

**The United Kingdom Government's Creation of the Personal Tragedy
Model of Disability**

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Abstract

This article utilizes data obtained through twenty qualitative interviews with disabled people as its base. Findings from this research indicate that efforts by the United Kingdom's Government, and its devolved parliaments, to shame disabled people into work have heavily contributed to more stigma and prejudice being perpetrated against them. It explains how one of the ways this was accomplished was by modifying the personal tragedy *theory* of disability. This theory conveys that the marginalization of disabled people is a naturally occurring part of the social process formed through society's suppositions about what disability means. This is different from the personal tragedy *model* of disability. This model employs targeted and deliberate acts often employing public opinion data to drive campaigns for policy changes that can result in the further marginalization of disabled people in society. This piece explains how this model has been created, why it was employed, and how it has impacted disabled people's lives. Recognizing this model as a true antithesis to progressive models of inclusion can hopefully aid in preventing its application in other areas.

Keywords: disabled, personal tragedy model, stigma, United Kingdom

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Model of Disability

“The imposition of stigma is the commonest form of violence used in democratic societies...[It] can best be compared to those forms of psychological torture in which the victim is broken psychically and physically but left to all outward appearances unmarked” (Pinker, 1971, p.175).

Disability continues to be “one of the most stigmatized identities across cultures and across history” (Bogart, 2018, p. 594). This can mean that disabled people have continuously “been defined largely in terms of what they are not able to do - employment, education, and being part of ‘normal society’ (Roulstone and Prideaux, 2012, p. 3).” Investigating how those in power use these stigmas to their advantage can assist in preventing the expansion of negative stereotypes and lessen their influence and impact on disabled people. The research conducted conveyed that this was much needed in the UK where disabled people have, “felt disenfranchised, pilloried by the media as being 'workshy' or 'scroungers' and targeted by politicians, government, by 'them', with welfare cuts and 'beat the benefit cheats' campaigns” (Walker et al., 2013, p. 228).

In total, twenty qualitative interviews were conducted with disabled people in 2019 /2020 (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). Each interviewee spent approximately 60-75 minutes discussing their lived experiences as a disabled person in the UK. Reflexive journaling, audio recordings and transcripts from these interviews were coded utilizing NVivo. These codes morphed from initial categories to encompass others. Some were expanded, and others were contracted. This was done as the researcher codified the data and relistened to interviews. This process was conducted by following the criteria for a good

thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke's 15-point checklist (2006). It also met the five actions utilized by Charmaz (2014) to identify a study that used grounded theory. As a result, 9 nodes and 32 sub-nodes were finalized into overarching themes.

Interviews covered numerous topics with stigma being identified as the largest barrier participants felt they faced in every aspect of society. About a quarter of participants specifically used the word stigma while others used words to describe UK society like prejudiced, abusive and bigoted. They also cited it as a place that was crushing, humiliating, marginalizing, demoralizing and whose populace enjoyed "slagging off" (i.e., insulting) (Lexico Dictionaries, 2019) disabled people. Participants stated that the stigma they faced increased in parallel with the implementation of the "benefit cheat" narrative implemented by the UK government and its devolved parliaments.

Stigma in the UK

Goffman's book, *Stigma: Notes on the management of a spoiled identity*, defines stigma as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (Goffman, 1990, p. 9). This situation usually emerges when evidence is shared, either voluntarily or involuntarily, during social interactions. During these interactions one participant recognizes, in the person they are interacting with, "an attribute that makes [the person] different from others in this category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak" thus reducing the person in the mind of the person being encountered "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a *handicap*" [emphasis added] (Goffman, 1990, p. 12). While the term handicap has mostly been socially eradicated in the UK, and the term disability has been adopted, this name

change does not mean that the stigma associated with having a disability has lessened. The UK, with its own unique history of social class division, has stigmatized and marginalized disabled people by subjecting them to pity, shame and even extermination (Stiker, 1999).

This may be surprising to some as the UK may be considered the home of the social model of disability. This model states that the inequalities disabled persons face result from how society is constructed and not because of one's impairment (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1975, discussed later). Despite this, disabled people in the UK still report that disability stigmatizes them for significant social differentiation and into the underclass of UK society (Barton, 1996). Disabled interviewees revealed that this stigma carries with it discreditation to their social value, creates social barriers that often prevents them from succeeding, and is pervasive throughout every aspect of their experiences in UK society.

While it may be true that the pervasiveness of stigma around the globe has led to the understanding that "stigma is a common, and even defining, aspect of the disability experience" (Bogart et al., 2018, p. 595), interviewees conveyed very clearly that the rhetoric around disability and other direct efforts employed by the UK government was directly correlated with an increased experience of stigma and discriminatory attitudes in their daily lives. In essence, the UK government not only guaranteed that stigma would be a defining aspect of disability in the UK, but that having this stigma would ensure that "to be disabled is to be discriminated against" (Barton, 1996, p. 13).

The Implementation of the Personal Tragedy Model of Disability

In 1974, a group of disabled activists in the UK brought forth the social model of disability (SMD). Created by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), the SMD made a clear distinction between what constituted an impairment and

what constituted a disability. They defined impairment as “lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; and disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.” Making a special point to note that “physical disability is, therefore, a particular form of social oppression” (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1975, p. 20).

Oliver and Barnes (2012) emphasized the power that the SMD brings to bear on society. It means that if disability is a social construction, attention can be shifted “to disabled people’s common experiences of oppression and exclusion and those areas that might be changed by collective political action and social change” (Oliver and Barnes, 2012, p. 22). The identification of this provides opportunities for removing barriers to inclusion and resisting socially oppressive policies. Unlike the personal tragedy theory of disability, the SMD does not see impairment as a personal tragedy. Rather, it sees it as a naturally occurring part of the life cycle. It sees the failings of inclusion, not upon the person with the impairment, but rather on the things that impose these restrictions. The barriers arise from society’s failure to appropriately organize a society that creates structures designed for the full social inclusion of all its populace. Whether it is transportation, physical access to locations, segregated education, or other barriers to inclusion, it’s the lack of planning that results in disabled people facing the discrimination institutionalized throughout society (Oliver, 1996) and not the disabled person's tragic fate or their internal failings. The SMD has encouraged progress for disabled people in the UK and across the World.

This is much different from the personal tragedy model (PTM) of disability which emerged as a caricature of personal tragedy theory. The personal tragedy theory (PTT) of

disability depicts those who are born with, or who acquire disabilities later in life, as victims of fate or sin and who warrant pity. Historically this ethos was often rooted in religious principles and ideologies that required its believers to demonstrate kindness and generosity towards disabled people through charitable giving and works.

Like other theories, the PTT provided “a proposed explanation whose status is still conjectural” (Dictionary.com, 2022). In the case of disability, the PTT was used to explain easily why disabled people were often impoverished. It was much easier for the populace to comprehend that someone had “bad luck” than to grasp the immensity of the social barriers disabled people faced to be fully included in society. Some may argue that this is still an issue today.

Historically, governmental bodies had no impetus for action as the PTT often relegated care for disabled people to religious and charitable organizations. This allowed governments to keep monies in their coffers while others cared for, or exploited, members of the population they were elected to represent. This changed slightly in later years as society created a social safety net for various people in society, including disabled people. It was this group, and these monies, the UK Government targeted when it took the PTT of disability and turned it into the PTM of disability. Modelling can be defined as, “to form or plan according to a model” (Dictionary.com, 2022). Unlike the PTT, the PTM does not root tragedy within violations of religious ideologies, but rather within disabled people’s personal failings. One such example is the framing of disabled people as possessing no work ethic, a consequence of which is their dependency on benefits. This explanation assigns blame without addressing the existence of systemic social inequalities and barriers that many disabled people face when seeking to obtain or maintain employment.

What makes the PTM even more damaging than the PTT is that it eradicates the

ethical mandate that disabled members of society, who clearly face disadvantage, should receive help from those not disadvantaged (Sharma and Dunay, 2016). This article will demonstrate how the UK government utilized the PTM in conjunction with data to create a replicable model that can be used to vilify and further marginalize targeted groups of people. This model utilizes governmental powers, and media outlets, to influence public opinion. It encourages its populace to view disabled people as tragic victims of fate.

Here, the hegemonic power of the government is displayed as its ability to alter social and political ideologies (Gramsci, 1971). Through the lens of Gramsci, we also see that hegemony is truly politically established and as such political bodies can choose to make concessions to their allies (e.g., bankers, media outlets, and professional organizations) to disseminate the kinds of knowledge it needs for government ideologies to alter personal ideologies to the point that they become seen as common sense and absolute truths. This means that authoritative bodies can indeed manipulate the epistemology of the populace's view on disability and disabled people.

As shown throughout this article, the UK government has created and initiated a process so that it could lessen, or remove entirely, its financial obligations to disabled individuals. To accomplish this, it encouraged people to see disabled people as tragic victims of their own flawed morality who do not deserve support. As Morris found in 2011, the UK government's drive to implement a newer and cheaper benefits system, capitalized on its efforts by using a corrupted version of the social model which claimed that the governments goals were to incorporate the concepts of "independent living," "user involvement," and "co-production" into its supports system (Morris, 2011) but in reality, served to undermine these topics. What they were using instead was the PTM. The PTM is not a model that can be used to advance disability rights but recognizing the power that it can provide to oppressive forces

can aid in creating appropriate countermeasures to it. First though, must be the recognition that the ability of a government to implement a model of oppression like the PTM validates that although models of disability can be utilized to better understand disability in society, to discuss ways to challenge social structures and to form groups of epistemic resistance, they can also be used as oppressive devices that harm and exploit people.

While Lawsons and Beckett (2020) may be correct when they state that the social model and the human rights-based models can work well in tandem to improve human rights for disabled people, advocates, and researchers must also identify models that work to counteract these efforts.

The Commitment by the UK Government to Increase Disability Stigma

“The easiest thing in the world for those in power is to simply blame the individual -for their poverty, their unemployment, even their own illness” (Ryan, 2019, p. 197).

While the creation of stigma can be due to various social constructs and social influences, interviewees for this project report that challenging the stereotypes that result from this stigma has become even more problematic due to extensive negative representations of disabled people by politicians and then in the media. Prior to the UKs Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (2010-2015) media representations of disabled people were often used to present them as unusual members of society who warranted pity, fear or admiration (Barnes and Mercer, 2010). The use of these views legitimized the inabilities of disabled people in the minds of the populace, highlighting disabled people’s inferiority and justifying their exclusion from society (Barton, 1996). However, after the emergence of the Coalition Government, this rhetoric towards disability was reported as taking a darker tone. The newer version, which Valentine and Harris (2014)

deem the “demonization of dependency,” questions the deservedness of disabled people to receive benefits and other socio-economic supports. The framing of this issue conveys that it is not illness, impairment, disability or discrimination that keeps disabled people from employment, rather it constructs a narrative that disabled people simply do not wish to take responsibility for their own lives and to fulfill their duty to contribute to society. Integrated into this argument is that *non-disabled* people are being mistreated. They are framed as good, hard-working citizens, who take personal responsibility for the success of the country, while disabled people are framed as unfairly receiving special treatment from the state. This framing concludes that non-disabled are justified in their prejudices against disabled people because, based on these presuppositions, disabled people have perpetuated injustices against them (Valentine and Harris, 2014).

The expansion of this narrative by the UK coalition government can be seen in its introduction of austerity in 2010 and through the rhetoric it utilized to justify it. “Austerity is a form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices, and public spending to restore competitiveness, which is ‘supposedly’ best achieved by cutting state’s budget, debts, and deficits” (Blyth, 2015, p. 2). One of the ways the government sought to apply this austerity and to lessen public spending, was to target the social benefits disabled people receive.

But how was the populace convinced that it was okay to stop spending monies on a population often categorized as vulnerable? It began in 2010 with what Clark and Newman called the “alchemy of austerity,” an approach that allowed politicians to lay the foundation for government retrenchment with the consent of its population (Clarke and Newman, 2012). Like most quality campaigns of consent, the coalition government’s efforts began with discourses that protected themselves and their interests. The government’s approach was not

just about blame avoidance for bailing out the UK banks, it was also about blaming people for the financial hole that resulted from them doing so. This was done through “a reworking that has focused on the unwieldy and expensive welfare state and public sector, rather than high-risk strategies of banks, as the root cause of the crisis” (Clarke and Newman, 2012, p. 299).

During this time the British Attitude Survey reported that public opinion was shifting away from the belief that government should attempt to deliver a more equal society through income redistribution. This was due largely in part to incorrect inferences being made by the public about fraud, which had been supported by general misinformation, both of which contributed to unfavorable public opinions about those on benefits. This included the lowest public support ever previously seen for increasing government spending on disabled people who cannot work. As an example, in 1998, of those who responded, 74% wanted to see more spending on benefits for disabled people who cannot work. By 2011, this number had steadily dropped to 53%. The same report showed other changes in perceptions well. This included the highest response on record of people agreeing that benefits are too high and discourage work (62%) and the lowest number of respondents agreeing that benefits are too low and causing hardship (19%) (NatCen, 2011). People in the population also believed that benefit fraud ranged between 50% and 70% (Briant et al., 2011), an estimate exponentially higher than the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) actual figure of 0.7% (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012). This may have contributed to politicians feeling secure in their approach to targeting those previously deemed as warranting support.

These incorrect beliefs about welfare fraud were not challenged as inaccurate by politicians. Instead, a greater emphasis was placed upon the welfare state as the cause of the UK’s financial woes. The coalition government’s prime minister at the time, David Cameron,

gave numerous speeches which almost always focused on the topic of personal responsibility. As just one of the numerous examples, in his presentation at the Conservative Party conference in 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron stressed that the nation's future would be determined by individual responsibility and by how much effort was given by responsible individuals to hold to account those whom they deemed as irresponsible in their actions (Cameron, 2010).

Cameron's speech specified that the state of the nation "is not just determined by the government and those who run it. It is determined by millions of individual actions – by what each of us do and what we choose not to do," adding later, "your country needs you" (Cameron, 2010). Cameron stated that this was to be a large national transition "from state power to people power. From unchecked individualism to national unity and purpose." In this discourse, he added that success would come from building a nation "of doers and go-getters, where people step forward not sit back, where people come together to make life better ... A country defined not by what we consume but by what we contribute" (Cameron, 2010). This rhetoric was a calling for a cut in spending and a focus on fairness. One part of this speech added that,

"Fairness isn't just about who gets help from the state. The other part of the equation is who gives that help, through their taxes. Taking more money from the man who goes out to work long hours each day so the family next door can go on living a life on benefits without working – is that fair? Fairness means giving people what they deserve – and what people deserve depends on how they behave. If you really cannot work, we'll look after you. But if you can work, but refuse to work, we will not let you live off the hard work of others."

This part of the speech is important. It emphasizes the redrawing of the lines of who is

and who is not deserving of disability benefits (Goodley, 2014). It categorizes only those who are in “critical condition” or who “need it most” as in need of resources (Un.org, 2016, p. 11) and as a result, from 2011 to 2013, this redrawing of boundaries between those deserving and undeserving of benefits led to a large increase of benefit sanctioning of those deemed as not seeking work in the appropriate manner, a measure that correlated with a steep increase in those requiring emergency supplies from food banks and the possible harming of people’s health (Loopstra et al., 2018).

The population appeared to be in support of these actions. This change in public attitudes was different from those seen following recessions in the past. Previously, the struggles of friends, neighbors, and others in need influenced people’s attitudes making them more sympathetic towards the needs of others. This was no longer the case. What appears to have backed the change in these expected responses was the role of political parties and their positions on welfare. This is in part because, as stated in the NatCen report, when people trust their party and its viewpoints, they can be expected to adopt and replicate them when asked about their own views (NatCen, 2011). The same report also suspected that, “recent political and media debate about the government's welfare reforms - including claims that large numbers of welfare recipients do not really deserve their payments - will have influenced attitudes, inclining people to be less supportive of benefits and those who receive them.”

While the use of this rhetoric by politicians such as Cameron was harmful, what was equally destructive was their requests for UK citizens to police the validity of the impairments of disabled people. In the same speech discussed previously, Cameron stated that to solve the social problems he identified, and to see positive social changes throughout the nation, citizens should not look to the government for too much help. Instead, he issued a “call to arms” from those who would “seize the opportunity,” who would “step up and own

it” and who would become “more powerful people.” He wanted them to focus on internalizing the “big society spirit,” a portion of which was to go out and identify government waste. Cameron stated that a part of this big society spirit meant, “facing up to this generation’s debts, not shirking responsibility” and placing the blame not just on Labour for this occurring but also upon those, “sitting on their sofas waiting for their benefits” (Cameron, 2010). This truly was a call for the populace to: locate those they felt were benefit cheats; to shame them; to shun them; to be prejudicial against them; to stigmatize them.

The Media Carries the UK Governments Disability Stigma to the Masses

“National governments and their associated executive agencies and arms length bodies are crucial influencers over both the tone and the content of news since they play a dominant role as a prolific source of news and as co-producers of political narratives” (Garland, 2018, p. 334).

The media was quick to latch onto the UK governments’ narratives and to expand them. This is supported by research from Briant, Watson and Philo whose research compared and contrasted UK media coverage of disability in 2004-2005 and 2010-2011. Their conclusion was that the way the UK newspapers reported on disability significantly changed between these two periods. They also stated that this coverage “was less sympathetic and there was an increase in articles that focused on disability benefit and fraud, and an increase in the use of pejorative language to describe disabled people. An audience reception study suggests that this coverage is having an impact on the way that people think about disabled people” (Briant, Watson and Philo, 2013, p. 874).

The researcher’s data tied these changes back to media coverage that was much more politicized than seen previously and that was highly reflective of the Coalition Government’s agenda. This coverage framed disabled people as a burden of the state and whose access to

disability benefits was a problem (Briant, Watson and Philo, 2013). For example:

“The Sun declared ‘war on benefit scroungers’, saying: ‘They cannot be bothered to find a job or they claim to be sick when they are perfectly capable of work because they prefer to sit at home watching wide-screen TVs -paid for by you’ (Sun, 2010). This was followed, a couple of weeks later by the Express warning that ‘scroungers who play the benefits system to milk incapacity benefit’ will be put back on the dole and forced out to work’ (Express, 2010)” (Quarmby, 2013, p. 70).

The Daily Mail ran the headline “State-funded idleness: 1.5m are spending fifth Christmas in a row on sick benefits,” and a story that stated that:

“The young are becoming accustomed to relying on benefits...the system needs radical overhaul...as evidence that the Coalition is right to demand incapacity claimants undergo a medical assessment to see whether they can work” (Shipman, 2010).

The government and media’s key argument was rooted in a belief that disabled people were getting free money from the government, that disabled people felt benefits were preferable to employment and that “these people” are abusing the system because the benefits are “overly generous” (Lindsay and Houston, 2013, p. 4).

Other media platforms, such as television, latched onto this narrative and launched shows that framed disabled people as “scroungers” and “skivers.” One such show was *Benefits Street*. Launched in 2014, the show was deemed by Jensen (2014) to be a part of an emerging genre of television known as “poverty porn.”

But once again, this was not a naturally occurring media event. It followed the lead from other media forms whose origin was the UK government’s narrative. For instance, the Sun’s “beat the cheat” campaign, which it deemed as a “crusade” that all patriotic Brits

should participate in (Dunn, 2012), was launched in 2012. Its campaign, which claimed there were systemic issues of fraud in the benefits system, was launched following the UK government's launch of its own campaign calling on citizens to "report a benefit thief" (Department for Work and Pensions, 2011).

After the launch of the government's campaign that encouraged people to report those, whom they felt were possibly fraudulently claiming benefits, six large disability charities reported to the UK Parliament that they had seen a large increase in resentful treatment targeting disabled people. They stated that while the media did play an inflammatory role by sharing the narrative that disabled people were 'scroungers' and 'fakers', it was the government's focus on alleged fraud by disabled people that was fueling the issue. The charities also warned that these increased hostilities could potentially result in hate crimes against disabled people (Pilkington, 2012) and from 2011 through 2015 the number of recorded hate crimes against disabled people in England and Wales increased from 1,748 to 3,629 (a 107.6% increase) (GOV.UK, 2018).

Despite these increases, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Fraud and Error Service did not end this campaign but rather relaunched it in 2014. The older and newer campaigns both encourage people to, "Report someone you think is committing benefit fraud," either by using an anonymous form on their website or by calling the National Benefit Fraud Hotline (NBFH) (GOV.UK, 2015). However, the newer campaign dropped the blatant accusation of thievery and added a secondary request aimed at those on benefits. It asked them to report if they have obtained a new job to report it to the DWP. It kept the portion of the campaign which told the public that, "if you know someone claiming benefits who shouldn't be, call us," in conjunction with the line, "when you report benefit fraud, we investigate it" (GOV.UK, 2014).

The rhetoric that disabled people represent, “the welfare-dependent individual passively reliant upon social security payments, draining the public coffers, unprepared to do a day’s hard work,” (Goodley, 2014, p. 9) was effective in getting neighbor to report on neighbor and thousands of calls were made. Over the financial years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017, there were 332,850 cases closed that resulted from members of the public who had reported fraud. Of these, 287,950 were shown not to have evidence to validate the claims of fraud they received. These numbers reflect that 87% of those cases reported were invalid (Cowburn, 2018). The number of the remaining 13% that was also determined to be non-fraudulent, after further investigation was conducted, is not known nor is the cost estimate for the monies dedicated to investigating these calls and cases.

Disabled People’s Recognition of the Government’s Role in Spreading Stigma

Interviewees identified that the rhetoric that emerges from the government and through the media points the finger at the “disability cheat,” “the scrounger,” and the “skiver.” They know that they were being presented as people who abuse the welfare state, rob the populace, and harm the country. They also recognized that this framing ignores that their current vulnerabilities (e.g., unemployment, undereducation, and poverty) are a direct result of government discriminatory policies. However, they felt disempowered to challenge these stereotypes, especially when powerful bodies were using stereotypes and fears to imbue disabled peoples’ vulnerabilities with “normative assumptions about deservingness, deviance, and deficit” (Emmel, 2017, p. 456).

In talking with interviewees, their interpretations of the media outlets’ role in spreading negative narratives about disabled people were made clear. They said:

“If you read The Sun, I won’t even say the newspaper The Sun. The collection of words, The Sun or the Daily Mail, that’s kind of what you get, ‘oh benefit cheats

this, that and the other thing' ... it's almost then straight away, everyone was a benefit cheat." – Alpha

"Media representation is probably a big problem. I think that they can paint a picture that makes it really hard for people to understand life with a disability, to understand what it is to be seeking work, or to be homeless, or any of those things...the Daily Mail says, that 'these people' are getting all this money and they shouldn't be getting it." – Omicron

"The media don't help, the only portrayal of disabled is either 'oh my goodness, aren't they so brave and courageous and sporty' or 'aren't they all spongers taking all our money and asking for so much money? what do they spend this money on? it's for the nice TV' ...it's the media and the current government and their whole rhetoric around disability and taking people off benefit, and then where do you put them, and making them feel like crap, and making them feel like they have to justify the fact that they have a disability and it's as bad as they say; it's quite toxic." – Gamma

However, it is not just print media that is cited. Interviewees recognized that television plays a large role in the spread of stigma as well.

"There was a programme – I was really disgusted with it at the time – It was about a couple who were blind, and they had kids, now the kids were sighted, but the couple basically was just throwing bread on the floor, and then the children were coming in and sort of picking that up and eating that. Now the couple were also alcoholics, and to them obviously, you know their main concern was getting money for the next drink ... To me, that would have greatly set back people's perception of someone that's blind. They just look at that and go, 'well there you

are, that's all that they can do type of thing.'" – Eta

"Did you know that there was a programme called Benefit Street or some shit like that? It was about a street where there was a lot of people on benefits on it and it really just followed them round, and it showed the worst possible side. So, everyone assumes that's what everybody's like." – Alpha

"If they're commenting about somebody in the media, like the TV shows that have all come out about disability – you know Benefits Street and all the rest – you ask them, 'Well who do you know in your life who does that?' and they'll say 'Oh I don't know anybody like that'. You know the person in their family who's receiving disability living allowance or PIP or whatever, now you know they deserve it, but everybody else they don't. I don't know if it's just, are we being made to hate each other for a particular reason or is that just what we do, I've no idea." – Gamma

But, once again, it is not the media alone that is bringing these negative stereotypes and the resulting stigma to fruition. As Gamma stated above, "it's the media *and the current government* (emphasis added) and their whole rhetoric around disability and taking people off benefit." This was acknowledged by Alpha as well who stated, "it doesn't help when you have government officials or shadow government officials coming out and saying things like disabled people should be paid less." It is important to note here that interviewees identify that the government, which has been mandated with ensuring their equality, is identified by this marginalized group as working against their best interests. Walker et al. have reported, that in Britain especially, the shame of poverty, and subsequently, disability was spread through the mass media. They found that "British respondents felt disenfranchised, pilloried by the media as being 'workshy' or 'scroungers' and targeted by politicians, government, by

'them', with welfare cuts and 'beat the benefit cheats' campaigns" (Walker et al., 2013, p. 228). This was supported by interviewees for this project who added that these actions negatively impacted their lives.

The Fallout of Government-Supported Stigma

The sweeping dedication to austerity by the coalition government, and other governments within the UK, since 2010 has had substantial impacts on disabled people by increasing poverty and intensifying social inequality (Mattheys, 2015). There has also been a large increase in hate crimes against disabled people and remains an issue that is continuously underreported (UK Independent Mechanism, 2018).

“About 2 days ago, I was called a ‘spastic,’ a ‘fucking spastic’ for that matter, in that gym back there. And I always think ‘aw what a tit,’ but that’s a hate crime, but it never really registered with me until I kind of had a bit of thought. You kind of go, ‘well you know what, he’s a fucking arse,’ but that’s me. What about if he kind of said it to somebody who really had an issue?” –
Alpha

Alpha’s conveyance of experience supports Hoong-Sin’s findings that “disabled people’s interpretations of what constitutes a ‘hate crime’ can lead them to downplay the ‘everyday’ experiences” through the “wrong ‘labelling’ of incidents” and that this “can exacerbate the under-reporting [of hate crime] by encouraging the victim to change their behaviour instead of taking action and reporting incidence to police” (Hoong-Sin, 2013 p.156). This provides good insight into how a government’s rhetoric, and the resulting social stigma that results from it, can place the impetus of social change, not on the system creating the oppression, but rather within those being oppressed. In cases of social abuse, disabled people may seek safety through social isolation (Gov.uk, 2021). This can mean that the

government's efforts to shame disabled people into work to reduce benefits can have a reverse effect by distancing disabled people even further from the labor market and employment.

Instead of seeking employment to remedy the scrounger narrative against them, this hate, created through social narratives produced by the government and administered through the populace, serves only to harm disabled people. This is supported by (1) Brookes' work which shows that, "through the constant feed of aggression which wears the disabled person down" (Brookes, 2013 p.130); (2) by Thomas who found that even when "these acts of hostility against a disabled person may not amount to crime ... [they] nevertheless hurt psychologically and emotionally" (Thomas, 2013 p.136); and (3) by Pérez-Garín et al. who found that, "although there are a few studies examining the emotional reactions of people with disabilities to stigma, all of them (qualitative and quantitative) agree that most emotional consequences of feeling stigma include anger" (Pérez-Garín et al., 2018 p.2). None of these reactions has been shown to be productive in encouraging disabled people to seek employment, to get off benefits, or to want to spend more time with others in society.

Instead, what disabled people have reported is that concerns about other people's views have stopped them from seeking education (38%), relaxing (71%), or going outside (62%) at least 'some of the time'. In addition, 51% of disabled people report that concerns about other people's views of them have stopped them from working. However, it is not others' views alone that can stop disabled people's inclusion into society. It is the actions that can stem from these perceptions. For instance, 54% of disabled people and 42% of carers worry about being insulted or harassed while in the street or any other public space at least 'some of the time' (UK Cabinet Office, 2021). This supports that "the attitudes and behaviour of non-disabled people are a major factor in the extent to which disabled people are isolated

or integrated into networks or communities” (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 177) and how the non-disabled can perpetuate a stigma against disabled people that involves them being labelled, stereotyped, separated from society and discriminated against because the stigmatizers have access to social, political, and/or economic power (Whittle et al., 2017 p. 182) that disabled people do not possess. This article adds that this can be done in purposeful ways through the use of a discriminatory model of change.

Conclusion

In this article, the actions of the UK government were discussed. The motivations and process it used to lessen government benefits for disabled people were illustrated. The argument was made that the UK Government instituted a new model of oppression called the Personal Tragedy Model. This model was based on the personal theory of disability. This theory postulates that disabled people warrant pity and charity because they have had the misfortune to be born with or acquire a disability. As conveyed the personal tragedy model took this a step further. It removes the pity and charity portion and replaces it with the belief that disabled people deserve little assistance as it is not social barriers but rather a disabled person’s own moral failings that lead to their dependency on benefits. The UK’s government supported and emphasized this view through the creation of a campaign of consent that used information on public attitudes to create a socially acceptable narrative that would allow the government to implement austerity initiatives that harmed disabled people. This harm was demonstrated through feedback from disabled able people who shared the impact these campaigns have had upon their inclusion into society and the negative treatment they received from fellow citizens following its proliferation. Understanding how powerful bodies’ actions can have long-lasting impacts on stigma, social exclusion and abuse should remain at the forefront of sociology and disability studies. Only by understanding how this

manipulation is performed can useful models and methods be developed for counteracting them. The personal tragedy model of disability is just one of these models.

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