

The background of the slide is a photograph of a rural landscape. The sky is filled with large, dark, and textured clouds, suggesting an approaching storm. The ground is a flat, brown field, possibly a plowed field or a dry riverbed. In the distance, there are some small buildings and trees. The overall mood is somber and dramatic.

Narratives beyond quantification

Lived Experiences of poverty and welfare reciprocity.

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The background of the slide features a vibrant blue and black pattern of binary code (0s and 1s) that appears to be receding into the distance, creating a sense of depth. Overlaid on this is a white rectangular area that resembles a piece of paper with a torn bottom edge. At the top of this white area, there is a small, light-colored rectangular tab.

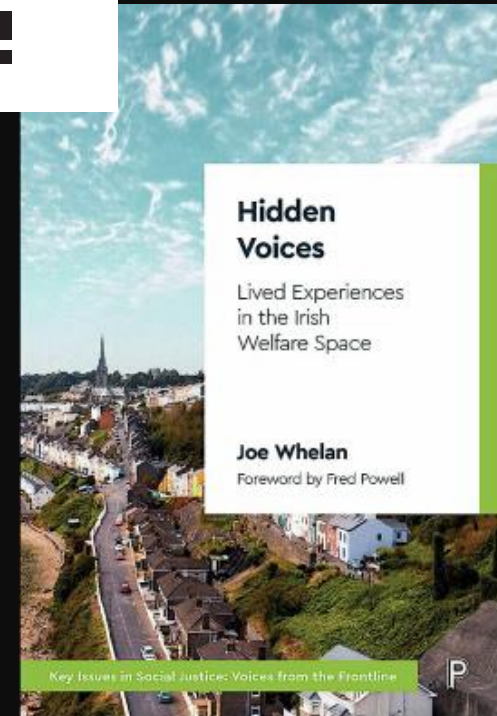
Plan

- Data as an entry point.
- Why 'lived experience'?
- Beyond numerical textures.
- What can social work do?

Key sources...

Drawing here on my recently published book *'Hidden Voices: Lived Experiences in the Irish Welfare Space'*.

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Hidden in statistics? On the lived experience of poverty

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ABSTRACT

Poverty aware practice suggests that understanding poverty and its effects can, in turn, shape practice. Arguably, this understanding is something that should underpin social work processes from referral, to assessment, through to intervention. Yet just what it means to experience poverty with respect to the day to days lives of those who do often remains 'hidden in statistics'. This article goes beyond statistics to relate understandings of poverty to lived experience. The method for doing so consists of taking up a definition of poverty developed as part of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy in Ireland in the 90s and juxtaposing this with an unblemished snapshot into the lives of persons experiencing poverty. In doing so, it is shown that those who experience poverty do so in an excluded social space which consists of material disadvantage but also instability, the inability to take part in society and experiences of social demotion.

KEYWORDS

Social work; poverty; exclusion; marginality; social demotion

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Why is it important to study
poverty?

A black and white photograph of a person walking up a long, dark staircase. The person is silhouetted against a bright light source at the top of the stairs, creating a strong backlight effect. The staircase is flanked by dark walls with diagonal lines. In the background, a tall building with many windows is visible. The overall mood is dramatic and symbolic.

Accelerating inequalities?

Poverty globally...



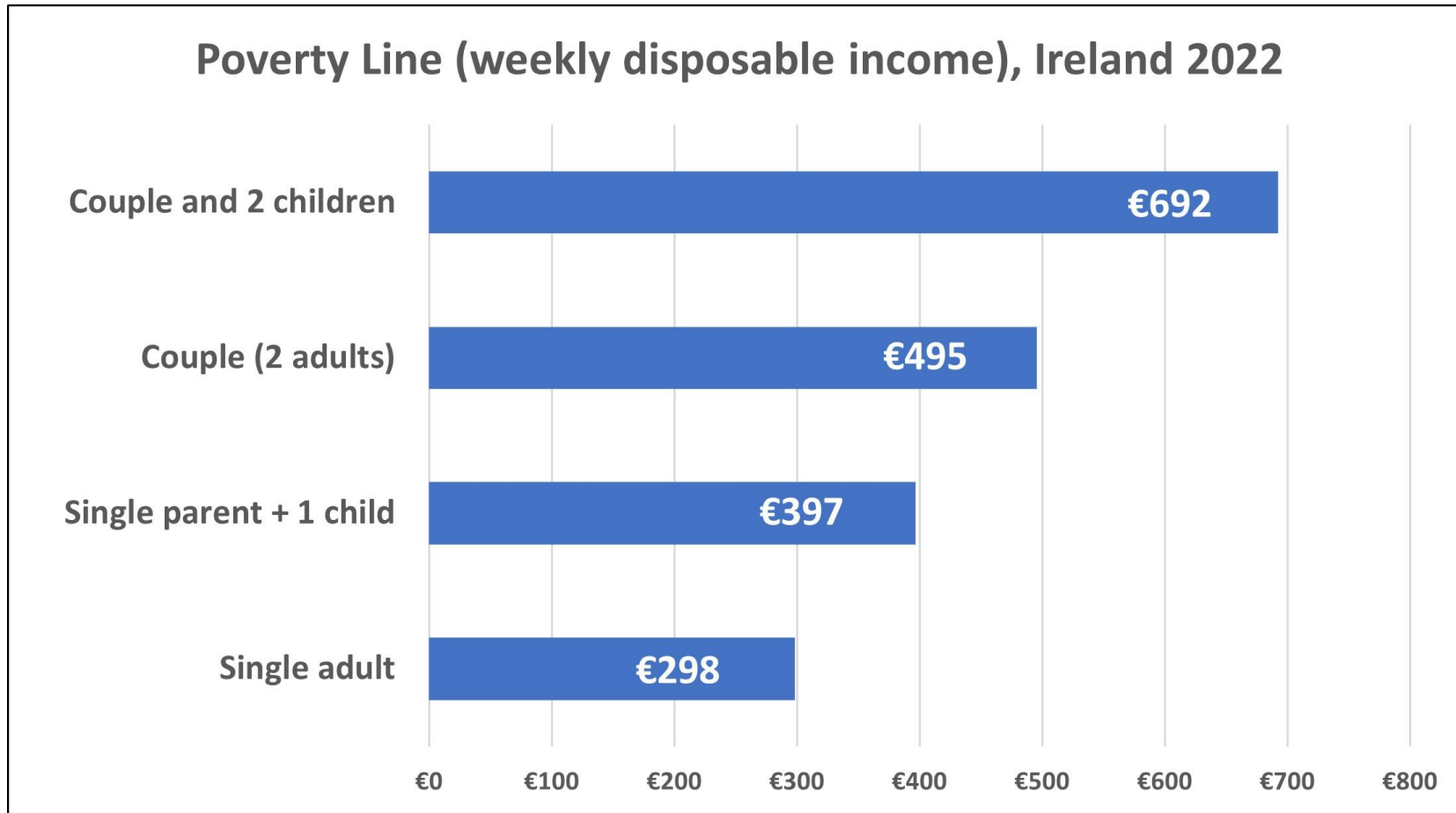
- 689 million people live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than \$1.90 a day.
- Children and youth account for two-thirds of the world's poor, and women represent a majority in most regions.
- Extreme poverty is increasingly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. About 40% of the region's people live on less than \$1.90 a day.
- Extreme poverty rates nearly doubled in the Middle East and North Africa between 2015 and 2018, from 3.8% to 7.2%, mostly because of crises in Syria and Yemen.
- Although countries impacted by fragility, crises, and violence are home to about 10% of the world's population, they account for more than 40% of people living in extreme poverty. By 2030, an estimated 67% of the world's poor will live in fragile contexts.
- About 70% of people older than 15 who live in extreme poverty have no schooling or only some basic education.
- 1.3 billion people in 107 developing countries, which account for 22% of the world's population, live in multidimensional poverty. About 84.3% of multidimensionally poor live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.
- 644 million children are experiencing multidimensional poverty.
 - (World Bank Group, 2020).

Poverty locally...



- **Key findings from SILC 2021 show:**
 - The at risk of poverty rate was 11.6% in 2021, compared with 13.2% in 2020
 - The at risk of poverty rate was highest for those 'unable to work due to long-standing health problems', at 39.1%
 - The consistent poverty rate was 4.0%, down from 4.7% in 2020
 - One in 20 (5.6%) households said they experience 'great difficulty' in making ends meet while one in six (15.9%) households consisting of one adult with children experienced this.
 - In SILC 2021, 13.8% of the population were defined as living in enforced deprivation.

Making the link: Poverty and social protection

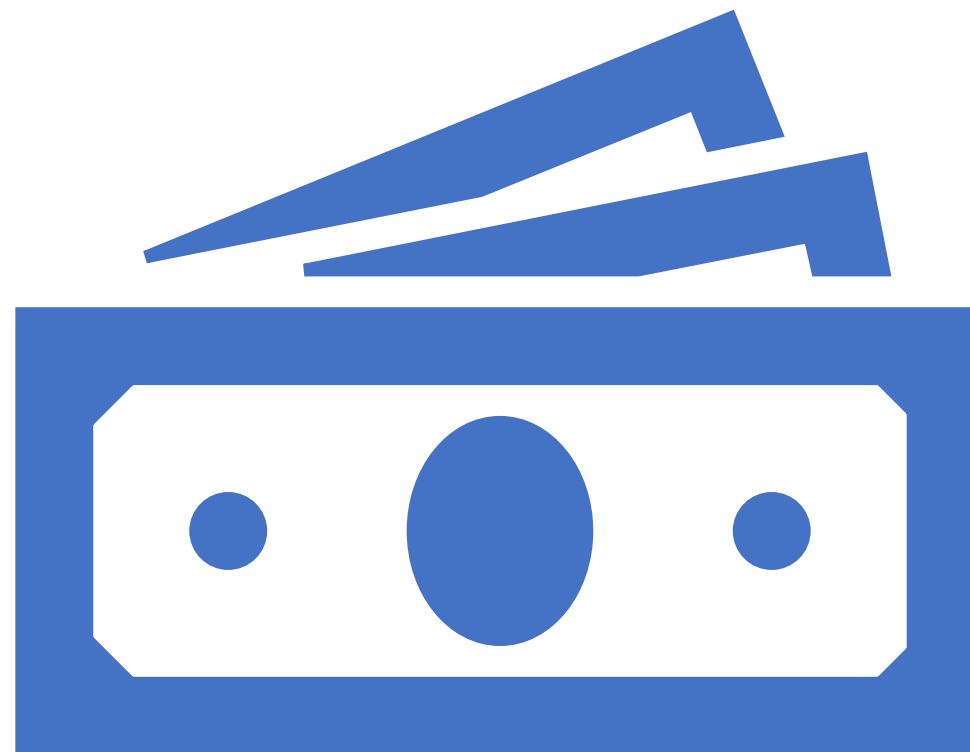


Making the link: Poverty and social protection

Jobseeker's Allowance rates 2022

Age	Maximum personal rate	Increase for an adult dependant	Increase for a child dependant
Aged 25 and over	€208	€138	Child aged under 12 €40 (full-rate), €20 (half-rate) Child aged 12 and over €48 (full-rate), €24 (half-rate)
Aged 18-24 and living independently*	€208	€138	
Aged 18-24 and not living independently	€117.70	€117.70	People aged 18-24 with children qualify for the maximum personal rate €208

In SILC 2021, if all social transfers were excluded from income and using the standard at risk of poverty threshold (€15,158), the at risk of poverty rate would have been 38.6%.



The background of the image is a dense crowd of stylized human figures. These figures are rendered in a 3D, blocky style, similar to paper cutouts or simple sculptures. They are in various shades of blue and grey, creating a sense of a large, diverse group. In the center of the image, a single figure stands out, rendered in a bright white color. This central figure has its arms raised slightly, and it is positioned directly behind the text. The text itself is white and consists of two lines: "Nuancing the data?" followed by "A social science based on experience". The overall composition suggests a theme of social science, data analysis, and the importance of individual experience within a larger population.

Nuancing the data? A social science
based on experience

Lived experience – so what?

- There are difficulties with the term 'lived experience'.
- McIntosh and Wright (2018: 450) note:
 - ...we have found the idea of lived experience both intuitive and useful, but have become increasingly perplexed by its potential to seem vacuous or contradictory – what is any experience if it is not lived?



Critiques of lived experience as a form of knowledge.

- Context specific: Research based on lived experience lacks a 'generalisability' factor making it somehow 'less valuable'.

Not reliable, not 'sticky'.



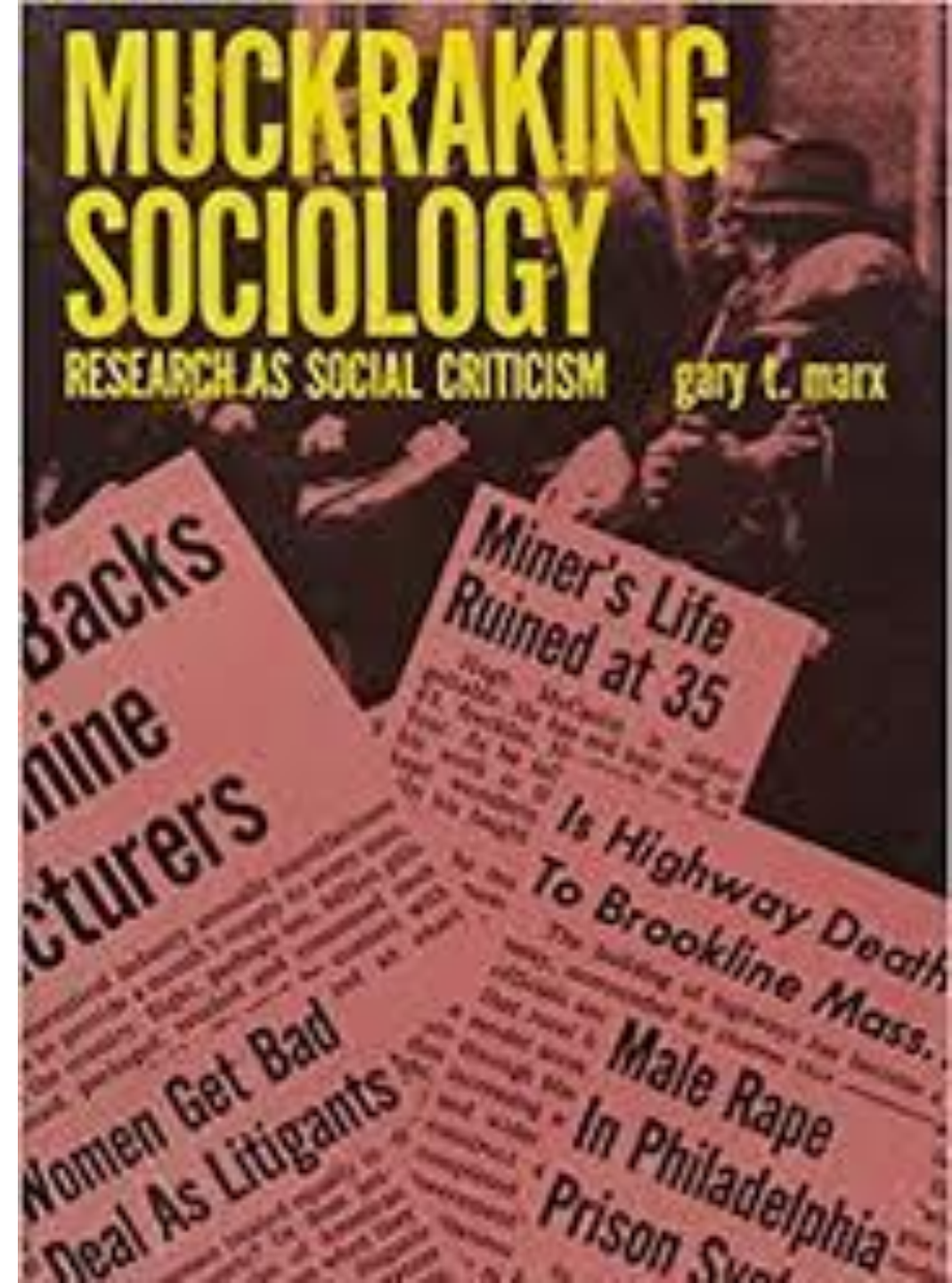
Lived experience as a form of knowledge

- Ultimately, through documenting the complexity of ‘lived experience’ as a term with particular meanings in particular contexts, McIntosh and Wright (2018: 463) argue that presenting lived experience as a form of knowledge can offer a ‘**sharp critical edge**’ and can, therefore:
 - ...be associated with an empathetic immersion in the lives and concerns of people affected by and involved in policy processes and outcomes, including elite policy makers and influential context creators, managers and front-line workers as well as disempowered and oppressed groups.



‘Muckraking’: The doing of social science as an active form of social critique

- Muckraking research and scholarship...
 - ‘...such research at its best documents conditions that clash with basic values, fixes responsibility for them and is capable of generating moral outrage.’
 - ‘...such research uses the tools of social science to document unintended (or officially unacknowledged) consequences of social action, inequality, poverty, racism, exploitation, opportunism, neglect, denial of dignity, hypocrisy, inconsistency, manipulation, wasted resources and the displacement of an organisation’s stated goals in favour of self-perpetuation. It may show how, and the extent to which, a dominant or more powerful class, race, group or stratum takes advantage of, misuses, mistreats or ignores a subordinate group, often in the face of an ideology that claims it does exactly the opposite.’
 - Gary Marx (1972).



Qualitative research with 'Big Q' values...

- Championing the doing of qualitative research as a means of arriving at real, distinctive and meaningful social scientific knowledge while also championing lived experience as a form of knowledge.



‘Big Q’/small q qualitative research

- Qualitative research is not just about data and techniques – it’s about the application of qualitative techniques and **values** within a qualitative paradigm.



A man in a dark jacket is looking towards a person wearing a large, vibrant pink feather costume and white sunglasses. The scene is set indoors, possibly in a hallway or a room with a curved ceiling.

Quantitative Research

Qualitative Research

To do and be different things...



Why does it matter?

Lived experience and epistemic injustice

Philosopher Miranda Fricker's (2007) work provides a pointer to the importance of lived experience not simply as a 'knowledge gap' or as a complement to other ways of knowing but central how we know and make sense of social experience.

If individuals and group experience is not heard; if as a society we lack the language and concepts that serve to articulate and make experiences meaningful then we are dealing with instances of epistemic injustice which have discriminatory and distributional consequences.





Lived experience and epistemic injustice

Two types of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007)

Testimonial injustice: (and testimonial smothering): where the capacity and credibility of knower questioned.

Hermeneutical injustice: lack of knowledge and conceptual frameworks that create a gulf between lived experience and institutional knowledge and practices.



Where social
work sees
poverty...

Social work and poverty

The link between those experiencing poverty and those who are likely to encounter social work is something that has been well-established over many years of scholarship and practice.

The Child Welfare Inequalities Project (2020: 4) notes that:

- Children in the most deprived 10% of small neighbourhoods in the UK are over 10 times more likely to be in foster or residential care or on protection plans than children in the least deprived 10%.
- This is a statistical assertion which tells us that if you are amongst the poorest you are also amongst the most likely to encounter social work services.



Social work and poverty

The Child Poverty Action Group (2020: 2) notes:

- Social workers told us that the vast majority of the families they work with are living in poverty. Families are experiencing food insecurity, homelessness, an inability to keep warm and stress associated with debt issues on a regular basis.
- This paints a qualitative picture; it again tells us that social workers are likely to encounter the poor in the 'vast majority' of the work that they do.



The image shows a close-up, high-angle view of a green artificial turf field. The turf is a vibrant green color with a visible texture of individual blades. White diagonal stripes are painted across the field, creating a pattern of green and white stripes. The stripes are made of a thick, white material that appears to be paint or a similar substance. The text "Defining poverty and adding texture" is overlaid on the image, centered horizontally and slightly below the middle vertically. The text is in a white, serif font and is underlined.

Defining poverty and adding texture

How do we define poverty in Ireland?

- People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.
 - Government of Ireland, 1997.



Definitions that reflect

- It is an inclusive definition in that it takes account of material, cultural and social resources, it also retains an emphasis on the relativity of poverty by focusing on acceptable standards of living and it incorporates exclusion by focusing on marginalisation and the inability to participate meaningfully in society.
 - All of these themes are encountered in the words of research participants in multiple studies.
 - (Whelan, 2022a).



The background is a complex, abstract texture composed of various shades of green and brown. It resembles a close-up of a natural surface like bark or a heavily textured wall, with visible vertical and horizontal striations and mottled patches of color. The overall effect is organic and aged.

Textures beyond numerics

A literature on lived experiences of poverty

- Research with people who are experiencing or who have experienced poverty reflects complexity beyond the numeric.
 - 'Poverty is conceptualised as a **stigmatised** social position that may have profound and damaging **symbolic, cultural, psychological and material** effects on people's lives' (Batty and Flint, 2013: 2).



Shame in the context of poverty

- Poverty has been associated with personal failure throughout history and across cultures (see Walker, 2014).
 - Poverty has also been conceived as a policy problem, since it raises humanitarian issues
- Amartya Sen contends that shame lies at the core of poverty.
 - Chase and Walker (2013: 743) observe how the words 'awkward', 'embarrassed', 'guilty', 'rotten', 'degraded', 'crap', 'useless', 'worthless', 'a failure', 'uncomfortable', 'funny' and 'dirty', were all used to convey how people in poverty felt about themselves or were made to feel in certain social interactions.
 - In *Status Anxiety*, Alain de Botton (2004: 12) stated that:
 - '...those without status remain unseen, they are treated brusquely, their complexities are trampled upon and their identities ignored'



A stack of old, rolled-up newspapers, likely from the mid-20th century, showing various headlines in Italian. The paper is aged and yellowed, with visible creases and folds. The text is in a serif font, typical of mid-century newspapers. The stack is thick, suggesting a large collection of news. The overall tone is historical and somewhat somber, reflecting the passage of time and the weight of the news reported.

Narratives beyond quantification

Stigma in the context of welfare reciprocity

- Martin talks about the negativity that goes with revealing being out of work and reliant on welfare:
 - 'From my perspective I've experienced there to be a stigma involved in mentioning that you're in any way accessing the welfare system – for whatever reason – if it's disability, death in the family.
 - personal stigma: a person's own sense that claiming benefits conveys a devalued identity;
 - stigmatisation: the perception that others will devalue your identity as a result of claiming benefits.
 - Baumberg (2016).



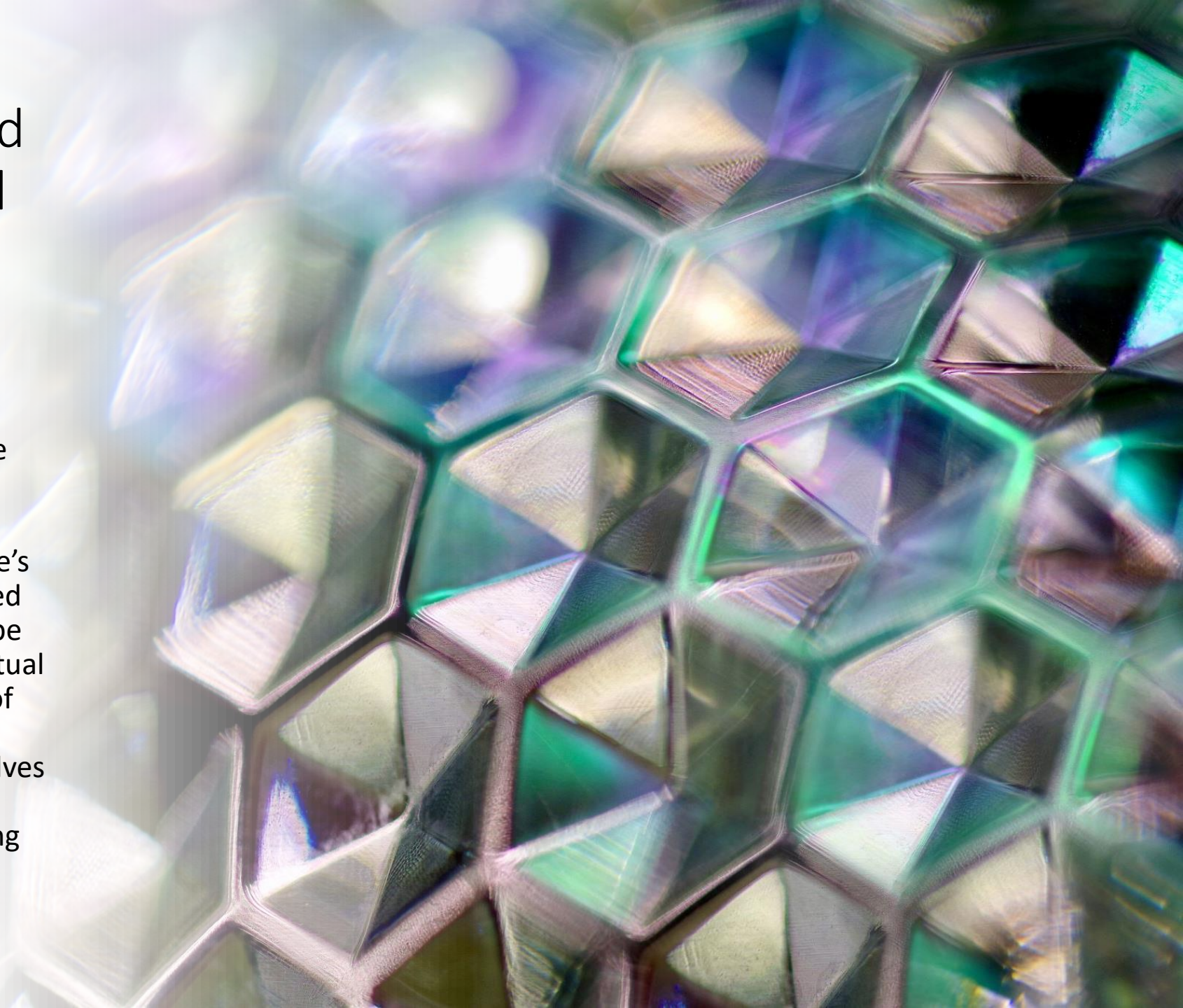
Shame and Social Stigma in the context of meeting basic needs

- Respondents in Garthwaite's study (2016: 280) in the context of using a foodbank:
 - **Tracey:** I said to Glen 'Get inside, don't let no one see us', 'cos obviously we'd never had to go anywhere like that before.
 - **Glen:** Ashamed, just felt ashamed.
 - **Tracey:** We were just so ashamed we had to go.



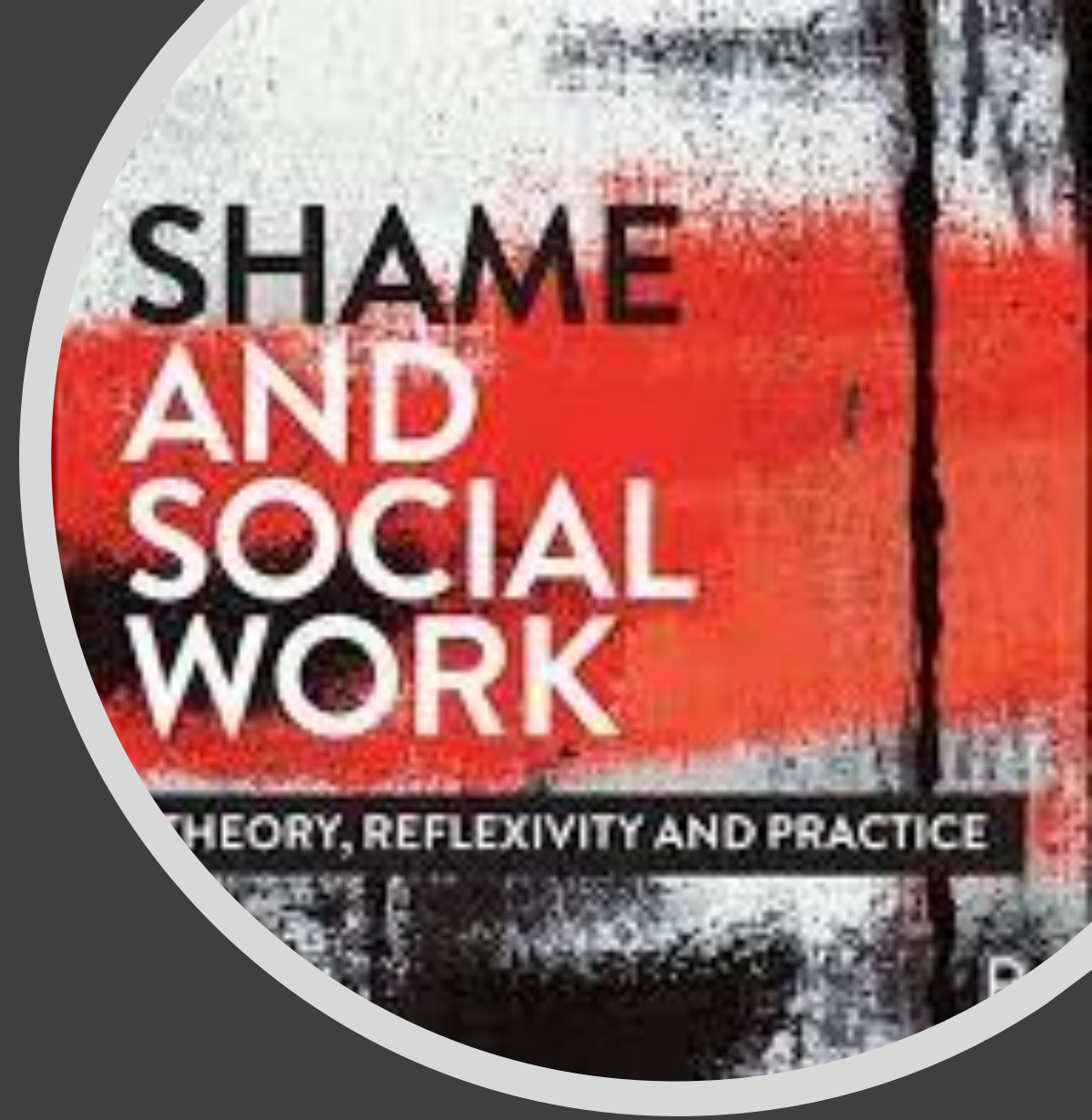
Experience tempered by entrenched social discourses

- Chase and Walker (2013: 740) recognise that the shame felt by people in poverty and who receive welfare is co-constructed, and features:
 - ‘an internal judgement of one’s own inabilities; an anticipated assessment of how one will be judged by others; and the actual verbal or symbolic gestures of others who consider, or are deemed to consider, themselves to be socially and/or morally superior to the person sensing shame’.



Shame and Social Work

- A growing area of scholarship in social work.
- Shame refers to self-esteem, which is inseparable from the esteem that others have for that person. Thus, an individual feelings of shame always concern the person's position amid a larger social context.
 - Neckel (2021: 47).



Experiences of exclusion and liminality

- ...marginality and social liminality are intimately intertwined to the point of being symbiotic. Marginality is often experienced first, with the effects of leading a consistently marginal existence ultimately leading to social liminality (Whelan, 2022: 33)
 - **Patricia:** If you don't have the money, if you don't have that extra bit of money to get involved with activities outside of school, straight away you feel that exclusion.
 - **Martin:** ...so I've found myself withdrawing more from wanting to interact socially, definitely, which I find very troubling because I'd really like to get involved in, you know, social activities...Well, very reclusive. That tends to be the angle that will come into my brain. Maybe I should just separate myself from people.
 - See Whelan (2022b: 34 and 40).



Poverty as a lack of good options

- Aside from the inability to take part in the social, there are other, less obvious perhaps, but still impactful aspects of not being able to take part:
 - **Scarlett:** I would be really conscious of my kids' health, like, when my kids were younger, and I really had to let an awful lot of that go because I could not afford to buy the nice healthy stuff . Some weeks I could have afforded to buy the beans and nuggets and the shitty stuff , you know, and I hated that. I really hated that.



Christmas 2021: Impossible choices...

- In launching its Annual Appeal the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP) said that calls for help this year will be at their highest level in its history and could reach almost 200,000 by the end of December.
 - *“We are once again appealing to the nation to help us assist the thousands of people who are struggling on inadequate incomes,”*



Why this is important as 'evidence'?

- What should the basis for social policy be?
 - The best of human inclinations, sympathy, empathy and understanding as the building blocks of social policy, seem like a good place to start.
 - ...a phenomenological conceptualisation of poverty that is grounded in the first-hand experiences of individuals who experience poverty and thus has the potential to drive a social and policy agenda that meaningfully reflects their perspectives and sense-making'
 - (Simpson-Reeves, Parsell and Liu, 2020: 440).
- To get there...
 - A holistic evidence base for social policy should include multiple ways of knowing;
 - People's experiences and how they communicate about and understand them is important;
 - Reporting lived experience and including it as part of a holistic evidence base has the potential to illicit the best aspects of a common humanity.



Has poverty become...

‘...too big to tackle and too familiar to notice’

???

(Morris et al, 2018: 370).

(Morris et al, 2018: 370).

The background of the slide features a stylized illustration of several raised fists in various shades of brown and tan, set against a dark red background with radiating lines. A thin white vertical line is positioned to the right of the title text.

Disruptive Social Work (DSW)

Disruptive social work (Fieldman, 2021: 8) that is...

‘...rooted in a structural analysis and addresses the oppressive aspects of society...’

Ideas lying around...



I have argued elsewhere that we need to move social work firmly back towards the **political**. In doing so we should revisit ‘ideas lying around’ and begin to reclaim our rich radical roots (Whelan, 2022c).

Poverty Aware Practice (PAP)

**Poverty Aware Social Work
(Krumer-Nevo, 2016).**

Understanding poverty and being aware of its effects can, in turn, shape our practice. Having this understanding is something that can and should underpin our work from referral, to assessment through to intervention.



Radical Hope

- Krumer-Nevo (2020) calls for a new paradigm of 'Poverty Aware Practice'.
- The poverty aware paradigm conceives of poverty as a violation of human rights.
- The epistemic foundation of the poverty aware paradigm is critical-constructivist.
- Poverty aware practice rests upon an ethic of solidarity.
- It based on *Redistribution, Recognition and Respect*.



RADICAL HOPE

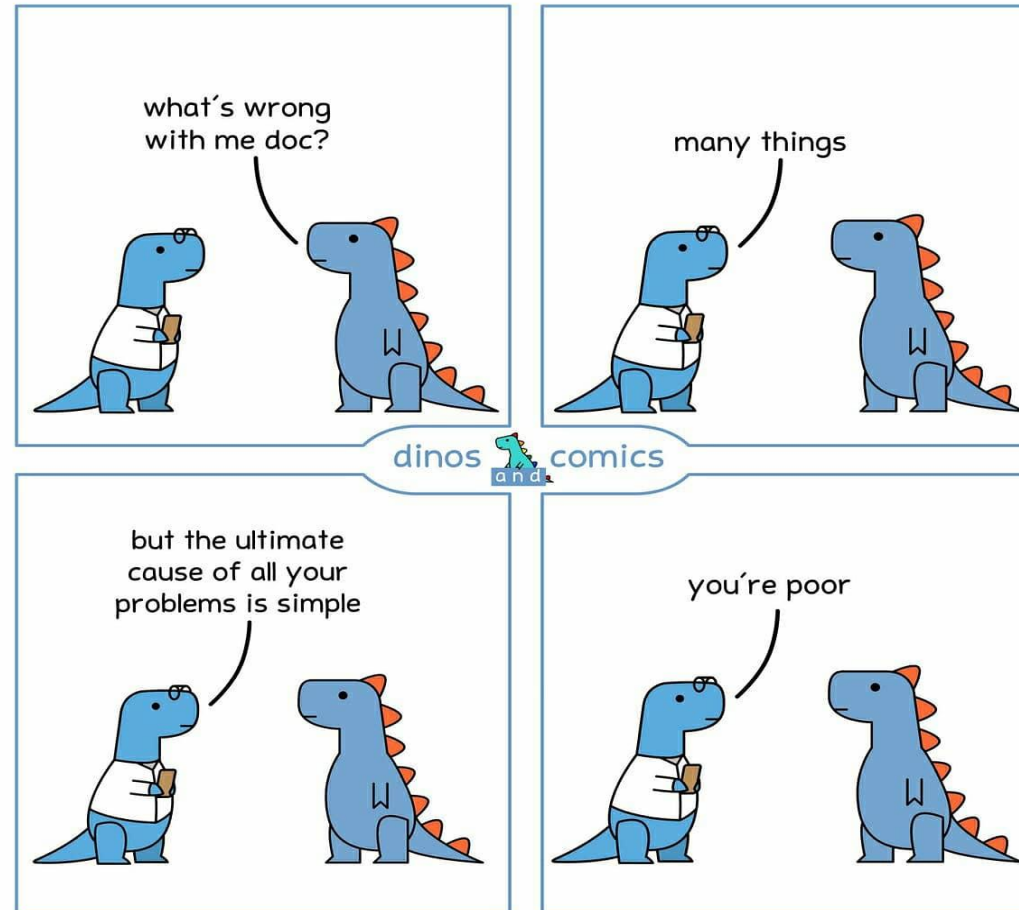
POVERTY-AWARE PRACTICE
FOR SOCIAL WORK



Beyond Awareness

- The report from the Child Poverty Action Group (2020), referenced here earlier to demonstrate the link between those who do social work practice and those who experience poverty, shows us that social workers are already keenly aware of not only poverty as a stark reality but also of the effects that poverty can have on and for those they work with.
- This begs a question then which asks 'if awareness of poverty is not at issue, what is?' It can be suggested that the answer lies, in part at least, and in its distance from policy in the area of poverty.
- Whereas it is clear that social work and thereby social workers can see poverty, can witness it and recognise the grinding repercussions associated with it, it is less clear what the current model of social work, and thereby what social workers, can actually do about it, if anything.
- This is not the fault of the social worker but rather, it is indicative of a failing of social policy.

Closing thought...





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