The social implications of weight bias internalisation:
Parents' ultimate responsibility as consent, division and resistance

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Today's presentation

- Background
  - Neoliberalism
  - Stigma
  - Family
- Research
- Findings
  - Consent
  - Division
  - Resistance
- Conclusion

Background

- UK, 40 years of Neoliberalism

- Economic and ideological alternative to 'welfarism' – primacy of the free market to advance human progress

- Hollowing out of the state: privatisation; shifting state responsibilities to individual/family; governance of 'governing from the distance' – self-regulation, monitoring, surveillance

Stigma

- Highly competitive, individualised, unequal system and produces stigma

- Parker and Aggleton (2003):

    'a political economy of stigmatisation and social exclusion (p.19); '..stigma feeds upon, strengthens and reproduces existing inequalities' (p.13)

Family

- Neoliberalism enters family life:
  - Site for neoliberal consumption – interpersonal relations as consumers based on informed choices (Lindsay and Maher, 2013)

  - Tensions: family as site of love and nurture and competency based parenting

  - Family conflicts around the child's higher weight body
    - parents/adolescents blaming each other (Lindelof, Nielsen and Pedersen, 2011)
    - conflict avoidance (Skouteris et al. 2011)
    - parents repeat weight bias inside family (Puhl, 2017)

  - Internalise self-blame/guilt for 'obesity' and poverty (Lorentzen, Dyeremose and Larsen, 2011)

Research

- Set to explore 'disconnects' between food-related 'obesity' policy and lived experience of working-class parents with higher weight children

- Methodology:
  - Qualitative critical research, multiple methods/sources of data, multiple critical theorists (Jones et al., 2016); thematic analysis
  - Field work: Local state policy actors - policymakers (n=6), policy implementers (n=10), parent-policy recipients (n=15)

- Found multiple interconnected disconnects including:
  - Multi-layered stigma and discrimination mediated by policy
    - Parents taking 'ultimate responsibility' was a core process

Ultimate responsibility

About power relations, governance of parents:

- Soft power through cultural sphere - hegemony (Gramsci) governmentality (Foucault) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu) (Aggleton and Parker, 2003)

- Gramscian hegemony - role of cultural in eliciting consent for actions not in your interests but that of dominant social group

- Foucauldian governmentality – subjectification – how produce the citizen to fulfil government policies

- Resistance
  - Hard to resist the powerful ideologies of choice and responsibility - 'fixes in place'
  - How resist? Where is the public sphere for meaningful deliberation (Habermas)?

Consent

Active consent: as 'common sense' in making the informed choice, Ferda, working class mother:

> *..I don't think it* [responsibility] *could be anyone else … food companies or supermarkets. Because we got range, choice, for our kids to eat … its down to the parents*

Consent to taking ultimate responsibility despite criticism of food industry – a 'knowing' but not having the capacity to resist. Bedria, working class mother:

> *Its … the economy … and government, everything linked together….It's one big chain goes around and we're in the middle and we're the one who just picks up!... it's us who's responsible for what goes into my child's mouth... we're the responsible…***How can I blame someone else for what I do?**

Self blame is reinforced by 'performance' (Miller and Rose, 2009) guilt becomes governmentality in the government of family life (Rose, 1987)

Division

Subjectification unfolds as parents label themselves; judge and label others
Colin, middle-class dad:

> *It's ultimately the parents' understanding and willingness to do something about it that's key …parent's ultimate responsibility because that's our job .. We're lucky we live in world with so much choice. What choices we make has to be our own responsibility … can't say its's someone else's fault. They don't force us to make those choices.*

Kerry, working-class dad:
> *…see a child who is very overweight, you look at the parents and say "why haven't you tried to regulate and   reduce his weight and tell him he can't have this and can't have that … its very important.*

Resistance

Challenging structural determinants and inequalities

Maya, working-class mother:

> *'They dump those things in our area because they see it as deprived and they think the people who live there don't matter'… 'we need a food revolution'*

Policy solutions tackled structural inequalities
- improve material conditions and greater control of food system
- shifting responsibility back to government and food industry
- health at every size

Action: community ethic of care for children e.g. volunteering on food projects

Vehicles to resistance and policy change

- Young people and social media: 'body positive' ?

- For these working-class parents: community, forums at children centres, schools

- Obstacles: democracy deficits
    - lack of public space for debate - closure of children centres
    - lack of personal resources enabling involvement – time and money
    - lack of meaningful deliberation e.g. participatory budgets decide cuts

- Trade unions not seen as a vehicle

- Agency: *'I should go into politics'* (Liz, bus driver, mum)

Conclusion

Going forward

How to tap into the resistance and meaningfully involve parents in building a new narrative on 'obesity' that removes blame, self-blame and stigma?

- *Thank you for listening*

References

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Notes

- Wealth inequality

Income inequality in the UK rose notably in the 1980s, then plateaued...

Legend: Before housing costs; After housing costs — Gini coefficient

Thatcher | Blair | Cameron

Years: 1977–2013