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# Challenge Your Stigma: How to Reframe and Revalue Negative Stereotypes and Slurs

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## Abstract

Stigma devalues individuals and groups, producing social and economic disadvantages through two distinct but reinforcing processes: direct discrimination (e.g., a White person not hiring a Black person based on race) and stigma internalization (e.g., women believing men are more qualified for leadership positions). We review strategies that individuals can use to not only cope with but also challenge their stigma. We discuss how attempts to escape stigma can be effective at the individual level but may leave the stigma itself unchanged or even reinforced. We then identify two ways individuals can reappropriate and take ownership of their stigma to weaken it: reframing and self-labeling. Reframing highlights stereotypic characteristics as assets rather than liabilities—for example, framing stereotypically feminine traits (e.g., social intelligence) as essential for effective negotiations or leadership. Self-labeling involves referring to oneself with a group slur. We discuss ways to utilize these reappropriation strategies as well as how to handle potential pitfalls.

## Keywords

stereotypes, slurs, reframing, self-labeling, reappropriation

In ancient Greece, people whose characters had been disgraced were publicly marked with a burn seared into their skin—a permanent stigma. Although modern instantiations of stigma are not literal burns, stigma scars people psychologically, discrediting and reducing the self “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Like a physical scar, stigma can be painful and shameful.

Stigma occurs whenever devalued attributes are linked to a person or to membership in a group (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Members of stigmatized groups endure a host of disadvantages, from interpersonal rejection to economic hardship (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth harbor more suicidal thoughts than straight youth (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009), African American students perform worse academically than their European American counterparts (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006), women trail men in pay

and career advancement (Goldin, 2014), and racial minorities often experience interactions with Whites as a source of stress (Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009).

To escape its suffocating burden, individuals often focus on concealing their stigma. The fear of being stigmatized is one reason why nearly half of the 60 million Americans with serious mental illness do not seek treatment (Corrigan, Druss, & Perlick, 2014). However, concealment leaves the stigma unchallenged and even reinforced.

This review outlines strategies to combat rather than reinforce stigma. These strategies challenge stigma by seizing control of the very traits and slurs associated with derogatory connotations. We focus on how the inherent

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malleability of stereotypes (Blair, 2002) offers routes to challenge stigma and transform a psychological liability into an asset.

### **The Spread of Stigma: Discrimination and Internalization Through Stereotypes and Slurs**

Stigma can lead to disparate outcomes through two routes. The first route is discrimination by out-group members. For example, lower-class children are evaluated as less intelligent even when their performance is identical to that of their upper-class counterparts (Darley & Gross, 1983). Similarly, female job applicants and entrepreneurs are evaluated less favorably than male applicants with identical resumes (Brooks, Huang, Kearney, & Murray, 2014), and Black leaders are evaluated less favorably than White leaders (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008).

The second route involves the psychology of the stigmatized individual. When individuals fear confirming negative stereotypes about their group, they experience stereotype threat and underperform on stereotype-relevant tasks (Steele & Aronson, 1995). For example, after viewing advertisements that employed gender stereotypes (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardtstein, 2002), women performed worse on both math and leadership tasks. When negative stereotypes about the intelligence of Blacks are highlighted, Black students perform worse on standardized tests (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Similarly, the elderly perform worse on memory tasks (Mazerolle, Régner, Morisset, Rigalleau, & Huguet, 2012) and Whites perform worse on athletic tasks (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999) when their corresponding negative stereotypes are salient.

Both the discriminatory and internalized disadvantages of stigma are reinforced through derogatory group labels, or slurs. Slurs are words used by out-group members that highlight a stigmatized group's lower status (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007; Henry, Butler, & Brandt, 2014). Slurs internalize the stigma; for example, the number of slurs a group faces is positively associated with suicide rates among group members (Mullen & Smyth, 2004). The use of slurs by out-group members is an effective way to confirm and spread the stigma (Mullen & Johnson, 1993).

The tools of stigma—stereotypes and slurs—create negative outcomes through discrimination and internalization. When left unchallenged, they produce self-reinforcing processes that sustain disadvantage (Jost & Banaji, 1994). However, stigmatized individuals have developed a variety of strategies designed to reduce the wounds of stigma and insulate themselves from these processes that perpetuate disadvantage (Crocker & Major, 1989). We build on work

from scholars who have explored how to cope with stigma, from the seminal theorizing of Allport (1954) to research on combating the effects of sexism (Becker & Swim, 2011) and racism (Trawalter et al., 2009).

We next focus on strategies that can protect an individual from stigma but do not reduce the stigma itself. We then identify two strategies—reframing and self-labeling—that have the potential to undermine and lessen the stigma.

### **The Individual Strategy of Escaping**

An intuitive strategy for reducing the consequences of stigma involves attempting to escape from one's stigma (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). One method is to detach oneself from a stigmatized group. For example, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints were once stoned, tarred, and feathered for their beliefs; to escape this discrimination, believers could disavow their beliefs and join a different religion. Alternatively, stigmatized members could conceal their group membership, as Catholics did in 16th-century England, or as LGBT individuals do when they remain "in the closet." Similarly, lighter-skinned Blacks often passed as Whites during the era of American slavery and beyond.

Attempts to escape from stigmatizing group membership can be effective when group membership is chosen or hard to recognize. However, when group membership is immutable or easily observable, it may be difficult or impossible to abandon; for instance, darker-skinned Blacks would have difficulty passing as White.

Alternatively, individuals can psychologically escape from the stigma by reducing the centrality of the group to their identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, racial minorities could distance themselves from their racial identity by choosing to psychologically invest in their professional identity (e.g., lawyer, psychologist). Another option is to disidentify with a specific set of stigmatized traits; for example, faced with negative stereotypes about intelligence, some African Americans devalue the importance of scholastic performance, considering it less central to their identities (Steele, 1997). Although this psychological distancing strategy may provide a temporary buffer against the threat posed by stigma, it can ultimately be detrimental by reducing the opportunities that arise from academic achievement (Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004).

Although evasion strategies can insulate stigmatized individuals, they ultimately leave the stigma intact because they do not challenge or lessen the legitimacy of the stigmatizing message itself. Next, we explore reframing and self-labeling as two approaches that contest the validity of the stigma, possibly weakening its derogatory force.

## Challenging Stigma

Instead of evading or hiding stigma, individuals can also attempt to challenge stigma by confronting it directly. This view is grounded in the notion that stigmatizing characteristics can change over time because stigma is socially constructed (Blair, 2002; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Some high-status groups who were once heavily stigmatized are now respected and valued in American culture. For example, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. suggested that anti-Catholicism was “the deepest bias in the history of the American people” (Ellis, 1969, p. 151), whereas today Catholicism is one of the most prevalent and highly regarded religions in America (Butler, Wacker, & Balmer, 2007). Conversely, many groups that suffer from stigmatization today were not stigmatized in other places and historical periods; for example, the gay community in ancient Greece and overweight individuals in ancient China did not face stigma (Archer, 1985). These examples highlight that stigma is inherently malleable and transformable over time, and therefore susceptible to strategies that individuals employ to challenge it.

In this section, we outline two strategies by which stigmatized group members can challenge their stigma—reframing and self-labeling—that capitalize on the malleable nature of stigma to reduce its negative connotations. These two strategies are forms of *reappropriation*, defined as taking possession of a slur or negative stereotype previously used by dominant groups to reinforce a stigmatized group’s lesser status (Galinsky et al., 2013).

### Reframing

Reframing involves altering the valence of a group stereotype by transforming a weakness into a strength. Consider the case of stereotype threat, where individuals perform worse because they fear confirming a negative stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995); essentially, the characteristics associated with stigmatized groups are seen as liabilities. This threat occurs even when an individual does not endorse the stereotype. But what if those same traits could be reframed as assets instead? A clever study by Stone et al. (1999) highlighted this possibility. They created a golf-putting task and framed it as a test of either analytic and geometric intelligence or athletic ability and hand-eye coordination; given the prevailing stereotypes of the two groups, they predicted that Whites would perform better under the intelligence framing and Blacks would perform better under the athletic-ability framing. This is exactly what they found. This work demonstrates that the same task can be framed around characteristics that are either viewed as liabilities or assets for a particular group.

Another example of reframing comes from the leadership and negotiation domains. Negotiation success is

often attributed to traits—such as assertiveness and rationality—that are stereotypically masculine. Indeed, when those traits are highlighted as necessary for negotiator success, men outperform women at the bargaining table (Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001). The belief that these masculine traits lead to effective negotiating is so strong that women exhibit a general aversion to negotiating (Small, Gelfand, Babcock, & Gettman, 2007). However, Kray, Galinsky, and Thompson (2002) noticed that some of the less salient traits that people associate with successful negotiators are stereotypically feminine—for instance, negotiators are great listeners, rely on intuition, and express emotion. Based on this knowledge, the researchers altered the typical stereotype-threat paradigm to strengthen the link between these feminine traits and effective negotiators. When the importance of effective communication and listening skills were highlighted as essential for negotiator success, female negotiators set higher goals and *outperformed* men. A similar possibility exists for leadership, as a number of qualities associated with women are crucial for successful leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Just like the stereotypically Black or White traits in the golf-putting task, stereotypically feminine traits can be framed as either assets or liabilities, thus reducing or reinforcing the stigma that women experience in the important domains of negotiations and leadership.

Notably, in the above examples, experimenters initiated this reframing. However, reframing may be equally effective when introduced by the targets of stigma themselves. For instance, Wolf, Lee, Sah, and Brooks (2016) found that expressions of workplace distress (e.g., crying) were viewed as a sign of weakness and worthy of condemnation. However, individuals who cried at work were perceived to be more competent and hireable when they reframed their displays of emotion to observers not as being overly sensitive but as being passionate. Importantly, displays of distress in the workplace are sources of employee stigmatization because they are seen as stereotypically feminine and a source of weakness, dependence, and irrationality (Wolf et al., 2016). These studies reveal that reframing can allow stigmatized group members to leverage their group’s stereotypes as strengths and improve performance and evaluations.

The process of reframing may be conducted privately. This intrapsychic or intragroup reframing will likely result in more favorable views of one’s own group and more personal confidence heading into important performance domains. However, by engaging in overt and public reframing—for instance, declaring to others that being a woman gives one a leadership or negotiation advantage—one challenges and potentially weakens the stigma not only internally for in-group members but also for out-group members.

Reframing challenges the negative expectations that produce stigma, turning group and individual characteristics

from liabilities into assets. Unlike escaping from stigma, reframing allows a group to remain engaged in a performance domain and to produce less discriminatory evaluations by changing how success is defined.

### **Self-labeling**

*Self-labeling*—where individuals and groups intentionally use negative labels self-referentially—involves embracing the very slurs used against one’s group. Slurs are vicious and efficient carriers of stigma that reinforce another group’s disempowered state (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). By self-labeling, stigmatized group members transform a slur’s connotative meaning from demeaning to empowering. From Alanis Morissette singing “I’m a Bitch,” to Singapore embracing the pejorative moniker “little red dot” as a national motto, to African American author Dick Gregory titling his 1964 autobiography *Nigger*, using a stigmatizing label self-referentially can be a surprisingly effective strategy to seize ownership of a slur.

Across a series of experiments, Galinsky and colleagues (2013) found that self-labeling engendered a sense of power for both self-labelers and their social groups. For example, participants were asked to recall a time when they had self-labeled or were labeled by an out-group member with a group-based slur. Compared to those who were labeled by others, self-labelers felt more powerful and perceived the slur less negatively. Additionally, Gaucher, Hunt, and Sinclair (2015) found that self-labeling with the slur “slut” in the context of a social justice movement (i.e., SlutWalk protest marches against rape culture) was associated with women’s reduced endorsement of common rape myths (e.g., young women who wear provocative clothing to parties do so to invite sex). Importantly, observers also perceived the slur to be less negative after witnessing someone self-label with it (Galinsky et al., 2013). This finding is critical because a group tends to be viewed as having higher status as the slurs associated with the group become less negative (e.g., see Henry et al., 2014). Taking ownership of slurs through self-labeling is empowering because it limits the dominant out-group’s control of the words and reduces their power to define stigmatized groups. As with reframing, we see both an immediate benefit of self-labeling with a derogatory term for the individual and a long-term benefit for the group through empowerment and a reduction in the slur’s derogatory force.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

Members of stigmatized groups are not powerless in the face of stereotypes and slurs. Rather, they have tools at their disposal to confront and combat their stigma. In the

current review, we have discussed how concealing, escaping, and minimizing stigma potentially protects the individual from its derogatory force but leaves that force intact. In contrast, we highlighted two tools of reappropriation—reframing and self-labeling—that can influence the strength and persistence of stigma, not only for individual members of the stigmatized group but also for the group itself.

One question for future research is how to encourage the utilization of these tools. At a structural level, legal or institutional protections for stigmatized groups may facilitate reappropriation attempts. Galinsky et al. (2013) suggested that the first instances of self-labeling with a derogatory term (e.g., *nigger*, *queer*) often coincided with increased legal protections (e.g., 1964 Civil Rights Act; repeal of state sodomy laws). They also found that perceptions of group, but not individual, power mattered: Individuals were more comfortable self-labeling with a slur if they reflected on their group’s power. Another psychological route is to promote an incremental mind-set in stigmatized individuals (see Dweck & Leggett, 1988, for a review). Entity theorists believe that attributes, traits, and abilities are fixed, whereas incremental theorists believe they are malleable. As a result, incremental theorists may be more willing to reappropriate stigma through reframing and self-labeling.

Future research can also explore when these tools are more or less effective. Reframing may be less effective for individuals who struggle to perceive their stereotyped traits as assets or see themselves as counterstereotypical (e.g., a woman who sees herself as assertive in negotiations). With respect to self-labeling, the presence of in-group members may not only give the self-labeler the confidence to self-label but embolden those in-group members who witness it to engage in self-labeling, further increasing perceptions of their group’s power.

Reappropriation strategies could engender intergroup strife if out-groups contest efforts to reframe and self-label in order to maintain their dominant positions. This conflict is exemplified by the recent Black Lives Matter movement protesting against police violence toward African Americans. Some have tried to reclaim the slogan, recasting it as “All Lives Matter,” to protest that Blacks are not unique in their lives mattering. Similarly, reappropriation attempts may produce counterattacks of even greater discrimination by dominant groups. Future research should explore the long-term ramifications of these reappropriation strategies and other psychological tools that members of disadvantaged groups can utilize to combat stigma, taking note that they take place as part of a larger intergroup battleground.

Disadvantaged groups do not have to accept their derogation. They can reappropriate their stigma by reframing stereotyped liabilities as assets and taking ownership of slurs through self-labeling.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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