





ARTICLE

## Narrating the Chilean Social Revolt through and against Stigma: The Case of Two Older Women from a Stigmatized Neighborhood

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### Abstract

This article explores the workings of social and territorial stigma among residents of an stigmatized neighborhood in Santiago de Chile in the context of nationwide conflict. By attending to the narratives of social organizers, it shows how stigma framed the narratives of the Chilean revolt of October 2019 produced by two female organizers older than fifty years without tertiary education. It argues that, for those with less educational and political resources, stigma can help think through a social conflict by translating broader political issues into everyday life experiences and can both constrain and enable different forms of engagement in the revolt. The narratives were obtained by ethnographic interviews carried out in a broader project of the unfolding of the unrest in Santiago's peripheries between November 2019 and July 2020.

**Keywords:** territorial stigma; resistance; neoliberal urbanism; social unrest; women's narratives

### Resumen

Este artículo explora la manera en que opera el estigma social y territorial entre residentes de un barrio estigmatizado de Santiago de Chile, en un contexto de conflicto nacional. Explorando las narrativas de organizadores sociales, muestra cómo el estigma articuló las narrativas de la revuelta chilena de octubre de 2019 producidas por dos mujeres mayores de 50 años sin educación superior. Argumentamos que, para quienes cuentan con menos recursos educacionales y/o políticos, el conflicto social puede ser comprendido desde el estigma ya que permite la traducción de cuestiones políticas más amplias a la experiencia de la vida cotidiana así como restringir o permitir diferentes formas de participación en éste. Las narrativas fueron obtenidas por medio de entrevistas etnográficas, realizadas en un proyecto más amplio del desenvolvimiento de la conflictividad en las periferias de Santiago, entre noviembre de 2019 y julio de 2020.

**Palabras clave:** estigma territorial; resistencia; urbanismo neoliberal; malestar social; narrativas de mujeres

In October 2019, high school students protesting a hike in subway fares in the Chilean capital, Santiago, set in motion a large-scale revolt that would expand throughout the country. For over a week, student demonstrations and fare evasions met with increasing support from fellow passengers, and state outlets suggested that passengers should simply get up earlier to avoid rising peak fares. On Friday, October 18 (a day that came to be known as 18-O), both peaceful and violent protests spread across the city. In the afternoon, a bus and nine subway stations were set ablaze. In response, most public transport services were suspended, and many people obliged to walk home joined organized or spontaneous demonstrations of discontent. Over the following weeks, and despite the deployment of military forces and the imposition of curfews, normal city life across the country was interrupted by demonstrators, whose tactics ranged from peaceful artistic performances to mob violence directed against police. The renamed Plaza de la Dignidad (Dignity Square) in downtown Santiago became ground zero and a meeting point for protestors from all over the city. Dubbed *la marcha más grande*, the “largest march” saw over 1.2 million people assemble in Santiago alone. Demonstrations also broke out in the peripheries of the city, where they acquired a more violent tone (Garcés 2020), which was ascribed to marginalized youth (Sepúlveda and Vergara 2019). Protests continued throughout November, accompanied by the formation of territorial and union assemblies and *cabildos* seeking collective to create new spaces in which to debate the country’s future. These activities tended to peter out after November 15 (Martucelli 2019), when the established political parties agreed behind closed doors to the mechanisms for a process of constitutional change. The resulting draft of a new constitution was eventually rejected in a referendum in September 2022.

Explanations for such an uprising in a country that, only weeks earlier, had been described as an “Oasis in Latin America” by then president Sebastián Piñera, point to multidimensional experiences of inequality, precarity, and mistreatment of broad segments of the population (Araujo 2019; Carrillo and Manzi 2021; Garcés 2020; González and Le Foulon, 2020; Somma *et al.* 2020). Across income lines, individuals faced excessive demands and exhausting struggles for minimally decent living conditions and/or inconsistent positions (Araujo 2019; Araujo and Martucelli 2011). Demands voiced during the uprising were driven by precarious employment, insufficient wages, and high levels of debt (Fundación Sol 2019; Tapia Marambio 2018). Health care, education, housing, pensions, and even highways were either commoditized and expensive or underfunded and low quality when provided as a public service. Against this background, the phrase *Hasta que la dignidad se haga costumbre* (Until dignity becomes the custom) appeared on walls and banners across the country and on social media.

The notion of dignity signals a moral dimension of social inequality that has been less prominent in explanations of 2019’s social unrest. As a noun, *dignity* refers to both material living conditions and the moral recognition that makes life bearable—a prospect that has shaped the everyday lives of the lower classes and the housing struggles of the *pobladores* movement (Han 2012; Murphy 2015; Pérez 2022). Indeed, two years earlier, a report by the UN Development Programme (PNUD 2017) identified unequal treatment as a key element of the experience of social inequality in Chile, with individuals with disabilities and those belonging to indigenous communities or the lower classes more likely to experience mistreatment and discrimination. The report also indicated social class and place of residence as the two main causes of such negative experiences as specified by surveyed individuals. While mistreatment threatens contemporary expectations of horizontal social relations identified by the report, neoliberal forms of governance stigmatize the poor by forcing them to resort to public services and state help (e.g., Fassim 2019). Furthermore, the workings of urban neoliberal dynamics have territorialized the stigma of poverty, affecting extensive residential areas and their inhabitants (e.g., Salcedo, Sabatini, and

Rasse 2009). The manner in which social and territorial stigma shaped engagement in the 2019 unrest remains a critical issue.

The literature on stigma has shown how stigmatized groups cope with, resist, and contest stigma through both everyday life and the local collective struggles they undertake against discrimination and dispossession (e.g., Larsen and Nagel Delica 2019). The present article goes further, exploring the role of stigma in nationwide social unrest, where a critical approach to social inequality and generalized precarity became widespread. In particular, it explores the role of poor-oriented stigma in the unrest narratives of social organizers in a stigmatized neighborhood. In line with previous research, we found stigma to stick differently to subjects in different positions (Pinkster, Ferier, and Hoekstra 2020; Tyler 2020). More substantively, we present an in-depth analysis of the uprising narratives of Juana and Fabiola, whose understanding of and engagement in the revolt are narratively articulated through stigma.<sup>1</sup> We find that for the disadvantaged—in this case, two mature female organizers with limited formal education—stigma can assist in the translation of broader political issues into everyday experience. For these women, the narratives of social unrest are structured through and against stigma, which can both constrain and enable different forms of engagement in the revolt.

The narratives analyzed here are the result of ethnographic interviews (Gúber 2004) of social organizers from a stigmatized neighborhood of Santiago de Chile about their experiences of the social unrest and their lives in the neighborhood. Interviews were conducted in the context of a broader ethnographic research project exploring politicization in Santiago's peripheral areas and the ways the mobilization locally unfolded after 18-O. We conducted narrative analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts (Riessman 2008).

### Urban configurations, stigmatization, and contestations in Chile

Building on the work of previous urban interventions by the state, neoliberal urbanism reinforced inequality and precarity in the city, creating new dynamics of urban segregation. The Pinochet dictatorship, which seized power in 1973, forcibly shunted the poor to the fringes of Santiago, driving higher levels of urban segregation (Morales and Rojas 1986). Following the return to democracy in 1990, government policies favored large-scale public housing projects and vouchers for low-income households, creating socially homogeneous areas in which much of the population became the target of social policy (Ducci 1997; Sabatini, Cáceres, and Cerda 2001; Rodríguez and Sugranyes 2002). Although many families did achieve homeownership as a result, and some projects benefited from the expansion of modern neighborhoods and commercial zones, most inhabitants of the periphery were expected to make do with inferior services, poor access to urban opportunities, and little or no government protection of rights and guarantees. As in most neoliberal peripheries in Latin America and the United States (Auyero, Bourgois, and Schepher-Hughes 2015, Salcedo et al. 2009; Wacquant 2006), illegal activities—notably the drug trade—have made violence a daily reality. In practice, this has relegated low-income inhabitants to what Bayon (2017) calls second-class citizenship.

These forms of second-classness that mark the experiences of peripheral residents contrast with the “urban citizenship” (Holston 2009) achieved by the urban “poor” under the twentieth century’s compromise state. As in other parts of Latin America, homeless Chileans fought hard for a home of their own, giving rise to the *pobladores* movement (Cortés 2021). Through collective organization, often under the guidance of political parties, the *pobladores* carved out a space in the city, building their own homes and

<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed for the sake of anonymity and confidentiality.

communities and articulating their needs by calling on the state to guarantee them their rights, thus enacting a dignified life (Murphy 2015; Pérez 2018). In doing so, the *pobladores* also countered the long-standing, pervasive stigma that categorized them, for being poor, as morally deviant (Cofré Schmeisser 2015) and unclean (Álvarez-López 2019). Through grassroots organizations mainly composed of (though rarely led by) women, the *pobladores* gained state recognition as legitimate citizens (Murphy 2015) and members of the working class (Álvarez-López 2021), thus securing that which was promised by the compromise state.

Once neoliberalism had undermined the foundations upon which “urban citizenship” could be built, inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods became less able to counteract the stigma historically associated with poverty. Besides the lack of opportunities and daily violence experienced by the residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods, territorial stigmatization was further amplified by the real estate market (Otero, Méndez, and Link 2021) and negative media portrayals (Ruiz-Tagle, Álvarez, and Salas 2021). Furthermore, the neoliberal shift in Latin American social policy and its emphasis on personal accountability further stigmatized the poor by depicting aid recipients as dependents and in need of moral change, also burdening women—the main recipients of such aid—with extra labor and responsibilities (Auyero 2012; Lavinás 2013; Rojas Lasch 2019; Schild 2007). If home ownership and community organizations took center stage in claiming property and citizenship under the compromise state (Murphy 2015), most residents of social housing built in the neoliberal era experienced everyday life in stigmatized and disadvantaged urban areas as a blight on their dignity while *pobladores* frame contemporary housing struggles for dignity (Angelcos and Pérez 2017; Angelcos and Rodríguez López 2023; Murphy 2015; Pérez 2022).

### Stigma as a site of contestation

According to Tyler (2020), stigma is a form of power—a symbolic marking of people and bodies that has very material effects on the (re)production and legitimation of social inequalities. As she states, “while experienced intimately through stigmatizing looks, comments, slights, remarks made in face-to-face or digitally mediated encounters, [stigmatization] is always enmeshed with wider capitalist structures of expropriation, domination, discipline and social control” (Tyler 2020, 11). Thus, stigmatization is a strategy of government that renders undesirable certain populations—often migrants, racialized groups, mental health sufferers, or those who live in poverty—and inscribes stigma onto their bodies and onto the communities in which they spend their lives.

As a form of government that shifts “responsibility for the social to society, but ultimately to individuals” (Schild 2007, 184), neoliberalism has restored the importance of stigmatization in value production, legitimating the retreat of the state from the social. Moral stigmatization of recipients of state help drives disregard for the structural processes that actually produce poverty, making stigma appear “deliberately designed into systems of social provision in ways that make help-seeking a desperate task” (Tyler 2020, 18). Particularly expressive of that trend in the region are means-tested “conditioned cash transfers,” which are offered mainly to mothers. As Lavinás (2013) shows, the accompanying obligations—such as keeping children in school or taking them for regular medical checkups—seek to transform mothers’ allegedly deviant behaviors through appeals to their sense of responsibility for budgeting and their family’s well-being.

Wacquant’s (2006) theory of advanced marginality developed in *Urban Outcasts* combines Goffman’s interactionist approach with Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power to state that territorial defamation represents one of the most relevant forms of symbolic dispossession that operates under conditions of neoliberal urban restructuring. Certain

“tainted” neighborhoods are targeted by neoliberal policies, and symbolic power serves the interests of enhancing urban segregation. Territorial stigma thus entails a symbolic socio-spatial pigeonholing operation that is meant to downgrade, marginalize, and cluster the poor, minorities, and others in specific areas of the city, in turn helping the state and the real estate business to shift blame for inequality and exclusion onto residents and their communities (Otero, Méndez, and Link 2021). While criminalization legitimates state intervention (Dammert 2012), it often paves the way for the dispossession of residents when their corner of the urban fabric attracts the interest of developers or urban planners (Larsen and Nagel Delica 2019; Parraguez Sánchez 2012; Paton, McCall, and Mooney 2017). Negative labels and narratives are also produced and circulated through both the media and everyday interactions and are the basis of local forms of social differentiation.

Within spaces with high concentrations of marginalized groups, territorial stigma comprises the variegated meanings assigned to internal differences of class, gender, ethnicity, age, and other characteristics (for a review, see Larsen and Nagel Delica 2019). For instance, stigma against poor women often differs from that targeting men, with the former branded unfit in terms of sexuality or motherhood and the latter as criminals—often simultaneously (Tyler 2020). As Schild (2015, 69) states, “the ‘responsibilization’ of women in Latin America [through poor-aid social policies] has gone hand-in-hand with a dramatic rise in the criminalization of poverty—and of male poverty in particular—through the police and courts, and increasingly privatized prison systems.” Similarly, negative stereotypes of communities and their residents are not perceived or experienced equally. Positionality may further affect the ways people engage with social and territorial stigma and its effectiveness (Kirkness 2014). Pinkster, Ferier, and Hoekstra (2020) argued that territorial stigma affects people differentially, and some will carry the stigma more unavoidably than others. As an example, she describes that where lower-middle-class and blue-collar workers, or renters and homeowners coexist, negotiation and neutralization of stigma will likely take less of an emotional toll on those in a more favorable position.

While stigma negatively shapes people’s lives, it can also be a site of contestation. In some cases, the experience of stigma results in processes such as its internalization or alienation (Contreras 2017; Cuny 2019), which involve internal or subjective processes of self-identification. In other cases, the way people members of marginalized groups see themselves and their direct experience as insiders of these communities may differ from outsiders’ perceptions, resulting in classificatory struggles (Tyler 2015; Bourdieu 1989). Stigmatized people may be able to respond with particular practices and representations, including coping, resistance, and contestation strategies, which offer a reframed or counterrepresentation. Such strategies are made “through symbolic and material appropriations of space from below, both politically organized and everyday” (Sisson 2020, 11). For example, in their everyday lives, residents of stigmatized areas may cope with that stigma by establishing strong connections with their neighborhoods (Kirkness 2014), distancing themselves from stigmatized groups there and prevailing views on local residents, or even denying living there or belonging to the stigmatized group (Sisson 2020). These coping strategies have been variously described as self-distancing or mutual distancing, deflection, and lateral denigration (Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira 2014) and involve a differentiation “between us” or a reorientation of stigma in another direction. Successful distancing within the stigmatized community depends on one’s relative status, of which class is a central dimension (Otero, Méndez, and Link 2021; Sisson 2020).

In Chilean peripheries, coping with social and territorial stigma often involves engaging with or taking part in the practices of the “culture of decency.” Such a culture, Martínez and Palacios (1996) argue, seeks social mobility by “legitimate means,” such as getting an education, working hard, and prizing cleanliness and personal effort. Performing decency allows for the residents of stigmatized neighborhoods to differentiate themselves from other representations of “poverty cultures” (Salcedo and Rasse 2012): the “ghettoized

poor,” who seek social mobility through crime; the “dependent poor,” who rely on public support and expect little of the future; and those who, similar to the dependent poor, hold few expectations for the future. Those who position themselves as part of the culture of decency can seek social mobility through collective organization and their own individual trajectories. The latter is seemingly more common in neighborhoods shaped by Chilean neoliberal urbanism (FUSUPO 2010, 2017), such as the one where we carried out fieldwork, whereas collective organization fueled the settlement and construction of working-class neighborhoods before the neoliberal era.

Resistance to and contestation of territorial stigmatization also takes place through collective struggles and becomes especially relevant when communities face threats of dispossession (Angelcos and Méndez 2017; Horgan 2018; Parraguez Sánchez 2012). Stigmatized communities often deploy physical or spatial strategies involving practices such as occupation, picketing, and protesting (Sisson 2020). The marshaling of collective claims as physical strategies is more likely to result in heightened political awareness (Sisson 2020), an enhanced sense of belonging and attachment (Kirkness 2014), contestation of the denigrating state’s politics of waiting (Koppelman 2018), and processes of destigmatization (Horgan 2018). As described earlier, social organization was central to countering the poor-oriented stigma targeting Chilean *pobladores* and to the latter’s demands for recognition as citizens (Murphy 2015). Despite changes over time, social and community participation remain central to countering social and territorial stigma, as is the case with membership in evangelical churches (Cornejo 2012) and public housing or housing debtor committees (Salcedo 2010; Angelcos and Pérez 2017; Pérez 2022).

In this article, we go beyond the local contestation of stigma that has prevailed in scholarship and explore its workings within nationwide social unrest. Following a similar line to that of Auyero (2003) in “Contentious Lives,” we explore the connections between experiences of marginalization and territorial stigma among low-income residents and their understanding and forms of engagement with the uprisings. This is a worthy exercise, not only for providing a more nuanced picture of the Chilean revolt, including the role of the moral dimensions of inequalities, but also for advancing the understanding of how stigma works beyond the local.

### Some notes on methodological choices

This article is one result of a broader ethnographic research project exploring social mobilization and politicization in three different peripheral and stigmatized neighborhoods in Santiago, Chile. The project was ethically approved by the Bioethics Committee of Andrés Bello University in Resolution No. 026/2019. In the context of the revolt, the research focused on how mobilization unfolded in these territories following 18-O, especially since the neighborhoods in question are located in districts recognized for their violent forms of protest. This article is based on research carried out in one of those stigmatized neighborhoods.

The neighborhood was built in several stages between the 1980s and 1990s—and still consists of differentiated sectors—in what was a semirural setting. It originally consisted of small two-story, thirty-one-square-meter terraced row houses, each with a three-meter-by-six-meter backyard that allowed space for additional constructions, which almost every house now features. The inferior units suffered from structural and habitability issues—mold, leaks, limited sunlight, and poor ventilation—from the outset. The development lacks sidewalks, and homes are connected by lanes little wider than a single vehicle; public areas are vacant lots. Initially isolated and surrounded by few other social housing complexes, over the years, several lower-middle-class and middle-class subdivisions (the latter often adjacent to urban expressways) have been built nearby, separated from the public housing projects by just a few streets, blocks, a road, or a



perimeter fence. Rapid growth brought shops, public transportation, and public and private services, such as three public and public-subsidized private schools. Nonetheless, the cramped surroundings, evident deterioration of the housing stock and public areas, and among the highest crime in the city led to territorial stigmatization of the neighborhood and surrounding areas.

The entire research team consisted of outsiders, mostly from more central, middle-class areas of Santiago. Fieldwork was conducted primarily by a middle-aged female researcher, and current crime figures reported in official municipal and police documents raised concerns regarding her safety. This was especially relevant given our initial lack of social networks in the area, our unfamiliarity with the chosen territory, and its remoteness, about sixty to ninety minutes from the researcher's home by public transport. Besides collecting some secondary sociodemographic information, by 18-O, we had made just one fieldwork visit to the neighborhood and surrounding areas, focusing primarily on reconnaissance. Visits became even more difficult following the uprising because of the imposed curfews and violent protests that took place almost daily across the district.

In November 2019, fieldwork resumed when the curfew was shortened and the pace of protest had slowed. Contact was made with a housing committee leader who lived in the surrounding area, enabling the research team to deploy a snowball strategy. By the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns imposed in March 2020, we had established rapport with a housing committee and a local assembly, both created after 18-O; had systematized the local organizations' social media posts; and had participated in two community activities (one involving two other research assistants) organized by a lower-middle-class neighborhood committee but open to the wider area in which the neighborhood is located. The fieldwork researcher also carried out six ethnographic interviews (Gúber 2004) with male and female social organizers of various ages, mostly in the participants' homes. The interviewer asked participants about life in the neighborhood and their experiences of social unrest using loose interview guides that adapted to the speaker's narrative flow. The pandemic rendered fieldwork dangerous for both researchers and participants, forcing us to orient our attention away from the neighborhood as a case study and toward the residents themselves as separate cases (Small 2009), each with a particular experience of the social unrest. Despite the challenges, we managed to carry out two further remote ethnographic interviews with social organizers. In total, we conducted eight interviews with four male and four female social organizers aged between the age of nineteen and over sixty, each lasting between 60 and 150 minutes.

Our ethnographic interviews produced narratives of social unrest and participants' lives in the neighborhood. We understand narratives as stories in which the "speaker connects events to form a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience" (Riessman 2008, 3). Close examination of narratives of social unrest is relevant to understanding the heterogeneity of experiences of such an event. As Auyero (2003, 11) affirms in his study of social unrest in Argentina in 1993 (based on conversations with two women participants), storytelling has "potential as a window into (but not a mirror of) the meanings of extremely diverse collective and individual practices," becoming a site where the intersections between biographies and the collective can be seen. For Small and Calarco (2022, 51), "digging deep into the experiences of the individual is essential to capturing their understanding of their circumstances, their experiences, and their motivations." If narratives tell of the ways that speakers understand and interpret their experiences, then attention to the audience and the particular context of their production (Riessman 2008) allows us to avoid the conflation of narrative with experience.

Narrative analysis differs from other analysis types by its special emphasis on how a story is told with "a focus on interaction and local level, an emphasis on the

contextualizing power of narratives, [and] a commitment with social theoretical concerns” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2015, 3). Without subscribing to any specific theory or design among the variety of narrative studies recognized by Riessman (2008), the interpretative statements presented in our research are the result of a procedure that targeted several outcomes. First, we sought to outline the plot that articulates each subject’s narrative, looking for a structure that is particularly clear, as in the cases presented here. As such, we analyzed the positions that speakers took in their stories, asking whether they told the story as protagonist, observer, opposer, or supporter. Second, we were attentive to the sequence of telling, turning points, and the causal relations of events expressed by speakers. Third, to avoid any impositions, we identified whether topics or words used were voiced by the interviewer or the interviewee. Finally, we reflected on how the context of the interview shaped the narratives produced.

## **Narratives of social unrest**

### ***The uses of stigma in narratives of the revolt***

The way stigma appeared in our interviews’ narratives of the social unrest and the neighborhood enabled us to divide the narratives into two groups, which coincided with similarities in age and educational attainment. The first comprised social organizers who were younger and had completed or were pursuing tertiary education. Three of them had undergone politicization processes as part of their secondary or tertiary education, and the others were motivated by friendship, relatives, or social organizations. All of them actively participated in different forms of protest in their neighborhood and in the city center. In the narratives of this group, stigma was recognized as a central feature of everyday neighborhood life as they grew up, but it was mentioned as a means of exposing pressing social and territorial inequality, thus demonstrating the need for social organizations. The gravitational center of their narratives was, nonetheless, the national political process, which identified historical events, previous episodes of unrest, and the actors involved (e.g., social organizations, politicians and political parties and their political tendencies), elaborating critiques of social inequalities that aligned, to a greater or lesser degree, with political views being debated publicly. They used words such as *Left* and *Right*, *democracy* and *anarchy*, *society*, *strategies*, and *organization*. Most positioned themselves as more omniscient speakers, and often as protagonists of the events, thus conjuring an urban memory of the revolt (Badilla Rajevic 2020).

The group of younger, more educated interviewees corresponds to those who were described in a survey as the most typical participants in the revolt. In the initial look at demonstrator characteristics provided by González and Le Foulon Morán (2020, 5–6), although men and women participated equally, the factors that actually segmented participation were age and education:

55% of 18–24 years old participated at least once in the protests, 37% of those between 25 and 34 did, and the percentage decreases further with age, so that those 55 or older, only 12% participated at least once . . . . As expected, participation in protest is also strongly associated with education levels . . . : whereas only 8% of those with 8 years of education or less protested at least once compared to the 30% of those with high school education—including at least one year of high school and those with completed high school.

Although the younger group was able to articulate a narrative centered more on organizational and political processes, the narratives of the two older women—analyzed in depth in this article—are mainly structured around stigma. As developed in the



following sections, Juana's and Fabiola's narratives of the neighborhood and social unrest unfolded around everyday neighborhood experiences, the struggle for survival, institutional mistreatment, and their expectations for a better life that led them to organize in the first place. They became social organizers later in their lives—Juana in her sixties and Fabiola in her fifties—and did so in historically feminized organizations in terms of composition (RIMISP 2020). These were, respectively, a neighbors' committee and a housing committee, both grassroots organizations that engage with the state to achieve their aims.

Although gender may seem irrelevant in quantitative surveys on demonstrator profiles during the 2019 social unrest, a qualitative, narrative approach allows us to nuance this assertion. There is some continuity in the way that gender shapes *pobladora* women's engagement with political processes. Women were at the forefront of historical struggles for housing and accounted for almost all participants in the economic organizations that struggled for survival during the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s in Chile (e.g., Valdés and Weinstein 1993). Yet they talked about participation in a way far from grand political discourses and more in terms of personal experiences and the concrete needs that organizations helped to satisfy (Álvarez-López 2023). In this regard, the narratives of Juana and Fabiola are similar. This resonates with the narratives of leading characters in Auyero (2003, 9), who “talk about collective histories through personal language” and incorporate a quest for recognition or respect shaped by their experiences of the revolt. In the narratives analyzed here, territorial and social stigma played a central role in articulating their narratives, where a sense of second-classness (Bayon 2017) is revealed.

### ***Juana: Deflecting territorial stigma and contesting institutional mistreatment***

Juana is a retired woman in her sixties and an elected board member of her local neighbor's committee. Her narratives of the neighborhood and social unrest were structured by her awareness of territorial stigma and its material and symbolic effects, as well as by her efforts to deflect criminality and violent protest to neighboring areas, leaving little space for more personal details of her life.

Juana engaged in community participation following her retirement. She currently lives with her husband, who still works in the construction sector, and their adult children live in the same neighborhood. Some three decades ago, when Juana, her husband, and their three children moved into what was then a new neighborhood, she was working at a cleaning company and had no time to spend in her community. She was very clear in stating that she became a leader in the neighbors' committee not because of politics—which she actually dislikes, “because they are all eating from the same plate, and then suddenly each one on their own side”—but, like the *pobladora* women who joined community organizations in the 1970s (Valdés and Weinstein, 1993), to improve her neighborhood. She wanted to fight the stigma that, as she stated, forces the residents of her neighborhood to change the address on their résumés and leaves them in a state of “abandonment,” as even the municipality “looks down on them.”

Juana's narrative positions herself mainly as an observer of the events of 18-O: although she explicitly agreed with structural social demands, she rejected mob violence and denied its local deployment. She acknowledged that roadblocks and pot banging did take place on the streets where different neighborhoods collide: “Here, there was nothing [mob violence]. But there [in the surrounding neighborhood], they did some pot banging, they held protests, but here [the area where she lives], no. It struck me.” She also indicated that she joined other residents in attempts to dismantle barricades and prevent others from being raised. In her narrative, most protesters were residents of other areas of her own neighborhood or adjacent lower middle-class complexes, while her neighbors remained uninterested in protest. “I thought the kids would go out and make trouble too, but they

couldn't care less," she said; instead, local young people preferred to loiter on sports courts through the curfew. Her accounts challenge hegemonic representations reproduced in daily conversations, the media, and scholarly assessments, which correlate violence with poverty (Dubet *et al.* 2016)—representations that she believed everyone had, from municipal agents to the middle-class researcher to whom she directed her narrative.

Juana used the same strategy to explain commonplace local crime: its perpetrators are not local people. During her second encounter with the researcher, she did admit, off the record, the presence of "a few drug dealers." She made sure not to disclose information about these individuals and was quick to describe most of her neighbors as "hard-working people." She also insisted on her area being "safer" than outsiders might think and that, contrary to media reports, she can keep her door unlocked, confident that "nothing will happen." Against representations of ghettoized poverty, she offered a counterrepresentation of her neighborhood through a deflective strategy (Sisson 2020), portraying both everyday lives and political behavior as embodying a "culture of decency" (Martínez and Palacios 1996) that is fitting to working people.

Juana's deflection strategy is indicative of both her own positioning and that of her audience, namely a middle-class outsider who was actually introduced by a contact from an adjoining lower-middle-class neighborhood whose residents, Juana said, also stigmatize them. Indeed, Juana initially showed distrust toward the researcher in their few phone conversations, maintaining a distant tone that began to change once the researcher had met her in person. The origins of this distrust unfolded during the interview, especially in a story about a "very bad piece of journalism where [a neighbor] is locking her gate with chains as if we lived like that, as if we lived in armored houses, and it's not like that." Her narrative thus expressed her unease regarding potential negative representations of her neighborhood and its residents made by outsiders like the members of the research team.

Juana's concerns about mob violence also evince a more local experience of the revolt: "I support all demands about education, healthcare, the pension system, the elderly being handed crumbs, but I can't agree with lashing out against everything. What happened here was a rampage that ended up hurting us, the common people." She insisted that a wrecked subway system meant intolerably long bus commutes, vandalized bus stops and traffic lights meant traffic chaos, and the torching of local supermarkets made grocery shopping difficult. The attacks on urban infrastructure meant a step backward for the little urban improvement she, as a long-standing resident, had seen over the years and did nothing to improve urban inequality: "In the end, the rich stay rich and live in comfort."

In this narrative, violent protests have similar effects to the (re)stigmatization of the area and its residents, especially by institutions. Juana sees institutional mistreatment in the context of urban precarity as dating back to the area's origins as a public housing complex: from the scruffy "green areas" to the tiny homes. The mistreatment has not changed with time and is nowadays expressed as abandonment, interrupted only briefly when "they [politicians] come [to the neighborhood] when they need a vote, because when they don't, they forget about us." When asked why she believes the municipality looks down on residents of the area, she recounted several times when authorities failed to provide a timely and adequate response to the needs of the neighborhood, telling of the poor quality or outright lack of local investment and maintenance. Because improvements seldom materialize, if at all (e.g., Álvarez and Cavieres 2016), her neighborhood appears undeserving of the government's resources, time, or interest. This contrasts with her claims that the district's better-off neighborhoods and their residents receive more respectful treatment, expressed in new playgrounds or cleanup after local street markets. Thus, her narrative evokes a feeling that residents of social housing are granted only second-class citizenship.

Although territorial stigma allows Juana to understand inequality and institutional mistreatment, it also sets the limits of what she considers acceptable ways to support the

social unrest without reinforcing stigma, even if they might seem contradictory. Despite her disdain for politics and the long history of institutional mistreatment of her neighborhood, Juana still believes in institutional channels for demands. For instance, she believes in voting, even affirming: “Most of us don’t vote, just as the rich want. That’s why these things happen to us.” As such, by the time of the interview, Juana was encouraging her neighbors to vote for the drafting of a new constitution. She briefly mentioned having attended a meeting of a territorial *cabildo* formed in a nearby lower-middle-class neighborhood with the sole intention of expressing her rejection of violent protest. This participation was, however, one-off and did not necessarily implied a new form of relations with the residents of local lower-middle-class neighborhoods. Indeed, toward the end of the year, she avoided responding to invitations from the neighborhood committees, one of them to a children’s Christmas party, because, “to tell the truth, the [middle-class neighborhood] has always looked down on us . . . And I think it’s better they stay on their side and we on ours. Not all of them are the same, but the majority of people from there are [like that].” In contrast, she praised an organization formed by leaders of neighborhood committees representing the entire neighborhood, whose purpose was to present joint demands to the municipality. She believed they became “more united, as [the neighborhoods] had previously been separated” despite experiencing the same issues. Thus, stigma dictated the actions, networks, and organizational spaces that she could safely occupy, even in the context of social revolt.

### ***Fabiola: resisting and contesting stigma toward aid recipients***

Conversation with Fabiola, older than age fifty, took a more biographical shape. Her account began with her arrival in the neighborhood, and she briefly described the difficulties in getting used to what she considered a dangerous place. As she delved deeper into her story, she wove a narrative around her ability to get on and “move forward,” an idiom she used repeatedly. It was in this context that both her participation in a housing committee and a strained relationship with the state as a benefits claimant took center stage. Although the former appears to have fostered her expectations of mobility, the latter seems surrounded by obstacles and permeated by stigmatizing representations and mistreatment as the main source of grievances. It is from here that she positions herself within the social unrest, expressing support for the revolt.

Fabiola’s participation in the housing committee served as a starting point for discussing her views and experiences of the revolt, likely encouraged by the fact that the researcher met her through a committee leader. Such organizations, composed mainly of women seeking to become homeowners, are the contemporary expression of the *pobladores* movement (Angelcos and Pérez 2017) and engage in mobilizations and conversations with government agencies to generate housing solutions. When asked whether her participation had changed her political perspective, she replied: “Sometimes you think, if we’re struggling to obtain a house, politics doesn’t come into it. But on the other hand, I understand that it [politics] is good because we still have to understand why this has happened, why we don’t have plots, why land is given to private entities.” She continued with a story of how an invitation from one committee member to join a network of social organizations with a clearer political profile caused internal conflicts within the committee. While the proposal was problematic for some of her peers, it was not so for her, as she believed such a move might allow her a broader understanding of their problems and struggles.

Uninterrupted by the researcher, Fabiola went on in her narrative to connect these political notions with a story that casts light on the political through state mistreatment of those who seek social benefits. The story can be summarized as follows: A week before the interview, accompanying her daughter to register for college, Fabiola found that tuition

fees were much higher than she had thought. While she could have used her bank card (her daughter could later qualify for free tuition and have the fees refunded), she refused to pay, reasoning that she would have to pay interest and, most importantly, could risk losing the housing subsidy she had been hoping for, as such a large expense could be seen to place her above the poverty line. She told her daughter: “I never liked them [the young men] smashing up the town, but you know, now I’ll tear up this student loan IOU because I want free tuition for you. Why should I have to pay so much for you to go to school?” While Fabiola, like Juana, acknowledges that the cost of wrecking urban infrastructure is often paid by the poor who use it daily, the specifics of means-tested social benefits prevented her from making an important investment that could eventually help her family’s journey toward social mobility. Her story not only makes explicit her understanding and support for forms of protest she would not otherwise endorse; it also shows her unease with social policies that force her to appear “needy enough” to remain eligible for a housing subsidy by keeping a tight rein on income and expenditure.

Fabiola’s narrative expresses a sense of dignity and gendered self-worth that goes unrecognized and even penalized by social policy. This was revealed when she recounted her skills in navigating precarious living conditions and unstable income throughout her life, raising her two children with little or no help from their fathers. She has earned a livelihood by pooling her income as a domestic worker, other casual jobs, and some state benefits, as well as striving to save and stay out of debt. Despite her best efforts, achieving a means of survival sometimes became critical, for example, in those periods when, like many women (PNUD 2010), Fabiola had been unable to work while caring for her children’s health. Such skills are particularly relevant in low-income sectors, as they have concrete effects on household living conditions (see Raczynski and Serrano 1985) and their possibilities of achieving a dignified life when threatened by the material context (Han 2012).

Women, generally the ones responsible for the day-to-day reproduction of family and household, are also the main beneficiaries of social services and state help (Auyero 2012; Rojas Lasch 2019; Lavinás 2013), so feel more intensely the neoliberal stigma that comes with it. Although concrete policies represent modest material help in order to make ends meet, they are nevertheless often experienced as institutional mistreatment. Asked about her relationship with the municipality, Fabiola responded:

Every time I applied for help, I came back in tears because no one really understands; no one listens. You may talk, you may cry, but no one cares. It’s as if . . . you know, “We’ll leave a note to call you again.” Then I thought, “Why should I be crying? Why should I cry about asking [for help]?” I don’t need to cry or humiliate myself any longer. I used to think, “If you show up with dirty shoes or long nails, it’s like they’d care more about you.” Some said, “Perhaps you overdressed.” “If you don’t look the part, they might think you aren’t that needy.”

Part of her experience of institutional mistreatment includes disinclination on the part of social workers and administrators to give advice on social benefits, where inadequate information results in losing out on social benefits or extreme delays in receiving them. This is what Auyero (2012) calls the disciplinary “politics of waiting,” which housing committees have attempted to contest (Koppelman 2018). Indeed, she once missed out on a housing subsidy because of a lack of timely information, and she recalled how, when accompanying her daughter downtown to collect her disability allowance, she was forced to ask for a free bus ride home, as they had been refused the money because of unexpected red tape. These experiences not only have concrete effects on her livelihood and chances of social mobility but also reveal attacks on her worth when engaging with social policy. If we look more closely, the previous excerpt from Fabiola also tells of

stigmatization through morally degraded representations of benefits claimants as grimy and dependent.

Stigmatization and the resulting strained relationship with the state appear in Fabiola's narrative as the backdrop to her forms of engagement with the social unrest and her experience in the housing committee. Although in her everyday life she contests poor-oriented stigma through practice, the committee contests it collectively through symbolic and physical territorial struggles (Sisson 2020). This has taught Fabiola that achieving a better life often requires that she overcome shame and reach out beyond established channels. This is most apparent in an account of her loose involvement in looting, where she was careful that her fellow churchgoers not see her. As such, unlike Juana, she is willing to negotiate the limits to which certain forms of violence could be used, along with broader forms of demonstration.

As happened to some *pobladora* women during the 1970s and 1980s (Álvarez-López 2023), through participation, Fabiola underwent a process of politicization that found resonance and legitimation with the spread of social unrest. Bursting with excitement, she described the many nights she joined her neighbors in pot banging “because of unity, to be united with the neighbors.” When the researcher again asked her reasons for protesting, she summed up certain debates within the committee: “Because of everything we’re going through, mainly because of our needs. Yes, because of everything, because of the land that’s being privatized, because of the water supply they want to privatize, because of so many other things they want to do. Because of that, we have to go out, we still have to go out . . . I think, don’t you?” Although housing committees have worked to symbolically reconceptualize poverty as a condition to be overcome through struggle, thus detaching it from a sense of shame (Angelcos 2012), Fabiola’s narrative also reveals a nascent understanding of the structural dimensions of struggles.

## Discussion and final thoughts

This article has shown how stigma can be central to the narratives of the 2019 social unrest among residents of stigmatized neighborhoods in Chile. We present the case of those in a more disadvantaged position, focusing on two mature female organizers with limited formal education. For Pinkster, Ferrier, and Hoekstra (2020), stigma “sticks” differently to different subjects, with age, education, and gender being the most prominent markers of difference in the interviewees’ narratives. For the younger, more educated protagonists of unrest, stigma appears mainly as a resource in political claims regarding inequality seeming to affect their individual worth in a less prominent fashion. It would seem that, as in Cairns (2018, 1227), “young people enact alternative place narratives in order to preserve a sense of their own identities, even as the stigma associated with their communities powerfully shapes their sense of place,” helping them defuse its symbolic power.

We also showed how Juana’s and Fabiola’s narratives of the unrest were mainly articulated through territorial and social stigma, shaping the way they understood and interpreted it. Although they briefly highlighted major demands—pensions, housing, health care, water supply—as reasons to support the unrest, these demands resonate with what Caldeira (1990) found among female community organizers in the favelas of São Paulo who used certain discourses to legitimize their practices before researchers. This could be the case: by the time of the interviews, these demands had come to feature in everyday conversations, on walls across the city, on social media, and even, to some extent, on television. On the whole, their narratives nevertheless connected deeply with grievances expressed freely at the beginning of interviews, when they were asked about their lives in the neighborhood. The two women talked with authority about

stigmatization—an intimate, everyday experience (Tyler 2020)—authority they may not have felt comfortable expressing if asked about the social unrest from a focus on the national political process. Such authority was also present among the younger, more educated women we interviewed. Thus, it is clear that territorial and social stigma helped the women with fewer educational resources translate inequalities—as a grievance at the heart of social unrest—into their everyday lives.

Territorial and social stigma can also impose greater or lesser limits—at least narratively—on forms of engagement with the revolt. Juana prevented herself from participating in protests and denounced mob violence of any type. Although she argued against the immediate negative effects of violence in her urban landscape, engaging in such practices might also invite the risk of (re)inscribing the stigma of criminality on her neighborhood. Thus, she narratively deflected stigma (Sisson 2020), at least when speaking to a middle-class researcher introduced by a leader from a nearby lower-middle-class neighborhood. She thus presented herself (and her neighbors) as performing a culture of decency (Martínez and Palacios 1996) against the “ghettoized” representations (Salcedo and Rasse 2012) that outsiders ascribe to the areas. As did Juana, Fabiola contested stigmatization through her own narrative of worth, but she seemed less constrained by stigma in terms of her engagement with the revolt, arguably as a consequence of the fieldwork researcher introduced by committee peers with whom she had demonstrated. Other narratives of engagement might have emerged if the researcher had been introduced to Fabiola, for instance, through contacts from her church.

To conclude, this article proposes that in contexts of national unrest, different forms of stigma allow for readings of the conflicts and the engagement of those stigmatized as they struggle against the symbolic power of social stigmatization. In Chile in 2019, as seen in the work of Auyero (2003) on Argentina in 1993, experiences of belittlement, humiliation, abandonment, waiting, and devalued representations of poverty became experiences that mobilized support for these revolts. The symbolic dimension of inequality and mistreatment that results from it became a source of grievances that shaped forms of engagement in the Chilean social unrest. The notion of dignity seems to encapsulate this, leading the way for the stigmatization of poverty to translate into certain forms of political mobilization.

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