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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM

A NEW LOOK AT STIGMATIZATION IN AND OF ORGANIZATIONS

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Although stigma has been studied extensively in psychology and sociology, there has been little research on stigmatization in organizational settings. This special topic forum, which includes four articles, builds on previous social science research and expands its coverage both to individuals within organizations and to organizations themselves. As we note here, these four articles provide an opportunity to examine not only the harm caused by stigma but its potential benefits as well.

Over the last forty years, social psychologists and sociologists have made stigmatization the subject of intensive research in a variety of settings. There has been a relative neglect, however, of research on stigmatization in organizational and work settings. The roles that people occupy at work, their experiences while performing these roles, and the groups and organizations with which they are affiliated all serve as potentially powerful sources of stigma. Stigmas that originate outside the organization (e.g., stigmas attached to the actions of corporate leaders in their personal lives) intrude upon and influence what happens inside the organization. Stigmas that originate in the workplace (e.g., stigmas resulting from organizational performance or procedures) affect control processes inside organizations and individuals' activities outside of work. This special topic forum builds on the social psychological and sociological work on stigmas to explore the relevance of this research for individuals and groups within organizations—as well as organizations themselves—by presenting four articles. Three of these articles address the issue of stigmatization of individuals within organizations—one as a result of disclosure of an otherwise invisible stigma (Ragins), one as a result of the transfer of stigma as the result of association with stigma-

tized individuals (Kulik, Bainbridge, & Cregan), and one as the result of stigma becoming attached to corporate elites who are associated with corporate failures (an organization-level article; Wiesenfeld, Wurthmann, & Hambrick). The fourth article, also at the level of the organization, discusses stigmatization of the organization itself as a form of organizational illegitimacy (Hudson).

Although much recent research has examined stigma, Goffman's (1963) comprehensive introduction remains the canonical understanding for this phenomenon. Goffman identified three forms of stigmatizing conditions for individuals: (1) physical abominations (e.g., physical deformities), (2) character blemishes (e.g., mental disabilities, homosexuality, obesity), and (3) "tribal identities" (e.g., race, sex, religion). Based on this definition, stigma represents an attribute that produces a social identity that is devalued or derogated by persons within a particular culture at a particular point in time (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998); it is a social construction that results from an interaction between the target of stigmatization and the audience of perceivers that produce the stigmatization.

Goffman (1963) observed that parties to an interaction form impressions of each other and compare each other's actual social identity

against a "virtual social identity" (the expectation of what persons in that situation *should* be like), and he reserved the term *stigma* for any discrepancies between the two that trigger the inference of a wide variety of negative attitudes, beliefs, or emotions. Thus, for example, a physical deformity can lead to an impression of the person as not only physically unattractive but also generally "bad," lacking in intelligence, morality, and/or social skills. Because stigmatization is situation specific, however, an attribute that can be stigmatizing in one situation may be neutral or even positive in another. Stigmas are neither inevitable nor permanent but may change over time, with changes in audience and the nature of the interaction between target and audience.¹

Why does stigmatization deserve the attention of organizational scientists? The articles in this issue bring attention to the role of stigma as a natural component of sensemaking in organizations. In so doing, they provide insight into a variety of organizational phenomena, including leadership, teamwork, motivation, and intergroup relations. At the same time, they bring attention to the harmful effects that stigmatization can have on organizations and employees. By definition, victims of stigmatization (both individual and organizational) lose legitimacy and valued reputations. Stigmatized individuals are denied opportunities available to the non-stigmatized and are subject to discrimination that includes bullying, harassment, and social

rejection. They may form negative self-identities that become self-fulfilling prophecies; take, for example, employees with mental illness who come to believe that they are less competent or deserving of advancement opportunities and act in ways that confirm their erroneous perceptions to themselves. As noted by Ragins, persons with invisible stigmas engage in coping strategies that can impose a personal cost on their health and well-being, career attitudes, and advancement.

Moreover, the social processes that accompany stigmatization within a group or organization can prove disruptive. As Kulik et al. point out, stigmatization can undermine the cohesiveness, morale, and effectiveness of an entire organization as the result of gossip and a climate of distrust. Organizational leaders who are stigmatized as the result of corporate failures or misdeeds may engage in efforts to manage the predicament in ways that worsen rather than improve the image of the organization (Wiesenfeld et al.). Further, subjecting organizational leaders to stigmatization that exceeds what is warranted can have a chilling effect on the willingness of others to serve in leadership roles (Wiesenfeld et al.).

NEW APPROACHES TO STIGMA AND STIGMATIZATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Although in some previous work on stigma and stigmatization researchers have discussed the nexus between stigma and identity (e.g., Goffman, 1963), much stigma research has been divorced from identity and other social psychological processes. Instead, the focus has been almost entirely on negative effects for the stigmatized individual or group. The articles in this STF provide new approaches to stigma, first, by highlighting the role of stigmatization in the process whereby personal identity and organizational identity are formed, maintained, and protected, and, second, by explicitly or implicitly suggesting potential positive functions of stigmatization for both the individual and the organization.

Extending Stigma and Identity Interconnections

Organizational identity consists of the beliefs about the central, enduring, and distinctive

¹ That stigma is situation specific represents the dominant view and the view of the authors of the articles in this special topic forum. There is, however, an evolutionary view that posits a biologically rooted, universal nature for some stigma because of empirical evidence of cross-cultural similarity in perceptions of stigma. Psychologists (e.g., Kurzban & Leary, 2001) have built on this evidence to posit that natural selection has led to the adoption of cognitive mechanisms that have had value in solving the problem of whom to reject from group participation. Specifically, they theorize that humans in all cultures have had to address the issue of what persons to avoid as poor social exchange partners (e.g., the untrustworthy, such as thieves or cheaters) or to reduce the risk of disease (e.g., those with severe physical or mental disabilities) and what groups to join for the purpose of competing against others (e.g., those who are sociable and cooperative). This evolutionary approach neither justifies the use of particular stigmas today nor guarantees their adaptiveness in modern-day social and physical environments; instead, it emphasizes how stigmas might have originated and provides a basis for arguing that they may be difficult to change.

characteristics of the organization consensually held by organizational participants (Weick, 1995: 43). Similarly, personal identity consists of the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics each individual person attributes to himself or herself. There is a complex interplay between personal and organizational identity that is often ignored. Not only is the identity of the organization shaped in part by the identities of the employees and other persons associated with that organization, but the personal identity of each organizational participant is affected in important ways by his or her identification with the organization. These processes are influenced by stigma and stigmatization so that personal and organizational identities may reflect the effects of such tainting or devaluation. Some of the authors in this STF concentrate on the individual level and others on the organizational level, but, as Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton have observed, "Identity and identification are terms that travel easily across levels of analysis" (2000: 13). The four articles together suggest potential similarities in the role that stigmatization plays in personal and organizational identity.

The first article, by Ragins, is concerned primarily with the consequences of disclosure of an invisible stigma across both work and nonwork domains. At one extreme is denial, where the person conceals his or her stigma in both domains and, according to the author, denial is associated with the most severe negative consequences in the form of ambiguity and stress. The healthiest situation exists where there is full disclosure in both work and nonwork domains—that is, there is no "disclosure disconnect" across the two domains. Similarly, one could argue that invisible stigmas also exist at the organizational level, with the healthiest situation being that in which there is no disclosure disconnect—that is, disclosure exists both within and outside the organization. One invisible stigma at the organizational level is corporate corruption. Such corruption can be disclosed within the organization (e.g., within the top management team) but concealed from those outside the organization. In this case the organization will experience stresses that diminish effectiveness. Take, for example, John Dean's report to former President Nixon that, as the result of the Watergate cover-up, there was a "cancer—within, close to the Presidency—that's

growing" (National Archives and Records Administration, 1973: 5).

Although Ragins focuses on the case where the stigmatized identity originates outside the work domain (such as when an employee brings his or her gay sexual orientation to the workplace), her model also appears relevant to the situation in which one's work or organization is the source of the stigma. Work is known to be a primary basis for personal identity; consequently, it should not come as a surprise to find that the type of work one does or the nature of the organization in which one is employed is an important source of stigmatization. An example is "dirty work," which can be classified according to the primary taint of the work—physical, social, moral—and the occupational prestige of the work—low, high (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Dirty work is often an invisible stigma to those outside the work setting so that some of the disclosure disconnects that Ragins discusses apply to it. Consider an individual who works for a tobacco company. To the extent that those outside the work domain stigmatize the individual on the basis of his or her organization, a disclosure disconnect exists that leads to physical and emotional stress (Ragins). This is a situation with which the individual employee and the management of the organization in which the employee works must cope. An important practical issue is how the management of the organizations in which such employees work helps them cope with these disconnects in a way that avoids emotional and physical costs for the individual and loss of productivity for the organization.

The next article, by Kulik et al., presents a social cognition-based discussion of the transfer of stigma from one individual to another within the workplace (e.g., "courtesy stigma"; Goffman, 1963). Kulik et al. highlight the various pathways along which cognitive processing may (or sometimes may not) result in stigmatization of those who associate with stigmatized individuals. It seems reasonable that one of the costs that persons contemplating disclosure of their invisible stigmatized attributes may consider is the potential negative consequences for their workplace associates via the transfer of stigma. As noted by the authors, those stigmatized by association have fewer organizational or legal protections than those who possess the stigmatizing attribute and, thus, may suffer from

particularly severe consequences in the workplace.

Kulik et al.'s model emphasizes the role that higher-order processing of the person who associates with stigmatized others plays in helping to ameliorate the tendency to transfer stigma. This suggests that organizations must provide employees with accurate information about the nature of the stigmatized attribute (e.g., it is not contagious) and the nature of, or rationale for, the association itself (e.g., it is involuntary, such as an assigned mentoring relationship) if they want to help to mitigate this process. Additionally, promoting closer relationships between coworkers may discourage stigma by association to the extent that such relationships lead to deeper cognitive processing and interfere with the confirmation of stigmatizing initial impressions.

Kulik et al. focus on cognitive dynamics, but their recognition that stigma transfer originates with members of negatively evaluated groups suggests another mechanism for stigma by association. This other mechanism relies on group processes instead of individual differences or a collection of individual processes and is explicated in the theories of social identity and self-categorization (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004; Tajfel, 1972). In other words, stigma by association occurs as a result of the ingroup member's decision to interact with a member of a stigmatized, devalued outgroup. Kulik et al. see the resulting stigma as spreading indirectly through contamination with a devalued other, but it can instead be directly assigned to an individual as a result of that individual's deviation from the group norms prohibiting association with a devalued other. This approach leads to interesting predictions that complement those made by Kulik et al. For example, more peripheral members of the ingroup (those who themselves may have lower status, seem less prototypical, or are otherwise uncertain of their membership status) may be more likely to stigmatize others in the ingroup who choose to associate with stigmatized outgroup members, in an effort to make themselves appear more prototypical. Kulik et al.'s work can also be generalized to suggest that stigma transfers across organizations via associations among their members, as long as some of those members have stigmatized identities.

Finally, the last two articles, by Wiesenfeld et al. and Hudson, show us how organizational stigmas become identified with identity markers (Elsbach, 2004) that are easily recognized by organizational audiences, because, in part, they mimic the markers attached to stigmatized individuals (e.g., Goffman's "abominations of the body," "blemishes of individual character," and "tribal stigma"). These markers may include artifacts (e.g., the neon signs that advertise "erotic" massage parlors versus therapeutic massage centers), geographic locations (e.g., an organization's address in a low-rent, high-crime neighborhood), salient activities or performance (e.g., an organization that files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy), labels (e.g., a gay spa that calls itself a "bathhouse" versus a health and fitness center), and ratings or rankings (e.g., a corporation that has its bond rating reduced from A to B, or a business school whose ranking in a large-scale survey falls out of the "top twenty"). These identity markers convey that these organizations are in stigmatized categories but, at the same time, are often used as symbols of the organizations' uncompromising stances on social issues and their unwillingness to be co-opted by organizations with opposing values.

Revealing the Positive Side of Stigma

Although stigmatization is widely regarded as negative, we suggest that the harm associated with stigmatization results from the overextension or misuse of what is basically a natural component of sensemaking. In fact, several positive consequences of stigmatization are suggested by the articles in this STF, for both individuals and organizations.² Stigmatization

² Here, "natural" implies that the sensemaking process is unavoidable. We argue that stigmatization results from sensemaking. Whether one views stigmatization as inherently evil or dysfunctional may depend on whether one views the process as primarily deliberate or automatic. Nonetheless, even though stigmatization involves derogation, negative stereotypes, and negative affect, we argue that positive consequences may flow from it. We certainly do not intend to minimize the costs of stigmatization; we are mindful that the "benefits" in any particular situation may easily be offset by costs. For example, Furuya (2002) concluded that economists such as Rasmussen (1996), who argued that the stigmatization of criminals leads to a net social benefit, err by underestimating the social costs associated with the stigmatization of those having arrest and criminal records. Furuya

of individuals, groups of individuals, or organizations can contribute to social or organizational control, the encouragement of organizationally or socially valued behaviors, the promotion of long-term organizational survival through the blaming of corporate leaders, and challenges of the stigma that can empower group participants in collective movements and/or help to construct stable and unique personal identities.

First, along with formal legal sanctions and the guilt associated with the violation of internalized moral rules, stigmatization and the social disapproval that accompanies stigma make up one of the three necessary mechanisms for establishing and maintaining social control (Wrong, 1961). Societies, organizations, and groups are all able to function as coherent social entities because of the existence of enforced ideals for human behavior. People internalize these ideals and strive to form personal identities that conform to them. Deviations from these ideals become the source of criticism and other negative sanctions. Applications of these ideals can result in negative consequences for some stigmatized groups—for example, persons with arrest or criminal records may be unfairly excluded from employment and as a consequence may revert to criminal acts.

Yet positive consequences are also possible. The economist Rasmussen (1996) posited that the more criminals are stigmatized in a society, the greater the benefit will be to the "total economic welfare" of society because of the deterrence of crime. Similarly, in the area of public health, the potential public benefits of stigma have been discussed. Stigmatization of persons who engage in unhealthy behaviors such as drug or alcohol abuse or smoking can aid in reducing these behaviors, just as the loss of stigma associated with the behaviors can exacerbate their tendency. Bayer and Stuber (2006: 47) have questioned "the commonplace assertion that stigmatization [is] a retrograde force" by bringing attention to the fact that a large part

of the success of the antismoking movement comes from the stigmatization of smokers.

One could extrapolate from these observations to propose that employees are more likely to act in a trustworthy, reliable manner and to refrain from stealing, harassing, cheating, or otherwise harming their coworkers and the public to the extent that they believe they will be stigmatized for such deeds. For example, as emphasized by Kulik et al., negative gossip can lead to harm in the workplace when information leaks about associations that some individuals have with stigmatized others. The stigmatization of those who engage in negative gossip could therefore provide positive benefits to the organization by improving workplace efficiency and cohesiveness. Employees may refrain from negative gossip, for example, so that they may be seen by themselves and others as the type of people who conform to the virtual identities prized in their workplace. Further, based on the social identity approach suggested above, stigma by association can be seen as a way of providing sanctions for the social deviance of those ingroup members who elect to associate with members of the stigmatized outgroup, particularly when the association puts the status or integrity of the ingroup at risk (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993).

Similarly, stigmatization of organizations helps to maintain organizational ideals within society. Laws, regulations, rankings, or public opinion polls are used as both stigmatizing marks and standards by which a stigmatized organization is identified. As Hudson notes, "legal and regulative indicators" (e.g., zoning ordinances) can be important proxies for measuring the "attitudes of social audiences" (p. 263). To avoid the stigma associated with these public evaluations, organizations avoid actions that cause them to be put in the same category as the stigmatized organizations.

Second, stigmatization helps to encourage socially or organizationally valued behaviors. Within an organization, this is equivalent to the formation of social capital—that is, the goodwill that exists among employees, as manifested in positive behaviors such as organizational citizenship behaviors, helping, trust, loyalty, and open communications. There would be difficulty in accumulating social capital without pointing out the behaviors that employees should *not* manifest. Crucial to the process of bringing at-

states that while "none of the community members may find it in his or her own interests to take in a stigmatized individual [, t]he community as a whole could still improve the ex ante welfare level by collective risk-sharing" (2002: 290)—for example, in the form of hiring those with criminal records. He notes, however, that such collective risk taking would require an enforcement mechanism in order to guarantee an increased level of welfare.

tention to the ideal employee who goes above and beyond the call of duty in his or her contributions to the organization and coworkers is the stigmatization of the "bottom feeders" in an organization. These may be actual persons, but more often they are hypothetical persons who are stigmatized as parasites, deadwood, and social loafers. For example, negative gossipers—actual or hypothetical—who work to the detriment of their coworkers, workgroups, or the organization as a whole provide the prototype for what organizations do not want their employees to resemble (Kulik et al.).

At the organizational level, the stigmatization of managers and organizations as a result of inappropriate responses to corporate failure (e.g., high pay and arrogant remarks, as are typically highlighted by journalists) signals and defines corporate behaviors that are less likely to lead to stigma in the future. As Wiesenfeld et al. report:

The individual elite who wishes to mitigate the eventual risk of stigmatization and devaluation may engage in certain behaviors... for example, the person may concertedly adopt a style of humility, even carrying this philosophy over to his or her pay package, in an attempt to avert emotional biases that can exacerbate stigma (p. 247).

In other words, organizational stigma—by providing a standard of deviance to be avoided—may benefit organizations by prompting members or groups in the organization to engage in valuable, counterstigmatizing behaviors that can improve the long-term prospects for the organization's survival.

Third, stigmatization can promote long-term survival of organizations with their legitimacy intact. Because organizational stigma markers are often attached to part, but not all, of an organization, organizational members may be able to cleanly isolate and remove the stigmatized parts of the organization while preserving the legitimacy of the remainder of the organization. In this manner Wiesenfeld et al. describe the "singling out" of corporate leaders for blame after a corporate failure as a common response to the stigma of such failures. Wiesenfeld et al. note that external audiences of organizations, such as the general public, stockholders, and customers, desire simple explanations for corporate failures and are often motivated by the emotion of "schadenfreude" (i.e., desiring to

punish or harm those seen as responsible for the failures). Given these constituent preferences, arbiters of organizational legitimacy (e.g., journalists, legal watchdog groups, and industry analysts) are likely to attach the mark of stigma to corporate elites (e.g., CEOs and directors) alone, rather than to the entire organization more generally.

While Wiesenfeld et al. note that these corporate elites may pay unduly for the failure of the organization, this isolation of stigma allows the organization to survive and move forward stigma free after the corporate elites are removed from the organization. Further, attaching the stigma of failure solely to corporate leaders helps to preserve our "romantic" notions of leadership (i.e., our heroic visions of leaders as "white knights" that lead organizations into battle and are largely responsible for victory or defeat). This "romance of leadership" (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) may help organizations to gain the confidence of arbiters of legitimacy and other constituents when new corporate elites are brought in to replace the fired ones. Finally, attaching stigma to a corporate elite, who is then forced out of the organization, may help to maintain the legitimacy of the arbiter and his or her organization by showing clear disidentification between the arbiter and the stigmatized elite. As Wiesenfeld et al. note:

By shunning the stigmatized, economic arbiters differentiate themselves and their organizations from the tainted. The act of visibly shunning a stigmatized leader helps to establish a perceptual boundary between the economic arbiter and the stigmatized (p. 243).

Fourth, stigmatization can lead to challenges of the validity of the stigma that can produce positive effects for individuals, groups, or organizations. For example, stigmatization of a group of people on the basis of race, disability, or other important classifications may trigger collective movements. A stigma can be a call to action to overcome discrimination and restore justice. Although coping with stigmas to avoid their negative consequences may, in the long run, be "a draining process that ultimately hurts individuals," an alternative, empowerment view would see stigmatized individuals "not as passive targets of prejudice who focus only on avoiding negative consequences but rather as active participants in society who seek to under-

stand their social world and create positive outcomes" (Shih, 2004: 180).

Contrary to the hypothesis that stigmatization leads to self-devaluation, Crocker and Quinn (2000) provide evidence that comparisons of stigmatized and nonstigmatized groups on self-esteem typically yield small or nonsignificant differences. Perhaps one reason for these results is that stigmatized people organize into empowering movements that overcome discrimination toward them and instill a sense of pride and identity that was previously missing. For example, the "culture of the deaf" and "queer theory" both emerged as positive identity responses to stigmatization. Ironically, group empowerment may be more likely to occur when there is blatant stigmatization of the group and may be more difficult when stigmas become more subtle. For example, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was energized by the open racial prejudice and discrimination of the time. Could a similarly successful civil rights movement be mobilized today given the prevalence of more subtle symbolic and modern racism?

Ragins' article in particular is important for highlighting the importance of disclosure of an invisible stigma in order to obtain the benefit of collective action. Ragins proposes that disclosure is more likely to the extent that there are similar others in the situation and personal relationships that support disclosure. One could build on these propositions to hypothesize that persons with an invisible stigma are motivated to find others in the workplace who also possess that stigma or who are supportive. In this sense, a stigma leads to positive consequences by motivating individuals to come together in support of each other and in opposition to discrimination and prejudice. Collective movements on a larger scale and interest groups on a smaller scale may form as an outcome of this attempt to find others who support and confirm one's identity.

Additionally, challenging the validity of a stigma—at least to oneself—may provide a critical element of an individual's search for identity. Forming a personal identity that is stable and unique requires a clear and consensual conception of those identities that are valued and those that are devalued. Additionally, a personal struggle against stigmatization can help in the formation of a stable and unique personal identity. This struggle is implicit in Ragins' discussion of the identity disconnects with which

people with invisible stigmas must deal. Although denial and concealment are often the response, an integration of the various identities may be a more beneficial and healthy response for both the individual and the organization, according to Ragins. We suspect that integration does not come without a struggle and would be difficult to achieve without a threat posed by a negative identity.

At the organizational level, challenges to stigma may be accomplished by attributing the stigma to unjust prejudice toward a stereotyped dimension of the organization (Crocker & Major, 1989). For example, in Hudson's discussion of gay bathhouses, he describes how some operators routinely attributed the stigma directed toward their businesses to prejudice against the gay lifestyle generally, rather than toward their businesses in particular. In turn, the marks of stigma attached to these bathhouses operated beneficially to focus on who was leading the prejudice against the stigmatized organizations (e.g., the zoning commissions that prevented bathhouses from operating in certain cities) and, thus, provided a target for attacks by the stigmatized organizations.

Ultimately, such challenges to stigma and the co-opting of marks of stigma may help to motivate social change and greater acceptance of the stigmatized organizations in question. For example, stigmatized organizations may attempt to justify their existence based on more broadly held ideals and values, such as individual liberty and freedom of expression. Further, the marks of stigma themselves may be co-opted to signify these ideals and values, thus "making a virtue of insurrection" (Oliver, 1991: 156). Much as the once pejorative individual term *queer* has been co-opted by the gay community as a mark of gay freedom and openness, the label *bathhouse* may be co-opted by organizational leaders to serve as a symbol of gay freedom. These types of challenges have led to greater acceptance of many types of organizations, including environmental activist organizations, gay rights organizations, and organizations for people with disabilities (as well as gambling casinos, strip clubs, and pornography retailers). Thus, not only can challenging stigma lead to collective action for justice, it can help to render the organizations involved in such collective action more acceptable.

CONCLUSION

The topics of stigma and stigmatization are important additions to the mainstream of organizational literature. This STF serves as a step in the direction of increasing the presence of stigma research in organizational literature by highlighting stigmas' crucial role in explicating multilevel processes in organizations. We have noted a few of the insights into stigma and stigmatization processes provided by the authors, but we are sure that the reader will find numerous other provocative ideas throughout these articles. It is our hope that this STF sparks additional theoretical and empirical developments regarding the antecedents and consequences of the stigmatization of organizations and of the people who participate in them.

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