The Moral Nature of Stigmatization: Mitigating the Negative Effects of Stigma on Helping

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The present research addresses the significant and persistent problem of how to increase support for the stigmatized. We provide theoretical insights into the moral nature of stigmatization and demonstrate in four studies how a single virtuous act can overcome the stigma of homelessness, mental illness, a criminal record, or alcoholism.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023688/volumes/v45/NA-45

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A stigma is an undesirable characteristic, imperfection, or mark of dishonor that leads a person to be rejected by society (Goffman 1986). The stigmatized include the mentally ill, criminals, welfare recipients, undocumented immigrants, the obese, and those who abuse drugs and alcohol (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2006; Overton and Medina 2008). Despite being among the neediest in society, the stigmatized are often the least likely to receive help (Latner and Stunkard 2003; Lundberg, Hansson, and Bjorkman 2007). Consequently, organizations have undertaken various promotional efforts designed to educate others and increase support for the stigmatized. Unfortunately, research suggests these campaigns are often ineffective (Corrigan 2012; Heijnders and van der Meij 2006) or even counterproductive by reinforcing negative attitudes (Korszun et al. 2012; Tolomiczenko, Goering, and Durbin 2001).

We propose that promotional efforts for stigmatized groups are likely to be ineffective if they do not address the group’s perceived deficit in moral character. We theorize that the stigmatized receive less help compared to other people in need because they are considered immoral, and therefore aversive, unworthy, and potentially harmful. Consistent with our theory, we find that people are less willing to help a homeless person who carries the stigma of a mental illness, a criminal record, or alcoholism compared to a homeless person who is a military veteran. However, we find that the negative effect of the stigma on helping is fully mitigated when the stigmatized person behaves virtuously. Importantly, we demonstrate that behaving in a virtuous manner is insufficient to redeem the stigmatized. It is only when the virtuous behavior is undertaken voluntarily and for an unselfish reason that it is diagnostic of moral character and consequently has the power to mitigate the negative effects of stigma on helping.

The relevant literature has not yet acknowledged the moral basis for stigmatization. However, previous research has considered how people respond to stigmatized groups (Gay and Whittington 2002; Harris and Fiske 2006). Harris and Fiske (2006), for example, examined how people respond neurologically to the homeless and to drug addicts—two groups identified as stigmatized in other research (Dunlop and Tracy 2013; Phelan et al. 1997). They found that exposure to images of addicts and the homeless evoked not only intense dislike in participants, but also disgust and contempt, which are negative emotions reserved for those who are morally condemned (Haidt 2003; Hutcherson and Gross 2011). Furthermore, participants displayed a lower activation of the medial prefrontal cortex when exposed to images of the stigmatized compared to images of members of societal in-groups. The authors concluded that participants considered the homeless and drug addicts to be “less than human” (p. 847). The foregoing illustrates that stigmatization involves the most essential of all moral judgements—is a person good or bad?

Given the moral basis for stigmatization, we propose that a moral redemption is necessary to mitigate the negative effect of stigma on helping. We find evidence across four studies that a stigmatized person in need is helped significantly less than a non-stigmatized person in need. However, we find that the stigmatized individual is morally redeemed and offered more help when he or she behaves virtuously. Study 1 examined the effect of a virtuous behavior on the willingness to help a homeless person who is either a veteran or a criminal. We found that the virtuous act of returning a lost wallet to its rightful owner (vs. the control condition) significantly increased the willingness to help the homeless criminal. In contrast, the same virtuous act had no effect on the willingness to help the homeless veteran.

Study 2 examined the stigma of alcoholism and modified the virtuous behaviour manipulation. We used the same behavior across conditions and manipulated the motive to be either selfish or unselfish. We found that participants were more likely to help the homeless alcoholic when he returned the lost wallet for an unselfish reason (vs. selfish reason). However, there was no effect on the willingness to help the homeless veteran across levels of virtuous behavior; he was already perceived to be moral. This study demonstrates the importance of motive, even when the behavior is socially desirable.

Study 3 examined the stigma of mental illness and introduced a measure of moral character to directly test its hypothesized role. We found the expected pattern of results on moral character and willingness to help. Specifically, returning a lost wallet (vs. control) had a significant effect on helping responses, but only when the homeless person was mentally ill. We found that the moral character of the homeless person was a significant moderated mediator—it fully mediated the negative effect of stigma on helping responses in the virtue-absent condition. However, there was no effect in the virtue-present condition, suggesting that the virtuous act mitigated the negative effect of stigma on helping.

Study 4 replicated the results of study 3 using a new virtue manipulation in which a virtuous behavior (i.e., picking up trash) is carried out voluntarily or involuntarily. Specifically, voluntarily (vs. involuntarily) picking up trash had a significant positive effect on moral character and helping responses only when the homeless person was stigmatized. Again, moral character was a significant moderated mediator. This study also ruled out empathy (Batson et al. 1997; Batson et al. 2005; Fisher and Ma 2014) and Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS; Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992) as alternative explanations for the results.

To sum, four experiments provide evidence for the moral basis of stigma and the redeeming effect of moral behavior; the negative effect of stigma on moral character and helping is fully mitigated when the stigmatized person behaves virtuously. By demonstrating this effect, the current research contributes to the literature on stigmatization and non-profit marketing. Prior research has not yet recognized the link between stigmatization and morality. Our research offers theoretical and practical insights into why members of stigmatized groups are unlikely to receive help and how addressing this deficit in moral character in promotional efforts can increase societal acceptance and support for the stigmatized.

REFERENCES


