

## The Self-Protective Properties of Stigma: Evolution of a Modern Classic

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We thank Trish Devine for nominating our work as a modern classic and Ralph Erber and Lenny Martin for giving us this opportunity to reflect on how these ideas originated and evolved over time and how others have used them. Our original idea about the self-protective functions of social stigma germinated for a long time, and there are people who directly and indirectly shaped our ideas, some of whom probably have no idea how they influenced us.

The origins of this work, at least in the mind of one of us (Jennifer Crocker) can be traced to a 1982 invitation to attend a summer institute on Stigma and Interpersonal Relations at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. Crocker applied to the summer institute because a secretary put the flyer in her mailbox, and it sounded interesting. She had been studying cognitive processes in stereotyping so thought her work was possibly relevant to stigma, although frankly she wasn't sure.

The summer institute was directed by Dale Miller and Bob Scott; included an interdisciplinary group of psychologists, sociologists, education researchers, anthropologists, and historians; and was a truly exciting intellectual experience. Each morning the stigma scholars met as a group to discuss readings that someone in the group had identified as important or interesting. Among those readings was Porter and Washington's *Annual Review of Sociology* chapter on Black identity and self-esteem, which argued that contrary to popular wisdom and a lot of psychological theorizing, Blacks do not always suffer from low self-esteem (Porter & Washington, 1979). At the time, it was a puzzling finding to Crocker, but not particularly relevant to her work on subtyping and stereotype change, and she didn't think further about it.

Over the next few years at Northwestern University, Crocker's research evolved to include more emotional processes, and she began to study the relations among self-esteem, threats to the self, and prejudice. Established wisdom suggested that people who are low in self-esteem are more prejudiced, but her research indicated that when threatened, high self-esteem people

are more likely to derogate out-groups or think their group is superior to out-groups (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987).

In 1985, Crocker left Northwestern (their choice, not hers) and joined the faculty at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Her second semester there, she gave a lecture on stereotyping and prejudice in her Introduction to Social Psychology course. After the class, an African American student approached her, observing that she sometimes wondered whether people were prejudiced against her. For example, she said, she drove a new red car, and recently a White man in a pickup truck almost hit her. She wondered if it could have happened because he was prejudiced against her. Although Crocker couldn't give her an answer, the conversation connected in Crocker's mind with the Porter and Washington (1979) article on race and self-esteem. She thought that the uncertainty, or attributional ambiguity that this student had experienced about whether she was the target of prejudice might account for high self-esteem in African Americans.

As Crocker thought about this, she realized that her colleague, Brenda Major, had a research paradigm that might be really useful for studying this phenomenon of attributional ambiguity. Major was interested in why highly attractive women did not have higher self-esteem than those who were less attractive and had done a study showing that attractive women were less likely to think they had written a good essay when the man who praised their essay could see them, because the blinds were up on a one-way mirror, than when the man couldn't see them because the blinds were down (Major, Carrington, & Carnevale, 1984). When the blinds were up, the women suspected he had ulterior motives for praising their essay, and they were less likely to believe they had written a really good essay. Less attractive women did not show this effect.

Crocker scurried to Major's office to talk about this idea and the connection with her previous research. Major was intrigued by Crocker's idea about

attributional ambiguity as an explanation for the lack of self-esteem differences between members of stigmatized and nonstigmatized groups. Major also saw connections and implications that had escaped Crocker and broadened the scope of the idea. Attributional ambiguity, she suggested, might not be the only reason that Blacks do not show the low self-esteem predicted by many theories. She suggested that the tendency to make in-group social comparisons and the tendency to devalue certain domains that one's group doesn't tend to succeed in might also protect self-esteem. Major had been studying the phenomenon of "paradoxical contentment" among working women, who are underpaid relative to men yet just as satisfied with their pay. Her research showed that women's tendency to compare their pay with that of other women, instead of comparing it with that of men, could help to explain this paradoxical contentment—women often didn't realize that they were discriminated against, because they didn't know that men made more than them (Major, 1987). Another explanation that had been offered for this effect was that women simply don't care about money as much as men do. Major argued that this might be so because women held a dim view of their prospects of making money. That is, women devalued money as a self-protective device, because they knew that as women they were unlikely to earn a lot. Major had also just finished writing an article with Kay Deaux exploring how targets' self-beliefs and goals interact with perceivers' stereotypical expectations to influence gender-linked behavior (Deaux & Major, 1987). The connection between Major's ideas and research interests and those of Crocker was clear was compelling, and a collaboration was born.

We decided to write a grant proposal to fund some research. Our graduate students (including Bruce Blaine, Wayne Bylsma, Cathy Cozzarelli, Riia Luhtanen, Oscar Romero, Monica Schneider, and Maria Testa) worked with us on designing some studies, and we submitted the proposal. In the meantime, we thought the ideas themselves were compelling enough that we should write them up. Over the next few months, we began conducting studies and wrote a draft of "The Self-Protective Properties of Stigma" (Crocker & Major, 1989).

We knew from the outset that our ideas could be misinterpreted. We were careful not to say that stigmatized people are motivated to perceive prejudice against them. Rather, we said that when those who are stigmatized explain negative outcomes as being due to discrimination rather than as being due to "internal, stable, and global causes" (Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 613) it can have the consequence of protecting self-esteem. And we were worried that people would interpret our article as claiming that stigma, or prejudice, has no harmful consequences, which we were not claiming.

From the beginning, we also realized that stigma was not always self-protective. Our article (Crocker & Major, 1989) included a section on moderating factors, including the time since the acquisition, concealability, internalization of negative attitudes, responsibility for the condition, and centrality of the stigma in the self-concept. And we also recognized and outlined in our article the potential costs of attributional ambiguity, in-group social comparisons, and devaluation for motivation.

### **Initial Tests of Our Ideas and Where They Led Us**

Our initial attempts to test our ideas in the laboratory met with some frustration. We needed to manipulate positive and negative outcomes in ways that were realistic enough to potentially affect self-esteem, to examine whether attributions to stigma, in-group comparisons, or devaluation could protect self-esteem. Creating believable and ethical manipulations that would have an impact became a challenge. Also, we found that the introduction to psychology pool of research participants included few African American students who could participate in our research, so it would take many semesters to recruit enough participants to fill out the design of a study. That was the original impetus for conducting the studies on women who feel overweight. We also naively assumed that we could use a trait measure of self-esteem as a dependent variable in our studies. Although we sometimes were able to find effects on measures of trait self-esteem, in other studies the effects were only significant for depressed affect. Eventually, we realized we needed to measure state self-esteem. We created a state version of the Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale and devised an early implicit measure of state self-esteem for this purpose (Bylsma, Tomaka, Luhtanen, Crocker, & Major, 1992).

Our early attempts to study attributional ambiguity underscored the importance of considering the perceived legitimacy of stigmatization from the target's perspective. Although women and African Americans showed some self-protective consequences of attributing negative evaluations to prejudice (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991), overweight women who thought they were rejected because of their weight showed drops in self-esteem (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993). Early on, we began thinking about the idea that some stigmatized people, especially those who feel responsible for their condition, might feel less deserving of positive outcomes and more deserving of negative outcomes. Hence, they might not attribute negative outcomes to prejudice and, even if they do, they might not be protected by such attributions (Crocker & Major, 1994; Major, 1994). These ideas

led to another grant proposal and related research (e.g., Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002; Quinn & Crocker, 1999).

Our early studies also taught us that the self-protective strategies we proposed were more complicated than we initially presumed. For example, one of our first devaluing experiments examined whether men and women would personally devalue a trait if they learned that the other gender group scored higher on it than their own gender group. Men devalued the trait, as we had predicted, but women tended not to (Schmader & Major, 1999). In another study we found that African American college students valued school just as much as did European American students, even though the former recognized that their ethnic group did not do as well in school as the latter group. African American students were more likely than European American students, however, to say that their self-esteem did not depend on their performance in school. These studies led us to recognize the difference between devaluing a domain and disengaging one's self-esteem from that domain (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001).

Our initial studies also led to the insight that attributionally ambiguous positive outcomes can have negative effects on self-esteem and affect. African American students who were favorably evaluated by a European American peer showed a drop in self-esteem (relative to their initial levels) if the evaluator knew their race. This did not occur if the evaluator did not know their race (Crocker et al., 1991). Our attempts to understand this surprising finding led us to consider the conditions under which those who are stigmatized might distrust positive feedback or believe that it does not reflect their true level of deserving (Major & Crocker, 1993). This finding also led to another grant proposal and to explorations of the affective implications of ostensibly positive acts, such as being the beneficiary of assumptive help (Schneider, Major, Luhtanen, & Crocker, 1996), pity (Blaine, Crocker, & Major, 1995), or preferential selection procedures (Major, Feinstein, & Crocker, 1994).

### **What Others Have Done With Our Ideas**

One of the first people to find our work useful was Claude Steele. Steele was just beginning his work on stigma and the underperformance of African American students—work on the phenomenon that has since been called stereotype threat (Steele, 1992; Steele, 1997). His idea that African American students may disidentify with school as a way of maintaining self-esteem shared our perspective on self-esteem protection and devaluation processes among members of stigmatized groups.

Our work led other scholars to reexamine differences in personal self-esteem between members of stigmatized and nonstigmatized groups. Meta-analyses revealed that although African Americans do have higher self-esteem than European Americans (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Twenge & Crocker, 2002), other stigmatized groups, such as the overweight (Miller & Downey, 1999), and other ethnic groups, such as Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans (Twenge & Crocker, 2002), on average have lower self-esteem than those who are not stigmatized. Other researchers found that people with concealable stigmas had lower self-esteem than those who were not stigmatized, whereas those with nonconcealable stigmas did not (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998). These findings raise interesting and still unresolved questions about why some stigmatized groups have high self-esteem and others do not.

Other researchers, assuming that we had claimed that those who are stigmatized are motivated to perceive prejudice against them, tested whether members of stigmatized groups minimize or maximize their likelihood of being a target of prejudice. In a widely cited study, Ruggiero and Taylor (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995) reported that those who are stigmatized do not attribute their negative outcomes to discrimination unless discrimination is virtually certain in the situation. This finding cast doubt on the hypothesis that those who are stigmatized might attribute attributionally ambiguous negative outcomes to discrimination. Subsequent work by other researchers, however, failed to replicate this finding (e.g., Inman, in press; Kaiser & Miller, 2001a), and other studies purportedly showing it were later retracted (Ruggiero & Marx, 2001). Other researchers explored how attributions to discrimination are affected by individual-differences factors, such as race-rejection sensitivity (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002) and stigma consciousness (Pinel, 1999), and situational factors, such as the attitudes of the evaluator and the clarity of prejudice cues (Operario & Fiske, 2001).

Our hypothesis that attributing outcomes to prejudice can protect the self-esteem of those who are stigmatized proved most generative, as well as most controversial. Nyla Branscombe and her colleagues, for example, argued that because group membership is an aspect of self, attributions to prejudice against the group implicate the self and hence are damaging to personal self-esteem. They showed that chronically perceiving oneself or one's group as a victim of pervasive prejudice is negatively correlated with self-esteem and well-being among members of stigmatized groups such as African Americans (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). These findings contradicted our speculation that "People who believe that they personally are frequent victims of discrimination...may have high self-esteem" (Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 621). Other

researchers, however, found that once the positive correlation between individuals' perceptions that they are targets of racial discrimination and their chronic sensitivity to rejection in interpersonal relationships is controlled, the negative correlation between perceptions of racial discrimination and personal self-esteem is no longer significant (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). In retrospect, it is perhaps not surprising that a chronic perception that one has been a victim of discrimination is negatively related to self-esteem, given that this perception is likely to reflect not only attributional processes but also the frequency and severity of discrimination to which an individual has been exposed, as well as personal dispositions to perceive rejection. The implications of perceived prejudice for psychological well-being continue to be a topic of considerable interest to researchers. We urge researchers to be more precise in their use of terms and measurement of constructs, as well as to resist inferring causation from correlation.

Researchers also followed up on our ideas by exploring the conditions under which attributions to discrimination are and are not psychologically beneficial. For example, although attributing negative outcomes to discrimination results in less depressed affect than does attributing them to an internal, stable, global cause such as a lack of ability (Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003), it does not result in less negative affect compared with attributing negative outcomes to a purely external cause, such as another person's being a jerk (Schmidt & Branscombe, 2002). Researchers also demonstrated that attributing negative outcomes to discrimination could be socially costly. African American targets who blame a negative outcome on discrimination are disliked and seen as troublemakers by European American students, regardless of the probability that discrimination was actually the cause of their outcome (Kaiser & Miller, 2001b).

Researchers have also explored alternative ways in which those who are stigmatized may cope with prejudice and discrimination. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Branscombe and her colleagues hypothesized that those who are stigmatized may cope with perceived discrimination by identifying more strongly with their in-group. This increased group identification, in turn, is hypothesized to lead to higher personal and collective self-esteem (e.g., Branscombe et al., 1999).

### **What We Have Done With Our Ideas**

In the years since the publication of our article (Crocker & Major, 1989), Crocker's work has wandered far afield from the original questions that drove us. A serendipitous finding in another line of research led her to think of the issue of stigma and self-esteem in

a different way. Specifically, in a study of collective, or group-based, self-esteem (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994), she found that for White and Asian students, private and public collective self-esteem were highly correlated, whereas for African American students, they were uncorrelated. In other words, how White students view their social groups is strongly linked to how they think others view their groups, whereas for Black students, their view of their groups was disconnected from how they think others view them. This suggested to Crocker that Blacks and Whites might have different sources of self-esteem, with Whites' self-esteem being more based in others' regard and approval (following Cooley, 1902/1956, and Mead's, 1934, suggestions), whereas Blacks' self-esteem was more disconnected from others' approval. Subsequent research has supported this view (Crocker & Blanton, 1999). This line of thinking took Crocker in an entirely new direction, in which the focus of her work became contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Although the impetus for this work was her interest in stigma and self-esteem, in her current work this is a side interest. Things have a way of cycling back, however, and Crocker's current interest in the costs of pursuing self-esteem has implications for the experience of prejudice and stigma that may bring her back to this topic.

Major continues to study responses to stigmatization, from a perspective that integrates justice theories with self-esteem theories. She argues that among those who are stigmatized, motives to protect personal and social identity often conflict with motives to justify existing status arrangements (Major & Schmader, 2001). Her current work examines how beliefs about the legitimacy of group status differences affect the use of self-protective strategies among members of disadvantaged and advantaged groups. She finds that members of lower status groups who believe their lower group status is legitimate are unlikely to devalue an attribute or domain in which higher status groups excel. However, if they are led to question the legitimacy of status differences, they do show the devaluing pattern we had predicted (Schmader, Major, Eccleston, & McCoy, 2001). Status legitimacy beliefs also affect the likelihood of attributing negative outcomes to discrimination. The more members of lower status groups (e.g., Hispanic Americans, women) endorse ideologies that legitimize their lower status (such as the belief in individual mobility), the less likely they are to attribute rejection by a member of a higher status group to discrimination. Just the opposite relationship is observed when members of higher status groups (European Americans, men) are rejected by a member of a lower status group (Major, Gramzow, et al., 2002). These findings are reminiscent of her earlier research on "paradoxical contentment" among members of disadvantaged groups and illustrate that things really do



have a way of cycling back! Major also continues to study the nature and antecedents, as well as psychological and behavioral consequences, of believing that one is a target of discrimination. Indeed, the contradictory findings and controversies that plague research in this area impelled her recently to undertake a review and revision of our original attributional ambiguity perspective (Major, McCoy, & Quinton, 2002).

We continue to be fascinated by the question of how people cope with threatened or devalued identities and, in particular, how it is that some people manage to maintain a sense of self-respect and dignity in the face of people, circumstances, and institutions that devalue them. We are honored that our collaboration has inspired the work of others, and we are delighted that after so many years of concentrating on the “perpetrators” of prejudice, our field has begun to give more attention to the psychological predicaments experienced by the targets of prejudice.

### Note

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