



Article

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Direct and Indirect Acts of Stigmatization

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Abstract: When considering the impact of stigmatization on society, we tend to think of one aspect of stigmatization while ignoring another. Drawing from historical and fictional cases, I argue that acts of stigmatization can be direct or indirect. Acts of direct stigmatization are acts taken by individuals or groups against an entity, while acts of indirect stigmatization are the specific acts taken by potential targets of stigmatization to prevent themselves from becoming victims of direct stigmatization. If we want a full understanding of the impact that stigmatization has on society, then we need to consider the impact of both direct and indirect acts of stigmatization.

Keywords: Stigmatization; Stigma; Discrimination; Social rejection; Hermeneutical injustice.

1 Introduction

Consider a world very much like ours where the following message has gone viral through email and social media:

To Whom it May Concern,

There is reason to believe that the *felis silvestris cati* (common domestic house cats) in your area are at great risk of developing the virus felinitis. Any *felis silvestris catus* with felinitis can easily spread the virus to any human by close contact, and any human that has been infected by felinitis can spread that virus to any other human by close contact. Unfortunately, felinitis is fatal to all hosts in 98% of cases. Protect yourselves.

While a quick internet search turns up nothing on felinitis, let us suppose that many people have read, and believe, the contents of this message. Finally, let us suppose that as Eve arrives at her office, she notices that several of her coworkers are physically pushing another coworker, Steve, into the corner of the office.

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The coworkers jeer at Steve for being “diseased” and “toxic” – and Eve quickly realizes what is happening. Like Eve, Steve is a cat-owner. The viral email has scared her coworkers, and out of fear, the coworkers are trying to separate themselves from any potential threat. Eve knows that her coworkers know she is a cat-owner. Eve does not want anyone to put their hands on her. Before the coworkers notice Eve, she runs to the corner and stands next to Steve. Call this case *Feline Fever*.¹

Thinking about *Feline Fever* might leave us puzzled. While it is clear that, at least in this one office, being a cat-owner is stigmatized, it is not clear what to make of Steve’s situation in contrast with Eve’s situation. Unlike Steve, Eve *chose* to stand in the corner. Are both Steve and Eve victims of stigmatization? Does Eve’s choosing to stand in the corner change whether or not she is a victim of stigmatization?

Questions such as these are important as stigmatization is a central dimension of injustice in the contemporary world, and as a dimension of injustice, it is poorly understood. In 2009, Arthur Kleinman and Rachel Hall-Clifford noted that stigmatization is a social, cultural, and moral process that prevents those with stigmatized conditions from being able to “hold on to what matters most to ordinary people in a local world, such as wealth, relationships, and life chances” (p. 418). In other words, stigmatization impacts all aspects of a person’s life by: affecting one’s social status and social relations, changing one’s status or relationship with respect to one’s culture, and damaging one’s moral status making the individual “less than” or “less worthy”. Kleinman and Hall-Clifford believe that it is important to research what stigmatization is as well as how it is transmitted because we cannot combat what we cannot understand. They argue, “we currently know surprisingly little about the moral processes that undergird stigma” (p. 418). While understanding what stigma is and how it spreads is important, it is only part of the picture. If we are going to ameliorate the injustices caused by stigmatization we need to understand more than what it is and how it spreads: we need to understand who the victims of stigmatization are.

¹ I am aware that there is sometimes resistance to intuitions gathered from toy examples. Using this toy example allows me to clearly focus on the key features of the case without being distracted by various historical details. While historical details do matter for understanding stigmatization, I build those historical details into the toy case when needed. Finally, toy cases such as this tend to be less loaded than real world cases. If, however, the reader is not motivated by this toy case and would prefer to consider a case from the real world, the case of Steve and Eve can be restated in terms of the persecution of Jewish persons in Nazi Germany. The reader could consider:

Dov – a person who is forced to stop attending his German school because he is Jewish.

Sarah – a person who chooses to stop attending her German school because she does not want to suffer the humiliation of being forced to stop attending school because she is Jewish.

In Section 2, I consider what has already been said about the nature of stigmatization in the psychology and philosophy literatures to provide some background on the current understanding of the phenomenon, and in Section 3, I argue that the current understanding of stigmatization does not provide us with enough information to ascertain who the victims of stigmatization are in a variety of scenarios. In Section 4, I utilize the lessons garnered from the previous sections to expand our understanding of stigmatization by elucidating how persons become victims of stigmatization. In Section 5, I explore some of the applications of the expanded understanding of stigmatization. Finally, in Section 6, I discuss some of the theoretical payoffs that are available to us should we adopt the expanded conceptualization of stigmatization.

2 Understanding Stigmatization

In this section, I provide a brief survey of what has already been said about the nature of stigmatization to provide some background on the current understanding of the phenomenon.

The contemporary understanding of stigmatization owes a great deal to Erving Goffman, who argued that stigmatization is a process that spoils the social identity of some persons within society and not others. According to Goffman, every society has a social ideology that contains normative expectations of what a person can/cannot do and should/should not do within that society (1963, p. 2). Goffman calls those who conform to the expectations of society “normals”, and when normals are presented with evidence that another person possess “an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind ... [h]e is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (1963, p. 3). For Goffman, the term “stigma” refers to the attribute that is deeply discrediting and the person that bears that attribute is “discredited” or “stigmatized”. Goffman’s work focused primarily on how stigmatization changes the behavior of the individual with the stigma. For example, Goffman argues that “almost all persons [with a stigma] who are in a position to pass [as normal] will do so on some occasion by intent” while other persons will attempt to hide their stigma and only disclose their stigma if absolutely necessary (1963, p. 74–75). Smart and Wegner agree with this sentiment arguing that sometimes hiding one’s stigmatized attribute is “crucial to the ability to participate in social life” (2000, p. 220). They go on to say that concealing a stigmatized attribute can prevent devastating consequences – including “social rejection, loss of job, and even persecution”

(Smart and Wegner 2000, p. 220). Concealing a stigmatized attribute, however, is problematic in its own right. Attempts to hide one's stigmatized attribute can lead to feelings of isolation, fraud, and fear of discovery. Withholding personal information about oneself (such as the fact that one possesses a stigmatized attribute) can be damaging to the development and maintenance of social relationships (Smart and Wegner 2000, p. 221).

In 2001, Bruce Link and Jo Phelan noted that the previous work on stigmatization (inspired by Goffman) (1) had been biased by those doing the research, and (2) had had an individualistic focus considering the perceptions and behaviors of individuals (p. 365–366). A fuller picture of stigmatization, they argued, understands that “elements of labeling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold” (2001, p. 382). For Link and Phelan, “stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power [because] it takes power to stigmatize” (2001, p. 375). In other words, considering stigmatization as strictly a matter between individuals is misleading since stigmatization can be built into (and maintained by) social structures and institutions.

In 2007, Lawrence Yang et al. expanded upon the idea that stigmatization harms one's social identity, arguing that stigmatization also “threatens [one's] moral experience (...) that register of everyday life and practical engagement that defines what matters most for ordinary men and women” (p. 1528). In other words, stigmatization reduces the value of one's lived experiences by threatening the elements of one's life that the individual cares about most. A loss of social status or identity does not just impact the individual socially because the person begins to believe that life is uncertain, dangerous, or hazardous (p. 1528). As such, the person's lived experiences are devalued as the person lives with that uncertainty or fear.

In 2010, Elizabeth Anderson noted that stigmatization has a “public character that constitutes an expressive harm ... *even when all parties to a social interaction reject the stigma*” (p. 53). By saying that stigmatization has a public character, Anderson means that the social ideology surrounding the stigmatization is known publicly to most (if not all) of the members of that society. Anderson provides an example where her car was having difficulties and a young black man offered to help her. Before offering his help, however, he held his hands up stating, “don't worry, I'm not here to rob you,” (p. 53). This example illustrates that racial stereotypes have a public standing that influences the interactions of both black and white strangers in unstructured settings (p. 53). Since elements of stigmatization (such as racial stereotypes) have a public character, Anderson argues that a “ritual must be performed to confirm that both parties [in a social interaction] *do* disavow that stigma, so that cooperative interactions may

proceed” (p. 53). The man in the situation suffered a harm in the interaction by having to engage in that ritual, and there was nothing that could have been done about it in that situation.

From the preceding discussion on stigmatization, we know that (1) stigmatization marks those with a stigma as “lesser” or “tainted”, (2) individuals with a stigma will frequently act to hide or compensate for their stigmatized attribute, (3) stigmatization is a multifaceted process that combines stereotyping, labeling, separating, status loss, and discrimination, (4) stigmatization can be built into (and maintained by) social structures and institutions, (5) stigmatization impacts one’s self image as well as their social status, and (6) elements of stigmatization have a public character.

3 Questions Without Answers

With a basic understanding of stigmatization in place, we need to consider a few questions. First, what does it mean to be a victim of stigmatization? If stigmatization is a process, then victims of stigmatization are those that are victims of that process. But what exactly does that mean? Also as the term “stigmatized person” and “victim of stigmatization” are both used in the literature: what is the difference between a victim of stigmatization and a stigmatized person?² For the purposes of this paper, a stigmatized person is a person who possess a stigmatized attribute.³ It is important to recognize that the set of persons who are victims of the stigmatization process need not be the set of persons who possess stigmatized attributes. This is because a person can possess a stigmatized attribute without ever becoming a victim of the stigmatization process, and in the same vein, a person could become a victim of the stigmatization process without possessing a stigmatized attribute. Since these two classes come apart, it is worth determining what it means to be a victim of the stigmatization process.

To begin, let us consider Steve and Eve from *Feline Fever*. In the office of *Feline Fever* being a cat-owner has become stigmatized. The anti-cat agenda has

² A colleague recently told me that he believed that persons cannot be stigmatized and as such there is no such thing as a “stigmatized person”. While I disagree, I wanted to flag that there are those who believe that persons cannot be stigmatized and thus all persons affected by stigmatization would be “victims of stigmatization”.

³ Later I will claim that a variety of things can be stigmatized: attributes, persons, groups, companies, behaviors, beliefs, and mechanisms. This list is not meant to be exhaustive. With this in mind, a stigmatized person would be a person who (1) possess a stigmatized attribute, (2) is stigmatized, (3) is part of a stigmatized group, (4) is part of a stigmatized company, (5) exhibits a stigmatized behavior, (6) possesses a stigmatized belief, or (7) possesses a stigmatized mechanism.

a public character in the office building, and as such, those who own cats are now viewed as “lesser” or “tainted”. Steve is a victim of stigmatization because the members of the office have forced him, as a cat-owner, to stand in the corner marking him as a tainted individual.

When considering Eve’s situation, it seems that Eve is a victim of stigmatization because she marked herself as a tainted individual by standing in the corner. In other words, Eve made herself a victim of stigmatization. Yet this does not seem quite right. Even though Eve chose to stand in the corner, it seems like her coworkers played a significant part in her being there. If Eve had not chosen to stand in the corner, her coworkers would have forced her there. Moreover, if the members of the office were thinking more rationally and not forcing cat-owners into the corner, Eve would not have chosen to go stand there herself. Eve probably does not want to spend her day standing in the corner, and she is only standing there by choice to avoid being physically forced. Eve’s choice to stand in the corner is one of self-preservation. If she is going to end up in the corner either way, it is safer for her to put herself there rather than be physically forced by others. To that extent, we should want to say that it is the actions of Eve’s coworkers that have, at least indirectly, coerced Eve into the corner – not Eve’s actions. Since it is the views and opinions of those in the office that resulted in Eve’s being in the corner, it seems that those people are the ones making Eve a victim of stigmatization – not Eve.

Situations like Eve’s are not the only ones that are difficult to diagnose. Let us add to *Feline Fever*. Let us now suppose that Reeve, a cat-owner, has never once told his coworkers that he owns cats. When Reeve arrives at the office and sees Steve and Eve in the corner, he walks quickly and quietly to his desk. When no one is looking, he deletes all of his cat photos from his phone. For good measure, he downloads a few dog pictures. Reeve pretends to be a dog-owner rather than a cat-owner. He makes sure to agree with his coworkers when they talk negatively about cats and cat-owners. Reeve puts curtains over his windows, so that passersby cannot see his cats, and he is careful to buy his cat supplies online and have them delivered somewhere where no one will see. If we were to examine Reeve’s life, we could reasonably conclude that Reeve lives in fear. If someone were to see him buying cat supplies, then everything would be ruined. He cannot invite people over, and he has to make sure that there is never any cat hair on his clothing. All of these extra steps to hide his cat-ownership are stressful and time-consuming. Reeve is choosing to do these actions in order to “pass” as a non-cat-owner, a non-stigmatized person.

What do we make of people like Reeve? If we analyze Reeve’s situation, it might seem that Reeve is not a victim of stigmatization. Nothing has marked him publicly as “lesser” or “tainted”, and it seems that Reeve has not suffered

the consequences of the stigmatization process. But perhaps this is too quick. It might initially seem correct to say that those who work to pass are not victims of stigmatization because if they are passing, then they have eluded the stigmatization process by passing – but there is still something going wrong for the person who is trying to pass. Let us consider some of the elements of the stigmatization process according to Link and Phelan: stereotyping, labeling, separating, status loss, and discrimination. Reeve's efforts to pass may have prevented him from being stereotyped, labeled, and discriminated against, but his efforts have separated him from society: he cannot have people over, he has to be very careful before leaving his home to interact with others, and he now hides some of actions from the rest of the world. His inability to interact freely with others will likely result in some status loss for Reeve as well: he will have to decline certain social functions and he will be unable to carry out other social functions as they will conflict with his passing efforts. With all this in mind, it seems that Reeve is a victim of the stigmatization process.

As was the case with Eve, it might seem that Reeve is a victim of stigmatization because he made himself a victim of stigmatization, and again this does not seem like the right result. What seems to be going wrong for Reeve is that society has set the world up in such a way that he feels the need to pass because he cannot live safely as his authentic self without being shoved into the corner. In some sense, Reeve feels forced to try to pass to avoid being stereotyped, negatively labeled by others, and discriminated against. The fear of what others will do if they find out he owns a cat looms over Reeve and fills his thoughts and actions with the desire to try to pass: Reeve knows that if he makes a mistake, he (like Steve and Eve) will end up shoved in the corner. To that extent, we should want to say that it is the actions of Reeve's coworkers that have, at least indirectly, forced Reeve to engage in his passing behaviors. Since it is the views and opinions of those in the office that resulted in Reeve's passing behaviors, it seems that those people are the ones making Reeve a victim of stigmatization – not Reeve.

Finally, let us consider Genevieve – another coworker at the office. Unlike Steve, Eve, and Reeve, Genevieve is not a cat-owner. Having received the viral email, Genevieve arrives at the office a little concerned about being in close proximity to cat-owners. When she realizes that Steve and Eve are in the corner, she feels a little relief at knowing that the cat-owners are quarantined from the rest of the office. Genevieve goes to her desk to start working. A nearby coworker notices a hair on Genevieve's jacket and shrieks, "look everyone! A cat hair! Genevieve has a cat!" The coworkers immediately begin yelling that Genevieve belongs in the corner. In a panic, Genevieve tries desperately to prove to her coworkers that the hair on her jacket is, in fact, her own. Unable to be swayed, the coworkers grab Genevieve and force her into the corner. In the corner, Genevieve tries her

best to stay far away from Steve and Eve because she knows that she does not actually have any chance of having felinitis, but she believes that Steve and Eve do. Knowing she does not belong in the corner, Genevieve is frantic to prove to her coworkers that she does not own a cat to rectify her current situation.

What do we make of Genevieve's situation? On the one hand, we could say that Genevieve is not a victim of stigmatization because she does not actually have the stigmatized attribute, though her coworkers think she does.⁴ On the other hand, we could say that Genevieve is a victim of stigmatization because, as an assumed cat-owner, the members of the office have forced her to stand in the corner marking her as a tainted individual.⁵ Though Genevieve is not a stigmatized person, a person who possesses a stigmatized attribute, she is a person who is negatively impacted by the stigmatization process. As such, we should want to say that Genevieve is a victim of stigmatization even though she is not a stigmatized person.

So who really are the victims of stigmatization in *Feline Fever*? When society engages in the process of stigmatization, who is impacted and how? Steve, Eve, Reeve, and Genevieve feel the impact of the stigmatization of cat-ownership. Moreover, all four feel that impact *as* possessors of the stigmatized attribute. Though Genevieve is not actually a cat-owner, she feels the impact as if she was a cat-owner because that is how she is being treated. To a large degree, she feels what the cat-owners feel. All four suffer some of the consequences of stigmatization: stereotyping, labeling, separating, status loss, and discrimination. Since all four suffer the same types of consequences, it seems important to group all four together in some way. As such, I argue that all four – Steve, Eve, Reeve, and Genevieve – are victims of stigmatization.⁶ Before moving on, I want to note that there is another important reason to group the four together. As victims of stigmatization, all four are victims of injustice. If we want to fight against injustice, then we need tools that will be effective in that fight. Being able to group Steve, Eve,

⁴ Goffman (1963): p. 3 says that when a person possesses a stigmatized trait, he is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.” Since Genevieve does not actually possess the stigmatized attribute, it can be argued that she cannot actually be a victim of stigmatization.

⁵ Again, Goffman (1963): p. 3 says that when a person possesses a stigmatized trait, he is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.” If we understand Goffman as saying that when a person seems to possess a stigmatized trait, then our perceptions of them change, then we can understand Genevieve as being a victim of stigmatization since it is thought that she possesses the stigmatized attribute.

⁶ I want to be clear that I am not claiming that all four should be treated exactly the same way. I do think there are important differences amongst the cases that will be discussed in the next section.

Reeve, and Genevieve together as victims of stigmatization is important because that grouping can be used as a label for the persons for whom we are seeking social justice. Since our current understanding of stigmatization does not clearly demarcate the victims of stigmatization, we need to add to our understanding of stigmatization.

4 Direct and Indirect Acts of Stigmatization

In this section, I utilize the lessons garnered from the previous sections to expand our understanding of stigmatization by elucidating how persons become victims of stigmatization. I argue that a person becomes a *victim of stigmatization* when acts of stigmatization are taken against them qua stigmatized entity or qua (presumed) possessor of a stigmatized entity. With the thought that Steve, Eve, Reeve, and Genevieve are all victims of stigmatization with important distinctions amongst them, I argue that acts of stigmatization take two forms: acts of direct stigmatization and acts of indirect stigmatization.

While I agree with Kleinman and Hall-Clifford that more research needs to be done to fully understand all the complexities of stigmatization, that is not my focus in this paper. Rather, I am concerned with what it means to be a victim of stigmatization. Since I am not concerned with defining stigmatization, I am happy to adopt (and expand upon) the understanding of stigmatization presented in the first section of this paper. *Stigmatization*, broadly understood, is a multifaceted process combining stereotyping, labeling, separating, status loss, and discrimination. The stigmatization process marks some entity as bad, disgraceful, or shameful. Many different types of entities can be stigmatized: persons, groups, companies, traits, behaviors, beliefs, and mechanisms.⁷ Moreover, many different types of agents can be engaged in the process of stigmatization: individual persons, groups of persons, and companies of persons. Finally, though the stigmatization process is multifaceted, an entity becomes a *victim of stigmatization* when acts of stigmatization are taken against it qua stigmatized entity or qua (presumed) possessor of a stigmatized entity.

Acts of stigmatization are taken against targets. An entity (or the presumed possessor of an entity) is a *potential target* if the social ideology finds it fitting to stigmatize the entity, though no individuals or groups are taking actions against that entity (or the presumed possessor of that entity). Stigmatization towards an

⁷ This is not meant to be a complete list. I am open to the possibility that other types of entities can be stigmatized.

entity is *fitting*, relative to the dominant social ideology at the time, if the entity is a token of a type of entity that is stigmatized for reasons found in the social ideology.⁸ An entity (or the presumed possessor of an entity) is a *target* if individuals or groups are taking actions of direct stigmatization against that entity (or the presumed possessor of that entity).

Acts of stigmatization take two forms:

The first form of stigmatization is direct stigmatization.

Direct Stigmatization =_{df} the act(s), taken by individuals or groups, against the entity or the (presumed) possessor of the entity for reasons found in the dominant social ideology.

These acts typically amount to rejecting, avoiding, or fearing the entity or the possessor of the entity on the basis of reasons that are found in the social ideology. These acts can also fail to treat persons as individuals in ways that are humiliating and tied to the dominant social ideology. Here I am happy to adopt Sally Haslanger's account of social ideology. Thus, a *social ideology* =_{df} is a public "network of semiotic relations" that, together with conditions found in the material world, structure our practices and provide the architecture for agency (Haslanger 2007, p. 15–16).⁹

The second form of stigmatization is indirect stigmatization.

Indirect Stigmatization =_{df} (i) the act(s), taken by potential targets, that seek to proactively circumvent or avoid becoming targets of direct stigmatization by others, or (ii) the act(s), taken by targets of direct stigmatization, that seek to retroactively mitigate or terminate the acts direct stigmatization against them as individual targets.¹⁰ These acts are done as a way to manage one's position according to the dominant social ideology.

It is important to note that an act of indirect stigmatization is one that abides by the status quo of the dominant social ideology. Ending the stigmatization altogether is not an act of indirect stigmatization; it is a successful revolution that ultimately shifts the social ideology. Suppose there were a cat-owner, Niamh, who managed to debunk the viral email and prove to the coworkers that there was no such thing as felinitis. Debunkers, like Niamh, are not trying to modify or manage their social position under the dominant ideology; instead, debunkers are trying

⁸ My use of "fitting" says nothing about whether stigmatization is moral in this context or not.

⁹ While Haslanger maintains that social ideologies necessarily sustain injustice and unjust social relations, I am not going to commit myself to this. Here I am going to remain neutral with respect to whether or not social ideologies are necessarily unjust, just, or amoral. It has been brought to my attention that what I am calling a "social ideology" is what Haslanger would call a "cultural technē".

¹⁰ I unpack this definition in detail later in this section.

to destroy that dominant ideology. It is for this reason that Niamh's debunking actions do not qualify as indirect stigmatization. This is not to say that Niamh is not a victim of indirect stigmatization – she might be. As long as the dominant social ideology remains anti-cat-owner, any cat-owner (including Niamh) could be a victim of direct or indirect stigmatization.

When acts of stigmatization are taken against the (presumed) possessors of stigmatized entities, the (presumed) possessors become *victims of stigmatization*. Since acts of stigmatization take two forms, (presumed) possessors can be victims of direct stigmatization or victims of indirect stigmatization. Since Steve's coworkers take action against him by forcing him into the corner because of the now dominant anti-cat and anti-cat-owner social ideology in the office, Steve is a victim of direct stigmatization. Unlike Steve, Eve chooses to stand in the corner because she does not wish to be forced into the corner. She acts to proactively circumvent the acts of direct stigmatization from her coworkers. As such, Eve is a victim of indirect stigmatization. Steve and Eve are importantly different because one is a victim of direct stigmatization and the other a victim of indirect stigmatization. Nevertheless, as both are victims of some type of stigmatization, both require a social justice movement on their behalf. This is why it is important to capture the lived experiences of both parties.

Since stigmatized entities are often ones that the societal ideology perceives as threatening to society, society often takes measures to set up signs or indicators to help members of society navigate around, and avoid, the (perceived) danger. These signs and indicators, known as stigmas, help members of society know where to target their attitudes and actions of stigmatization. Stigmas are physical or nonphysical markers that point to an entity that it is fitting to stigmatize. For example, in *Feline Fever*, cat-owners are being forced to stand in a corner as there is a fear that cat-owners are infected with the deadly felinitis virus. As such, there is a fear of being persecuted for being a cat-owner and a fear of being mistaken for a cat-owner. With all this in the social ideology at the time, *being a cat-owner* is stigmatized. Since *being a cat-owner* is not something that you can see, it is somewhat difficult to direct attitudes or acts of stigmatization towards cat-owners. If someone in the office forces all cat-owners to wear a button that says “meow”, then those buttons would serve as markers that would aid office members in their efforts to pick out those who it is fitting¹¹ to stigmatize. It is important to note, however, that stigmas do not have to be man-made: if one is perceived to have cat hair on their jacket (as Genevieve is) then one is perceived to have a stigma for *being a cat-owner* even if the hair on the jacket is actually

¹¹ Recall that stigmatization towards an entity is “fitting” if the entity is a token of a type of entity that is stigmatized.

human hair. It is also the case that stigmas do not have to be physical: someone shouting “that man owns a cat!” could function as a stigma indicating to those who see that man that there is a need to put him in the corner.¹²

With all of that said, we are now in a position to give an account of stigma:

For some context c , x is a *stigma* iff according to the social ideology dominant in c , x is a physical or nonphysical marker that indicates to the members of the society that the bearer of the marker is a fitting target¹³ for direct stigmatization in that context.

Note that the account of stigma just presented is relative to a particular context. This is because a variety of contextual factors play into what counts as a stigma: the time period, the location, and the specified society. When the context is the office from *Feline Fever* during the period of time after the viral email, then cat hair on one’s jacket is a stigma because according to the social ideology of the members during the period of time after the viral email, cat hair is a physical marker that indicates to the other members of the office that the bearer of the cat hair is a fitting target for stigmatization.

Bearer =_{df} a loose term meant to indicate that the entity in question bears the relevant relation to the stigma such that the entity in question can be stigmatized.

What counts as a relevant relation will change depending upon the nature of the stigmatizing ideology. A person who has cat hair on their clothing is a bearer of a stigma because having cat hair on one’s clothing is a relevant way to be connected to cat hair qua stigma. A person that sees cat hair on another person is not a bearer of a stigma because seeing cat hair is not a relevant way to be connected to cat hair qua stigma. Cat hair laying on the sidewalk is not a stigma because cat hair cannot indicate that the sidewalk is a fitting target for direct stigmatization for being a cat-owner, since sidewalks cannot be cat-owners. Yet this same cat hair lying on the sidewalk can become a stigma if the context changes. Suppose that Jim is standing on that same sidewalk near the cat hair. Passersby might assume that the cat hair has fallen off of Jim. In

¹² Seeing Genevieve is not a stigma by itself. Seeing Genevieve qua cat-owner (the belief attitude that accompanies the experience of seeing Genevieve) is the stigma. Some might argue that this makes Genevieve, a physical entity, the stigma. I am open to this possibility. I want to leave open the possibility that nonphysical stigmas exist. If all of the cases of nonphysical stigmas are also cases like this Genevieve case, I would be willing to grant that either all nonphysical stigmas coexist with physical stigmas or that there are only physical stigmas.

¹³ Recall that stigmatization towards an entity is “fitting” if the entity is a token of a type of entity that is stigmatized. An entity or the possessor of an entity is a “fitting target” for acts of stigmatization if the entity is a token of a type of entity that is stigmatized.

this scenario, those passersby could take the cat hair as a stigma indicating that Jim is a cat-owner and therefore a fitting target for direct stigmatization. In a world where being a cat-owner is stigmatized, persons might try to keep their distance from cat hair lying on the sidewalk, not because they are engaging in acts of direct stigmatization against the sidewalk for bearing the cat hair but because they fear accidentally becoming the bearer of the cat hair themselves.

Note that a stigma can *indicate* that the bearer of that stigma is a fitting target for direct stigmatization when that bearer is not actually a fitting target for direct stigmatization. In the same manner, individuals or groups can believe that a person possesses a stigmatized entity, and is thus a fitting target for direct stigmatization, when the person does not actually possess a stigmatized entity. As such, acts of direct stigmatization can be applicable or inapplicable. Granting that the treatment of both Steve and Genevieve is unjust, we should still recognize that there is a contrast in their situations. Steve is a cat-owner, so he bears some stigma for being a cat owner and he is a fitting target for direct stigmatization because he is (as stated) a cat-owner. On the other hand, Genevieve is not a cat-owner, but her coworkers believe the hair on her shoulder to be a cat hair. Suppose, for a moment, that the hair in Genevieve's shoulder *is* cat hair. Perhaps some evil trickster put it on her shoulder. Since having cat hair on one's shoulder is a stigma for being a cat-owner, Genevieve does bear a stigma for being a cat-owner though she does not own a cat. In other words, the cat hair is a stigma that indicates that Genevieve is a fitting target for stigmatization even though, being a non-cat-owner, she is not actually a fitting target.

Acts of direct stigmatization toward an entity/(presumed) possessor of an entity are *applicable* iff

- (i) the entity/(presumed) possessor is taken to be a fitting target for direct stigmatization, and
- (ii) the entity/(presumed) possessor is actually a fitting target for direct stigmatization.¹⁴

Saying that direct stigmatization is applicable in no way means that the direct stigmatization is ethical or something that society should be doing.

14 Recall that targets can be the stigmatized entity or the possessor of the stigmatized entity. Stigmatization toward an entity is “fitting” according to society, if the entity is a token of a type of entity that is stigmatized. Acts of stigmatization against the (presumed) possessor of an entity is “fitting”, if the entity is a token of a type of entity that is stigmatized. Think of Genevieve. Genevieve is not actually a cat-owner, so she does not possess the stigmatized entity *being a cat-owner*. As such, Genevieve is not a fitting target of stigmatization.

Acts of direct stigmatization toward an entity/(presumed) possessor of an entity are *inapplicable* iff

- (i) the entity/(presumed) possessor is taken to be a fitting target for direct stigmatization, and
- (ii) the entity/(presumed) possessor is not actually a fitting target for direct stigmatization.

With all of that in mind, we are now in a position to consider the many ways in which indirect stigmatization can occur. First, indirect stigmatization occurs when a potential target makes proactive efforts to avoid becoming a target of direct stigmatization. This is Reeve's case. Second, indirect stigmatization occurs when a target of inapplicable direct stigmatization takes actions to prove that the direct stigmatization was inapplicable in an attempt to mitigate/terminate the direct stigmatization. This is Genevieve's case. Third, indirect stigmatization occurs when a target of applicable direct stigmatization takes actions to "prove" that the stigmatization was inapplicable (even though it was applicable) in an attempt to mitigate/terminate the direct stigmatization. This would be the case where a cat-owner in the office decides to pretend that he no longer owns cats (even though he still does) to end the direct stigmatization against him. Fourth, indirect stigmatization occurs when a target of applicable direct stigmatization takes actions to mitigate/terminate the direct stigmatization. This would be a case where Eve stops coming to work to avoid future acts of direct stigmatization against her.

Before moving on, I want to respond to a worry that may arise for the reader at this point. After reading the definition of indirect stigmatization, the reader might worry that my conceptualization of stigmatization is committed to two problematic claims: (a) that individuals who protect themselves from stigmatization also, in some sense, stigmatize themselves, and (b) that engaging in acts of indirect stigmatization is blameworthy.

Let us begin with the question of whether or not protecting oneself from direct stigmatization is, in some sense, equivalent to stigmatizing oneself. To some extent, the answer is yes. In some sense Reeve has some agency over what happens to him. When he walks into the office, he is aware that he will likely become a victim of direct stigmatization because he has cat pictures on his phone and he has previously never made much of an attempt to hide his cat-ownership. In that moment, Reeve has agency to decide whether he will (a) do nothing and allow the possible direct stigmatization to occur, or (b) choose to engage in acts to protect himself from that possible direct stigmatization. He still ends up suffering as a result of his own actions (he is isolated and living in fear), but he is suffering less than (he believes) he would be if he were to be a victim of direct stigmatization. Since Reeve is able to choose whether he becomes a victim of direct stigmatization or indirect stigmatization, we can say that Reeve has some agency here.

The more important question, however, is whether or not Reeve is blameworthy for that agency.

First and foremost, there are some actions that are never morally wrong, and as such, a person engaging in indirect stigmatization via these actions is never blameworthy for them. For example, someone who chooses to give a cat away to a good home has engaged in an action that is not morally blameworthy, so there is no need to question whether or not the person is blameworthy for this action. Other actions, however, can be considered morally blameworthy: lying, subterfuge, etc. When a person engages in indirect stigmatization via these actions, as Reeve does, that person is not typically blameworthy for these actions. Before I can explain why, we first need to consider whether direct stigmatization is necessarily unjust.

Since philosophers are currently divided over the issue of whether or not stigmatization is necessarily unjust,¹⁵ the definition of direct stigmatization leaves open the possibility for just direct stigmatization.¹⁶ In a circumstance where direct stigmatization is *unjust*, persons who engage in indirect stigmatization are not typically blameworthy for their actions. This is because when a person is a potential target, they are left with a choice: take no actions and eventually be a victim of the unjust direct stigmatization, or take actions to avoid becoming a victim of the unjust direct stigmatization. If they take no actions, then they will likely become a victim of direct stigmatization, and they will have to face all of the unjust consequences of that stigmatization. If they take actions to avoid being directly stigmatized, then they are met with the burden of having to engage in those actions to avoid becoming a victim of direct stigmatization. It is not the case that protecting oneself is bad, but rather it is the case that *having* to protect oneself is bad. The blame, here, falls on the direct stigmatizers within society for making it the case that these persons are given the unfair burden of having to engage in acts to proactively avoid being victims of the unjust direct stigmatization.

In the same manner, if a person is a current victim of unjust direct stigmatization, then that person is also left with a choice: take no actions and continue to be a victim of unjust directly stigmatization, or take actions to mitigate or terminate

¹⁵ See Arneson (2007). Also see Courtwright (2013).

¹⁶ I believe that direct stigmatization can be just if and only if: (1) society ought to reject or avoid some entity on the basis of reasons that are found in the social ideology, (2) those reasons are morally good, (3) it is the case that the stigmatizing actions are not unjust, and (4) and the stigmatizing actions are directed to all and only the fitting targets of stigmatization. Absent any of these things, direct stigmatization is unjust. Considering how difficult it would be to meet all four of these criteria, it is likely the case that just stigmatization is a theoretical possibility rather than a practical possibility. As mentioned previously, there are philosophers that argue that stigmatization is sometimes just.

that unjust direct stigmatization. Again, persons in this scenario are not typically blameworthy for engaging in acts of indirect stigmatization. Taking actions to mitigate or terminate the unjust direct stigmatization is a burden that these persons have to take if they want to be rid of the unjust stigmatization. As before, it is not the case that protecting oneself is bad, but rather it is the case that *having* to protect oneself is bad. The blame, here, falls on the direct stigmatizers within society for making it the case that these persons are given the unfair burden of having to engage in acts to mitigate or terminate the unjust direct stigmatization they face.

This is not to say that indirect stigmatization in response to an unjust social ideology is always blameless. If, in an effort to end the stigmatization of cat-ownership, Reeve chooses to act violently against his coworkers, then we can still hold Reeve accountable and blameworthy for his violent acts.

In a circumstance where direct stigmatization is *just*,¹⁷ then persons who engage in indirect stigmatization *might* be blameworthy for their actions. Again, a person can only be blameworthy for actions that are morally blameworthy. To illustrate this point, let us consider a society where pedophilia is justly stigmatized. This means that (1) society ought to reject pedophilia on the basis of reasons found in the social ideology, (2) the reasons to reject pedophilia are morally good, (3) it is the case that the acts of direct stigmatization against pedophiles are not unjust, and (4) the acts of direct stigmatization are directed to all and only fitting targets. Suppose that Mr. X is a potential target – this means that Mr. X is either a pedophile or a person with pedophilic inclinations. If Mr. X engages in indirect stigmatization to hide his pedophilic nature so that he can engage in the immoral act of pedophilia, then Mr. X is blameworthy for his acts of indirect stigmatization as well as his acts of pedophilia. If Mr. X engages in indirect stigmatization by going to therapy and seeking help for his pedophilic tendencies, then Mr. X is not necessarily blameworthy for his actions. Typically, engaging in indirect stigmatization is blameworthy if the person engaging in indirect stigmatization is doing so to conceal other immoral actions.

5 Applications of the Conceptualization

In this section, I demonstrate how acts of direct and indirect stigmatization can be applied to a real life case. I then walk through some interesting applications of direct and indirect stigmatization. By seeing how the view handles a variety of situations, the reader can begin to see some of the theoretical payoff

¹⁷ This assumes that just stigmatization is, practically speaking, possible.

of expanding our understanding of stigmatization to include acts of direct and indirect stigmatization.

5.1 The Direct and Indirect Stigmatization of Mental Disorder: A Real Life Application

Prior to this point, we have mostly been talking about *Feline Fever*, a toy example. While I believe that case is helpful, it is important to also consider a real life application of acts of stigmatization so that the reader can appreciate the importance of the distinctions we have been making.

5.1.1 The Direct Stigmatization of Mental Disorder

Unfortunately, the stigmatization of mental disorder is all too common in modern society.¹⁸ First, stigmatization of mental disorders frequently results in fewer job opportunities for persons with mental disorders.¹⁹ Loss of job opportunities might be understandable in cases where a person with a specific mental disorder is not selected for a job where the specific mental disorder prevents the person with the mental disorder from being successful at that job. Unfortunately, the loss of job opportunities for persons with mental disorders extends well beyond these cases. A study from James Bordieri and David Drehmer found that employers do not seem to be thinking about whether the disorder prevents the applicant from doing the job, but rather, employers seem to care most about how the applicant sustained the disorder.

Employers look unfavorably at a disabled²⁰ applicant when the applicant's disability is presented as being internally caused. When no causal information is given, the employer acts as though the applicant was personally responsible for the disability. When causal information is presented, and the cause is presented as being due to external factors beyond the applicant's control, this information would be expected to enhance the employer's evaluation of the applicant (Bordieri and Drehmer 1986, p. 205–206).

18 The predominant ideas held by society will change depending upon how society is defined. For the purposes of this paper, I am taking society broadly and focusing on contemporary attitudes in the United States and the United Kingdom. I expect that similar patterns show up throughout other regions of the world.

19 Farina and Feliner (1973) found that, if an employer knows that an applicant has a mental disorder, the employer is far more likely to refuse to hire the applicant or will “only hire [the applicant] for certain jobs” that the applicant is deemed capable of handling. See also Thornicroft et al. (2010).

20 Bordieri and Drehmer use “disabled” as an umbrella term for mental disorder and physical disability.

Bordieri and Drehmer speculate that “employers react in a stereotypical manner toward disabled persons. Persons who are seen as responsible for their own disabilities may also be seen as potentially causing work-related problems” (1986, p. 205).

Let us suppose that Sally has a mental disorder. Let us also suppose that Sally’s potential employer learns of Sally’s mental disorder. The employer realizes that Sally’s mental disorder would not impact Sally’s ability to perform the potential job. Nevertheless, the employer refuses to hire Sally. This is a case of applicable direct stigmatization. This is a form of direct stigmatization because the employer has taken an action against Sally (refusing to hire her) for reasons found in the social ideology (mental disorder is stigmatized). The direct stigmatization is applicable because Sally actually has a mental disorder. Saying that the direct stigmatization is applicable does not condone the employer’s decision to refuse to hire Sally nor indicate that Sally would have been an unfit employee. It was already stipulated that Sally’s mental disorder would not have impacted her work performance!

Let us suppose that Roger does not have a mental disorder, but his potential employer speculates that he does during his interview. If the employer refuses to hire Roger because of his presumed mental disorder, then this is a case of inapplicable direct stigmatization. This is a form of direct stigmatization because the employer has taken an action against Roger (refusing to hire him) for reasons found in the social ideology (mental disorder is stigmatized). The direct stigmatization is inapplicable because Roger does not actually have a mental disorder.

Third, stigmatization of mental disorders can cause problems in the work environment if coworkers learn (or speculate) that they are working with a person with a mental disorder. A 2006 General Social Survey taken in the United States showed that 47% of respondents indicated that they would be unwilling to work on a job with someone with depression, and a staggering 67% of respondents expressed unwillingness to work with a person with schizophrenia (Pescosolido et al. 2010). If coworkers refuse to work with someone because that person has a mental disorder (and that person actually has a mental disorder) this is an example of applicable direct stigmatization. Again, the fact that the direct stigmatization is applicable does not condone the action of refusing to work with someone that has a mental disorder. If coworkers refuse to work with someone who is suspected to have a mental disorder (and that person does not actually have a mental disorder), then this is an example of inapplicable direct stigmatization.

Fourth, persons with mental disorder are commonly, and inaccurately, considered dangerous. A 2000 study by Arthur Crisp et al. found that there is a strong tendency to associate mental disorder with violence: 60% of respondents expressed that a person with schizophrenia is likely to be violent (2000, p. 6). This

thought that persons with mental disorder are likely to be violent is what leads to the assumption that mass shootings are committed by persons with mental disorders.²¹ Since this is inaccurate, any actions or behaviors against persons with mental disorders under the assumption that those persons are violent is a case of inapplicable direct stigmatization.²²

Fifth, studies have found that stigmatization towards persons with mental disorder often leads to dehumanizing and discriminating treatment by doctors and caregivers (Thornicroft et al. 2010, p. 54). Acts taken by doctors and caregivers against persons with mental disorders is applicable direct stigmatization because (presumably) the persons under the care of doctors and caregivers actually have mental disorders. Nevertheless the dehumanizing and discriminating treatment by doctors and caregivers is unjust and inhumane, and precisely the reason why social justice movements on behalf of victims of direct and indirect stigmatization are necessary.

5.1.2 The Indirect Stigmatization of Mental Disorder

Many persons do not seek necessary mental health treatment for fear that others will treat them poorly if their mental disorder is discovered (Thornicroft et al. 2010, p. 54). Persons with mental disorders sometimes require accommodations at school or work for their mental disorder, but since many persons with mental disorders avoid getting diagnosed or treated, those persons do not get the accommodations that they need. Whenever a person with a mental disorder decides not to get treatment or help because they are seeking to avoid the potential stigmatization that could go along with mental disorder diagnosis and treatment, that person is engaging in an act of indirect stigmatization. The fact that some persons avoid getting necessary medical treatment for fear of the direct stigmatization associated with mental disorder is an important example of why social justice movements need to fight on behalf of victims of indirect stigmatization.

In a similar vein, a person with a mental disorder might refuse to go out to a social event because they fear the symptoms of their mental disorder (their mental disorder stigma) will be more apparent than usual at this social event. By staying home, the person is avoiding becoming a target of direct stigmatization once their stigma becomes apparent to those at the social event. This is another example of a person with a mental disorder engaging in an act of indirect stigmatization.

²¹ See Thomas (2017), and McGinty et al. (2013).

²² See Swanson et al. (1990); Steadman et al. (1998); Swanson et al. (2002); Arkowitz and Lilienfeld (2011); and Metzl and MacLeish (2015).

Having to hide one's actions and avoid going to social events that one might want to go to is tiring. The person avoiding the social event is unable to live their true authentic life for fear of what others might do.

5.2 Directly Stigmatizing Oneself

While this was not previously discussed, it is possible to take acts of direct stigmatizations against oneself. If a person possesses a stigmatized attribute and believes that the stigmatized trait is shameful or worthy of stigmatization, then that person could come to resent themselves or believe that they deserve to be a victim of direct stigmatization. If a person takes himself to be a fitting target of direct stigmatization, then that person could engage in acts of direct stigmatization (like fearing and rejecting) himself. There are countless examples of self-stigmatization where a person comes to directly stigmatize oneself. When LGBTQ+ people buy into the ideology that there is something wrong with being LGBTQ+, those people frequently reject themselves by trying to hide their identities, not engaging in romantic or sexual relationships that match their identities, or trying to change their identities.

5.3 Indirect Stigmatization without a Potential Target?

As presented, the account of indirect stigmatization may seem vulnerable to an objection of the following sort: could a person be a victim of indirect stigmatization for something that is not stigmatized according to the societal ideology? Suppose that Jerry believes that he lives in a society where *being a violinist* is stigmatized. As a matter of fact, Jerry's society does not stigmatize violinists or violin playing. Jerry loves to play the violin but he does not want to become a victim of direct stigmatization for his violin playing. Jerry keeps his violin in a locked trunk in his closet so that there is no chance of one of his guests seeing the violin. When Jerry wants to play the violin, he takes care to load the violin into the trunk of his car when no one is around. He then drives to a remote location and plays out of earshot of anyone else. Jerry never speaks of his violin playing to anyone, and he is careful to hide all aspects of his violin playing from everyone. Since Jerry engages in activities that seek to proactively circumvent becoming a target of direct stigmatization for *being a violinist*, does Jerry count as a victim of indirect stigmatization? This seems to be the wrong result. If the account of indirect stigmatization is committed to saying that Jerry is a victim of indirect stigmatization, then the account of indirect stigmatization seems too broad.

Fortunately, the account of indirect stigmatization is not committed to saying that Jerry is a victim of indirect stigmatization. Indirect stigmatization occurs when a *potential target* engages in acts that seek to proactively circumvent or avoid becoming directly stigmatized by others. While Jerry believes that the stigmatization of violinists is part of the social ideology, he is incorrect about this. Since the stigmatization of violinists is not part of the social ideology, Jerry is not a potential target for direct stigmatization for *being a violinist* – there are no potential targets for direct stigmatization for *being a violinist* at all.

It is not the case that every person who thinks they are a victim of stigmatization is actually a victim of stigmatization. We need to be able to identify which persons are actually victims of stigmatization and which ones are not. The account of indirect stigmatization allows us to say that the social ideology determines what entities are targets or potential targets for acts of stigmatization and what the stigmas for those entities are. Only persons with those stigmas (or who are imagined to have those stigmas) can be victims of direct or indirect stigmatization. In this way, the account of indirect stigmatization is not vulnerable to overgeneralizing. Taking precautions to avoid becoming a victim of direct stigmatization for a stigmatization that does not exist does not count as indirect stigmatization.

6 Theoretical Payoffs

In this paper, I expanded upon our current understanding of stigmatization by providing a theoretical framework that helps us to understand who the victims of stigmatization are. Understanding that victims of stigmatization are victims of direct or indirect stigmatization enables us to clearly demarcate who the victims of stigmatization are in most (if not all) contexts. While that in and of itself is significant, the theoretical payoffs extend well beyond that.

Adopting the account of direct and indirect acts of stigmatization is useful for social and political philosophy because there is a certain pattern in the social world that it is valuable to track for social justice purposes. Recognizing that victims of indirect stigmatization are victims enables us to include them among those for whom we are fighting a social justice fight.

Finally, adopting the account of direct and indirect acts of stigmatization is useful because it helps to alleviate the hermeneutical injustice faced by victims of indirect stigmatization. Miranda Fricker defines systematic hermeneutical injustice as “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice

in the collective hermeneutical resource” (2007, p. 155). In other words, marginalized social groups suffer because they lack the hermeneutical resources necessary to render their experiences communicatively intelligible, and those in power lack the hermeneutical resources to understand the experiences of the marginalized social groups. Ultimately, the lack of understanding on the part of those in power results in further suffering for the marginalized social groups.²³

Under the standard conceptualization of stigmatization, persons suffering from indirect stigmatization have no resources to communicate the injustices they face. Suppose that Reeve attempts to tell his friend that society is pressuring him to hide his cat-ownership.

“You don’t understand. I’m having to go out of my way to hide who I am. It’s exhausting.”
 “No one is making you do this, correct?”
 “Well...not technically...”
 “Is anyone hurting you physically or mentally?”
 “Again...not technically...”
 “Has anyone threatened you?”
 “No.”
 “Then society isn’t forcing you to do anything. You’re choosing to live that way.”²⁴

Reeve wants to explain what is wrong with his situation, but he lacks the resources to do so. In the same vein, Reeve’s friend lacks the resources to understand what is wrong with Reeve’s situation. By introducing the term “indirect stigmatization” into the English lexicon, persons who are victims of indirect stigmatization are given a little more power. They can say, “this is what is going on. I am suffering from indirect stigmatization. Society is forcing me to hide who I am or face the unjust consequences that society has to offer.” This grants victims of indirect stigmatization the power to begin to fight for themselves, and it enables those who are not victims of indirect stigmatization to recognize the injustices of indirect stigmatization and aid those suffering in the fight against injustice.²⁵

23 This occurs because (1) those in power do not recognize the suffering of the marginalized social groups and thus do not try to help them, and (2) those in power may continue to subject persons in the marginalized social groups to further injustices due to the lack of understanding.

24 This exchange is intended to echo Fricker’s use of dialogue from Ian McEwan’s novel *Enduring Love* to illustrate what hermeneutical injustice might look like. See Fricker (2007): p. 156–157.

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