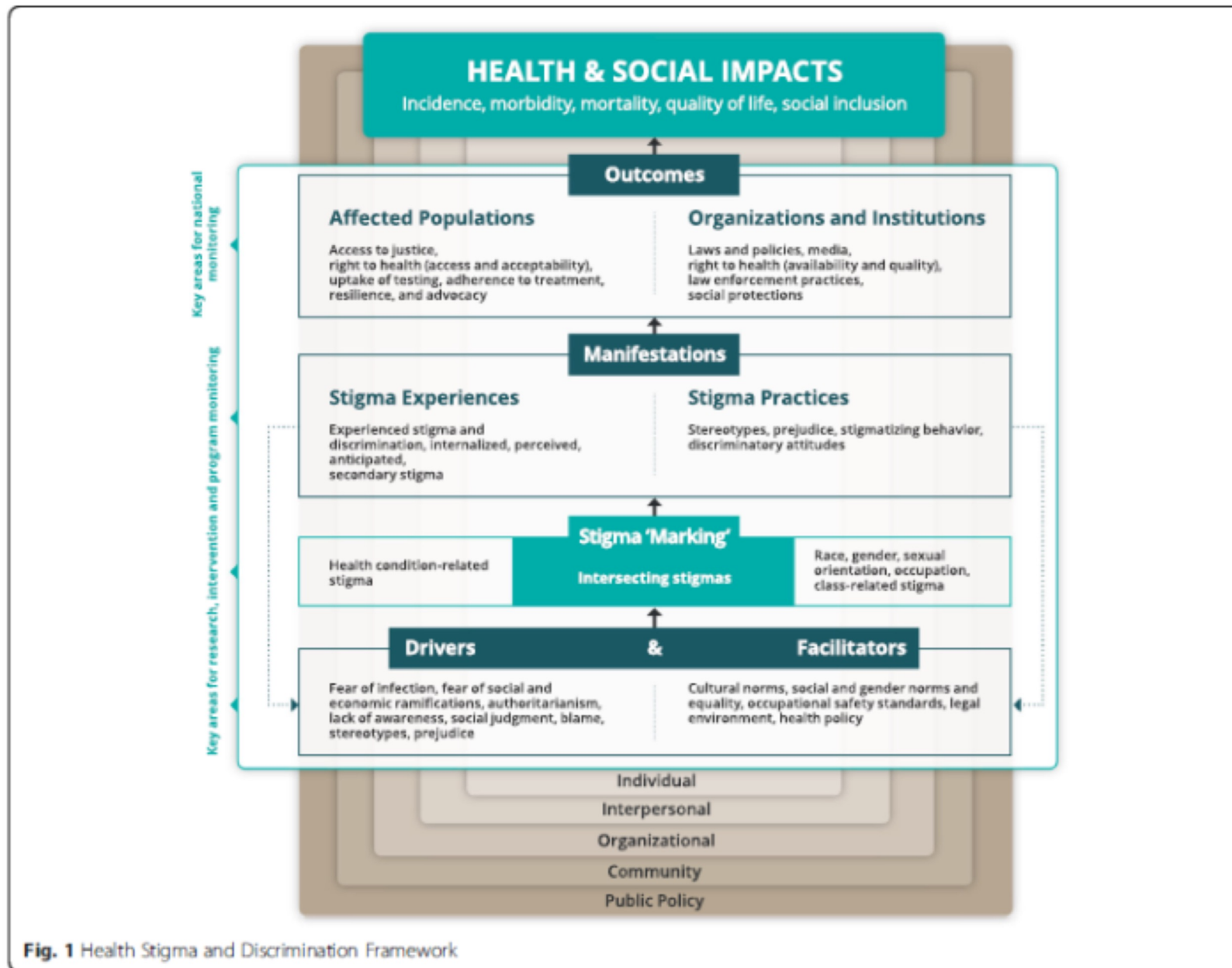


Fig. 1 Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework

Stangl, A. L., et al. (2019). "The Health Stigma and Discrimination Framework: a global, crosscutting framework to inform research, intervention development, and policy on health-related stigmas." *BMC Medicine* **17**(1): 31.

There has been vast study of the experiences and contexts for stigma; understanding of micro-scale interactions is rich, and there is increasing analysis of macro-scale interactions, but little understanding of how these levels interact.

Social theory on stigma can be characterised as having a 'gap'.

In the absence of such theory there is little to guide systems interventions that could address these dimensions of stigma.

Our questions and aim

- 1 How is stigma and discrimination experienced by people who are homeless?
- 2 How is this stigma shaped by the health and homelessness systems people engage with?
- 3 How can we change these systems?

Aim: develop theory of how stigma operates within different systems, using Bourdieu's social practice theory, to inform new systems level interventions

Methods

Ethnography and survey in south
London

2022

2023

2024

2025

2026

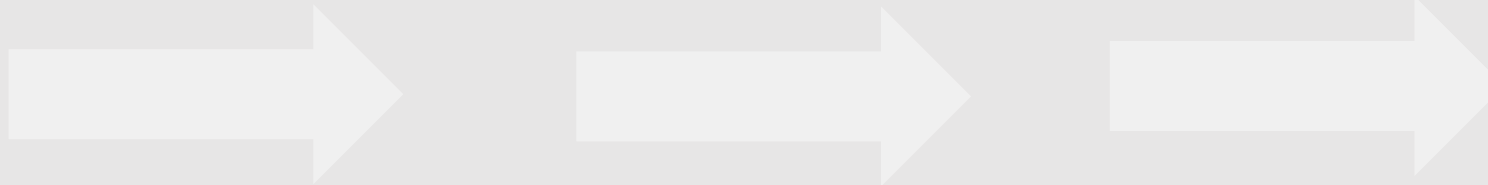
2027

Ongoing ethnographic case study in south London

To date - interviews (n=73), focus groups (n=3); observation (100+ hours) in hostels, day centres (2024+: within NHS, welfare and policing settings)

Survey of experiences of stigma (n=74)

Sub-study on lived experience roles and stigma



Developing & evaluating Systems interventions

Early Findings

How and where is stigma experienced?

Experiences of stigma

ANTICIPATED STIGMA

PERSONALLY MEDIATED DISCRIMINATION



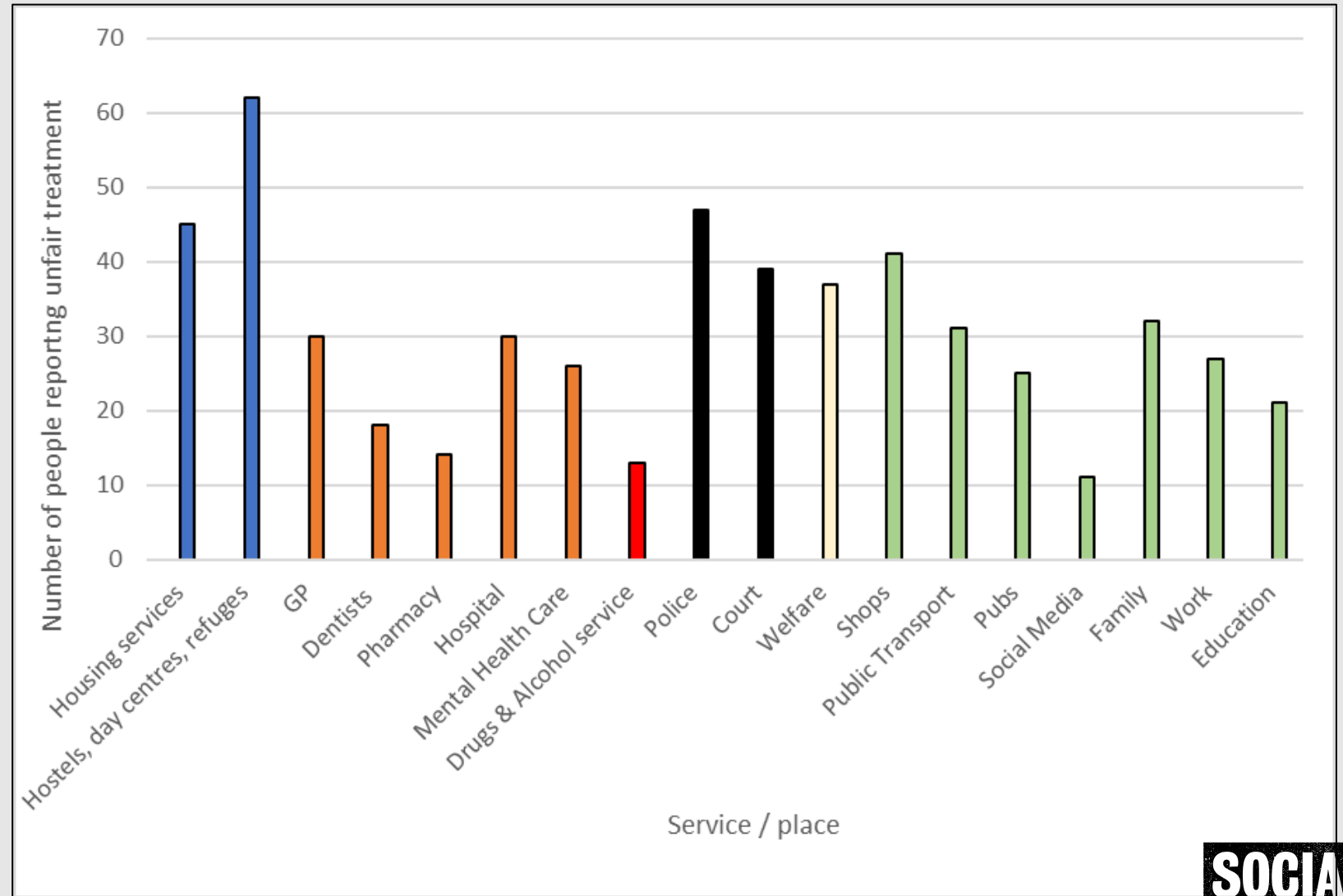
STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION

INTERNALISED STIGMA

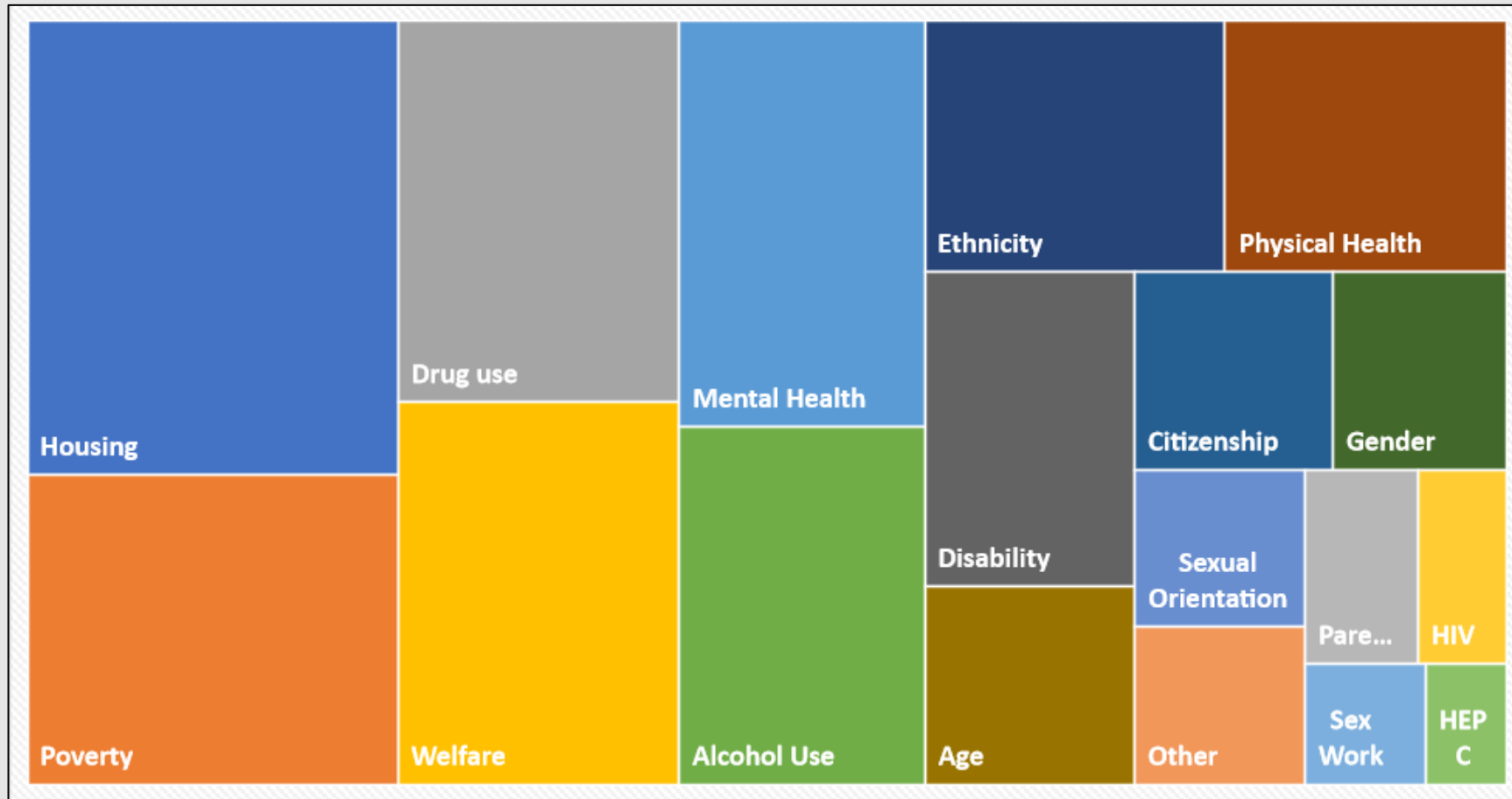
ASSOCIATIVE STIGMA

PERCEIVED STIGMA

Where have you experienced unfair treatment?



What do you think contributed to unfair treatment? Stigma attached to...



New Findings

Stigma traps: how good worker's
help through them **reinforces**
stigma

Properties of Stigma Traps

- A necessary step towards accessing assistance to address inequality
- Fundamentally describing a boundary between normal and not
- Reinforce stigma associated with excluded groups

Stigma Trap 1. The numbers game

- “Evidence-based policy making”
- Outcomes Based Management
- Compulsory Competitive Commissioning

Stigma Trap 2. Digital technologies of assessment and access

"A lot of our clients they receive documents and they have to use DocuSign and some of them are not able.

They are asked via different institutions to upload documents, email them and they are just not able to do it. That makes people feel even more like irrelevant because they cannot do what most of the people are able to do."

Stigma Trap 3. Access Criteria and the burden of proof

"...if you're rough sleeping or you're exposing some kind of crisis, you're often really unable to comply with or provide the information the local authority need or demand to support you, i.e. like you might not have a phone, you've got chaotic lifestyle, you know, sometimes they will ask for ID before they will even start you know, doing anything with you or they want evidence of some support needs that are making you really vulnerable, like DV. They want a police report or they want, you know, medical records."

Stigma Trap 4. Require indications of compliance

” You're not working, it must be because you're lazy. So you have to prove to us that you're not lazy by jumping through these hoops constantly over and over and over, you know, and, like, searching for jobs that aren't there for you. Someone who's rough sleeping doesn't have an address, doesn't have a bank account, can't get a job. But to get their benefits, they have to attend to these things.”

Good Worker Patterns of Practice: disarming stigma traps

- Anticipating stigma
- Overplaying/underplaying needs of clients
- Doing all the talking and form filling
- Cherry picking and gaming outcomes
- Sharing private information
- Flout boundaries
- Finding Loop holes

How does this help – what does it tell us?

- Trying to act on people working in the sector not a good use of resources.
- Need for a space of repair from the damage done through years of working through these traps
- Perhaps it is a prompt for the question: who exactly are these traps working for? And in so doing prompt us to focus on how interventions against stigma need to target where symbolic power lies

Thank you for listening

Do you have a view on this? And/or want to know about other findings?

Email simone.helleren@kcl.ac.uk

Webpage www.kcl.ac.uk/research/social-responses-to-stigma

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