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Reclaiming Stigma: Alternative Explorations of the Construct

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INTRODUCTION

Reclaiming Stigma: Alternative Explorations of the Construct

Jessica Eckstein & Mike Allen

Previously published research tends to rely on oversimplifications of Goffman's (1963) work to define stigma—attributes/qualities devalued in particular situations. In descending order of typical approaches by Communication scholars, stigma is typically examined by looking at (a) *if* and then *who* is stigmatized, (b) *how* it affects that particular group of people, and (c) *what* can or should be done about it, with the latter technique inclining toward simplistic prescription of a “stop doing it” admonishment. Missing from this discussion is examination of the construct/ion of stigma. With few exceptions, the nuances of this construct—a subject of potentially great interest to communication scholars—are rarely explored.

Certainly, the underlying importance of the development, valuing, and assignation of stigma drives much communication scholarship: terminology or label assignation arguments over GLBT participants (e.g., bears, grinders, dykes), health care (e.g., PLWA versus HIV+), substance addiction (e.g., users versus abusers), relationship functions (e.g., healthy versus dysfunctional relationships), and relational identities (e.g., survivors versus victims). However, despite the advent of increasingly immediate forms of interpersonal and public communication, the *use* of labels, interpersonal behaviors, and complicated rhetorical constructions related to stigma have become more taken-for-granted by scholars using methods of social framing and influence. Rather than simplistically labeling a group as “stigmatized” and/or jumping to the assumption that this label is always negative, a more complex examination would search for the underlying mechanisms at play. This special issue of *Communication Studies* is a continuation of an ongoing set of panels from annual meetings of the

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Central States Communication Association. Authors in this issue were competitively selected to address a dearth in the field by scrutinizing the nature of stigma.

For example, what does it mean to say that “a stigma exists”? Stigmas, negative or positive depending on their inference or implications, are typically assumed—by their users and even those who study them—to be “deservingly” assigned. Whereas some groups/individuals seek or desire such distinctions, some desperately wish to avoid or deny the stigma assigned. Stigmas are differential because, “one person’s terrorist is another person’s patriot.” Stigma can provide recognition as well as establish affect towards the target.

Groups, particularly those outside mainstream “normative” standards, fear the assignment of labels or the use of labels by persons outside the community. The authors in this issue consider how various stigmas are derived and applied. Further, each piece deals not only with groups considered outside the mainstream, but also contemplates how groups representing themselves as mainstream are portrayed. The authors embrace diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives in their original works, referencing current, societal exemplars through both full research projects and critical thought-pieces.

Because the rejection of how others view us represents a need to create a self-controlled identity, we often reject (or have alternative views of) others culturally assigned to the same group in which we reside. The simplest, and to-date most commonly applied, explanation would be to argue that stigma operates like attribution theory. Clearly, there are elements of a stigma that are connected to attribution when group assignment invokes a number of values. But some persons are stigmatized as individuals for specific actions that become part of the public discourse at specific-individual levels (e.g., OJ Simpson, Donald Zimmerman, Miley Cyrus) and more generic “identity” levels (e.g., “atypical” abuse victims such as parents and men). These stigmas are linked to popular notions, but also carry implications that operate a bit differently than in an attribution framework. They also beg the question, can an individual be stigmatized without reference to group membership?

In the final analysis, stigma becomes a stigma when the population or some clear segment accepts the notoriety involved with the action. A stigma is linked inevitably to some type of public recognition or action shared with others. In this special issue, Salek provides a sense of how a considered-powerful-by-many religious group deals with its felt-stigma and shows how larger cultural messages (e.g., a country espousing religious freedom) conflict in deciding the extent and nature of stigma used. But essentially, as Salek points out, these are old issues—communicators seeking to avoid the attachment of labeling, a process that often begins in childhood (e.g., see Striley’s piece). As such, even mass media distribution of interpersonal-level messages is often essential to the public consciousness and corresponding development of any stigma, a factor also shown in Holton, Farrell, and Fudge’s look at autism treatment in the news. Macro-level influence of normativity also affects and is affected by interpersonal-level interactions, attitudes and messages discussed by Smith in terms of an interpersonal model of stigma.

These outcomes of stigmatization do not necessarily need to be negative, as Smith and Hughes articulate in regard to functional purposes of infectious disease stigma.

Illustrating again the not-always-negative or marginalizing process of stigma, Striley also shows how even “positive” stigmas operate for good and bad; ingroup/outgroup equivalencies thus become hard to distinguish in a constantly diversifying society of individuals eager to “claim” their difference for themselves. Bringing us full circle back to a social identity analysis, Stearns’s consideration of Goffman’s “conundrum” indicates the choices faced by communicators in a variety of circumstances. If the normal expectation for communicators is to simply comply or fit into established roles—to “get along” by “not creating waves” and accepting the existing social order—then the failure to accept a social order, to reject or ask that the status quo be changed, provides the basis for assigning a stigma. As Stearns showed in the case of Rosa Parks, the decision to refuse to move on a bus invoked a stigma or application of a label (i.e., “uppity Negro”) considered negative; however, the essence of change required not only the use of the label (and the accompanying social, critical debate surrounding its use), but also then led to the embracement or disavowal of the action that generated the term. Through the lens of history, such actions can become positively viewed, but it was the initial stigmatizing symbol that formed the basis of change, and an ultimately explicit rejection of the label.

Through this special issue, we seek to push the exploration of stigma further. The ideas provide a basis for understanding the importance and pervasiveness in communication of the role of stigmas. If a stigma reflects and assigns value, what are the ways in which stigma can be good? How does the process of a productive stigma work—societally, interpersonally, and individually? Through analysis of the construct of stigma (as opposed to its mere application to groups of people we research/study), we can someday come back to the main goal: If stigma is a *created* and *fixable* difference, we can find actual, feasible means (i.e., *applied* stigma management tactics—personal and political) to address interpersonal stigma for those affected—interpersonally and societally.

Reference

- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.