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Combatting a Stigma Begins with You
Sven Mikolon, PhD, Glen E. Kreiner, PhD, and Jan Wieseke, PhD

Workplace-related stigma has been studied in a variety of contexts – from stigmatized work to stigmatized workers. Stigma is inherently problematic for any worker but is particularly detrimental for real estate agents and other sales representatives. Stigma can be detrimental to agents because job performance and personal well-being depend greatly on favorable interactions with customers. Such interactions can fall flat when a real estate agent falls victim to a common salesperson-stigma, which may involve negative ascriptions such as “agents only care about the sale,” “agents are just untrustworthy salespeople,” or that “being a real estate agent requires no real skill set.”

Unfortunately, we lack deep understanding of how a stigma plays out in salesperson-customer interactions. Past research analyzing the phenomenon of stigma in customer-employee interactions only detail the aversive reactions to a stigma by the perceiver or the negative effects for the stigmatized individual. However, the causes and effects of stigma must be directly examined from both sides. Therefore, our research sought to expand our knowledge of the interactions between those who are stigmatized and those who stigmatize them by integrating the perceptions of the stigmatized worker and the stigmatizing customer into one model to account for the interdependent effects during stigmatized client-worker interactions.

Our results showed that frontline workers’ meta-stereotypes (i.e., what they, as a group, believe others think about them) and prototypicality (i.e., the degree to which an individual is exemplary for an organization) play pivotal roles in triggering stigmatization by customers. Additionally, our results revealed that the negative adverse effects of stigma in customer-employee interactions are co-produced by the stigma bearer and perceiver. We have termed this interaction between frontline workers’ meta-stereotypes and customers’ stereotypes the stigma magnification effect.

Our Study

Our research conceptualizes and tests a model that includes both the stigmatized frontline worker and the customer. Our model captures the phenomenon occurring within the context of social interactions in which stigmatized individuals unwittingly reinforce others’ negative reactions.
toward them. We propose that a magnification results from two cognitive processes: (a) as negative stereotypes become activated when stigma is perceived in a stigmatized frontline worker and (b) as negative meta-stereotypes become activated when a stigmatized worker perceives a customer.

For the purpose of this study, we studied the frontline employees of two stigmatized organizations that sell “homeless-advocate street newspapers” – newspapers that are sold often (though not exclusively) by homeless individuals. In fact, only one third of the employed frontline workers are actually homeless. We argue that all of the frontline employees – including the non-homeless – acquire a stigma through being perceived as prototypical representatives of their organization. For each organization, we collected data from vendors, data from trained observers who coded vendors’ prototypicality, as well as data from customers and noncustomers who observed sales encounters with these vendors. Data from the different sources were matched by using code numbers.

**Our Findings**

We hypothesized that higher frontline workers’ organizational prototypicality (i.e., the degree to which an individual is exemplary for an organization) will both trigger customers’ negative stereotypes more strongly and will lead to stronger frontline workers’ meta-stereotypes (i.e., what they, as a group, believe others think about them). As predicted, results from the study support a positive association between frontline employees’ organizational prototypicality and their customers’ negative stereotypes as well as a positive association between their organizational prototypicality and their own meta-stereotypes. Study results support the hypothesized negative relationship between customers’ negative stereotypes and their perceived quality of interaction. Results also confirmed that perceived quality of interaction is positively associated with customer rewards and that the link between customers’ perceived quality of interaction is affected by meta-stereotypes.

**Conclusion**

Our integrated approach to understanding stigma, particularly in the workplace, sheds light on the dual-party mechanisms through which a stigma becomes salient and subsequently poisons customer-employee interactions. Our research approach enables us to understand how the stigma phenomenon is related to perceptions of both frontline employees and customers. Through the “stigma magnification effect,” we uncovered that the negative adverse effects of stigma in customer-employee interactions are actually co-produced by the stigma bearer and perceiver. This magnification effect seems to occur without necessarily involving conscious intent of either or both parties involved.
So what does that mean for you as a real estate agent? It means that combatting a stigma and long-held negative stereotypes of those in your profession starts with you.

You have some control to minimize stigma placed on you by current and potential clients. Once you have become associated with any stigmatized category, as a function of being a prototypical exemplar for this category, you are believed to carry the focal category’s inferred negative attributes. That means, once you do something typical that leads customers to assume you are amongst the black sheep of real estate agents, you are subject to all the negative associations customers have regarding this subgroup of real estate agents.

Therefore, the key is to investigate the drivers rather than the outcomes of stigmatization you are or may be experiencing. What are you doing that’s making you higher in prototypicality for the stigmatized subgroup of your profession? What is the content of your own meta-stereotypes, or what you believe clients are thinking of you as a real estate agent?

Furthermore, rather than trying to change clients’ negative stereotypes, you can apply a variety of techniques to cope with a stigma that might be cast onto you by reflecting about your own meta-stereotypes. To initially reduce meta-stereotypes, consider utilizing perspective-taking training, in which you are meant to put yourself in your client's’ position. Additionally, try actively addressing your client's’ negative stereotypes during your interactions by using humor or other relatively nonthreatening means of confronting stereotypes. Remember stigma in the workplace is not unidirectional but rather co-produced by the perceiver and the stigma bearer, so take control of the role you play in your own stigmatization.

Recommended Reading


About the Authors

Sven Mikolon, PhD
Assistant Professor of Marketing, Imperial College London
Dr. Sven Mikolon studied business administration and economics at the Ruhr-University of
Bochum (Germany), where he also obtained his doctoral degree in business administration. In his research, Sven bridges the literature on organizational psychology with that on consumer behavior with a strong focus on the customer-frontline worker-interface. His research in this domain has been published in top-tier academic journals, such as the Journal of Marketing, the Journal of Service Research, and the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science. His work has been featured by the Harvard Business Review.

Glen E. Kreiner, PhD
Professor of Management, Penn State University
Professor Glen Kreiner is a John and Becky Surma Dean’s Research Fellow. He received his Ph.D. in Business Administration from Arizona State University. Professor Kreiner currently serves on the editorial boards of the Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly, and Organization Science, and previously served three terms on the editorial board of the Academy of Management Journal. He has published his research in the Academy of Management Review, the Academy of Management Journal, Organization Science, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Management & Organization Review, Journal of Management and Organization, Human Relations, Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice, Human Resource Management Review, Family Business Review, and Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes. His research findings have also been reported on by the Associated Press, The Wall Street Journal, and print and broadcast news organizations internationally. He has received two prestigious awards from the Academy of Management’s Organizational Behavior Division: (1) Best Conference Paper, 2006 and (2) Outstanding Publication, 2007. He has also won two major awards for his work-family balance research: the Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award for best publication in work-family research and the Best Paper Award from the Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology. He and his co-authors also won a 2015 "Best Paper" Award from the British Academy of Management Annual Meeting.

Jan Wieseke, PhD
Professor of Sales Management, Chair of the Sales & Marketing Department, University of Bochum Business Administration and Marketing, Ruhr-University of Bochum, Germany
In his research, Dr. Jan Wieseke focuses on strategic and operational sales management in industrial and consumer settings, psychological phenomena in customer-salesperson interactions, and social psychology in sales contexts as well as services marketing. His works have been published in leading international journals, such as the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Retailing, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Marketing Letters, and Journal of Service Research. The American Marketing Association’s research productivity ranking counts Jan among the most productive researchers worldwide.