In Debate

The Implications of Stigma for Institutional Violence

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Abstract

The retirement of the stigma term is currently up for debate among advocacy groups. This debate questions the relevance and utility of the term for the conceptualization of discriminatory treatment against individuals who deviate from some societal norm. In Goffman's (1963) seminal conceptualization of stigma, he described how stigma can be used to demonstrate an individual's disqualified humanity. Further research has suggested that stigma can be used both to represent the disqualification of an individual's humanity and to create humanity disqualification by inciting discrimination. While discrimination is a common result of stigma, there has been little discussion in academia regarding the use of stigma to promote the discrimination of certain groups or individuals by propagating prejudicial ideologies. This discrimination has implications for the justification and sanctioning of violence by institutions of power. Due to the fact that this is an area of stigma research which is largely uninvestigated, it would be premature to retire the stigma term without fully understanding its implications. This article will examine the implications of stigma for state sanctioned violence and review the limitations of this subject as a research topic.

Keywords: stigma, discrimination, institutionalized violence

Introduction

The relevance of the stigma term is currently being debated in the advocacy community. This debate questions the utility of the term as a means of conceptualizing the separation and discrimination of individuals who differ from some societal expectation. Given this approach to conceptualizing stigma, it is possible that the ambiguity of the term is a factor in the debate. If stigma represents the separation and discrimination of individuals based on a perceived deviance of one of the individual's traits, then it is possible for any individual trait to become a stigma. Another problem with this approach is that it assumes that a stigma is the result of an individual's trait deviance, rather than being the result of socio-cultural processes. This assumption has guided the focus of stigma research to the individual rather than the socio-cultural circles in which the individual lives. This shift in research focus has resulted in a gap in the scholarly literature on stigma. In order to demonstrate that the stigma symbol is still relevant, this article will present one of the gaps in the scholarly literature on stigma which has resulted from this focus on stigma as a trait deviance rather than a socio-cultural process.

In the many conceptualizations of stigma since Goffman's (1963) seminal work on the topic, the stigma symbol has been convergently validated as a recurring social phenomenon within many social science disciplines. Much of the work which has been done on the stigma symbol has revolved around its implications as a representation of disqualified humanity, a definition which stems back to Goffman's original definition of stigma (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). By comparison, there have been far fewer studies which have investigated the use of stigma as a tool for the propagation of prejudicial ideologies. In other words, while many researchers have focused on how stigma represents some social meaning, few researchers have focused on how stigma creates social meaning.

The few studies which have investigated this aspect of stigma have found that stigma can serve as a means of propagating prejudicial social values. In a review

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of two case studies on mental illness stigma, Yang *et al.* (2007) suggested that stigma can be used to enforce social imperatives upon stigmatized individuals, whose trait deviance is perceived as a breach of those social imperatives. Ablon (2002) came to a similar conclusion in her review of medical illness stigma by noting that stigma can be used to bolster broader prejudicial assumptions about the role of sick individuals in society. While these studies suggest a link between stigma and prejudicial ideologies, they do not articulate a potential mechanism to explain that link. In order for stigma to be understood as a creator of social meaning, the properties of language, as a medium for propagating understandings of stigma, must be investigated.

Interaction between Language and Stigma

Since the linguistic turn, language has been understood as a collection of symbols (Toews, 1987). The symbols used in language represent socially subscribed meanings. In other words, the symbols used in language are anchors for phenomena which society chooses to give meaning to. By applying the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), these symbols can be related to one another in order create new concepts and ideas. Language therefore both represents and creates new meaning for social phenomena through the combination of symbols in language. This conceptual development implies that language is a significant tool for both the understanding and the creation of the meaning of observed social phenomena.

Goffman recognized the importance of language in his seminal definition of the stigma symbol, *the term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes is really needed* (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Goffman demonstrated that the stigma symbol does not exist in isolation, but is given meaning through its constructed relationships with other symbols in language. In order to define the social meaning of stigma, Goffman (1963) suggested that individuals construct *stigma theories*. Stigma theories are explanations for the stigmatized mark which are used to justify the discrimination of individuals bearing those stigmatized marks. These stigma theories represent the connection between stigma symbols as representations of meaning (the stigma symbol relaying some socially significant information) and stigma symbols as creators of meaning (the stigma symbol instigating some attitude or behaviour which changes the social landscape).

As a representation of meaning, the stigma symbol is interpreted to mean something about the humanity of the stigma bearer. Goffman (1963) noted that the stigma symbol is designed to represent the discredited humanity of the individual. In line with this interpretation, Kurzban and Leary (2001) suggested that stigma, as a social representation of meaning, may have evolved as a means of maintaining the fitness of the social group. They propose that stigma symbols represented the diminished mate quality of the stigma bearer and the propensity of the stigma bearer to parasitize the resources of the group. In both of these interpretations, stigma serves as a meaningful cue for the *otherness*, and potential dangerousness, of the stigma bearer.

As a creator of meaning, the stigma symbol serves as an instigator of certain discriminatory behaviors. Link and Phelan (2001) noted that stigma is enacted through the *co-occurrence of its components-labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination* (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 363). This process of enacted stigma enforces the interpretation of stigma as a meaningful indicator of the otherness, or inhumanity, of the stigma bearer. Through their investigation of HIV/AIDS stigma, Parker and Aggleton (2003) found that stigma was used to maintain the stratification of society through the recapitulation of previous societal discrimination regarding race, gender, and class. Parker and Aggleton's investigation demonstrates how stigma theories can incorporate societal beliefs or norms as a means of justifying the discrimination of the bearers of stigmatized marks.

These properties of stigma demonstrate how this symbol represents and creates, through instigated discrimination, the disqualification of the humanity of the stigma bearer. Zola (1993) demonstrated that language can mediate the expression of the properties of stigma. Zola found that the means by which grammar is used to relate individuals to stigmatizing labels can affect the extent to which an individual is stigmatized. Since language is the medium through which stigma theories are formed, the properties of the stigma symbol are also defined through language. Ludwig Wittgenstein hypothesized that language serves two roles in defining the properties of social realities: first, language combines words to create concepts and, second, language provides a logical form in which objects (symbols) can be combined to create theories (Naugle, 2002). It is in this role as a logical form where language can serve to propagate the meaning of different symbols like stigma. In this role, however, language also operates according to rules which are validated by societal institutions of power.

The interaction between institutions of power and the conventions of language is best described by Michel Foucault's (1970, 1972) concept of general grammar.

Foucault hypothesized that language conforms to a set of implicit rules called a general grammar. This general grammar determined how concepts could be ordered, separated, and integrated through language. Foucault described how the rules in this general grammar varied according to different institutions in society. These institutions in turn validated a general grammar according to the form of positivity (a-priori validation) which the institution subscribed to. The general grammar therefore represents the norms and assumptions of its validating institution. This process demonstrates, according Foucault, how institutions can determine the expression of theories through language, by validating certain theories and invalidating others.

In the same way that language is formed and validated by institutions of power, Link and Phelan (2001) hypothesized that institutions of power are also required to form enacted stigma. Link and Phelan described that political, economic, or social power is an essential requisite for the formation of enacted stigma for two reasons: first, there must be some power differential between the stigmatizer and the stigmatized in order for discrimination to occur and, second, power is required in order to successfully propagate a stigma theory. Institutions of power therefore have an influence on stigma in the following ways: first, through the validation of certain stigma theories, second, through the enforcement of discrimination against stigma bearers and, third, through the propagation of certain stigma theories. Furthermore, language is the medium through which institutions of power can influence the formation of stigma. This is because institutions of power differentially reinforce the use of certain stigma theories by providing an a-priori validation for the claims made by those stigma theories.

Stigma and Institutionalized Violence

There are several implications of this relationship between institutions of power, language, and stigma. For the purposes of this article, only one will be described. Since stigma serves to represent the inhumanity, or the otherness of an individual, stigma can also have an immediate effect on institutionalized violence; that is, violence that is sanctioned by institutions of power. Barash and Webel (2009) noted the tendency in institutionalized or group violence to *dehumanize members of other groups—that is, to give the impression (to compatriots and, at least at the subconscious level, to oneself) that the other group members are not really (or fully) human at all. It is especially easy to dehumanize those who are recognizably different because of language, appearance, cultural*

practices, political ideology, and so on (Barash & Webel, 2009, p. 126). This institutionalization of humanity disqualification may provide a means of reinforcing acts of violence against individuals from a stigmatized group. An example of this institutionalization of humanity disqualification is the propaganda which was produced by the Third Reich during the holocaust in Germany.

In order to demonstrate this example of institutionalized humanity disqualification, Schwartzman (2009) analyzed the evolution of language used by the Third Reich preceding the ultimate extermination of the Jewish community during the holocaust. Schwartzman hypothesized that the terminology used by the Third Reich during the holocaust influenced the extent to which the discrimination of the Jewish community would be deemed justifiable by German society. In Schwartzman's investigation, he found that the language used by the Third Reich demonstrated reliance on racial science in order to justify the biological otherness of the Jewish community. Once the otherness of the Jewish community was instituted, the Third Reich presented a proposed *separate but equal* policy, which separated the Jewish community from German society. This separation was justified by the irreconcilable differences which were purported to exist between the Jewish community and the rest of the German nation. It naturally followed that the two groups should be separated in order to avoid competition for resources or racial blending (Schwartzman, 2009).

Following this separation of the Jewish community from German society, the racial differences between the Jewish community and the rest of society were further emphasized as a competition for resources, noting the incompatible survival of both groups. The Jewish community was then seen as both inferior and a drain on social resources. The danger of racial blending between the Jewish community and German society was then articulated, presenting the Jewish community as a threat to German society. The ultimate solution, the extermination of the Jewish community, was then presented as a medical intervention designed to cure the German nation of a disease (the disease in this case being the Jewish community) (Schwartzman, 2009).

The progression of the language used by the Third Reich to institutionalize violence follows the process of enacted stigma (*labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination*) outlined by Link and Phelan (2001). This progression of language development, as demonstrated by Schwartzman (2009), represents the logical form of the stigma theory which was propagated by the Third Reich. The Third Reich (as an institution of power) validated the language used to propagate an interpretation of a stigma symbol (membership in the Jewish community). Schwartzman's use of telogology

also demonstrates the influence of intentionality on the stigma formation process. Telogology assumes that specific terminology is used in order to achieve a pre-determined goal. As this example demonstrates, the Third Reich, as an institution of power, used this stigmatizing terminology to justify the discrimination of Semitic people groups.

This account is externally validated by the use of stigmatizing language throughout the 1994 Rwandan genocide. During, and prior to, the extermination of Tutsis in Rwanda, the Radio-Television Mille Collines (RTLM) frequently presented messages of ethnic hatred which described Tutsis as animals (Uvin, 1997). These radio broadcasts were tolerated and allowed to persist by the Habyarimana administration in Rwanda. The radio broadcasts also compared slaughtering Tutsis to destroying weeds (Hintjens, 1999). These broadcasts demonstrate, in a similar fashion to the propaganda designed by the Third Reich, how dehumanizing language can be used to justify violence by institutions of power.

Stigma, as a representation of disqualified humanity, can be used by an institution of power to discriminate and justify violence against a particular group in society. By framing stigma within an institutionalized context, discrimination becomes normalized by the existence of the stigma theory. This interpretation of stigma demonstrates the potentially devastating, and largely un-investigated, consequences of stigma as a tool of political manipulation by institutions of power.

Limitations of Stigma Research

While Barash and Webel (2009) contend that the separation and dehumanization of a group of individuals can be an incentive for violence, the authors note that other causes are usually involved in the instigation of state sanctioned violence. Other causes of violence may focus on resource competition, political or economic frustration, or religious differences. These ancillary causes of violence are integrated with theories of dehumanization to bolster support for violence against a group. These ancillary causes can also be used to legitimize the dehumanization of the individual.

There are, however, problems regarding the empirical investigation of the stigma symbol. In order to establish the inhumanity of an individual, there needs to be a definition of humanity to contrast against. The definition of the human condition is therefore a necessary reference point for the definition of stigma. For example, Ingstad and Whyte (1995) demonstrated that stigmatization is reliant upon cultural conceptions of humanity in their investigation of culture and disability.

The definition of stigma is therefore made ambiguous by the multitude of definitions available for the human condition.

Similarly, there is a lack of criteria in the identification of stigmatizing language. Ablon (2002) noted that the stigmatization of disabilities was reliant upon a number of factors, including: the characteristics of the stigmatized population, the characteristics of the stigmatizing population, the permanence and visibility of the stigmatized trait, and the treatments available for ameliorating the stigmatized trait. The diversity of these factors demonstrates the complexity of the characteristics of stigmatizing language. As the previous examples demonstrate, stigmatizing language can be determined by the discriminatory behavior which follows. In other words, if the use of certain forms of language leads to stigmatization then that language is deemed stigmatizing. This approach, however, forces a perpetual retroactive definition of stigmatizing language and leaves the definition susceptible to the influence of hind-sight biases.

Perhaps as a result of these limitations, there is a lack of research which demonstrates the impact of language on stigma. Empirically establishing the relationship between language and stigma would define the stigma symbol as a product of socio-cultural processes, rather than an individual attribute independent of social processes.

Conclusion

Stigma, as both a representation and creator of social meaning, can theoretically be used to propagate prejudicial ideologies and justify institutionalized violence. This understanding implies that stigma is not just used passively, as a means of making sense of a stigmatized mark, but also actively, as a means of creating social meaning. Because this is an area of stigma research which has not been comprehensively reviewed, it would be premature to retire the stigma term prior to assessing the implications of stigma as a creator of social meaning. This gap also represents a potential political implication of the stigma symbol, demonstrating the manipulation of a socio-cultural process by institutions of power.

Acknowledgments

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