An Examination of Prestigious Stigma: The Case of the Technology Geek

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines “technology geek” through the social psychological lens of stigma. The research expands on an aspect of stigma that can materialize in work settings but has not been fully explicated in prior stigma theory, namely, prestige. The authors argue that a stigma may be worn with pride rather than shame, typified by the case of the technology geek, called “prestigious stigma.” The theory building focuses on interactions between the technology geek and others in the organization, positing that prestigiously stigmatized individuals behave in ways that differ from what social psychologists have generally posited for the stigmatized. This effort culminates in a model of mixed interaction involving the technology geek, which extends prior stigma theory and provides insights for practice and future research regarding technology professionals in organizations.

Keywords: Mixed Interaction, ‘Normals’, Prestigious Stigma, Technology Geek, Work Relationships

“...You can’t live with ‘em and you can’t live without ‘em. No, I’m not talking about the opposite sex. I’m talking about geeks...”

Glen (2003: xv)

Well researched in social psychology, stigma has traditionally considered the plight of individuals possessing an undesired differentness such as blindness or bodily deformity. More recently, organizational researchers have applied the stigma concept to less physical sources of nonnormality (Cox, 1993). For example, Clair and her colleagues discussed the troubles of those bearing invisible stigmas in organizations (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005), while Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) examined the stigma of “dirty work” experienced by those in occupations such as garbage collection and grave digging. What is the same in the social psychological and organizational formulations of the stigma concept is the devaluing of the stigmatized individual and the view that they are less than they should be (Goffman, 1963).

In extrapolating the social psychological conceptualization of stigma to organizational settings, an aspect of stigma emerges that has not been given sufficient attention in prior stigma theory. It is the property of prestige. A stigma may exist that is worn more with pride than shame, and we refer to this as “prestigious stigma.” Here, we focus on a particular mani-
festation of prestigious stigma that is commonly found in organizations, namely, the “technology geek.” Our examination illuminates, among other things, the double-edged sword inherent in bearing this type of stigma, as displayed in the opening quotation.

We argue that, in organizations, the presence of prestige in conjunction with a stigma affects interactions between the stigmatized and non-stigmatized (in stigma terminology, this is called a “mixed interaction”). At an individual level, biases that arise within mixed interactions interfere with the career success of the stigmatized (Clair et al., 2005; Herek, 1996; Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, & Scott, 1984; Leary, 1999; Reimann, 2001). These biases also affect organizational functioning by hindering the sharing of knowledge, and this in turn limits the effectiveness of decision-making and business processes. For these reasons, it is imperative that we understand, manage, and improve these interactions.

Toward this end, we explore the mixed interaction of the prestigiously stigmatized technology geek with others in the organization. In the pages to follow, we review the basic elements of the stigma concept from the social psychology literature and then introduce the stigma of technology geek, confirming that it does indeed qualify as a stigma. We next examine the special property of prestige that accompanies the technology geek stigma. Then, we explore mixed interactions involving the prestigiously stigmatized, culminating in a theoretical model and propositions that extend prior stigma theory and can lead to research that will deepen our understanding of interactions between technology geeks and non-geeks in organizations. To conclude, we provide implications for practice and directions for future research.

THE CONCEPT OF STIGMA

Social identity is at the core of the concept of stigma. Goffman (1963) contends that social settings lead to the establishment of categories of persons likely to be encountered, consequently leading to normative expectations of the people we meet in a particular setting. These expectations include norms of appearance and behavior, making up the “virtual social identity” of an individual (i.e., what we anticipate the person will be like given the setting of the encounter). For example, in a work setting, we may expect a person we encounter to dress in a way that matches others in the organization and to communicate in the company vernacular (e.g., in an insurance company, to understand and be able to converse about insurance claims at some level).

But, what if, in the encounter, evidence arises that this person does not conform to the (virtual) social identity that we expect? In other words, what if the “actual social identity” (the set of attributes the individual actually possesses) runs counter to the anticipated identity? While the attributes the individual does possess might easily be well received in a different social setting where they match up with expectations, when the actual social identity presents an undesired differentness from what is expected, the person can be seen to possess a stigma. According to Goffman (1963), when a person is stigmatized (i.e., when there is an undesired discrepancy between an individual’s virtual and actual social identities) and this departure is known or apparent, it spoils his social identity in that setting and leaves him a discredited person. The non-stigmatized (in stigma terminology, these are the “normals”) begin to construct an ideology, or mental picture, to explain the differentness, or inferiority, of the stigma bearer. This process consists of both automatic and controlled responses (Pryor, Reeder, Yeadon, & Hesson-McInnis, 2004), including avoidance (Pryor et al., 2004) and a predominance of negative stereotypes that devalue the whole person (Major & Crocker, 1993; Goffman, 1963). A stigma is fundamentally different from a conventional stereotype due to its global nature. Stereotyping assigns a particular characteristic (positive or negative) to an individual, but assigning a stigma leaves one’s whole identity discredited (Goffman, 1963). The pervasive effects of stigmatization envelop not just the non-stigmatized’s view.
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