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Work and thrive or claim and skive: Experiencing the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare recipiency in Ireland

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to shed much needed light on lived experience in the context of worklessness coupled with welfare receipt in Ireland. In doing so, the work ethic is presented as an objective social force that can be imposed externally and in a number of social and administrative contexts. Coupled with this, receiving welfare is argued as being a 'problematic' and potentially shameful social position. On this basis, it will be shown how worklessness and welfare receipt can coalesce to form a 'toxic symbiosis', something which can deeply and negatively affect those who experience it. The claims made in this paper are based on original research conducted in Ireland, in which 22 people were interviewed about their general experiences of being welfare recipients and their interactions with the Irish welfare state. Drawing on rich qualitative data, epistemic integrity is offered through depth of understanding meaning that what is presented here sheds lights on the social implications of the continuous denigration of welfare recipiency coupled with the continuous valorisation of work. In a practical sense, this suggests that, on the one hand, a new, less corrosive societal relationship with work is both desirable and necessary in respect to the well-being of persons, while on the other, a more holistic approach to the administration of welfare, in which a return to work is only one part of an overall approach, is both needed and ultimately more humane.

Keywords: Work, worklessness: welfare, welfare recipients, the work ethic, Ireland.

Introduction

In this paper, the work ethic is conceptualised in a novel way as something that is historically mediated and socially experienced, deriving power and efficacy from the continuous linking of paid formal employment to feelings, experiences and inherent ideas of social value and moral self-worth. The act of performing work is presented as being 'the thing itself' the work ethic, on the other hand, is the social fetishisation of work which resultingly sees the performance of formal

work as valorised, glorified and dominant in popular and political discourses that encapsulate what it means to be of value and to be valued. Building on this, it is also proposed that being in receipt of social welfare is considered as the antithesis to being in work and is therefore seen as a deeply shameful and stigmatised social position. This leads to what is conceptualised here as the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare receipt. Effectively then, it is argued here that when worklessness and welfare receipt function as two strands of the same experience, the consequences for those susceptible to its effects are socially corrosive and subjectively negative. I also want to argue and show how this negativity and corrosiveness is acquitted and felt, both in daily life contexts and in institutional contexts within and through the welfare state. In order to achieve this, a theoretical discussion is juxtaposed with the presentation of empirical material produced via original research conducted in Ireland. Therefore, in the latter half of this paper, an exposition of data that evidences the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare receipt and its effects is offered. Before this however, an explanation of and an argument for the theoretical concepts deployed is offered.

Theorising the work ethic and the 'toxic symbiosis'

First it is necessary to make apparent what is meant by the work ethic in the context of this paper. In a paper by Burawoy and Wright (1990), the contrast is made between coercion and consent in the context of the relationship between labour power and capital with the latter seen a consequence of behavioural and evaluative norms that are internalised. In most instances, the work ethic is arguably understood as aligned with consent rather than coercion. The work ethic, as conceptualised here, acknowledges this and the empirical material presented here also speaks to it in part. However, something further is offered in that the work ethic is also presented as being an objective social force that can be externally enforced or 'foisted upon' persons meaning it is not only a purely

internal or subjective response to the absence of work. Furthermore, the data presented here suggest that where the work ethic is enforced externally, people are likely to be less concerned with the need to find work or with the fact that they are not working and are often more concerned with the nature of the system to which they are subjected. This is particularly true in the context of welfare systems where a trend towards increasingly harsher and restrictive levels of conditionality based on labour force activation is now deeply embedded (Brodkin and Larsen 2013; Hansen, 2019; Umney et al., 2018). Boland and Griffin (2015a) have denoted this process of embedding as evidenced by the semantic shift from 'unemployed' to 'jobseeker' as a descriptive category for those seeking unemployment support. The socially enforced work ethic is also writ large in 'daily life' contexts outside of welfare systems and, as will be shown here further on, permeates the general lived experiences of the unemployed. This implies that the work ethic can be understood in the normative sense and, where enforced, it can lead to experiences of stigma and feelings of shame. The work ethic, therefore, is something that has a distinct presence in the sociology of sociality and is resultantly given effect through politics and in social policy (in Ireland, where this study is based, see Pathways to Work, Government of Ireland [GOI], 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016 for example). As illustrated in Figure 1, situating worklessness alongside welfare receipt in this way allows us to conceptualise a 'toxic symbiosis' which can result in experiences of stigma and feelings of shame. Experiences of welfare receipt therefore, as a form of 'stigmatised beneficence' or 'ungenerous gift' (Boland and Griffin, 2016), produces feelings of shame, that most notorious and painful emotion (Fischer, 2018). The data presented further on suggest that these feelings of shame are elicited by a sense of dissonance in respect to socially prescribed normative identities surrounding work and worklessness coupled with the 'shame' of receiving social welfare (Goffman,1990/1963; Scheff, 2006; Schefer and Munt, 2019). It is also shown

that this emphasis on paid formal employment, constituted as a balm to soothe the shame of worklessness, is threaded through, and is therefore a very potent aspect of, experiences within the Irish social welfare system. The analogy of symbiosis is used here to denote the way in which worklessness and welfare receipt, though separate strands of the same experience, work together, each exacerbating the other, in effect producing a socially 'toxic' outcome.



Figure 1. The toxic symbiosis of worklessness and welfare receipt.

Arguably, discourses surrounding work are couched within the wider ideological discourse of neoliberalism and the type of hyper-capitalism it produces which effectively judges all things, including people, by the economic value they produce and at the same time denigrates anything, again, including people, which does not produce economic value (Harvey, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). Recent work by Tyler (2020: 19) offers the broad lens of 'neoliberal stigma power' which, building on previous work, seeks to track the empirical links 'between the amplification of social stigma and extractive forms of neoliberal capitalism' In doing so, it takes in the processes of advancing welfare conditionalities and retrenchment as embedded within the neoliberal project. Yet, if neoliberal economies have amplified stigma within welfare systems, it should be remembered that this amplification does not denote the creation of something new. Indeed, to follow Pinker (1970), stigma as a form of sophisticated symbolic violence in the context of welfare is always present by design and history will tell us that it always has been. Indeed, much of what makes a reliance on welfare stigmatising devolves upon deeply entrenched societal ideas about perceived

levels of deservingness, idleness and dependency (Powell, 1992, 2017) and this is what makes pertinent the need to view contemporary experiences in a historical context. In the next section, a brief discussion of the historical embeddedness of the work ethic is offered and more recent literature is also considered. In order to contextualise the empirical materials, a note on the specificity of Irish welfare, which briefly documents the 'workfarist' turn that has become prominent in recent years, is also offered. Following this, the research methods are briefly described and the empirical material which grounds the arguments made in the paper is then introduced. Finally, the paper is concluded with a brief discussion.

The work ethic

In the post-war context, it can be suggested that the word welfare and the term welfare state have undergone a semantic vicissitude in the popular lexicon, essentially moving from being words once imbued with the positivity of collective solidarity to becoming words now largely used in the pejorative, as slurs and points of attack, in the context of social welfare at least, where they are substantially associated with a mythos of deviancy, fecklessness and idleness (Whelan, 2019; Devereux and Power, 2019; Jensen and Tyler, 2015). In much of the literature, this tendency is largely grounded by attributing the ideological origins of this paradigm shift to the American neoliberal paternalists (Mead, 1986, 1992; Murray, 1984, 1990, 1994) and communitarians (Etzioni, 1997; Selbourne, 1994) who separately advocated for the withdrawal of state supports under the guise of promoting citizen self-reliance and disincentivising a culture of 'dependency' (Dwyer, 2016; Gilbert, 2009; Soss et al., 2011; Wright and Patrick, 2019). While these types of discourses may have been American in origin in respect to the latter half of the 20th century at least, they are undoubtedly much older than this, having a long history in European countries also (Fox-Piven and Cloward, 1993; Powell, 1992, 2017). When considering the power and

dominance of the work ethic, as it has been conceptualised here, it is important to acknowledge the impact of the work of the aforementioned neoliberal paternalists and communitarians, the 4 Irish Journal of Sociology 0(0) persistent and damaging embeddedness of the discourses they advanced and the critiques to which these discourses gave, and continue to give rise. However, I want to go back further here and suggest that is possible to point a very particular historical epoch, wherein a number of factors coalesced to begin to give shape to ideas about, and ascribe moral value to, both work and worklessness in a more pronounced way than had formerly been the case, predating the arguments of Murray, Mead, Etzioni Selbourne and others by several centuries. The period in question broadly encapsulates the reformation and post-reformation, with the intellectual expression of ideas coming via the thinking of many church reformers, early political economists and enlightenment figures. Lutheranism and Calvinism in particular had an enormous impact on ideas about work, poor relief, industriousness, idleness and how each should be viewed. Specifically, Calvin's doctrine of 'predestination' had an enormous effect as work under Calvinism became glorified on the basis that success at work was seen as a way to 'gauge' whether or not one was in 'God's' favour (Graham, 1971). Effectively, those who were successful and industrious may be a little more confident as to where they were heading in the next life. In this respect, the protestant ethic thesis (Weber, 2001/1902) is important and therefore not strayed from overly much here. When working with Weber's (2001/1902) thesis, it is important to note that there are criticisms which point out that the Protestant ethic was not the sole catalyst for the development of capitalism before putting then these to one side. Weber (1902/2001) never claimed this. In fact, he was clearly aware of the existence of pre-reformation capitalism. What he did point out, and what is most interesting from the perspective of this paper, was that early forms of capitalism, what he called adventure capitalism, had tended to end in a sort of final consumption

predicated on a type of hedonism and largess and so did not result in ongoing capital accumulation. Capitalism predicated on and couched in puritan values such as hard work and thrift, what Weber (2001/1902) has called aesthetic capitalism, was inherently different on the basis that its practitioners eschewed hedonism in favour of thrift and sobriety and thus were much more naturally inclined toward the reinvestment of profit. Weber (2001/1902: 116) captured this in the following terms: When the limitation of consumption is combined with [the] release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through aesthetic compulsion to save. For Weber (2001/1902) then, this is one of many factors in a pluralist explanation of an emerging capitalism. The effect of this, in part, is the formation of a more pronounced work ethic, manifesting as a social force, encapsulating new understandings of work and worklessness (Meiksins-Wood, 2005).

In the literature on historical social policy, both Spicker (1984) and Powell (1992) note this period also, with Powell (1992) citing changes from Christian charity and the decline of apostolic poverty towards a more rational or 'scientific' Whelan 5 approach to poor relief and suggesting that this began to engender negative perceptions of those in receipt of such relief, particularly amongst the landed gentry whose taxes upheld the 'burden'. This is an important point for the 'toxic symbiosis' thesis posited here, as it is suggestive of the coupling of worklessness with the receipt of poor relief, showing how they begin to function together to stigmatise and to produce shame. Spicker (1984) offered a similar assertion in tracing the emergence of stigma in the context of historical Britain and also noted the declination of charity in respect to religious duty. He further noted that the reformation, along with the emerging protestant work ethic, in effect, destroyed the religious basis for charity which had previously venerated the poor. If, sociologically, idleness began to be viewed with contempt and industriousness as a mark of divine grace, this was given a formal basis in

developing social policy; initially, through legal-rational apparatuses such as the Lutheran ‘community-chest’ and latterly through the reformed poor laws of the 19th century both of which constituted and therefore punished ‘able-bodied-ness’ as an indicator of a poor work ethic and the avoidance of work (Edwards, 1994; Powell, 1992). Again, this is a key point for understanding the historical development of the ‘toxic symbiosis’ as it demonstrates an emerging emphasis on individualising worklessness and coupling it with welfare recipiency in way that still characterises modern welfare systems. The work ethic in contemporary literature Having discussed the historical embeddedness of the work ethic and the early development of the ‘toxic symbiosis’, there is a growing body of literature that has addressed the often-toxic nature of what constitutes the contemporary work ethic under neoliberalism in a very direct way which I want to briefly explore. Some of this literature has sought to challenge the nature of prominent assumptions about what work is and what it should be. In doing so, much of the intellectual endeavour has devolved upon demonstrating the deleterious effects of a powerful and socially entrenched work ethic. There is also a literature which shows how ideas about work and the work ethic are deeply embedded within welfare systems thus demonstrating how the ‘toxic symbiosis’ of worklessness and welfare receipt are actioned within the compulsive geography of welfare states and I want to offer a brief synthesis of this literature here too.

Sage (2018) has written about how unemployment has traditionally been associated with an array of social problems including poor physical health and mental well-being. However, Sage (2018) rejects traditional arguments and instead argues that social policy wrongly disregards the role of the work ethic in shaping experiences of unemployment. He suggests that in societies which glorify employment as a signifier of identity and status, those without employment suffer. Through an analysis of the European Values Study (2008), Sage (2018) convincingly demonstrates the efficaciousness of an internal work

ethic, showing how unemployed people with weaker work ethics have significantly higher life satisfaction than those with stronger work ethics. He also suggests the power of an externally 6 Irish Journal of Sociology 0(0) constituted work ethic, concluding that the most effective way of dealing with the psychosocial effects of unemployment is to challenge the centrality of employment in contemporary societies. This is an area of debate that has also been met by Frayne (2015), who explicitly considers the theory and practice of the resistance to and refusal of work. Frayne (2015) draws on the testimony of research participants, who have, for a variety of reasons, begun to actively resist work, to question the very nature of the role of work in contemporary societies and to go so far as to refuse work altogether. In doing so, and of particular interest here, Frayne (2015) affirms the powerful and coercive dynamic that enters peoples' lives in the form of an externally enforced work ethic as they face confusion, rejection and condemnation from their families and peers for their stated rejection of work as a lifestyle choice to the point where many of the participants in Frayne's (2015) study, who had set out on a journey of rejecting work and envisioning a different sort of life, ultimately acquiesced to external pressure and returned to formal paid employment. Frayne and others have since built on this work (see Frayne, 2019) and others still have separately entered the wider space that encapsulates the sociology of work in a way that asks similar questions (see Lloyd, 2018; Pettinger, 2019). Other literature of interest emanating from the UK is also relevant here, particularly in the context of the coupling worklessness with welfare receipt and the effect on experiences that this has. Patrick (2016, 2017) is relevant in this respect. This is because many of the participants in Patrick's (2017) study were clearly very affected by the power an externally imposed work ethic. Many of the participants cited in Patrick's (2017) study conflated work with moral worth or value while, conversely, there was the sense that receiving welfare was viewed as non-altruistic and problematic. This

demonstrates the ‘toxic symbiosis’ of worklessness and welfare receipt at play and foreshadows the empirical material that will be presented here further on. More broadly, Mills (2018) has noted the wider stigmatisation of welfare claimants in a way that can be read through the lens of worklessness coupled with welfare receipt and the effects that this potentially has on persons as they encounter the spectres ‘dependency’, the internalisation of market logics and the sense of economic ‘burden’.

In the Irish context, Boland and Griffin (2015a, 2015b, 2016) have also entered this space when writing about the sociology of unemployment, specifically in relation to Jobseeker type payments. They document the ungenerous and punitive nature of the ‘welfare gift’ (2016). In doing so, they show how the previously designated ‘unemployed person’ has become more recently designated ‘jobseeker’ whose sole role, task or ‘job’ becomes the unending pursuit of formal paid employment. Gaffney and Millar (2020) show how the ‘workfarist’ turn and the continuous focus on unemployment and welfare fraud potentially acts to undermine and delegitimise welfare states and this is a point I will return to in the discussion. Wiggan, (2015), Collins and Murphy (2016), Millar and Crosse (2018), Murphy (2020), Fitzpatrick et al. (2019), Gaffney and Millar (2020) and Whelan (2020) have all also documented increasing conditionalities and the ‘workfarist’ turn in the Irish welfare system; a turn which strongly couples the receipt of welfare with Whelan 7 the need for the pursuit of work and thus enforces the ‘toxic symbiosis’. Taken together, this body of literature demonstrates the continuing centrality of an externally imposed work ethic encapsulated within welfare systems and in doing so, grounds the empirical materials presented further on.

The 'workfarist' turn: A note on the Irish welfare model.

Before progressing to describe the research methods and present the empirical material that demonstrates the power of the work ethic and 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare receipt, a note on specificity of the research context is necessary. Drawing on the work of Esping-Andersen (1990), commonly prescribed welfare state models are usually articulated as follows:

- **A conservative or corporatist model:** Strongly based on the concept of social insurance also known as contributory payment schemes;
- **A liberal or residual model:** Strongly based on social assistance type payments, also known as non-contributory schemes and...
- **A social democratic or universal model:** Strongly based on universal or non-means tested payments.

In reality, things are seldom this simple and most welfare states have some of the features of all three types. In respect to Ireland, Dukelow and Considine (2014a: 56) have noted that:

> ...in social policy terms, while typically linked with the liberal welfare regime, the range of influences on Ireland's welfare development has meant that its position as a liberal welfare state is open to some ambiguity. It has been observed that it 'defies classification' and is better described as a 'hybrid regime,' with links in particular to the welfare tradition of the conservative/corporatist regime.

With a view to grounding the material presented further on within a relatively contemporary timeframe we can look to the post-2008 Irish welfare state. Of this time, Considine and Dukelow (2011: 181) have noted that 'the policy response to the Irish crisis [was] characterised by a rapid and severe turn to austerity'. Mirroring international trends, the area of social protection in Ireland became

heavily politicized, coming under intense scrutiny and facing repeated criticism for being overly generous and badly managed (Dukelow and Considine, 2014b; NESC, 2011). This was particularly true, initially at least, in respect to unemployment type payments such as JA and JB. Essentially, the Irish welfare system changed from being a predominantly passive system, which focused on job creation, education and training, to an active and punitive system which focused on labour market activation and sanctions (Boland and Griffin, 2015a, 2016; Dukelow, 2011; Dukelow and Considine, 2017). Coupled with a change in tone, much of the Irish welfare state infrastructure was also aesthetically redesigned, 8 Irish Journal of Sociology 0(0) particularly with the launch of Intreo in 2012. Perhaps one of the most profound examples of this change as articulated in policy terms is to be found in the Pathways To Work policy strategy which has gone through several iterations since its inception (2012, 2013, 2015, 2016–20). Described by Boland and Griffin (2018) as 'latecomers' to the realm of activation, the Irish Government arguably hit the ground running. In the first iteration of the Pathways To Work policy statement, it was suggested that there would need to be 'more regular and on-going engagement with the unemployed' (GOI, 2012: 05). Also contained within the policy and consistent with a 'case management' style of engagement was the introduction of "probability of exit" (PEX) profiling for all new claimants at this time (GOI, 2012). Claimants were also asked to sign a 'social contract' of 'rights and responsibilities'; and to commit to a 'progression plan'. The policy made no pretence of the very real possibility and intention to deploy sanctions for those seen not to be meeting the required standard of the active jobseeker. It could be argued that such polices are indicative of a broader ideological 'attack' on welfare and on the welfare state as well as on those who find themselves at its door. At the very least, polices such as these are illustrative of changed ideas around welfare and the 'doing' of welfare and of the centrality of work and the work ethic in the Irish welfare space.

Welfare provision in Ireland has continued to be subject to wider international trends (Brodkin and Larsen, 2013), much of which devolve upon increasing levels of welfare conditionality though here it must be noted that where there are similarities between Ireland and other jurisdictions, these can appear somewhat superficial. Ireland has not entered the realm of the 'Dickensian' in the way that the UK, for example, has (see Alston, 2019). Nevertheless, literature suggests that ongoing reforms to welfare regimes across jurisdictions since about the 1970s are indicative of the bedding in of neoliberalism as a 'global' ideology (Brodkin and Larsen, 2013; Dardot and Laval, 2013; Harvey, 2007). A pronounced feature of this 'bedding-in' has been an emphasis on welfare reform that promotes strict conditionality (Hansen, 2019; Umney et al, 2018). Overall, this has constituted an emphasis on a 'work-first' mode of practice in the Irish welfare state (Millar and Crosse, 2018). Much of the data presented in this article bears the hallmark of this changed welfare dynamic.

Research design: Brief overview

Having explored discussions and debates underpinning the work presented in this paper, I want to shed some light on the research undertaken and on how this was conducted and carried out. The method of data collection was in-depth interviews each of which were carried out over a period of several months in 2018 in various locations in Ireland. Interviews were approximately an hour in duration and focused on various thematic aspects of participants' experiences of claiming and receiving social welfare and how this impacted on their day to day lives. Drawing on the work of Baumberg (2016) and Patrick (2016, 2017), the following concepts were utilised as fieldwork instruments to help give a language to experience:

1) **Claims stigma:** The stigma that arises during the process of actually claiming benefit or welfare entitlements;

2) **Stigmatisation:** The perception that others will devalue your identity as a result of claiming benefits;
3) **Personal stigma:** A person's own sense that claiming benefits conveys a devalued identity.

These concepts were not theorised beyond how they have been dealt with in the work of Baumberg (2016) and Patrick (2016, 2017) and neither was it the intention to approach the use of these concepts in an attempt at abduction. Rather they functioned as research tools by simply allowing the researcher to open up a dialogue with participants. Twenty-two interviews were carried out and 191 were subsequently transcribed for analysis. NVivo code and retrieve software were used to store and work with the data throughout the analysis process. In particular, this study focused on those who were or who had been in receipt of the following core group of payments:

1) **Jobseekers benefit (JB) and jobseekers allowance (JA);**
2) **Illness benefit (IB) and disability allowance (DA);**
3) **One parent family payment (OPFP) jobseekers transitional payment (JST).**

Inclusion criteria

To be included in the research, participants simply either had to have been in, or still be in, receipt of any of the payments listed above. There were no exclusions based on age, ethnicity or gender or other kinds of personal identifiers. This was because the core research interest was broad representation across the core working age payments related to unemployment as opposed to seeking to test whether there were differences in experiences according to other aspects of identity. It should be noted that where names are used in the paragraphs to follow, these are pseudonyms.

Empirical materials: The 'toxic symbiosis'

Firstly, and before demonstrating how the work ethic is enforced within the Irish welfare system, it is important to look at how participants in this study articulated the importance of work in the context of formal paid employment along with where participants first become exposed to, and first experience, the power of the work ethic. In this way, it is possible to transmit both an internal sense of the work ethic on the part of the respondents and to show where it is imposed from outside. There is a strong body of evidence within the data and across the different payment types which demonstrates the importance that participants attach to work in the form of formal paid employment and, as will be seen, this is something that is often first introduced in familial circumstances. Frank, a long-term recipient of DA, talks firstly about what working has meant to him throughout his life:

> It was just an amazing life I had. I thought I was the luckiest man in the world. I had a job and I could do the things that I wanted to do. If I wanted to go out and have a meal I could go out and have a meal. I'd be paying my own way. Nobody was paying for me (emphasis in the original).

In the above excerpt Frank talks about the importance of formal paid employment in the context of the life and opportunities he felt it had provided him, allowing him to feel 'lucky' and granting him the ability to pay his own way, demonstrating a subjective work ethic and also consent. However, this sense of the importance of work and of paying your own way was not accidental and was instilled in Frank from a young age. So, when asked where his sense of work ethic came from, Frank spoke passionately about his mother:

> My mother. Without a doubt my mother. She worked all her life. She die[d] at 51 but she worked so hard and she worked for half of nothing,

> but she always taught us, you know, you go out and you make your own living, you don't depend on other people to help you.

The language used here by Frank in relation to the values to which his mother introduced him is very strong. The cornerstone of this value position devolves on the notion that you 'don't depend on other people' and that 'you go out and you make your own living'. Inherent in this is the suggestion that not doing so, that is, by not working and making your 'own living', you are doing something shameful. Frank, in particular, spoke very strongly on the importance of work. As someone who had 'worked all his life', in predominantly hard physical occupations, he found himself in need of social assistance in the form of DA after having a serious accident which left him unable to work. This was devastating for Frank, who seems to have carried the values he had learned in his formative years and from his mother into his adult life thus clearly linking a sense of his own intrinsic worth and well-being to being in formal paid employment. As a result, he found the thought of receiving social welfare extremely difficult:

> Didn't want to accept it. I mean to say, when you work from 13 right up to here, nearly in your fifties, you don't want to accept the fact that you can't work anymore. You don't want to accept the fact that you have to live on social welfare...other people are paying for to keep you.

Here we see a response from Frank that amply demonstrates the effects of the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare receipt. Frank struggles not only with Whelan 11 the thought of his own worklessness but also with the fact that he must now receive social assistance. Frank was not alone in articulating the importance of work to self-worth and well-being. Here, Trish, a long-term recipient of JA, talks about the importance of work in the context of making job applications:

> I want to be working. I'm a good worker. I'm a hard worker. It's just a change in the career. And I'm after getting a few rejection letters. That kind of sets me back. But that's normal, you know. Of course it's normal. But I'm going to push through it. I know I will. It's just getting there.

Trish talks about being a 'good worker', a 'hard worker' and of wanting to work, clearly demonstrating her internal work ethic and the value she places on formal paid employment. She also rationalises her current unemployment by articulating it as a change of career or something to 'push through'. Again, as was the case with Frank, this sense of a work ethic and the importance of making your own way was instilled in Trish from a young age in a familial setting:

> My dad worked hard all of his life. He was never down in the Social Welfare looking for whatever, you know. So he did try to teach us not to go to the Social Welfare...

The language used by Trish to describe her dad and the values he tried to impart overlaps with that of Frank in how he described his mother and her values. Again, it also demonstrates the 'toxic symbiosis'; you must work hard, you must not rely on social welfare. In Trish's case, she talks of her dad who she says 'worked hard all his life' and never sought help or social assistance, even suggesting he tried to teach her and her siblings 'not to go to the Social Welfare'; an act which at once valorises work and demonises social assistance. Again, the message inherent in the valorisation and impartation of values such as these is that to not work is something shameful and, therefore, by definition, to seek social assistance galvanises this sense of shame. For Trish, this internal conflict around what it means to be working versus what it means to be receiving social assistance is mediated by societal norms imposed from outside. This experience of work being held up as being virtuous by family members was common across the participant group. Scarlett, an OPFP claimant made similar remarks:

> I know that lots of people are brought up to work hard...no one wanted to ask for help and [it was] looked down upon to ask for help...I was brought up to work hard, so, you know, I was working from 13, you know, and I wanted a job and I like working, you know.

Again, the language used here demonstrates the values of hard work and of working hard being imparted in formative settings. Scarlett talks about being 'brought up to work hard', of working from a young age and of liking work and again this demonstrates internalisation and consent but also external social pressures.

Claim and skive: Broader social discourses

As well as experiencing the impartation of values surrounding the work ethic in close familial or formative settings, many of the participants have experienced the power of an externally imposed work ethic in broader, more social, domains. Again, this suggests that the work ethic can be seen to act as a social mechanism that can be experienced in different spaces and in different ways. Furthermore, this suggests that even if people are not exposed to a strong set of values valorising work and demonising social assistance early on or in a formative period, they may still become exposed to and affected by them in later stages of life. For example, in interview, Jane expressed the idea that she grew up in an area and in a household where there was no stigma around the idea of engaging with the social welfare system in times of unemployment. In the exchange described by Jane below, she mentions how she first becomes aware of a different view on the part of others:

> I remember speaking to one friend of mine who I had just met who was from Douglas and, you know, very middle-class and she never went on the dole6 even when she was unemployed. You know, she would just keep looking for a job—'Oh, I'll have to get a part-time job.' ...But more

> than that I remember her having a reaction when I said I was signing on the dole ...I remember her saying, like, why? She couldn't understand. Why don't you just look for a job? And her thing was really go out and look for a job immediately...

Jane describes engaging with the social welfare system in what could be suggested to be a perfectly reasonable, rational and correct way during a period of unemployment. Nevertheless, Jane becomes exposed to the work ethic later through contact and conversations with people outside of her immediate circle. In the exchange she describes, the other party appears to be taken aback by the idea of someone engaging with social welfare, even at times of unemployment, and can't understand why Jane doesn't 'just look for a job?' This exchange, and perhaps more like it, had an effect on Jane and as a result changed her outlook in relation to the work ethic. Because of this, though primarily reliant on a welfare payment, Jane describes how she endeavours to always at least remain partly employed as a way of demonstrating a good work ethic which is something she has come to see as important:

> I would just say I feel better about myself when I have a part-time job... it's just not being completely dependent. I suppose it shows you're not completely dependent on social welfare and it also shows you have a work ethic.

Jane talks about feeling better about herself when she has a part-time job. She links this to ideas about dependency, she also directly references having an internal work ethic though this is clearly tempered by social experience. The social reinforcement of the work ethic, experienced by Jane, was something that many other of the participants also experienced in direct contact with people outside of their immediate circle. For example, 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...I've experienced it looking for positions for jobs. Once you mention that you're unemployed or that you've been out of work for so many months, so many years, they're just—you know, immediately the conversation changes.

Martin directly references the imposition of a stigma here and links this to both receiving social welfare and to being unemployed thus demonstrating the 'toxic symbiosis' proposed here. He suggests that there is stigma attached to a reliance on social assistance and that this is further exacerbated, in a social setting, by mentioning an absence from formal paid employment. There is evidence of the societal reinforcement of the work ethic, mediated, on the one hand, via a sense of shame or stigma around receiving welfare and on the other by an overt negativity surrounding unemployment. Below, Clive, a recipient of JA who has been unemployed for a period of 10 years approximately, talks about experiencing similar exchanges in a social setting:

> I've had it now, for example, with a friend of mine...Just a thing he said about people that are on the dole, you know what I mean, that they should get off their asses and get work...people will say, ah, these bums, they never worked a day in their life, they don't want to work, why should they, they're on social welfare, you know.

Clive describes an exchange with a friend that was replete with a heady brew of familiar tropes. Again, the two-sided attack based on the dual entities of a reliance on social welfare and unemployment is to the fore in the described exchange. Clive's friend feels that unemployed people who are receiving social welfare should 'get off their asses and work'. Clive, as someone who is experiencing both welfare receipt and unemployment, does in fact 'belong' to the category about

which his friend is speaking. In this sense, Clive is experiencing the societal reinforcement of the work ethic and, while he may not be in a position to do anything about it in terms of acquiescing to his friend's latent demands, he cannot but be affected by it.

We have seen here the importance that many of the participants attach to work in the sense of portraying an internal work ethic based on consent. We have also seen the external imposition of the work ethic and how participants can first become exposed to this. It is often, though not always, imparted in close familial settings through a strongly articulated value position. It can also be reinforced at a social level outside of what might constitute an immediate circle. Aside from these powerful exposures to the work ethic, participants were also often aware of yet broader reinforcement in the form of popular and political discourses that also tend to valorise work and denigrate 'dependency'. In this respect, a way in which the work ethic seems to be continually reinforced is through various examples of popular media:

> ...news stuff, especially, yeah, like tabloid newspapers will often target welfare recipients as again I would say the scapegoat of an issue and they'll blow up figures and say it's this whole—it's a crisis, you know. Like it's this big sensational kind of thing that they're draining the economy or whatever.

Above, Alan, a recipient of JSA, talks about the effect of media such as tabloid newspapers who he suggests give disproportionate coverage to welfare recipients, creating 'moral panic' in the tradition of Cohen (2011) and effectively scapegoating them. Mary, a recipient of JA, echoes much of this point in the context of radio programming:

> I suppose I've heard so many conversations on the radio and different, like, you know, conversations that people would have had on the talk

> shows and things like that and it just kind of seems to be the same thing and those kind of words are coming up all the time and like it just nearly kind of associates with yourself then. You kind of think, oh, like, am I actually that person? Like am I actually like a lazy person? You know, things like that. So you kind of, you know, you feel like kind of ashamed nearly that you're on it.

Mary uses language that clearly demonstrates how deeply affective and effective the reinforcement of the work ethic, along with the denigration of welfare recipiency can be at this level. She finds herself questioning her personhood, asking herself whether or not she is lazy and ends up with confused feelings that are tinged with shame and personal stigma.

Alongside this broader societal reinforcement of the work ethic in the context of popular media such as tabloid newspapers, television and radio, many of the participants also experienced this reinforcement as a type of social or moral policing on various online platforms. For example, Grace talks about reading the comments that often follow an online article in which there has been reference to unemployment and the receipt of social welfare. She too finds herself questioning her own personhood as a result:

> Yeah, so there might be an article and there might be a man and he's not working or whatever, or a woman who has a child and she's not working, or she is working and— whatever—somebody gets a bit of social welfare...There's just little clause in one of the sentences in the big long article. And then in comments it's 'oh, social welfare—' you know, people are just tearing somebody to shreds over the fact that they get social welfare.

Both of these last examples demonstrate the societal reinforcement and imposition of the work ethic in broader social contexts along with a widespread assumption that receiving social welfare or assistance is inherently 'bad'.

So far, this paper has focused on the effects of the work ethic on participants whilst in receipt of social welfare by focusing on family, community and social factors in the introduction, enforcement and reinforcement of the work ethic. This was done in order to 'build up' a sense of how the work ethic is both internal and subjective but also externally located and objective. I also wanted to demonstrate the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare receipt and how this is threaded through people's daily life experiences leading to experiences of stigma and feelings of shame. I next want to show how the work ethic is something that many of the participants in this study experienced as being 'built in' to all aspects and stages of the Irish welfare system. In this way, the work ethic is enforced externally by an instrument of the state and this, in part, speaks to coercion, not consent.

Work and thrive: How the work ethic is threaded through the Irish social welfare system

The strong emphasis on the work ethic and on finding work is something that many of the participants in this study experienced during their interactions with administrators in the welfare system. As might be expected, this tended to be strongest for, and most frequently encountered by, those receiving jobseeker type payments. This is because jobseekers, in particular, are expected to be keenly aware of their responsibilities in order to receive their payment. These responsibilities include:

- Being available for work;
- Being fit for work;

- Genuinely seeking work;
- Unable to find work.

Jobseekers are also committing to engage with Intreo's employment advice and training referral services. They are also advised that if they 'fail to honour this commitment it will lead to a reduction or withdrawal of your jobseeker's payment' (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection [hereafter DEASP], 2019, np). It is clear then that the emphasis for welfare claimants, and jobseekers in particular, is strongly on work from the beginning of their interaction with the welfare system. Below, Alan describes an experience which clearly demonstrates the emphasis that is placed on the work ethic and on finding work by welfare administrators:

> Yeah, so you're kind of regularly filling out forms saying you've applied for jobs in this place on this day and, you know, whatever. Every time I interacted with someone in the office they'd ask me how often are you applying? One day I kind of wasn't being particularly mindful and I just said that I—I think she said, 'When did you last look?' And I said I looked the day before yesterday. And this was early in the morning, you know. And she said, 'Why didn't you look yesterday?'

Alan describes the regularity with which he was expected to look or apply for jobs. He also describes the negative reaction he encountered having been perceived to not be applying enough. Below, Patricia echoes Alan's point in relation to frequency, describing the high level of postal contact she received relating to making job applications:

> ...[w]hat was really annoying me...was the fact that I kept getting sent out a letter every few weeks just to say that I had to prove what jobs I had applied for.

Again, it is clear here that the emphasis is very much on the work and on finding work. This need to constantly be on the lookout for work and to be ready to prove oneself in this respect was something that affected many of the participants. Olive describes the rigorous steps she took to both find work and to keep proof of her job-seeking activities on hand should it be required:

> It was all work. And there was a big folder. I remember the green folder where I put all the ads from the papers or the ad from the internet and the job and the application, whether it was application form or CV, and then there was the reply back. So they all were kept and they were all put in date order I suppose so that when that letter might come then I'd have my proof on hand.

The efforts undertaken by Olive clearly show how an emphasis on work is contained within the Irish social welfare system and how this filters into the lives of welfare recipients, affecting them deeply and dictating their activities to an extent at least. The inherent suggestion in this is that those in receipt of jobseeker type payments take on the role of constantly being expected to search for work and that this is stringently enforced and reinforced by the welfare system. This has certainly proved to be the case for many of the participants in this study.

Along with receiving correspondence through the post, welfare recipients and, again, jobseekers in particular are often expected to meet face to face with an assigned Intreo officer where the emphasis is primarily on work and job-seeking activities. Below, Peter, a long-term recipient of JA who has had experience with both state provided and privately provided welfare services describes his experiences of continuously meeting with an Intreo officer over a six-month period:

> Well, I went in I talked to him about myself and about work and what work I'd like to do, and that was fine. Then I had to call down to him

> every two weeks and prove that Whelan 17 I was looking for work. And I wasn't finding any work. That just basically was it. And I was there for six months...

This personal or caseworker approach was something experienced by many of the participants, usually involving face to face meetings with an emphasis on work. Below, Mary describes her experience which clearly overlap with those of Peter:

> I like have a caseworker, kind of a specific fella that I go to...It's kind of like intermittently really that I would go to him, and he's just kind of there to—basically, you know, you have a personal progression plan and he'll go through all that kind of stuff with you...if he sees any jobs online, you know, he'll give them to you, or any courses that he thinks might be, you know, good for you then he will kind of recommend them to you and stuff like that.

Again, the emphasis in these meetings is very much consistent with reinforcing the work ethic. Mary has a 'personal progression plan' and jobs and suitable courses are recommended at the meetings. While the tone of these frequent meetings as described by both Peter and Mary may on the surface appear to be largely formulaic and mundane, the data show that in actuality these, as well as other general contacts from the DEASP, could be highly stressful occasions for many of the participants and had the potential to engender upset, nervousness and even fear as described by Mary:

> I suppose the nerves came when like I'd get a letter to say you have a meeting to see how you're getting on and all this kind of stuff. So I guess it was very—like it's very nerve-wracking.

It should also be noted that attendance at meetings such as these are required as mandatory, falling under the 'committing to engage with Intreo's employment advice and training referral services' aspect of receiving jobseeker type payments, with recipients facing a potential sanction for non-engagement. Below, Patricia describes how this was made plain by the Intreo officer:

> ...like she kept reinstating it. 'It's mandatory that you're here. It's mandatory that you're here. You have to comply.' And then I had to sit down and fill out a contract and in the contract, you have to say what your goals are.

These examples strongly speak to the external enforcement of the work ethic.

If the reinforcement of the work ethic is built into the Intreo system as it relates to jobseeker type payments, then this appears to become even more pronounced when claimants are referred onto to private service providers, something over which claimants have no control. Many of the participants in this study will have had experiences such as these. In the first instance, the modus operandi of the private providers appears to very much mirror that of the state provided Intreo service. Below, Peter describes in detail, his initial introduction to Turas Nua:

> I went down into Turas Nua. You've an interview. There's about fifteen, sixteen people in the group and they go through their introductions and how they're going to help you find work and this, that and the other. And then you get assessed with one person and she's meant to help you find work. And you report to her every week, maybe two weeks, and if you don't turn up your social welfare will be docked. So I says, 'Grand, fine.' I turned up. You give your CV and she puts it up on the computer... They were just telling us that there's great opportunities in Cork and this, that

> and the other, and there's work out there for everybody and we'll all find work for ye. And I went, 'Grand.'

It is clear from Peter's description that the work ethic is strongly reinforced from the very initial stages. This is not altogether surprising given the mandate of entities such as Turas Nua who operate on the basis of a 'payment by results' contract which must dictate their strategy in part at least. However, this is then coupled with an explicit threat in the form of sanctions for non-engagement. Present also in the experience described above is the language of responsibilisation, recipients are clearly told that there are 'great opportunities' and that there is 'work out there for everybody'. Use of language such as this is arguably imbued with the latent suggestion of failure on the part of those referred to private job-matching entities such as Turas Nua, a failure to seize the 'great opportunities' and to avail of a seeming abundance of work. It also speaks to the external enforcement of the work ethic by the welfare system.

It is arguable that this type of opening gambit can be explained, in part at least, by what many participants experienced as the enforcement of an 'any work any job' policy on the part Turas Nua and this is consistent with much of the literature (Boland, 2018; Boland and Griffin, 2018; Collins and Murphy, 2016). This clearly denotes a form of external coerciveness. Staying with Peter, who was very animated when describing the following exchange, this external coerciveness or pressure was something he certainly experienced very strongly:

> Why aren't you applying for this job? What aren't you applying for that job?' I said, 'I don't want to do that job and I don't want to do that job.' 'But you have to find work.' I said, 'I'm looking for work.' I says, 'Why are you doing this job?' 'Because I like it.' 'And that's why I'm going to look for them job, because I like them.' I says, 'I'm not applying for a call

> centre and I'm not being sent to a call centre.' I said, 'I won't do that work.'

In the end, in what could perhaps be considered to be an act of disguised compliance, Peter describes feeling that he was really just going through the motions:

> Yeah, it's get work, get work. 'Where's your emails?' I said, 'There's my emails.' 'Why aren't you applying for this job? There's a job there, there's a job there.' I said, 'I'm not qualified for that.' I said, 'I'm not doing telesales. I don't like it, I'm not doing it.' I was just applying for jobs I knew that I wasn't going to get to keep her happy.

The emphasis on the part of Turas Nua in what Peter describes is not only on finding suitable or 'job-matched' work, it's on 'any work', regardless of the wishes of the claimant. Peter resists this at first but in the end finds himself applying for jobs he feels he has little chance of getting in order to match the expectations being set down for him. This represents a clear example of an externally imposed work ethic.

Ultimately, experiences with both state and private service providers were negative for the respondents in this study. The overriding emphasis appears to have been very much predicated on the importance of finding work tempered by thinly veiled coercion. Some participants were able to resist this and the feelings it engendered more than others. Below, in one such moment of resistance, Patricia, who was very animated in recalling the exchange, manages to aptly sum up the general sense of Turas Nua and the feelings it tended to engender for the participants in this study:

> 'Ye actually make me feel like I should have a tag on my foot.' I said, 'The communication here,' I said, 'everything,' I said, 'is just—' I said,

> ‘Everything is wrong about this.’ I said, ‘The whole thing is wrong,’ ...Like you had people in front of you—say there was like maybe a 60-year-old woman. She had a limp. She was sitting right in front of me being interviewed and I could hear her whole history, her whole employment history, someone asking her oh, you’re only working three days a week, why aren’t you working five days a week? I could hear anything that was going on right in front of me...It was like a job concentration camp.

Toxicity in the body and on the mind

Recently, Imogen Tyler (2020) has written about how stigma becomes marked upon the body of the bearer. This paper has claimed that being out of work and in receipt of welfare represents a ‘toxic symbiosis’ which has a deep and negative effect on those who experience it. For the most part, the data presented so far have shown how this is imposed in various social and institutional contexts. However, for something to be ‘toxic’ it must demonstrably and substantially harm people’s wellbeing in important ways, it must be carried in the mind and borne upon the body. Therefore, in order for the thesis of ‘toxic symbiosis’ to be borne out fully, it is important that it is evidenced through the data. In this final section, I want to introduce data which meet this task and offer a corollary to Tyler’s work, by showing, in a very real way, the effects of the’ toxic symbiosis’ upon the body and the minds of those who experience it.

In the following excerpt, Trish offers a reflection which amply illustrates the toxic and subjective effect of the inward projection of the messages relayed through experiencing the ‘toxic symbiosis’ of worklessness and welfare recipiency:

> The older I’m getting—like at the moment I’m pissed off with myself. I just want a job. I don’t want to be dealing with them anymore, you know. I just want to get as far, far away from them as I possibly can and their

> brown envelopes. I do feel bad. I feel a bit shitty, to be honest. You know, I know there's more in me, you know. I didn't plan on sitting on the dole for two years and six months...

Trish clearly addresses the starkness of worklessness, she is 'pissed off' and 'just want[s] a job'. Alongside this she is clearly exasperated through having to engage with and receive correspondence from the administrators of welfare. Ultimately, worklessness and welfare receipt exacerbate each other and culminate in low feelings and a longing introspection. Clearly, Trish expresses suffering here, she blames herself. Trish was not alone in this and, accordingly, many of the other participants expressed similar sentiments. Alan, for example, clearly demonstrates the effect of the 'toxic symbiosis' and how it can manifest in 'layers and layers' through the following excerpt:

> There's layers and layers of ways that it kind of made me feel very negative. The first was to do with the stigma and it was the way people treated me that kind of a sent me a very clear signal that I was bad in some way, you know. The next is that I kind of felt like I was be treated as a second-class citizen...So that was an immediate kind of hit to my self-esteem, you know.

Alan is almost verbose here. As noted, he speaks of 'layers and layers' of negativity and uses terms like 'stigma' and 'second-class citizen'. Alan is talking about his experiences in everyday contexts and in the institutional context of the welfare state. Like Trish, he also talks about how this has and did affect him in an internal and arguably damaging way, ultimately affecting his self-esteem. The effect of the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare receipt in respect to the impact on self-esteem was writ large across the data. Below, Mary demonstrates this further:

> It kind of goes into your head nearly, like, and, you know, I suppose like I feel like that sometimes that I feel lazy...Or, you know, that you just feel like maybe not good enough or something because you're like trying to, you know...So it's trying to kind of push through that to try and do the jobhunting, but also, you know, you're just kind of constantly thinking, oh, God, like, you know, what are people thinking of me?

Mary, like Alan and Trish, demonstrates a tendency toward negative introspection, she worries that she might not be good enough and about what people must think of her. It is not difficult to infer that must be damaging to her personhood and to her self-esteem. Mary, Alan and Trish were in receipt of JSA at the time of interview. However, this negative internalisation, demonstrating the toxic effects of experiencing worklessness and welfare receipt, was common across payment types. For example, Scarlett, a recipient of OPFP, gives an almost perfect account Whelan 21 of how worklessness and welfare receipt function together and of how this makes her feel:

> I had my daughter I could not get back out to work—I couldn't afford to—and I found that hard on my self-esteem. I don't like walking into the post office to collect my One Parent Family...

In a final example, we return to Frank, a recipient of DA who, it was shown earlier, was deeply affected by his worklessness, acquired through injury, and the need to receive welfare to support himself. In the following excerpt, Frank shows just how damaging the internalisation of this narrative can be, ultimately manifesting in the physical and pushing him to the precipice of self-destruction:

> I thought everyone that looked at me said, oh, look, he's in welfare, we're keeping him...I wasn't long on social welfare when I attempted suicide, because I didn't want to be around. I didn't want to be a burden...people have to work to keep me today and that makes me feel like nothing.

Frank is unequivocal here. By not working, the stigma of 'public burden' weighs heavily upon him. He has internalised a narrative of welfare as 'taking while not giving' which he demonstrates through his assertion that 'people have to work to keep me today', something which Frank cannot find a way to reconcile to the point where suicide felt like an option for him.

There are many more instances of similar experiences across the data. Some of which conjure the spectres of shame, depression and low self-esteem, others which, like Frank, evoke the existential, all of which demonstrate the power of the inward projection of the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare recipiency.

This concludes the presentation of empirical material. It is hoped that what has been presented bears out the arguments at the core of this paper and that the 'toxic symbiosis' of worklessness and welfare receipt has been aptly demonstrated. In the next section, I will offer a brief concluding discussion.

Discussion and conclusion

Having presented empirical material to bear out both the power of the work ethic as it is conceived here and the symbiotic and toxic relationship between worklessness and welfare receipt, I next want to offer a brief discussion on the implications of what has been presented. I want to address the power of the work ethic and an emphasis on work specifically in the context of what it means for those who seek to avail of state support during times of unemployment and also for welfare as an ongoing project. In the first instance, it makes sense to note that, despite attempts at reclamation (see Whelan, 2019; Glennerster, 2017 for examples), the word welfare has been thoroughly politicised and demeaned and has ultimately become overtly pejorative in the public consciousness; both internationally and in Ireland (Devereux and Power, 2019). Therefore, this must

temper, to a degree at least, the experiences of those who find themselves in need of welfare. What this suggests is that the popular 'welfare imaginary' is already a factor and driver of experience for those who enter the welfare state. This was demonstrated empirically here through the lens of the 'toxic symbiosis' that is constituted by socially widespread ideas about worklessness and welfare receipt; ideas that, in many cases, pre-empted the experiences of welfare receipt for the respondents in this study who had had strong and value-laden formative and social experiences in this respect. This type of 'welfare imaginary', an imaginary where people who seek to avail of a social support structure that is already tainted by the spectre of 'public burden' (Titmuss, 1974) is something far removed from any notion of a 'welfare commons' or of welfare as a public good (Jensen and Tyler, 2015) thus eschewing the welfare state as envisioned by the architects of the post-war settlement. Admittedly, the welfare state in the Ireland was never part of any post-war settlement and the ad hoc nature of its development reflects this (Cousins, 2005; Dukelow and Considine, 2017; Powell, 2017). However, the broader point remains, suggesting that, in effect, welfare and the welfare state is an already stigmatised structure; bearing the stigma of an institutional 'spoiled identity' and therefore the power to at least imbue those who make use of it with a 'deeply discrediting' attribute by proxy (Goffman, 1990/1963).

Nevertheless, popular or 'common-sense' (Jensen and Tyler, 2015) perceptions of welfare do not necessarily tell us about what happens within the geography of a welfare state in respect to that which might exacerbate stigma and stigmatising experiences. An abundance of recent work has suggested how increasing levels of welfare conditionality, much of which revolves around labour market activation, has had a hand in shaping stigmatising experiences of welfare receipt; something which became more pronounced in recent decades as part of the broader neoliberal project (see Bonoli, 2011; Brodkin and Larsen, 2013; Dukelow, 2015; Hansen, 2019; Umney, et al, 2018; Watts and Fitzpatrick,

2018; Welfare Conditionality, 2019, for just some examples). Much of the sociological and social-policy-based work in this area in recent years has emphasised increasing levels of restrictiveness, harshness and stigmatisation in a post-crisis austerity context; with austerity becoming somewhat of a nom de plume for stigma. Yet, Pinker (1970) tells us that neither the broader neoliberal project nor the most recent wave of austerity are necessary or foundational to stigma in the context of welfare, rather stigma, as a form of symbolic violence resides within welfare states as a matter of course. History bears out Pinker's (1970) assertion and shows that the stigma attached to early forms of poor relief was rooted, at least in part, in ideas around industriousness, able-bodied-ness and idleness (Powell, 1992; Spicker, 1984). What this paper wishes to suggest is that particular sets of ideas, ideas that may be constant or cyclical, stigmatise, and, in doing so, undermine solidarity and welfare state legitimacy.

To give an example, Gaffney and Millar (2020) show this to be the case in respect to the idea of 'welfare fraud' and the constitution of welfare recipients as potentially fraudulent, an idea closely related to welfare receipt due to worklessness which can equally be perceived as 'idleness'. They do this to show representations of the 'problem' of welfare fraud can offer insight into workfarism and the emphasis on work within the Irish welfare system; something for which empirical evidence has been presented here. In doing so, they also crucially show how ideas such as these when situated in the welfare context ultimately have the effect of eschewing solidarity and undermining welfare state legitimacy. If we return the discussion to ideas at the heart of this paper, the same cause and effect can be asserted. Notions and ideas about work and idleness delegitimise the very act of claiming welfare before a potential recipient has crossed the threshold of a local welfare office. Once the geography of the welfare state is entered and the claim process begins, the emphasis on work and the reinforcement of an externally imposed work ethic is unrelenting. The upshot of

this is that people are harangued with the latent suggestion of burden and failure while being forced to look for work they do not want and to accept low paid, low security and often precariousness work (Nevin Economic Research Institute [NERI], 2019) to comply with the basis for legitimate receipt. This too was demonstrated via the empirical material presented here. Nevertheless, this study is limited in that it concerns the experiences of a small number of welfare recipients. Despite this, however, depth of understanding and thick description from which to theorise is offered. The theoretical implications of what is offered here devolve mainly on how the work ethic has been conceived, as an objective social force, and on the assertion that where worklessness and welfare receipt are found together, these two separate strands of the same experience tend to exacerbate each other. It has been necessary to first develop a novel understanding of the work ethic in order for the 'toxic symbiosis' to work. The social implications of the continuous denigration of welfare recipiency coupled with the continuous valorisation of work manifest in things like low self-esteem, negative introspection and, as was seen in Frank's case, potentially much worse. At the very least, when people are under the cosh of the stigma of 'public burden', they are less likely to be in a position to take up and sustain paid employment if and when they do find it. Undoubtedly then a new, less, corrosive, damaging and stigmatising societal relationship with work is needed. This is also true in respect to the administration of welfare. A return to work, where this is possible, must form only one part of a bigger picture. Welfare systems must learn to see people and not just economic potential or non-potential. Not only would this be more humane, but it would also be closer to what welfare should and could be about.

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