

# Challenging stigmatising practices in the Juvenile Justice System

Some reflections on stigma, prejudice and  
professional attitudes towards young offenders

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Scene from 'La Heine' (1995)

# Fabricating social monsters – the pedagogies of *monsterisation*



‘punishment and fear have replaced compassion and social responsibility as the most important modalities mediating the relationship of the youth to the large social order. Youth within the last four decades are increasingly represented in the media as a source of trouble rather than as a resource for investing in the future and are increasingly either treated as a disposable population and cannon fodder for barbaric wars abroad, or defined as the source of most society’s problems.’

(Giroux, 2012: xv)



The *pedagogies of monsterisation* are part of a range of *inculcation* processes that 'teach' us values, cultural and aesthetical references, etc, that define social boundaries.

The monsterisation process comes when such boundaries are set by social disgust, indifference, hate and social fear that are translated into the dehumanisation of persons, social groups, ethnicities...

Stigmatisation is central to the operation of the *pedagogies of monsterisation*



# What is stigma?

‘stigma is defined as the co-occurrence of **labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss,** and **discrimination** in a context in which **power** is exercised.’

(Hatzenbuehler et al. 2013)

# Defining social boundaries

‘we and them’ (or what is socially acceptable/not acceptable)

- Apparel
- Cultural taste
- Behaviour in public spaces
- Language
- Attitudes towards life





# Why stigma is perverse?

- **Stigmatisation legitimizes the reproduction of inequalities and injustices** (Wacquant, 2010)
- **Stigmatising practices** reproduce **oppressive power** which essentially:
  - Keep people **down** (exploitation, low self-esteem, worthless)
  - Keep people **in** (norm enforcement, 'policing' and controlling 'behaviour')
  - Keep people **away** (avoidance, social distance, boundaries)(Link and Phelan, 2001)
- Stigmatisation is a form of '**social abjection**' which is a **violent exclusionary force that strips people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste** (Tyler, 2013)

# Consequences of stigma

- **Social Isolation**

- Fear of rejection and negative evaluation

- **Psychological and Behavioural Responses to Stigma**

- Self-Stigmatisation (lowered self-worth and self-esteem)
- Maladaptive coping behaviours (smoking, drinking, drugs)

- **Reinforcement of inequalities**

- Impact on life opportunities (jobs, access to resources)
- Neighbourhood stigma

- **Reinforcement of disenfranchisement**

- Lack of power, spaces and opportunities to opine, influence and decide on policy design and delivery

# Two stigmatising paradigms

- The 'disposable' / 'lost generation' / 'unwanted' / 'junkie'
- The 'needy' / 'vulnerable'

# The politics of stigma

- Stigmatised people are not passive receipts of imposed stigma. They are also **agents** that react in different ways to stigma
- Reactions to stigma can either reinforce stigma or challenge stigma in a positive way
- Some reactions are predictable, and in some extent, the systems in place can operate to reinforce some reactions to either promote positive outcomes or to penalise people
- The current system is reflected for example in the *Welfare Reform*. Here stigma is used to maximize specific reactions that will lead to penalisation and punishment

# Towards pedagogies of coexistence

- Pedagogies of coexistence challenge the pedagogies of monsterisation
- Coexistence, in what is proposed, means the creation of conditions in which fundamentally the *other* is seen as *same*.
- This goes beyond 'putting your self in someone's shoes'; but acknowledging that your shoes might not be the response too
- What is demanded is a shift in paradigm where different degrees of monsterisation are challenged – starting from the attitudes staff have in relation to 'clients', and going into the direction of political and institutional changes

# Tackling stigma in service provision

- The role of practitioners: empathy, engagement, compassion - humanity
- The approach to 'service users' in a **citizenship paradigm** means the recognition of people as **subjects** (of policy, rights, responsibilities) rather than **objects** (or 'receipts' of service provision, benefits).
- The current system is dubious. It wants to impose responsibilities without consider the preparedness of people. This results in more stigma, negative public reactions and punishment. In summary, **it operates to fail people**.
- 'Service users' should have more space, opportunity, power and recognition to **participate** on policy design and service delivery. This is necessary to shift the paradigm towards citizenship with a balanced weight between rights and responsibilities.
- Services need to 'read' situations more appropriately in order to consider issues that are typically ignored by 'standardised' ways to deliver service. For example: if people have time management issues, why should services punish them instead of finding ways to address the problem??



# Self-Esteem and Self-Worth should mean Empowerment

- It is necessary to overcome the socio-symbolic barriers that prevents **empowerment and participation** of people who are historically disenfranchised
- Services should be an opportunity to promote '**civic encounters**' in order to encourage people to have a more active (and organised) voice in relation to policy and services. This means, in other words, the exercise of '**civic literacy**' (Giroux, 2011) as a component of service provision.

# Provocative thoughts

- Staff training is not enough unless pre-conceived values and attitudes are challenged
- Work together and collaboratively does not mean we need to agree in everything
- It is necessary to increase democratic practices as a mean to empower people
- Policy has to be challenged at local level and adapt through participatory and creative approaches
- Service = Client, Object ; Right = Citizen, Subject ; Service = Right???

# Thanks

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