Nobody becomes stigmatised ‘all at once’: An interactionist account of stigma on a modernist council estate

Stephen Hicks
School of Health Sciences, University of Manchester, UK

Camilla Lewis
School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University, UK

Abstract
This article examines how residents experience and account for stigma at Claremont Court, a modernist social housing scheme built in Edinburgh in the early 1960s. Although listed as having special architectural interest, the building has been subject to disinvestment and has a mix of residents, including council and private renters as well as owner-occupiers. This article explores micro-distinctions between residents, showing how the categories ‘stigmatiser’ and ‘stigmatised’ are not as rigid as we might expect. It then considers stigma associated not with residents but, rather, the building itself, and argues that closer attention to the relationship between the material and social is required in order to understand residents’ complex articulations of belonging. Finally, residents’ views on dirt and rubbish are explored, showing how they use these signifiers of stigma to reveal concerns about shame and respectability. Responding to the call from this journal for more sociological understandings of stigma, this article argues that interactionist approaches offer an important alternative, one that highlights how stigma is negotiated, resisted and apportioned in everyday life. This perspective reveals residents’ practices in interaction with the material environment, as well as the ways in which stigmatisation processes work simultaneously in upward and downward directions, rather than in a unidirectional way.

Keywords
belonging, community, interactionist sociology, social housing, stigma

Corresponding author:
Stephen Hicks, School of Health Sciences, University of Manchester, Jean McFarlane Building, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.
Email: stephen.hicks@manchester.ac.uk
**Introduction**

A growing body of work within the social sciences draws attention to processes by which those who live in social housing are subject to stigmatisation (Baxter, 2017; Palmer et al., 2004; Roberts, 2017; Thoburn, 2018). These studies highlight the destructive effects of practices which denigrate estates and their residents and reveal how, within neoliberal policies of ‘austerity’, disinvestment in the welfare state has been obscured by moralising discourses about poorer people. Sociological research on belonging reveals how people who live in stigmatised places oppose these narratives for a number of reasons, including pride in their area, objection to negative portrayal by others and an enduring sense of community. Jensen and Christensen’s study of Aalborg East, for example, challenges ‘the assumption that underprivileged people as a general principle internalize or incorporate the degrading gaze of the dominant’ (2012, p. 90). However, social housing residents also highlight the effects of stigma, commenting on how neighbourhood representation impacts upon how they are seen by others (August, 2014; Garbin & Millington, 2012).

Yet, ‘stigma’ is a contested concept (Parker & Aggleton, 2003; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015; Tyler, 2020) and one that is variously theorised. In a special edition of this journal (Vol. 66, Issue 4), for example, Tyler and Slater called for a more ‘thoroughly sociological understanding of stigma’ (2018a, p. 727), since most studies treat it merely as a ‘problem of social norms that can be challenged and alleviated’ (2018b, p. 11). Tyler has also suggested that an understanding of stigma as ‘embedded within the social relations of capitalism, and as a form of power entangled with histories of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy’ is needed, since much writing focuses only on ‘individual experiences . . . in ways that occlude an understanding of stigma as a material force, a structural and structuring form of power’ (2020, pp. 8–9).

Our article offers a response to Tyler and Slater’s important collection, *The Sociology of Stigma* (2018b), drawing upon interactionist theory (Dennis et al., 2013; Plummer, 1975). Via a detailed, ethnographic study of the experiences and practices of residents of a 1960s Edinburgh housing scheme, we propose that stigma is something of a resource taken up and used in order to subjectify not only the self but others and, further, that it is negotiated, resisted and apportioned in everyday life by residents. Tyler and Slater are critical of interactionism because of its ‘tendency to over-state individual agency in terms of people’s ability to influence or determine their own fates’ (2018b, p. 12). Acknowledging that the ‘best examples of social interactionist work on stigma reveal not only how stigma is (re)produced within everyday interactions, but how[,] what and who is stigmatised transforms across time and place’ (2018b, p. 12), they remain cautious about its limitations, especially what they perceive to be a failure ‘to take into account structural and structuring factors’ (2018b, p. 13).

Our argument is, instead, that close attention to what might be thought of as micro-level interactions within a community are vital, not only because they indicate the ways in which stigma is both produced and maintained, but also because they show how people may take on and reproduce wider, powerful discourses concerning, for example, undeserving welfare recipients. Later in this article, we show how some residents make such distinctions, claiming that those who require social welfare ‘bring down’ the tone of
the scheme/estate. And it is here that attention to local ‘social norms’ is crucial, since these are in part, we argue, derived from powerful discourses of the neoliberal state, which create hierarchies between persons via stigmatisation of those who most require state support. Such ethnographic concern with local practices is therefore focused on both the micro and the macro simultaneously, since what may appear to be ‘merely’ everyday concerns of residents actually draw upon and rework structural ones. We therefore argue that work on stigma must not only ‘study up’, or look towards powerful state forces, but should also take a multidimensional approach which focuses on everyday interactions between individuals.

Paton’s study of stigma and redevelopment during the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games, for example, argues for “gazing up”, rather than “gazing down”, that is, looking at the role of the stigmatisers . . . and not the stigmatised’ (2018, p. 921). Echoing this, Tyler notes that ‘looking up’ is important in work on stigma because this ‘allows us to ascertain how [it] is designed, crafted and activated to govern populations . . . as state-led stigma campaigns . . . cascade into our everyday interactions’ (2020, p. 20). For us, however, this ‘stigmatisers versus stigmatised’ position is rather limiting as, in our study, we rarely found that scheme residents occupied only one such position. Actually, they used the resource of stigma to take up both, as we shall demonstrate. Indeed, in other studies, such as Toyoki and Brown’s research in Helsinki Prison, stigmatised identities were even used positively as ‘badges of honour’ at times, and these authors go on to remind us that ‘stigmatized identities are not appropriately regarded as passive, neutral, disinterested or impartial, or rendered in simplistic terms as “functional/dysfunctional” or “positive/negative”, but are, rather, embedded in relations of, and suffused with, power’ (2014, p. 729). In looking closely at the local production of stigma, we shall argue that residents expressed views about class conflict, about social welfare ‘dependency’ and the role of ‘the council’ in maintaining social housing schemes. These indicate not only residents’ concerns about wider, structural issues, such as housing tenure and maintenance, the need for social services, and disinvestment in the welfare state, but also demonstrate how powerful discourses are drawn upon to make such distinctions.

Thus, in taking an interactionist approach, we wish to avoid what might be seen as something of a top-down, determinist account: in other words, seeing the state as producing stigma and imposing this on those with less power. This does not mean that we disagree with Tyler and Slater’s argument for attention to stigma’s structural aspects but, as Dennis et al. have noted, interactionists ‘reject the notion of structural determinism . . . [T]hat does not mean that they reject the notion of social structure. Structures exist, but – for the symbolic interactionists – they are the product of human behaviour, and have no existence separate from that behaviour’ (2013, p. 22). So, our argument is that stigma is something of a local resource to do things with – to take up or attribute subjectivities, to make distinctions between persons or places, to reflect upon and even object to the role of the state – rather than being just a ‘label’ that some people are stuck with or a powerful mode for organising inequality. And this is vital because part of the process of challenging stigma must involve attention to the ways in which it is resisted or subverted in the everyday.

In this article, before presenting cases from our study of residents of the Edinburgh housing scheme, we first explain the context of the project, our methods and theoretical
perspective drawn from interactionism. Our analysis then goes on to focus on three inter-related themes: we explore micro-distinctions between residents, showing how the categories ‘stigmatiser’ and ‘stigmatised’ are not as rigid as we might expect. We then consider stigma associated not with residents but, rather, the building itself, and we argue that closer attention to the relationship between the material and social is required in order to understand residents’ complex articulations of belonging. Finally, we explore residents’ views on dirt and rubbish, and how they use these signifiers of stigma to reveal concerns about shame and respectability. To conclude, we suggest that an interactionist approach to stigma allows for an exploration of the contradictory ways in which it plays out in the everyday lives of residents, focusing on its negotiation, resistance and apportionment within proximate relations between persons, buildings and environments.

The background to this article: The project, methods and approach

Our work adds to a small number of studies which have turned to explore residents’ experiences of modernist or high-rise buildings and estates (Baxter, 2017; Glendinning, 2008; Jacobs et al., 2008; Roberts, 2017; Thoburn, 2018). In dominant media accounts, such post-war housing has been labelled a ‘failure’ and associated with fragmented communities, antisocial behaviour and urban decline. The idea of the ‘concrete monstrosity’ (Thoburn, 2018, p. 613) has been used to assign stigma, yet the voices of estate residents are usually absent from debates about their lived experiences of the buildings they occupy. Where they have been included, residents paint a far more complicated picture of belonging. However, it may also be worth pointing out that most of this attention has focused on a number of high-profile, larger scale or high-rise examples (such as Robin Hood Gardens, the Aylesbury Estate and Balfron Tower in London or Cables Wynd House in Edinburgh), rather than lesser known, mid-rise estates.

Our project focuses on Claremont Court, designed by Basil Spence & Partners, which was commissioned by the City and Royal Burgh of Edinburgh’s 1957 Development Plan and is situated just north of the New Town. Claremont Court is a relatively modest, low-rise housing scheme, which features original designs including radical layouts that depart from the expected spatial structure of the working and middle-class home. Via open-plan living, landscaped courtyards, open-access decks, balconies overlooking shared gardens, communal laundries, drying greens and pram stores, Spence & Partners hoped to produce a scheme both functional and ‘classless’, encouraging a better way of life, including social interaction between neighbours (Costa Santos, 2019; Costa Santos & Bertolino, 2018).

Like many other post-war buildings, Claremont Court has suffered from long-term disinvestment. Yet, the building was also listed in 2011 by Historic Environment Scotland, meaning that it is registered as having special architectural interest representative of a particular period or style. Originally a local authority housing scheme, Claremont Court today is socially mixed, with residents separated equally between council tenants, private renters and owner-occupiers (Costa Santos et al., 2018). According to the Scottish Government’s Index of Multiple Deprivation (2016), it is located in one of the fourth
most economically and socially deprived areas of the country by decile, with its housing stock ranking amongst the ‘most deprived’. Claremont Court therefore has a socio-economically mixed population and a variety of housing sizes, designs and tenures.

This article draws on research from an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded, interdisciplinary project which involved a team of social scientists and architects. The aim of the research was to explore residents’ sense of belonging and community at Claremont Court. Here, we focus specifically on the social science side of the project and our use of semi-structured and walk-along interviews. The data derive from three months of fieldwork conducted over the summer of 2016. Seventeen residents took part in the study: three couples were interviewed together and the remaining 11 people individually. All interviews were conducted in participants’ homes or, alternatively, in a place where they felt comfortable, such as the communal areas of the Court or a workplace.

Participants were also invited to take part in a follow-up walking tour of the Court, its environs and their homes (Lewis et al., 2018) and seven of these ‘go-alongs’ (Kusenbach, 2003) were conducted. Here, immersion in situ was vital, as the walking interviews prompted close attention to residents’ interactions with each other, the building and environment. The opening up of a vista, for example, elicited recollections about the past or about changes in the area, which allowed for the emergence of reflections on stigma to unfold ‘at street-level . . . offering novel perspectives and prompting different questions’ (Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017, p. 4). Some of these observations, such as how residents responded to the changing skyline, redevelopment of the area or the ‘feel’ of the different blocks at the Court, might not have emerged unless they were formulated with the researchers moving through the site. In this sense, our methods allowed us to observe some residents’ interactions as they unfolded.

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then thematically analysed using a qualitative software package. The participants were provided with information about the project, their written consent sought and researchers’ details given for follow-up questions. In addition, the project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Northumbria. Because the site was chosen specifically for the architectural ethos behind its design, participants were made aware that the Court would be referred to by its real name, but pseudonyms have been used and, in some cases, identities disguised to protect anonymity.

Our approach in this article is influenced by Plummer’s Sexual Stigma, which emphasises that meanings between persons are ‘constantly being modified and constructed through interaction’ (1975, p. 13). His account suggests that stigmatising ‘deviance’, however, is not something merely defined by the reactions of powerful ‘control agents’ (1975, p. 201). Rather, although this is important, ‘self-reaction’ (1975, p. 22), or the ways in which deviant categories may be self-defined, is vital. This is necessary for our analysis because we are interested not only in whether and how residents take on stigma but also in how they use it – including, for example, their identification of concerns to do with wider, state power or actions. Plummer’s phrase, nobody ‘becomes deviant “at all once”’ (1975, p. 27), is also crucial for our argument, since this suggests that deviance is not something imposed, taken on and fixed at one point in time. As Vassenden and Lie note in their study of Norwegian social housing, residents’ responses regarding stigma are ‘both fluid and characterised by individual variation’ (2013, p. 86). In short, stigma
is less an imposed label and more of a resource that may be *negotiated, resisted and apportioned*, even though aspects of those processes may, as Tyler notes, reinforce ‘existing social hierarchies’ (2020, p. 27). Following Plummer, we argue that analysis of stigma should examine reactions to attributions of deviance *in situ*, focusing on the ‘tacit, shared understandings’ that occur within interactions (1975, p. 51), which is of course as much a methodological as theoretical point.

**Micro-distinctions, stigma and place**

Whereas Claremont Court may appear, from the outside, to be a monolithic ensemble, inhabitants drew on their experiences to highlight contrasting elements or ‘micro territories’ (Garbin & Millington, 2012, p. 2080). As with Tersteeg and Pinkster’s (2016) study of a mixed tenure complex in Amsterdam, residents made distinctions between particular dwellings and neighbours, especially those they associated with ‘antisocial behaviour’. For example, Neil, an owner-occupier in his forties who lived with his family in a maisonette, expressed a sense of discomfort about some residents. In an interview, he explained:

> I definitely don’t believe that, I’m not a, not a kind of ‘not in my back yard’ type of person. I’m quite happy that, you know, I actually quite like the idea of living in a mixed tenure building, I thought that was quite a nice thing . . . but that’s just not, you know, you shouldn’t be dealing drugs from a council owned property and you shouldn’t be leaving syringes on the ground and you shouldn’t be intimidating people. I think if that’s what you’re doing you shouldn’t, you know, that’s not the right type of accommodation for you. So, that’s not what you should be doing in a community.

Neil’s account incorporates the management of identities (Goffman, 1990), those of both the self and the ‘other’. He is simultaneously arguing against being positioned as an insufficiently tolerant kind of person (the stigma associated with the ‘not in my back yard’ type) yet, at the same time, raises concerns about other residents and practices, particularly those focused on drug use. This example illustrates how he is both resisting stigma and, yet, allocating it at the same time. But, as van Eijk (2013) has also noted, residents are careful about judging those they deem less fortunate, in part because this creates the danger of being seen as immoral, and so Neil is keen to assert that he ‘quite like[s] the idea of living in a mixed tenure building’.

Neil’s comments also show how micro-distinctions between residents are about macro concerns, such as social welfare and the state. His emphasis on the importance of ‘mixed tenure’ buildings highlights his ongoing support for the provision of social housing. In discussing drugs paraphernalia, he indicates an understanding of welfare problems – that some people may need support concerning drug use – and also a desire for the safety of residents. Yet, at the same time, Neil’s remarks about ‘council owned property’ demonstrate concerns not only about individual responsibility, but also about the lack of appropriate supported accommodation for drug users. Still, he is also saying that drug dealers/users should not be living in ‘his’ community, a point that indicates the problematic dynamics of norm formulation in stigmatisation, or what Tyler refers to as
the taking up of tacit positions which ‘obfuscate and naturalise ... power’ (2020, p. 110). As in Watt’s study of social housing in Camden, cuts to welfare services are often highlighted as a reason for poor social relations between neighbours, yet the need to maintain ‘a sense of respectability allow[s] ... tenants to symbolically distance themselves from those low-status others who also happen ... to share the same physical space as themselves’ (2006, p. 794).

Michael, a man in his thirties who lived with his elderly mother in a rented council property, also expressed discomfort with some of the behaviour of other residents. During a walking tour of the scheme, he remembered in nostalgic terms how, when he first moved to the court as a boy, all of the children would play out together and he described the Court as a friendly place, where neighbours socialised. However, Michael felt that, as he grew up, this sense of community declined. Now, ‘nobody really talks to each other’, he said. His account highlighted social problems, including drugs, violence and stealing, and he explained how ‘undesirables’ sometimes discarded used syringes, which brought the ‘tone’ down. He was also annoyed about ‘outsiders’ coming into the Court, particularly those who let their dogs ‘do their business’ on the grass. In these discussions, Michael objected to Claremont Court as a ‘dumping ground’, drawing upon symbolic aspects of stigma, such as various forms of waste. Yet, his claims about respectability also resisted stigma, something that he achieved through his strong sense of attachment to the Court. Michael explained that, although the flats may not be the ‘nicest looking ... compared to other places’, he always looked forward to coming back to the Court, adding, ‘I’d find it quite hard to move away from here ... This is home.’

Our interview with Muriel, an owner-occupier in her sixties, revealed that, when she first looked around, she did not like the 1960s style of Claremont Court and thought the flats looked quite ‘slummy’, ‘dilapidated’ and ‘unloved’. However, she specifically mentioned affordability as a reason for buying at Claremont Court and said that, since moving in, she had radically altered her initial concerns about the look of the scheme. In part, this was because her experiences of living in her flat were very different from seeing it from the outside (‘I just knew that I could live here’). Muriel had renovated her flat and had begun to appreciate the communal spaces of the building, remarking that the shape was ‘really pleasing’. These comments reveal the affective qualities of stigma, showing how a dwelling may contain both comforting and distressing atmospheric qualities at the same time.

Asked whether she felt that she belonged to the Court, however, Muriel said that did not because she felt that there was a ‘council versus tenant versus homeowner tension’. In part, this comment reflects the stigmatisation of renters that sometimes happened at the Court. Home-owners, such as Muriel, drew a sense of identity from their tenure, and she commented that her flat ‘feels like me ... it’s my flat, I’m just going to do it the way I want it’. However, local authority tenants also took great pride in their homes, adding personal touches to balconies and their interior spaces. Robert, a single man who rented his maisonette from the council, had an immaculately decorated flat which he showed us around with great satisfaction. So, it is likely that comments such as Muriel’s are something of an attempt to create some distance from renters, but also from the stigma associated with a building suffering from overall neglect and a relatively poor status, one assigned to many modernist estates (Roberts, 2017; Thoburn, 2018). Although Muriel
was one of a group of newer residents interested in the modernist aesthetic of Spence’s design, the scheme overall was not subject to the level of ‘middle-class appropriation’ (Thoburn, 2018, p. 616) or expropriation in evidence elsewhere (e.g. see Orazi, 2015).

A theme which ran throughout many of the interviews with long-term residents was how the population, and therefore neighbourly relations, had changed substantially due to the sale of local authority flats and houses under the ‘Right to Buy’ scheme. This policy was introduced by the UK Government in 1980 but was ended in Scotland in 2016, in order to protect depleted social housing stock from private sale. For example, Kevin, who had bought a maisonette 20 years before but had grown up in a council owned tenement, described in interview how, when he first lived at the Court, there was a more stable population:

The nature of their absentee landlords and quite sort of quick, or overturning of new tenants, if you like, that’s probably not the way to express it . . . for a year there’s some young students and maybe say it’d be different, so there’s no kind of, there’s no incentive really to be part of that community ’cause you just live in a flat, investment, belongs to someone else, it’s not theirs.

For Kevin, changing tenures had resulted in more short-term lets and, therefore, a more transient population, which he perceived to be less invested in the upkeep of communal areas and also the community at Claremont Court. These concerns feature in other studies too (Arthurson, 2010; Vassenden & Lie, 2013), yet Kevin’s interview also demonstrated how distinctions between stigmatisers and stigmatised were flexible and related to the type of ‘investment’ that residents saw as significant. It was ‘absentee landlords’ that provoked the most ire, since they were seen as interested only in making money via rent and ‘investment’ in property.

**Lived experiences of the building**

Our findings suggest that, at Claremont Court, it is not only residents who are stigmatised, but also the building. For this reason, closer attention to the relationship between the material and the social is required in order to understand residents’ complex articulations of stigma and belonging. All of our interviewees commented on how the Court stands out because of its 1960s, modernist aesthetic that contrasts markedly with the surrounding area, which is made up of Georgian terraces, tenements, semi-detached and terraced local authority housing stock. Residents attributed different meanings to the physical appearance of the Court, with Julie, a social housing tenant in her fifties, noting in an interview:

I don’t like things that stand out. I like things to play it down hence the reasoning why I say it’s like Claremont Court has just been dumped at the end of the road and I feel that’s how it is.

Julie’s response shows a clear sense of anxiety about the appearance of the building, and her use of the word ‘dumped’ signifies a feeling of lack of care about the position of the building, its look and upkeep. In other words, it might become ‘a dump’, a term that
features in other studies of perceptions of public housing (Palmer et al., 2004). She explained, ‘I’m not massively fussed on . . . the paintwork and stuff like other people are. But I do think here, I mean it’s not just the paint, it’s like it’s really kind of falling apart here.’ This is an important point since, as other researchers have noted, ‘mould, damp, dust, rust, and fading . . . play their part in the creation of architectural atmosphere’ (Jacobs et al., 2012, p. 136). Deterioration of the physical environment was something that Julie highlighted when she commented on the Court’s poor upkeep. Again, this also references macro issues concerning social housing, since disinvestment and disagreements about responsibility cause building decay, something that may contribute to the sense of a building ‘standing out’. Asked about whether the Court feels different to the surrounding area, Julie answered:

I mean painting is just surface. I mean, it’s surface anyway because people walk past like and go, ‘What a horrible building’, because I know I do and I live here. I think if you change the outlook of something then if you modernise, I’m not sure what I’m trying to say here. If you try and modernise something, I think there’s every chance if you can adapt the building to blend in with the surroundings then there’s less chance of it standing out.

A double sense of stigma is evident in this extract, both in Julie’s view of the Court and that of outsiders. Julie wanted the Court to be updated, so it would blend into the surrounding area, in order to avoid stigma associated with dilapidated social housing. Yet, these comments also reveal how residents sometimes have limited ability to resist discrimination, since the powerful symbolic apparatus of stigma legitimises inequalities based upon differential understandings of value and worth. This is something that may further feed into ‘self-stigma’, an acceptance of ‘assessments of lower value or worth’ (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015, p. 94). Yet, even here, Julie is ‘not sure what [she is] trying to say’, which may also indicate some resistance to the idea of being so stigmatised.

In contrast, some residents felt that the 1960s aesthetic stood out in a positive way and they associated modernist design with optimism and democracy. Kevin, for example, was nostalgic for the 1960s and modern architecture, saying:

. . . whereas this had a kind of feel to it when I first came here, I thought, yeah, it had a kind of old, I always felt, I don’t know if you, as a child if you, ‘Mary, Mungo and Midge’ used to be on and they lived in a block of flats like this and they used to go down in the lifts. If Mary, Mungo and Midge were around they’d actually stay next door to me, it felt a bit like that kind of modernity and it was based in a kind of . . . a quieter time if you like, yeah.

Kevin’s reference to a cartoon from his childhood was used to override dominant images of high-rise flats as places of stigma. Kevin was able to turn this type of stigma into cultural capital, using his knowledge about the architect and the design intentions, which he knew aimed to promote a ‘classless, modern way of life’ (Kallin & Slater, 2014, p. 1362). Kevin highlighted the possibilities of the building being home to a mixture of residents, even though he was very concerned about a growing ‘impoverished class’ in the present. In the setting of the interview, Kevin contradicted dominant ideas about ex-council buildings, showing how stigma can shift into prestige depending on the interactional context.
While Kevin was nostalgic about the period in which the Court was built, he was also annoyed about the lack of repair work which had been done:

It’s not the fault of the building ’cause the building . . . becomes an inanimate object when you live in it, it’s an inanimate object, it’s a space, it’s about what happens to the building, what happens socially, you know, when they all moved in here in the ’60s I’m sure they all knew each other.

For Kevin, the design of the Court was not to blame for declining social ties, but rather the people who live there and a changing sense of community. That is, he suggests that younger generations have less commitment to the scheme than older residents. His comments illustrate the complex relationship between the material and social. He describes how community is made via people’s social interactions but also how, during the time he has lived there, people interact less. In part, this was because communal facilities, such as the laundry and the drying greens, were no longer used in a way that encouraged social mixing. The drying greens on the roofs were locked and no longer accessible and the communal laundry had long since closed. Instead, laundry had become a largely individualised or private matter.

Michael understood and negotiated the sense of stigma associated with the building in a slightly different way. He was nostalgic about the dwellings and the flats, recalling seeing the flat for the first time with his Mum. Commenting on the design, he said:

I actually came back with her when her and my uncle were moving her stuff in the house. I’d never seen a house like it, a Court house. And I remember looking through the letterbox and when she opened the door the first time I would run to [the] living room door and look at the staircase and go, ‘Oh, wow, this is cool.’ I’d run up the stairs. I’ve lived in houses bigger than that but it just . . . that sort of small compact sort of cube, but with just a stair that goes right up.

The feelings about the interior spaces that Michael describes are also about home making practices, since they reference residents’ responses to spaces and to the atmosphere of a house. Baxter’s research on the Aylesbury Estate in London demonstrates how home making is a complex practical activity that involves the addition of ‘material and imaginary dimensions of the home’ (2017, p. 342). The process of home making can be intensified if activities and experiences are particularly valued because they are engaging or intrinsically pleasurable, reflected in Michael’s response to first seeing the ‘small compact sort of cube’ and the suggestion of ‘cool’. Baxter has argued that novel features, such as vertical walkways, may become positive spaces due to their views and lighting, but they may also be associated with antisocial behaviour and crime. The unplanned effects of design features were echoed in our research, with Michael fondly recalling chasing around the decks and stairways as a child but, like many others, also commenting that these very same features attract crime and other illicit behaviour. Thus, rather than seeing the building itself as a source of stigma, we argue that residents’ interactions with the building and with each other are more complex. Where a sense of stigma was associated with the building, in some cases this might challenge feelings of belonging but, in others, it strengthened residents’ sense of home.
Rubbish and dirt

Rubbish and dirt were both mentioned frequently in the interviews and are significant for our analysis because they are used as a shorthand to determine appropriate behaviour, respectability and the stigma of place. This is a common trope used to reference modernist buildings, relating to what Slater terms ‘symbolic defamation’ (2018, p. 891) via images of decay, oppression or waste. Julie’s use of ‘dumped’, for example, suggests not only something of an eyesore, but also discarded ‘rubbish’. As other researchers have pointed out, by association residents are sometimes similarly imagined (Garbin & Millington, 2012; Kallin & Slater, 2014; Wacquant, 2008).

Responsibility for dirt and waste featured in many residents’ accounts, which revealed disagreements about the cleaning of communal areas. For example, Kevin explained how this had become a problem in the last few years:

Nobody cleans the walkways. I actually paid a company to come for a year to clean the stairs and the walkways ’cause I’d never seen it done . . . whereas I come from the tenements where if you didn’t do your stairs, you know, if you lived with your parents in an area like that where, if the neighbours knew it’s your turn for the stairs, would come and tell you, would say, ‘It’s your turn for the stairs’, and woe betide you if you . . . and so I just automatically assumed that just when I first came here.

Kevin described how cleaning used to be a shared responsibility, divided between residents who understood a moral code about community responsibility. However, he argued that there was no longer a shared commitment to care for communal spaces. For Kevin, residents did not invest in the Court when they rented privately or short-term, only when they owned their flats or rented long-term from the council. For owner-occupiers and local authority tenants, private renters were often referred to in this way, as temporary, irresponsible or uncaring. Yet, this kind of distinction uses what Wacquant terms the ‘faceless, demonized other’ (2008, p. 240) in stigmatising discourses. In addition, Kevin’s point is made via reminiscence about another time and place, as he argued that residents in the past had a different, communal attitude towards cleaning.

Claremont Court was designed with communal rubbish chutes and incinerators for waste disposal, positioned on the deck access hallways at the end of each stairwell. Robert explained in an interview how, over time, the volume of rubbish produced by residents had become much larger, which meant that the chutes were no longer suitable. To replace them, the local authority had introduced new waste disposal systems, including recycling boxes and large bins in the communal areas. These were changes related to broader developments in waste management, including the privatisation and outsourcing of waste disposal, which meant that residents were required not only to carry rubbish large distances to communal bins but also to sort materials for recycling. As with arrangements for laundry, Claremont’s original design had been superseded by those linked to profit and individual responsibility. And, as Glucksberg has noted, ‘structural’ causes of poor waste management are rewritten as the ‘outcomes of individual failures . . . and [seen as] symptomatic of some sort of moral lack on the part of the poor’ (2014, p. 112).
Robert explained how the courtyard and surrounding passageways were often ‘strewn with litter’ and how he spent a lot of time making phone calls to the council to make sure the bins were emptied. He thought that many ‘original’ tenants were used to the rubbish chutes and unwilling to change – a distinction that appears to draw upon both age and also housing tenure – but he also blamed ‘outsiders’ for dumping waste at the Court:

We also get, because there’s an accumulation of bins and often rubbish, there’s a fair amount of fly tipping that goes on where people literally will, I mean builders or people with a sofa or a bit of furniture will just drive into the Court drop it beside the bins and go away again.

A strong sense of powerlessness and also intrusion comes through in Robert’s narrative, since he feels that Claremont Court is used as a dumping ground for others’ waste, with the associated sense that residents end up with rubbish on their own doorsteps. As Tyler has noted, under the neoliberal and ‘punitive’ state, particular groups – including the residents of social housing – are treated as forms of ‘waste’ to be managed (2020, p. 19), and so we might infer here that Robert wishes to distance himself from what he calls an ‘accumulation of . . . rubbish’, both literal and symbolic. But this is also an example of the stigmatised/stigmatiser in action: Robert feels that dumped rubbish adds to the stigma surrounding his home but he also stigmatises those that he sees as responsible, the nameless others represented by original residents ‘fixed in their ways’, ‘builders’ and other fly tippers, something of a classed narrative in itself.

Similar concerns emerged in an interview with a married couple, Karen and Craig, who rented from the council. They described in a joint interview how the communal spaces needed a ‘bit of attention’:

Craig: This area used to be . . . I don’t know. It wasn’t . . . I’m not saying it’s dirty but it could do with a bit . . . people being a bit tidier with their rubbish and . . .

Karen: I think you see outside and then you come into the house and you think, they’re actually nice houses, they’re just that . . . like their verandas are filthy, hen. It’s just when you’re outside, it’s filthy.

Karen remarked how, when they first moved to Claremont, cleaning just happened spontaneously. In contrast, she felt that, nowadays, her neighbours kept their doors closed and were not interested in looking after the communal spaces:

I really don’t understand. I think sometimes it’s some people think they’re too busy, hen, to worry about the outside of their, different kind of people in the Court have got enough to worry about inside than worrying about [outside].

The couple were concerned about misuse of the rubbish chutes, describing how residents had to pay the Council to get them unblocked. Indeed, on one of our visits to the Court, a resident had taped a written note to a rubbish chute, stating, ‘Blocked yet again. Will neighbours stop putting large bags. Council says we are now being charged £145 per call out per block charge. Stop it please!!!’ This micro-managing of rubbish, via concerns about communal areas and rubbish chutes, is also part of maintenance of respectability because, as Glucksberg notes, poorer inner-city dwellers and their homes are often
‘portrayed as dirt, waste, scumbags, wastes of space, sink estates and so on’ (2014, p. 98). Participants insisted that they always dealt with their rubbish properly, and it was unidentifiable ‘others’ who caused the problem. Yet, in doing this, they often blamed individuals, rather than asking questions about waste disposal processes which have actually placed increased responsibility, including financial ones, onto residents. As Kevin noted:

But aye, it’s that thing that when they’re not listened to . . . people feel really betrayed and unfortunately . . . it’s that thing where the thing appears bigger than you, like the big wave, what do you do when you’re an elderly person and you’re frightened? You turn on each other or . . . you blame . . . when somebody parks in your parking space, when somebody drops rubbish.

Kevin’s observation about ‘turn[ing] on each other’ is crucial here, because it highlights a number of points concerning stigma in action. First, his comment, ‘the thing appears bigger than you’, references wider and more powerful forces: the state, changes in and cuts to welfare provision (including the maintenance of social housing) and major shifts across time in how local communities are organised. But, in addition, the sense of turning on your neighbours also demonstrates how, under conditions of ‘austerity’, it is often those who need more state support that are portrayed as ‘undeserving’ via various stigmatisation processes. And it is often in the interpersonal interactions that stigma is not only felt but also imparted.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have suggested that micro-distinctions between residents at Claremont Court are produced to make ‘them/us’ categorisations, which both resist and apportion stigma at the same time. This is an important point which, we argue, is missed in some of the existing work on stigma, where people often seem only to occupy either stigmatised or stigmatising categories. Our argument draws upon interactionism’s suggestion that ‘a complex orientation both to the purpose of [an] action and to any other people who might be relevant to the action’s development over time’ (Dennis et al., 2013, p. 17) exists and is present in how residents negotiate stigma. Rarely did we find they were simply ‘the stigmatised’. As Plummer (1975) notes, a focus solely on how control agents stigmatise others results in the production of a homogeneous group but, following his lead, we have argued for attention to subtle processes of negotiation, resistance and apportionment by those who also feel stigma’s effects. In addition, while stigma is referenced via particular kinds of language (e.g. the building was described as a ‘dump’) it may, simultaneously, be part of the ways in which residents claim a sense of belonging. For example, a certain pride in an estate/scheme or home does not discount stigma, but rather takes it up and reworks it.

The interactions between people and the building – involving the symbolic too – is also of interest here. Claremont Court was designed to challenge stigma, for example concerning the traditional separation of classes into distinct dwelling types (Glendinning, 2008). However, apart from the fact that it is hardly possible to design out ‘class’
distinctions in everyday life, the scheme has also been stigmatised via the association of modernist developments with architectural failure, a word ‘reserved almost exclusively for works built by the state, and, most commonly, in reference to social housing schemes’ (Roberts, 2017, p. 125).

For our participants, the practical effects of such disinvestment in social or council housing – decay, damp, mould and the like – were an important part of this picture. Disagreements between residents about the upkeep of the building were difficult to resolve, but also signified a wider sense of frustration with state neglect. Thus, issues such as rubbish and its disposal fed into symbolic forms of stigma and may also, at times, cause residents to blame one another, as Kevin noted. State ‘weaponising of stigma’, a process by which shame is shifted to blame (Scambler, 2020, p. 79), is echoed in residents’ attributions, wherein individuals are deemed culpable. And here, our findings also echo Parker and Aggleton’s argument that we ought to ‘reframe our understandings of stigmatization and discrimination to conceptualize them as social processes that can only be understood in relation to broader notions of power and domination’ (2003, p. 16).

Our analysis has also explored the processes by which stigmatisation is attributed and modified via relationships with both self and other, demonstrating that a concern with both micro and macro forces is vital to understanding how these are mutually implicated. But, in addition, we have also suggested that the results of attempts to stigmatise are never straightforward. As Plummer noted, nobody ‘becomes deviant “at all once”’ (1975, p. 27), so too, we argue, with stigma. Stigma is never something merely ‘internalised’ by people, since that would suggest a rather static process in which it is taken up by the individual, becoming some kind of fixed characteristic. Instead, interactionism is interested in the processes by which people negotiate stigma over time and in their everyday dealings with others, since it is only produced via such interactions. Stigma’s effects are powerful, but not deterministic. Throughout this analysis, our aim has been to move beyond depictions of housing scheme/estate residents as either stigmatised or stigmatising and to have shown how multiple forms of stigma are often enacted at the same time. We argue that such micro-distinctions require further attention, as our findings show how residents hold a strong sense of attachment to particular places and community while, at the same time, have to negotiate stigma’s powerful effects in their daily lives.

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Notes

1. In Scotland, the word ‘scheme’ is frequently used rather than ‘estate’.
2. The team consisted of Sandra Costa Santos, Nadia Bertolino, Stephen Hicks, Camilla Lewis and Vanessa May.

References


