



## Stigma power

Bruce G. Link<sup>a, b, \*</sup>, Jo Phelan<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Columbia University, USA

<sup>b</sup> New York State Psychiatric Institute, USA



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### ABSTRACT

When people have an interest in keeping other people down, in or away, stigma is a resource that allows them to obtain ends they desire. We call this resource “stigma power” and use the term to refer to instances in which stigma processes achieve the aims of stigmatizers with respect to the exploitation, control or exclusion of others. We draw on Bourdieu (1987, 1990) who notes that power is often most effectively deployed when it is hidden or “misrecognized.” To explore the utility of the stigma-power concept we examine ways in which the goals of stigmatizers are achieved but hidden in the stigma coping efforts of people with mental illnesses. We developed new self-report measures and administered them to a sample of individuals who have experienced mental illness to test whether results are consistent with the possibility that, in response to negative societal conceptions, the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of people with psychosis lead them to be concerned with staying in, propelled to stay away and induced to feel downwardly placed – precisely the outcomes stigmatizers might desire. Our introduction of the stigma-power concept carries the possibility of seeing stigmatizing circumstances in a new light.

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### Introduction

When people have an interest in keeping other people down, in or away, stigma is a resource that allows them to obtain ends they desire. We call this resource “stigma power” and use the term to refer to instances in which stigma processes achieve the aims of stigmatizers with respect to the exploitation, management, control or exclusion of others. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1987, 1990) concepts of symbolic power and misrecognition, our central thesis is that many stigma processes serve the interests of stigmatizers in subtle ways that are difficult to recognize in the absence of conceptual tools that bring them to light. Indeed, when we scan extant literature on stigma, prejudice and discrimination, we note (see below) that in many instances the processes described are ones that are hidden from a casual observer's view. The concept of stigma power brings to the forefront the idea that these hidden, misrecognized processes serve the interests of stigmatizers and are part of a social system that gets them what they want. In keeping with this thesis, we explore one avenue through which stigma power is exercised in the area of mental illness. Specifically, we use the concept of stigma power as an additional lens through which to observe what had previously been conceptualized as stigma coping or stigma management efforts. We

note that many of the things people with mental illnesses do to cope with stigma ultimately achieve the goals of stigmatizers by inducing strong efforts to stay “in,” “down” or “away.” When this happens, persistent, patterned and in this instance hierarchical social relationships between people with mental illnesses and people without them are created and sustained. In what follows we 1) develop the concept of stigma power, 2) examine the literature on stigma-related mechanisms of discrimination from the vantage point of the stigma-power concept, 3) apply the concepts in the area of mental illnesses, and 4) examine whether empirical relationships between measures of mental-illness stigma are consistent with a stigma-power conceptualization.

### The stigma-power concept

At its essence the stigma-power concept proposes that stigmatizers have strong motivations to keep people down, in or away and that they best achieve these aims through stigma processes that are indirect, broadly effective, and hidden in taken-for-granted cultural circumstances. We draw on concepts from Phelan, Link, and Dovidio (2008) and Bourdieu (1987) to conceptualize the hidden, misrecognized cultural circumstances that make stigma processes effective.

### The motivation to stigmatize

Phelan et al. (2008) identify three generic ends that people can attain through stigma. In the first, exploitation and domination or

\* Corresponding author. Mailman School of Public Health, 722 West 168th Street, New York, NY 10032, USA.

E-mail addresses: [BGL1@Columbia.edu](mailto:BGL1@Columbia.edu), [bg11@mail.cumc.columbia.edu](mailto:bg11@mail.cumc.columbia.edu) (B.G. Link).

**“keeping people down,”** wealth, power, and high social status can be attained when one group dominates or exploits another (Phelan et al., 2008). Classic examples are the racial stigmatization of African Americans in the era of slavery, the Europeans’ colonization of countries around the globe, and U.S. whites’ expropriation of the lands of American Indians (Feagin, 2009; Feagin & Bennefield, 2013). In the second, enforcement of social norms or **“keeping people in,”** people construct written and unwritten rules regulating everything from how soldiers should fight wars to how people should sip tea. Stigma imparts a stiff cost that can both keep the norm violator in and serve as a reminder to others that they should remain in as well (Erikson, 1966). In the third, avoidance of disease or **“keeping people away,”** deviations from the organism’s normal (healthy) appearance such as asymmetry, marks, lesions and discoloration; coughing, sneezing and excretion of fluids; and behavioral anomalies due to damage to muscle-control systems could signal a danger of infection and induce people to want to stay away (Kurzban & Leary, 2001, p. 197). The evolutionary advantage of avoiding disease might have led to a more general distaste for deviations from any local standard for the way humans are supposed to look or carry themselves leading to a strong desire to stay away from people who deviate with respect to a broad band of physical or behavioral characteristics.

The key point is that whether it is to keep people down, in, or away, there are motives or interests lying beneath the exercise of stigma. With clear motivations identified, we might expect people to use power to achieve the ends they desire, and it is our claim that stigma is frequently the power mechanism of choice.

#### *Stigma power, symbolic power and misrecognition*

For Bourdieu (1987) symbolic power is the capacity to impose on others a legitimized vision of the social world and the cleavages within that world. His theorizing about symbolic power has three implications for our understanding stigma. First, in Bourdieu’s theorizing, cultural distinctions of value and worth are critically important mechanisms through which power is exercised. As stigma represents a statement about value and worth made by stigmatizers about those they stigmatize, stigma is, in Bourdieu’s terms, a form of symbolic power. Second, according to Bourdieu people who are disadvantaged by the exercise of symbolic power are often influenced, sometimes without realizing it, to accept cultural assessments of their value and rightful (lower) place in the social order. With respect to stigma, this is evident in the idea of “internalized” or “self” stigma (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). Finally, the exercise of symbolic power is often buried in taken-for-granted aspects of culture and thereby hidden or “misrecognized” by both the people causing the harm and by those being harmed (Bourdieu, 1990). Misrecognition serves the interests of the powerful because it allows their interests to be achieved surreptitiously. We adopt Bourdieu’s theorizing in the development of the stigma-power concept and expect that when we turn to the literature on stigma, prejudice and discrimination, we will see evidence that the interests of stigmatizers are often effectively achieved in hidden and indirect ways.

#### **Mechanisms of discrimination from the vantage point of the stigma-power concept**

A massive and very flexible repertoire of approaches is available to exercise stigma power. There are so many ways to put people down, slight them, exclude them, avoid them, reject and discriminate against them that when motivation and power are in place, stigma processes offer a handy toolkit to achieve desired ends (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013). In previous work, we identified several generic processes through which discrimination occurs – direct person-to-person discrimination, interactional

discrimination, structural discrimination, and discrimination that operates through the individual (Link & Phelan, 2001).

#### *Direct person-to-person discrimination*

The most obvious and most widely recognized form of discrimination, occurs when one person discriminates against another based on openly expressed prejudicial attitudes or stereotypes (Allport, 1954). But blatant person-to-person discrimination brings significant problems for the stigmatizer. Setting people apart in a lower status using only direct forms of discrimination would exhaust the capacity of the stigmatizer to always be present, always be ready and always have the resources at hand to discriminate effectively. Further, there are often strong norms or laws against discrimination and often people know it is not socially acceptable to stigmatize others. Finally, the interests of the stigmatizer are apparent (or can be made to be so) in direct discrimination, and when interests are apparent, they can be challenged. Things work more smoothly for stigmatizers if their interests are misrecognized by others and themselves such that they are either not observed at all or judged to be just the natural order of things (Bourdieu, 1990). In sum, person-to-person discrimination is a clumsy tool because it is too difficult, too embarrassing or too easily recognized to be used broadly and effectively. As a consequence of the difficulties involved in direct person-to-person discrimination, other means to achieve desired ends are required.

#### *Structural discrimination*

Many of the articles in this special issue join a growing body of research that shows that structural discrimination disadvantages stigmatized groups cumulatively over time via social policy, laws, institutional practices, or negative attitudinal social contexts (Hatzenbuehler, Bellatorre, et al., 2013; Lukachko, Hatzenbuehler, & Keyes, 2013). Such structural-level factors can serve to keep people down, in or away, and while they are often extremely explicit and directly discriminatory, they nevertheless exempt individual stigmatizers from the burden or embarrassment of directly exercising discrimination. From a stigma-power perspective an individual stigmatizer’s interests need not be expressed or even acknowledged as his/her aims are effectively achieved at the macro-level.

#### *Interactional discrimination*

In this form of discrimination people bring expectations or schemas that relate to characteristics that are made salient in an interaction. A person interacting with someone who carries a stigmatized status may behave differently, with hesitance, uncertainty, superiority or even excessive kindness. The person with the stigmatized status reacts, responding perhaps with less self-assurance or warmth, causing the interaction partner to dislike him/her. The end result is an emergent property of the interaction which if repeated over multiple circumstances results in the stigmatized person being excluded and assigned a lower social status (e.g. Sibicky & Dovidio 1986; Taylor, 2013, Phelan, Lucas, Ridgeway, & Taylor, 2013). Although strong inequalities emerge in these interactions, it is often true that neither participants nor casual observers would notice obvious acts of discrimination, thereby allowing stigma power to be exercised in ways that are misrecognized.

#### *Discrimination operating through the stigmatized person*

A final mechanism focuses on stigmatized individuals themselves who in reacting to societal stereotypes are pushed to remain in, be kept away or be placed down. As a prominent example, consider theory and research relating to the concept of stereotype threat (Steele

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