

# **Why work it when you can dodge it? Identity responses to ethnic stigma among professionals**

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## **Abstract**

Culturally different professionals often encounter stigma as they negotiate work lives. Professionals commonly seek to repair stigmatized identities by constructing more positive and relatively coherent self-views. This study draws on interview, observation and diary data from Romanian professionals in the UK, in order to understand how they construct their identities when faced with ethno-cultural stigma. We find that these professionals engage in counterintuitive identity responses which consist of simultaneously denying and acknowledging personal stigmatization (doublethink), and evading engagement with the stigmatized identity (dodging). Unlike the restorative identity work highlighted by previous studies, these atypical responses require less effort, provide less coherence and do not attempt to restore the blemished ethno-cultural identity. Our analyses further indicate that being professional and being White confer individuals privileges that sustain doublethink and dodging. We contribute to scholarship by underscoring the need to consider both stigmatized and privileged identities, when investigating reactions to stigma. We also reflect on the practical implications for organizations of what it means for stigmatized individuals to deny stigmatization or to dodge engagement with stigma.

**Keywords:** stigma, identity, identity work, identity doublethink, identity dodging, professionals, migrants

## **Introduction**

*“We are the victim of our own success. We are so well integrated that the world doesn’t notice us at all.” (Razvan Constantinescu, Romanian diplomat in the UK, 10/04/2017)*

This paper examines how Romanian professionals in the UK make sense of, and respond to, ethno-cultural stigma. Stigma is an attribute that taints and discredits, restricting individuals’ full acceptance in society (Toyoki and Brown, 2014; Goffman, 1963). Pervasive ethno-cultural stigma shapes professionals’ occupational experiences and identities, whether ‘ethnic minorities’ in their own country (with regards to African Americans in the US, Slay and Smith, 2011) or self-initiated migrants in a different country (e.g. Turkish nationals in Germany, Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Ozbilgin and Game, 2013). Recent UK anti-immigration political rhetoric and media coverage have created an intensely stigmatizing environment for Romanians. Despite this, as seen in the quote above, there is the belief that this stigma may have been successfully navigated to the point of invisibility. Little is known about Romanians’ identity responses to stigma. This may be due to this migrant group’s novelty, relative inconspicuousness in organisations and atypicality as stigma research targets.

In response to stigma-induced threats (Petriglieri, 2011; Roberts, 2005), individuals are presumed to engage in identity work, a reactive and constructive response allowing them to fashion current and future self-understandings (Brown, 2017) and “create, adapt, signify, claim and reject identities from available resources” (Brown, 2017, p. 298). Professionals in particular will expend effort in creating, sustaining and maintaining credible work identities (Roberts, 2005) to minimise gaps between how they see themselves and how others might unfavourably perceive their stigmatized selves. Identity responses to stigma deserve further attention beyond current understandings focused on how the stigmatized identity is managed in isolation, to how it is constructed holistically, as part of a repertoire of stigmatized and non-stigmatized identities

(Toyoki and Brown, 2014). The case of Romanian professionals in the UK is a potentially fruitful empirical context because of this population's partially stigmatized national identities and partially privileged White professional identities.

Our study contributes to literature on stigma and identities (Slay and Smith, 2011; Toyoki and Brown, 2014), particularly concerning stigmatization responses in organizational contexts and among professionals (Paetzold et al., 2008; Zikic and Richardson, 2016). We draw on insights from identity (Gotsi et al. 2010, Clarke et al., 2009) and psychological literatures (Foster and Matheson. 1999; Quinn et al., 1999) to theorize 'doublethink' as an identity response to ethnic stigma, evidencing antagonisms and contradictions in identity responses to stigma. We also draw on notions of 'identity minimalism' (Alvesson and Robertson, 2015) to theorize 'dodging' as lack of engagement with concerns around stigmatized identities. Further, we theorize from privilege literature (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014; Macintosh, 2012; Mavin and Grandy, 2016) how these novel identity responses to stigma are sustained, addressing calls to consider the juxtaposition of multiple identities and to conceptualize stigmatized identities alongside non-stigmatized ones (Toyoki and Brown, 2014).

We first locate our theoretical interest within stigma and identity literatures. Then, we outline our qualitative methodology using interviews, diary, and observation data with 21 participants and describe our findings, elaborating on identity responses to stigma. We discuss how these expand understanding of professionals' responses to ethno-cultural stigma by drawing on identity and privilege scholarship, concluding with limitations and future research directions.

### **Stigma and stigma-related identity processes**

Stigma is generally understood as a characteristic associated with an individual or group, that is devalued in particular social contexts (Crocker, Major, and Steele, 1998), leading to (self)

perceptions of those with that characteristic as having tainted, inferior or discounted identities (Goffman, 1963). Examined across a range of disciplinary and theoretical traditions, the recognition of difference and devaluation remain key elements of the concept (Dovidio, Major, and Crocker, 2000). Goffman's (1963) seminal work identified three types of stigma or 'blemishes' relating to 'character' (i.e. personality and mental health), 'body' (i.e. visible disabilities), and 'tribe' (i.e. socio-cultural groupings such as race/ethnicity, religion). Such stigmatized attributes are also markers used for identification of self and others. We focus on the relevance of ethnic stigma for migrants who are professionals.

Migrant communities are often pathologized, positioned as in competition with citizens (Anderson, 2014) and stigmatized such that in-group diversity is downplayed and social distance with the host society emphasized (Ward and Kagitcibasi, 2010). This pathologization has tangible consequences on migrants' occupational experiences (Al Arris et al., 2012), akin to the career obstacles faced by ethnic minority workers (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). In recent years, Romanian migrants have received sustained negative media coverage and have been essentialized with criminal tendencies, uncivilized behaviour, and moral deficiencies (Fox et al., 2012). Such stigmatizing coverage has intensified, latterly linked to the UK's 'Brexit' referendum vote. Alarmist portrayals of Romanian migrants as a nuisance or a menace produce collective frames of meaning that perpetuate stigma, creating oppression and marginalization. Stigma affects a person's identity such that 'stigmatized individuals work actively to manage conceptions of the self' (Toyoki and Brown, p. 718) and deliberately seek to mitigate the negative consequences of stigmatization (Morosanu and Fox, 2013).

The prevalent theoretical perspective on stigma is socio-psychological, seeking to elucidate how people construct social cognitive categories and associate stereotypical beliefs with these

categories (Major and O'Brien, 2005). For instance, Pachankis and colleagues (2018) identify shared dimensional features across 93 types of stigmas: visibility, persistent course, disruptiveness, unappealing aesthetics, controllable origin, and peril. Psychological theorizing emphasizes the notion of stigma as an affixed 'mark' or socially devalued individual-level attribute, investigating how perceptions of stigmatized individuals shape micro-level interactions, and how individuals cope with stigma.

A key finding associated with the perspective of stigmas as fixed, is that when stigma-relevant stressors are appraised as harmful to one's identity and exceeding one's coping resources, individuals experience identity threat and enact coping strategies to reduce it (Major and O'Brien, 2005; Petriglieri, 2011) seeking to redefine the meaning of stigmatized identities (Lyons et al., 2017); or by selectively disclosing invisible stigmas (Jones and King, 2013) to increase well-being and mitigate performance losses induced by stigma threat (Steele, 1997). Roberts (2005) theorizes two broad responses professionals use to counter stigma. First is social re-categorization, based on self-presentation behaviours to increase social mobility by changing social categories to which individual have been assigned; this includes de-categorization (de-emphasizing group affiliations and emphasizing individual traits and attributes) and assimilation (de-emphasizing group membership and emphasizing a more positively regarded group). Second, positive distinctiveness can also be used to counter stigma (increasing own group status through communicating its value), integration (incorporating social identity into professional image) or confirmation (capitalizing on stereotypes to gain desired rewards). Another coping strategy is a paradoxical but robust tendency among stigmatized individuals to distance group-level discrimination from personally-experienced discrimination (Personal/Group Discrimination Discrepancy, PGDD)<sup>1</sup>. Here, disadvantaged

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<sup>1</sup> We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for drawing this to our attention.

individuals report greater discrimination against their group in general than against themselves personally (Foster and Matheson, 1999; Quinn, Roese, Pennington, and Olson, 1999). PGDD suggests that individual meanings about stigmatized identities are contested, although organizational scholarship has neglected how such discrepancies play out in professionals' identity responses to stigmatization. Overall, the psychological perspective predominantly focuses on the functional utility of identity processes mobilized in response to stigma (e.g. reducing threat to enhance performance). This research strand has been criticized for excessive individual-level focus and neglecting structural discrimination (Fiske, 1998; Link and Phelan, 2001), as stigmatization processes occur across individual, interpersonal and socio-structural levels (Bos et al., 2013).

Drawing on more fluid conceptualizations of identities, another strand of stigma scholarship comprises interpretivist and critical approaches examining the narrative construction of stigmatized identities through discourse and the role of power therein (see reviews by Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2015). These approaches, dominant in organizational and sociological/migration studies, conceive identities as multiple, achieved rather than affixed, entangled with issues of power and control, and situated in broader cultural contexts. With few exceptions (e.g. Roberts, 2005), functionalist perspectives rarely consider stigmatized identities in conjunction with more positive ones. Interpretivist work tends to explore stigma and identity dynamics in more fluid ways, tackling how individuals reconstruct the stigmatized self through discourse and, sometimes, in relation to other non-stigmatized identities: e.g. Helsinki inmates draw on socially valued 'parent' identities (Toyoki and Brown, 2014) or African American journalists redefine prevailing negative occupational rhetorics in ways that seize on the professional value of their stigmatized Black identities (Slay and Smith, 2011). These studies also surface broader discourses regulating (and stigmatizing) identities, highlighting how external

influences (e.g. the discourses of others regarding the self) shape self-narratives and self-meaning (Beech, 2008). Interpretivist and critical scholars tend to be concerned with identity practices mobilized by individuals to reconstruct a sense of self for their own benefit in the face of stigma, rather than how individuals manage an affixed stigmatized identity facet to achieve a functional outcome, typical of psychological scholarship. Furthermore, sociological and migration studies adopting a critical perspective emphasize the role of context in the construction and sustainment of culturally created stigma categories. Lamont and Mizrachi (2012) note that broader cultural repertoires and structural contexts shape individuals' everyday responses to stigmatization; and that responses to stigmatization are part of how individuals construct their ethno-cultural specificity and difference. Migrants often cope with stigmatization by emphasizing and positively (re)framing their ethno-cultural distinctiveness (Vasquez and Wetzel, 2009), mobilizing local cultural repertoires (e.g. Brazil's 'racial mixture' myth; Silva and Reis, 2012), or transferring stigma onto other groups with whom one may be frequently misidentified (Morosanu and Fox, 2013). The two broad perspectives outlined offer distinct ways of conceptualizing stigma and ensuing identity responses (Table 1).

**[Insert Table 1 here]**

Aligned with interpretivist perspectives on identity, our interest lies in understanding how Romanian professionals make sense of their socially devalued, stigmatized ethnic identities. We draw on the broader notion of identity work to examine and locate stigma responses, as we see it germane to surfacing more fluid and complex responses to stigma. We note three gaps in this literature on identity and stigma. First, the tension between coherence and fragmentation in stigma responses is under-examined. One common assumption of the approaches discussed so far is that active 'work' on identities provides comfort and meaning through coherence, integration or



resolution (however temporary) of competing identity pressures (Brown, 2014; Caza, Vough and Puranik, 2018). Inconsistency across different facets of the self is conceived as conscious and psychologically taxing in psychological approaches (e.g. Pachankis, 2007, on concealable stigmas). Interpretivist research however views individuals as capable of authoring and internalizing dynamic, not fully coherent narratives about the self, and conceive identity work as an agentic tool to navigate or reconcile identity tensions. For example, Essers et al. (2013) found that female entrepreneurs of Turkish and Moroccan descent in the Netherlands manoeuvre strategically between conflict and compliance when navigating cultural norms in their identity work as professionals (e.g. using selectively cultural repertoires about honourable behaviour). Examining medical and IT immigrant professionals in Canada, Zikic and Richardson (2016) surface the identity work triggered as they seek to re-enter their professions in the host country, evidencing how different professional domains entail different forms of identity work (e.g. customization, shadowing, struggle, enrichment). The authors note that identity work fails to repair or protect professional identities when strong identity threats exist, resulting in identity crisis. Such findings challenge the notion of identity work as a restorative and coherence-inducing process.

Indeed, interpretive scholarship draws attention to alternative processes that could unfold in a stigmatizing context, such that (stigmatized) identities, even when recognized, are not ‘worked on’ in predictable ways. Security is not only derived from achieving coherence between conflicting identity dimensions and coherent narratives about the self (e.g. by constructing a practical-artist meta identity through integration of artistic and commercial pressures, as evidenced by Gotsi et al., 2010). People also make meaning by perpetuating antagonistic discourses, with limited awareness of it. For instance, managers draw on antagonistic discourses to author versions of their selves while responding to organizational disciplinary practices (Clarke, Brown, and Hailey,

2009). Contradictions abound in employees' accounts of organizational life, as they describe themselves as both political and apolitical, and their careers as both self-managed and manager-managed (El-Sawad, Arnold and Cohen, 2004). El-Sawad et al. (2004) posit that such contradictions persist through 'doublethink' i.e. holding two (or more) conflicting beliefs simultaneously, keeping them separate through bracketing, and reducing awareness of paradox, rather than curtailing the paradoxical beliefs as such. While interpretive scholarship conceives identities as relatively fragmented or at best precariously coherent (Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2015), it theorizes insufficiently the tension between coherence and fragmentation of identities as it relates to stigma responses, generally assuming that identity work resolves tension and reduces identity threat (Caza et al., 2018).

A second assumption made in the literature that needs additional scrutiny is that individuals necessarily 'work' on their (stigmatized) identities. Rather, individuals may eschew identity construction completely. Rather than construct, strengthen, or disaggregate identities, professionals can also circumvent deeper identity questions through teflonic identity manoeuvring (TIM) or identity minimalism via 'dis-engagement in or with identity construction processes, demanding at best very little "work", "struggle", or "emotional labour"' (Alvesson and Robertson, 2015, p.3). Relative to identity work, TIM is less conscious, engaged and effortful; it entails circumventing, bypassing and distancing oneself from events expected to trigger identity work. This identity manoeuvre offers an intriguing implication for contexts in which one would expect effort to be exerted in sustaining a particular (positive) self-construction. While Alvesson and Robertson (2015) examined how investment bankers utilize material (money) and discursive (professionalism) resources to deflect identity concerns, it remains unclear how such identity minimalism might play out when individuals are faced with ethno-cultural stigma. What does it

entail to both self-categorize as a stigmatized group member and not engage with, or avoid, the stigma? This is a knowledge gap to which we contribute.

A third area insufficiently unpacked by critical and interpretivist scholarship is the interplay between stigmatized and non-stigmatized identities when theorizing stigma responses. Authors such as Toyoki and Brown (2014) and Slay and Smith (2011) emphasized how non-stigmatized identities are deployed to mitigate stigma effects in constructing the self, but have less to say about how the non-stigmatized (or even, privileged) self is constructed. Similarly, studies of the career experiences of ethnic minority professionals (Essers, Doorewaard and Benschop, 2013; Zikic and Richardson, 2016) generally focus on non-White migrants and neglect issues of Whiteness and privilege. Romanian professionals provide an interesting empirical context where privilege and stigma intermingle. Unlike minorities whose ethnicity is visible (e.g. African-American journalists, Slay and Smith, 2011), Romanians' Whiteness makes ethnic stigma partially concealable. Akin to identity work triggered by invisible stigmas (Clair et al., 2005), they have some agency in masking or disclosing ethnic origin. Yet, despite being nominally White, Romanians are not automatically afforded ethnic privilege in the UK due to entrenched cultural racism (Fox et al., 2012). Eastern European migrants are perceived as inferior, lower class and suited for low-skilled occupations (Samaluk, 2014), having a "downgraded social status" despite their White racial status (Fox et al., 2014). This fluid interplay between disadvantage and privilege remains under-examined in identity work and stigma scholarship. We suggest that attending to socially privileged identities may provide a more complete picture of identity responses to stigma.

Privilege (with origins in critical race studies) is the notion that individuals accrue advantages by virtue of being constructed as members of a higher social status group (Black and Stone, 2005). Privileged identities (e.g. White ethnicity, male gender, heterosexuality) become the

normative benchmark for other groups (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2018), being less salient than ‘tainted’ counterparts (Atewologun and Sealy 2014; Sellers et al., 1998), and requiring minimal identity work (Pratto and Stewart, 2012). In contrast to the acute awareness triggered by disadvantaged, subordinate or stigmatized identities (Sanders and Mahalingam, 2012), privilege is often invisible, unconscious, unarticulated (McIntosh, 2011). Thus, individuals are more likely to perform identity work in relation to disadvantaged identities. Although individuals are never unilaterally stigmatized or disadvantaged (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014; Mavin and Grandy, 2016), empirical studies and theorizing of how stigma and privilege coalesce in individuals’ self-constructions remain scarce.

Despite advances in recognising privilege as a systemic social phenomenon (McIntosh, 2011), there is relatively little understanding of the psychology underlying individual experiences and behaviours linked to privilege, such as White privilege (Phillips and Lowery, 2018). Since individuals are defined simultaneously by multiple social categories (Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016), considering privilege when examining stigmatization entails surfacing both identity penalties and resources embedded in broader systems of social (dis)advantage, and acknowledging how broader historical, political and cultural contexts constrain and enable individuals’ identity work (Carrim and Nkomo, 2016). Importantly, this analytical focus helps us conceptualize responses to stigma that consider the dynamic juxtaposition between stigma-based disadvantage and resources stemming from more privileged identities, thereby attending more holistically to individuals’ multiple positionality (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014; Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016; Mavin and Grady, 2016), rather than narrowly focusing on the stigmatized identity alone. By drawing on the concept of privilege, we address calls to enhance our understanding of identity responses to stigma

by also attending to non-stigmatized, more privileged identities (Toyoki and Brown, 2014), currently under-examined in organization studies.

Thus, our interest lies in stigmatized individuals' identity responses. Our research question is: *What are the identity responses displayed by Romanian professionals faced with ethno-cultural stigma?* We explore this by drawing on interpretivist identity theorizing that points to counterintuitive identity processes (incoherence, minimalism), and on privilege literature that provides insights on the possible significance of White and professional status in stigma reactions.

## **Methodology**

### *Context*

There were 326,000 Romanian-born people living in the UK in 2016 (Office of National Statistics, 2017). Romanians have been the subject of intense scrutiny and debate in the UK, particularly as European Union (EU) labour market restrictions for Bulgaria and Romania were lifted in January 2014. Media and political discourse depicted migration as 'hordes', 'floods', and 'invasions', portraying Romanian migrants as unscrupulous benefits scroungers at best, and criminals at worst. For instance, the Daily Express tabloid launched a petition against Romanian migrants, printing on its front-page: 'Britain is full and fed up. Today join your Daily Express Crusade to stop new flood of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants' (31/10/2013) and 'Benefits Britain, here we come! Fear as migrant flood begins' (31/12/2013). With reference to Romanians and Bulgarians, then Prime Minister David Cameron warned that immigrants 'can no longer expect something for nothing', vouching to 'keep out EU benefit tourism' by restricting access to housing and health benefits (The Telegraph, 06/01/2013). Conservative Members of Parliament aired concerns about a 'surge' in Romanian and Bulgarian migration and UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage warned that 'London and other parts of the country are currently going through a Romanian crime

epidemic'. Some British politicians described this stigmatizing context as 'absolutely toxic' (Vince Cable, *The Guardian*, 18/09/2013), and anti-discrimination campaigns were mobilized by The Alliance Against Romanian and Bulgarian Discrimination and Romanian diplomats (e.g. the Romanian ambassador's frequent media contributions sought to dismantle negative stereotypes and to emphasize positive contributions of the Romanian community). Europe's Human Rights Commissioner has accused Britain of shameful rhetoric on migrants, noting that 'a stigma is put on Bulgarian and Romanian citizens just because of their origin' (*The Guardian*, 29/03//2013). These immigration concerns regarding Romanian and Bulgarian nationals fuelled anti-EU sentiment in the run up to the EU exit ('Brexit') vote in June 2016. Since then, incidents of racial hatred towards Eastern European migrants have spiked (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2016), reinforcing their 'second class citizen' status (Sky News, 20/03/2017) and in extreme cases going as far as petrol bombing Romanian-owned shops (*The Independent*, 13/07/2016). Thus, Romanian professionals working in the UK operate in an environment where their national identities are highlighted and stigmatized.

#### *Data collection*

Between 2014 and 2015, we conducted in-depth interviews with 21 Romanian professionals in the UK (12 of whom were women), mostly in the London area. Participants were selected through personal networks and by publicizing the study via Romanian professional networks. Ages ranged from 28 to 52 years; all had lived in the UK for minimum three years, with an average of 6.7 years (Table 2).

**[Insert Table 2 here]**

Four weeks prior to interviews, participants were briefed to reflect (in diaries) on experiences where their identity as a Romanian national was made salient in a professional context.

Using identity-based diaries is a useful method for examining identity work, especially among minority professionals (Brown, 2017; Atewologun, et al., 2016). Unlike other studies (e.g. Atewologun et al., 2016), respondents' use of diaries was uneven across the sample (9 out of 21 completions), which we later interpreted as symptomatic of atypical stigma responses<sup>2</sup>. When diaries had not been completed, participants cited lack of time or being unable to locate specific (Romanian) identity-heightening episodes in their own lives, only to recount several such episodes subsequently in interviews. Diary completion (or difficulty in doing so) thus became a 'warm up' for the interview itself.

During interviews, we explored how respondents negotiated their identity as Romanian professionals in the UK, using diaries as a starting point. We did not define 'identity'. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting about 1.5 hours. Questions explored recorded incidents and individual reactions to them. The first author (who is fluent in Romanian and English) conducted most of the interviews. Fourteen interviews were conducted in Romanian and seven in English. Researching coethnic migrants entails both privileges and challenges stemming from assumed insidership based on shared ethnicity (Morosanu, 2015). While participant access and initial rapport building were undoubtedly enabled by the first author's Romanian status, being a coethnic researcher also created difficulty in navigating other aspects of the interview (e.g. emotive reactions when participants negatively stereotyped Roma ethnic minorities, implicitly assuming shared prejudicial views; attempts to relate in ways consistent with national culture but inconsistent with professional 'scripts' as a researcher – e.g. several participants avoided scheduling interviews in their workplace, preferring to meet at home, in parks, in pubs and seeking to bond socially).

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<sup>2</sup> When diaries were more diligently completed, it was generally to record restorative 'traditional' identity work responses to stigma; while doublethink and dodging responses emerged more often among participants who engaged in a limited manner with the diaries. See Findings for more information.

Keeping a fieldwork diary and regularly sharing reflections with the second author helped make sense of such complexities. Authors met regularly throughout the data collection, to discuss and jointly reflect on the emerging data and the interviewing process. Additional observations collected at Romanian embassy events with Romanian professionals, and conversations with embassy officials and subject matter experts (9 hours in total) served as supplementary contextual data.

### *Data analysis*

Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed, eliciting 382 pages of transcripts. Romanian interviews were translated so that both authors could engage in data analysis. Using NVivo, coding started with primary nodes comprising categories related to broad topics covered in interviews: career background leading to UK arrival, and experiences where participants' Romanian identity became salient (Table 3). We used these identity-salient experiences to code identity responses to stigma. Informed by stigma literature, we sought evidence of stigma responses akin to identity work (Toyoki and Brown, 2014), creating secondary nodes to capture how participants tackled their stigmatized Romanian identities, such as “hiding”, “claiming/embracing” or “recategorization”. These responses were focused on confronting stigma and repairing blemished identities. Another secondary node was added to reflect “stigma awareness” as all participants commented – without being prompted - on the intense public stigmatization of Romanians in the UK. As we immersed ourselves in the data, stepping away and into it, we observed recurrent contradictions in which participants both reported and denied experiences of stigmatization during the interview, resulting in a new “doublethink’ node (initially coded as “contradictions/paradox”); this captured contradictory assertions about the stigmatized self across the interviews, often linked to statements about professional status. Joint, on-going analyses also revealed that significant portions of the transcripts did not fit the traditional



expectation of effort to resolve tensions associated with acknowledged stigmatized identities, but rather indicated disengagement with these identities and reference to more favourable White identities; this resulted in a new secondary node of ‘dodging’ (initially coded as ‘avoidance’). Following ongoing engagement with data and literature, we experienced a common methodological challenge: since privilege is not something people deploy or articulate consciously and visibly, it is often difficult to locate empirically; White privilege in particular is often about experiences one does *not* have (McIntosh, 1998) e.g. not being stopped by police or not being mistaken for the secretary in an executive meeting. Informed by relevant scholarship, we paid attention to silent implicit privilege. Given our theoretical aims and the extensive prior research on conventional identity responses to stigma, we focus our contribution on what we deemed atypical and novel stigma responses, namely dodging and doublethink. We use pseudonyms to report findings.

**[Insert Table 3 here]**

### **Typical and atypical responses to stigmatized identities**

We begin our findings discussing participants’ dominant awareness of the ethno-cultural stigma attached to Romanians. Next, we present how they engaged in typical restorative identity work in response to stigma. We then elaborate on atypical stigma identity responses (doublethink and dodging), explaining how professional and White privilege enabled these atypical responses that go beyond what has traditionally been conceptualized as restorative identity work. Typical and atypical identity responses are not mutually exclusive and can work in tandem.

#### *Ethno-cultural stigma awareness*

All participants reported stigma awareness across a range of work-related contexts, including formal workplace meetings, informal conversations with co-workers, job interviews, encounters

with authorities for work permits, as well as in social (i.e. non-professional) encounters<sup>3</sup>. Stigma related to Romanian nationality included negative cultural associations such as post-communist orphanages, burglary and corruption. Stigmatization was often inferred from indirect cues rather than direct comments, such as people's reactions when national origin is mentioned.

And the question 'where are you from?' ... 'Romania' ... 'Ah! Oh! Oooh!' ... You get these sceptical reactions and all these onomatopoeia. (Maria, Senior HR Advisor)

In particular, participants stressed others' subtle, yet perceived incongruence between being Romanian and being a highly skilled professional.

[British colleagues] have a stigma and they see this as a contradiction. 'How is it possible... hmm really?' My British boyfriend also said that the first thing you think about when you hear 'Romanian' is someone who puts bathroom tiles or is a cleaner. [...] That's why there is always an element of surprise. (Claudia, Strategy Consultant)

Minority individuals often experience subtle stigmatizing and marginalizing encounters (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). The nuanced and ambiguous nature of these encounters may indicate under-reporting of stigmatizing experiences:

I think on a scale from 1 to 10 it [stigma of being Romanian] is somewhere around seven-eight, but because of it being 'camouflaged' it can appear less substantial. But that's not true, it's always there. (Maria, Senior HR Advisor)

The ubiquity of stigma awareness was supported by our observation data, which coalesced strongly around a collective discourse about the stigmatization of Romanians in British media; this was a constant preoccupation across networks of Romanian professionals. For instance, at an event hosted by the Romanian Embassy in London (01/12/2014), the Ambassador commented on the

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<sup>3</sup> Due to our interest in how participants manage stigma as professionals we focused our analysis on experiences that were work-related or relevant to the construction of the self as professional and Romanian.

recurrent negative media coverage, noting that ‘some Romanians would like to be anything but Romanian these days’. The Romanian Ambassador and Social Affairs Attachés regularly sought to challenge this negative rhetoric in media appearances and at public events. The Ambassador commented: ‘Romanians have become targets in a political and media game in the UK they neither want nor need to play. Anti-EU rhetoric, economic uncertainty and misleading predictions from nearly a decade ago have combined to create a culture of blame which allows misguided stereotypes of “bad” Romanians to flourish, unchecked.’ (The Telegraph, 07/10/2013). Next, we discuss the identity responses to this perceived stigma.

*Typical responses: Confronting stigma through restorative identity work*

We coded four identity work strategies used by participants that involved engaging with the stigmatized identity directly. Respondents denied Romanian origins (e.g. excluding this from their CVs); displaced stigma (e.g. to other ethnic Romanian groups such as the Roma<sup>4</sup>); embraced their Romanian origins (e.g. emphasizing Romanian values) or embraced alternative identities (as professionals or Europeans). These strategies were often used in tandem.

*Denying Romanian identity at work.* Several participants consciously avoided disclosing where they are from or ‘airbrushed’ their Romanian identity in professional encounters, constructing oneself as ‘not Romanian at work’. Romanian identity was actively de-emphasized by withholding career-relevant information that explicitly connected them to their home country; e.g. Claudia and Maria occlude the full name of their university and years of work experience in their home country on their CVs (‘Why would I mention it? It’s not something that helps me’ -

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<sup>4</sup> Roma are ethnic minorities comprising 3.3% of Romania’s population. They are socially and economically disadvantaged and highly stigmatized in Romania.

Claudia). Similarly, Veronica justifies hiding her Romanian origins by saying that her nationality ‘was never an advantage, only an obstacle’.

*Displacing stigma.* Besides downplaying ethno-national-cultural background, participants also transferred notions of stigma to strongly stigmatized minority groups in Romania, i.e. the Roma. Most criticized society’s frequent conflation of Romanian and Roma and deflected taint by blaming Roma groups for the negative image of Romania abroad. Veronica recalls seeing Roma co-nationals practicing illegal gambling and reporting them to police. Her active disassociation from the Roma is illustrated below:

What I didn’t do and I should have done is also say to the (police): ‘Look, I think they’re Romanians, I want you to know that I’m Romanian as well. Please, don’t judge us the same’. [...] Would I be doing this for selfish reasons, to wash my hands off this and separate myself from them, or is it a genuine need to help society? It would have been more for my own PR. (Veronica, Head of Marketing)

*Embracing the Romanian self at work.* A third, but infrequent identity work strategy entailed positively embracing aspects of Romanian identity. For example, Dana talks about being resolute in her job search and links this to Romanians being accustomed to hardship; she also attributes her friendliness and social orientation at work to the ‘Romanian communal spirit’, and visibly engages in Romanian cultural workplace practices (e.g. bringing birthday cake for colleagues).

I think our values are healthy. I think it’s normal to tell people what you think, to be honest, to fight for something, to have this resilience and not be discouraged by obstacles, to have a community spirit which I haven’t quite noticed amongst English people. (Dana, Commercial Lead)

However, such positive distinctiveness (Roberts, 2005) was rare in our sample. Two participants derived a sense of pride in overcoming obstacles associated with their national origin, and only Dana purposefully embodied 'healthy Romanian values' in work behaviours. Unlike other studies showing that migrants often cope with stigmatization by positively emphasizing their ethno-cultural distinctiveness (Vasquez and Wetzel, 2009), our findings suggest that reconstructing positive ethno-cultural identities is not an identity work option regularly deployed by Romanians (akin to Morosanu and Fox, 2013). Perhaps, due to their positions as relatively new workers in the UK, there are limited positive discursive resources/cultural repertoires about Romanian professionals on which to draw. Alternatively, the particular circumstances surrounding these professionals offer the opportunity to wholly sidestep the stigmatized Romanian identities as they negotiate working lives in the UK, which we discuss further below.

*Embracing alternative, more positive identities.* A fourth typical identity work response in the face of stigma comprises recategorization by opting into non-stigmatized, more privileged identities (Toyoki and Brown, 2014). There was evidence in our data that participants downplayed stigmatized Romanian identities and emphasized positive professional and broader transnational White identities (e.g. 'young international adult', 'European'). For example, Veronica is frustrated when a work colleague mentions her nationality during a workplace event:

I really don't think this is a label you need. Present people as a professional first and foremost - please, can you identify me by my work, the quality of my work and what I'm capable of doing; the fact that I'm Romanian is neither here nor there.

Rather than blending her Romanian and professional identities, Veronica displaces her Romanian-ness as 'neither here nor there', and embeds her identity in work, quality, and competence. Such incidents illustrate how participants actively leveraged and claimed professional

identities in a manner indicative of effortful, deliberate identity work. Stigma was acknowledged and competence, professionalism, and career achievements were used to trump stigmatized national identities, foregrounding a coherent more positive professional identity. In isolation, these reactions can be categorized as restorative identity work due to their focus on preferred alternative identities; however, our data suggested that these stigma responses were encapsulated in broader identity processes that differed from what is typically understood to be restorative identity work. For this reason, we expand further on this empirical material in the sections below pertaining to atypical identity responses.

The identity work strategies so far outlined (denying Romanian identity at work, displacing stigma, embracing the Romanian self at work, and embracing alternative positive identities) are typical stigma responses that enabled Romanian professionals to reject or repurpose ethno-cultural stigma through recategorization and positive distinctiveness (Roberts, 2005). These findings support prior studies showing how individuals either claim or deflect ethnicity to cope with stigma (Morosanu and Fox, 2013), pointing to the importance of identity work as mindful effort to repair and reconstruct blemished identities and to foster a coherent sense of self (Clair et al., 2005; Toyoki and Brown, 2014; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Despite evidence of restorative identity work triggered by stigma awareness, interviews also featured extensive responses to stigma that were inherently contradictory or sidestepped engagement with the stigma altogether. We identified two categories of broader identity responses which comprised over half of the identity responses coded in our data: identity doublethink and identity dodging. Our focus here is not the ‘work’ that goes into embracing alternative identities per se (as captured in traditional restorative identity work), but the disengagement with stigma we observed from our participants’ accounts, and what enables this. Unlike traditionally theorized

identity work in response to stigma, these atypical responses entailed little apparent effort to resolve incongruence in conflicting accounts of stigma, to provide coherence, or to engage with the acknowledged blemished ethno-cultural identity in an effortful and reflexive way. The responses go beyond active claiming/rejecting of certain identity aspects and encompass subtler, less active reactions than typical identity work, that, during dodging, appear tantamount to wholesale eschewing or evading engagement with the stigma.

*Atypical responses: Doublethink about stigma enabled by being professional*

Beyond traditional restorative responses, on further analyses, our data suggested that professional identities also enabled a response to stigma in which participants appeared to hold a simultaneous acceptance and denial of personal stigmatization - doublethink. 'Doublethink' (El-Sawad et al., 2004), captures how participants sustained contradictory beliefs in identity claims (e.g. acknowledging and denying stigma simultaneously), accompanied, in our sample, by apparent inattentiveness to the contradictions in one's narrative, and the absence of reflexivity or discomfort regarding one's inconsistent meaning-making. In the majority of the accounts (19 out of 21) Romanian professionals acknowledged the impact, to varying degrees, of stigma in their working lives. However, there was a dominant secondary theme of our respondents downplaying the centrality of stigma in their everyday lives, a contradiction they sustained by referring to being professional or part of the global elite. Several times in our data (8 out of 21 transcripts) everyday micro-experiences of Othering were recognized and reported, but constructed into an overall narrative in which stigma or discrimination did not affect them. Analyses suggested that being professional buffered them from stigma as, often, participants invoked their highly educated working environments or professional status to argue that they were not in fact stigmatized. For

instance, Gabriel switches deftly, from being perceived as Romanian to replacing this with ‘being professional’ to protect himself from prejudice in an encounter with public servants granting his work permit:

When I said I was Romanian, I felt his attitude changed from extreme friendliness to scrutiny. Everything became very official and professional. I reacted as a professional, I showed him all documents. It was important for me not to expose myself to prejudice by remaining professional. (Gabriel, Entrepreneur)

Then, after sharing several such personal experiences of stigmatization due to his nationality, he concludes surprisingly:

That being said, I think from a professional standpoint, competence matters more than any prejudice you might hold, especially in London where everything is so commercial, transactional and professional. (Gabriel, Entrepreneur)

Greta also admitted hesitating to identify publicly as Romanian in response to stigma (‘You think twice about saying where you’re from because I don’t want to attract attention especially in the context of a lot of negative press’), but later denied stigma’s prevalence and impact in her life (‘My life is so dull, no discrimination!’) and claimed not to feel vulnerable, buffered by a title, a good job, and income that come with being a professional:

These issues don’t concern me, they concern people who are in a weaker in social position that does not protect them from negative stereotyping. I don’t feel vulnerable at all [...] but I know [these issues] are threatening to a lot of people who can’t hide behind the title or a good job or money. (Greta, Senior Lecturer)

In a further example, Greta reports identity threats in the form of banter from colleagues about ‘Romanians taking over’ senior positions, commenting that ‘some of us thought it didn’t always



sound like a joke, it sounded a bit threatening’. However, later on, she asserts: ‘In academia it’s hard to be explicitly racist [...], so I never actually experienced any of that’, thus invoking the professional identity of ‘academic’ to deny the impact of the threat she had just described. Similarly, Andrei acknowledges stigma and recalls regularly having to ‘educate recruiters and companies’ about his legal working rights. Later, he asserts that ‘People have this idea that they are going to be treated differently for being Romanians and it is not true’, drawing a distinction between stigmatization in public media and his highly educated working milieu, as seen below.

I don’t think the press coverage is okay and I’m a bit irritated by it. Sometimes I talk about it with my colleagues and I’m positively surprised that most of them don’t care about the Daily Mail. (Andrei, Academic Researcher)

In a final example, Sebastian declared ‘I can’t say anyone behaved differently towards me because I am Romanian’ while also alluding to being the butt of jokes (deemed too rude to be repeated) from colleagues:

Sebastian: I’m not someone who takes offence easily. There are jokes everywhere and there have been jokes here but if they joke about me being Romanian, I joke about them being Scots or Welsh.

Interviewer: What kinds of jokes?

Sebastian: I don’t want to repeat them as it sounds negative. (Sebastian, Manager)

Later, Sebastian comments on the prejudice-free nature of his professional environment; similar to Andrei, he mentions that stigmatizing stories on Romanians published in tabloids have little credence in the cosmopolitan and highly educated work environment they all inhabit, thereby invoking professional status and privilege. In the examples above, Andrei, Greta, Gabriel and Sebastian cite personal accounts of being subject to stereotyping in work-related scenarios but

deny any direct impact or relevance to them, and invoke their work-related identities while doing this. This, and other contradictory positions of narrating the impact of having a stigmatized identity while also denying the impact of stigma in one's life, were not expressed as problematic. Individuals' accounts of such incidents were internally consistent in isolation, at the micro-narrative level, but dissonant in relation to each other. There was no evidence of attempts to construct a coherent overall narrative to unify these statements.

Thus, beyond embracing professional identities as a positive alternative to stigmatized ones (a form of restorative identity work through social recategorization), participants invoked being professional in such a way as to apparently buffer themselves from stigmatization. Claiming more socially valued professional identities is an identity work tactic already documented in stigma research (Roberts, 2005). While in isolation this response might look like conventional identity work, interpreted in conjunction with participant accounts of stigma being absent or irrelevant, doublethink involves sustaining contradictory accounts which is made possible largely by drawing on notions of being a professional or part of the global elite to buffer one from having to engage with the stigmatized self. Organizational identity scholarship has documented conflicting processes in identity work. However, our findings depart from Gotsi and colleagues' (2010) paradoxical identity work. There, individuals consciously recognized the contradictions across their different (work-related) identities, experienced discomfort and ultimately 'resolved' apparent contradictions by crafting meta-identities (e.g. 'practical artists'). Many of our participants pointed to circumstances where the threat of stigma was reduced on account of their allegedly more educated and tolerant socio-professional identities and milieu. Thus, by virtue of the relative cocooning afforded by privileged professional status (Mavin and Grady, 2016), participants sidestepped the expected search for coherence via identity work typically seen in migrants'

responses to stigma. Instead, their response suggests parallels with the person-group discrimination discrepancy (PGDD)<sup>5</sup> described previously. However, while PGDD evidences conflicting assessments of personal vs group discrimination/stigmatization, we evidence conflicting assessments at the level of personal perceptions of stigmatization.

*Atypical responses: Dodging stigma enabled by being White and being professional*

Whilst doublethink entailed acknowledging the stigmatized Romanian identity and engaging with it to some extent, 11 of the 21 transcripts also revealed surprising instances of not constructing, strengthening or restructuring identities in response to stigma but apparently avoiding identity concerns altogether. As previously discussed, our data suggest that respondents were cognizant of the salience of Romanian stigma in general, unlike the identity minimalism of UK bankers (in Alvesson and Robertson, 2015) for whom identity was not a concern at all. Yet, respondents found ways of evading stigma-targeted identity work by isolating themselves from broader stigmatizing discourses (e.g. Maria and Clara stopped watching the news and reading the national press to avoid exposure to stigma). Again, our analytical interest does not lie in the already evidenced work that goes into downplaying the impact of stigma through reframing the taint associated with the stigmatized identity, but in the processes that enabled evading the stigma as observed from our participants' accounts. When stigma emerged in personal/professional encounters, participants depersonalized the meaning and significance of such stigmatizing episodes by making generic comments. For instance, in recounting a conversation with colleagues in which migrants are depicted as benefit claimants, Sorana depersonalizes stigma effects by putting it down to the recent global economic crisis prompting social attitude changes, speculating that it might not be about

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<sup>5</sup> We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

Romanians in particular as ‘nationalistic attitudes are emerging everywhere’. We coded this episode (and similar others) as dodging because the emphasis was on not engaging with the stigmatized identity, or actively constructing /opting into a more desirable one. Instead, the data showed a strikingly impersonal response to what appeared to be deeply personal stigmatizing episodes.

Several participants believed that negativity against Romanians was not personally directed at them. Unlike racial and gender stigma experienced as “threat in the air” that spills into personal experiences and performance among African Americans and women (Steele, 1997), our participants acknowledged ethnic stigma in broader environment and personal encounters, but seemed to insulate themselves from it. For instance, Sorana and Ina distance themselves from stigmatizing media coverage and colleagues’ response to it:

Maybe sometimes people comment on what they read in the press [about Romanians] but I can’t say it’s personal. (Sorana, Architect)

Concerning this debate around Romanians and Bulgarians, I never felt... although it’s clearly racism... but if you ask me, it’s as if I dissociate, I don’t feel personally attacked. (Ina, Senior Lecturer)

These quotes reflect dodging as a response to stigma by talking about it in abstract terms rather than in terms of personal impact/relevance, in a way that minimizes engagement with the targeted identity. This is distinct from the identity work focused on engagement with stigma. We theorize that this subtler, more nuanced, less active response to stigma was enabled by our participants being not only professionals, but also White in the UK. Evading ethno-cultural stigma was relatively unproblematic based on phenotypical similarity to the dominant (White) racial group<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> According to the 2011 census, 86% of UK’s population is White (ONS, 2018).

I always blended in Western European countries because you look pretty much like everyone else! (Greta, Senior Lecturer)

For Ana, being Romanian is irrelevant in her diverse and international workplace, where she sees herself as ‘another ingredient to this melting pot’. She describes herself as ‘a young international adult’, evoking cosmopolitanism as she embraces her transnational professional and educational experiences.

[My employer is] a big international company full of people from all over the world, so you really feel at home, integrated but at the same time individual. (Ana, HR Programme Manager)

Similarly, Andrei reports:

I look at my identity and I think of myself as a global citizen more than just a Romanian citizen. (Andrei, Academic Researcher)

We propose that alongside professionalism, Romanians’ White ethnicity enabled them to opt into a generic European identity that became unnoticed (in reference to the opening comment in this paper) or, as participants said, ‘lost’, invisible in the ‘melting pot’ of ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘international’ London-based working environments, where most of them lived. Similar to other studies that examined the lived experience of White ethnic privilege (Samaluk, 2014), most interviewees did not make explicit reference to their White ethnicity, since being White often comes with “the luxury of obliviousness” (Johnson, 2006, p. 22). Informed by privilege literature (Dyer, 2012; Phillips and Lowery, 2018) we paid attention to their obliviousness of how Whiteness, in conjuncture with professional status, enabled them *not* to think about their stigmatized ethnicity or to blend into more generic identities imbued with normative Whiteness (e.g. European, cosmopolitan professional). Whiteness infuses Western cultural constructions of

professionalism and the prototype of the ideal worker / leader (Dyer, 2012; Van Laer and Janssens, 2017; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014). White minorities can phenotypically blend in since they don't have to manage visible ethnicity, and are thus seen as 'raceless' (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014). Thus, evoking broader European cosmopolitan identities relies on both professional and White privilege. Corina reports several upsetting stigmatizing personal experiences as a resident of other UK cities (which she conceived as relatively more 'provincial') and contrasts these to her experiences in multinational workplaces in London and Oxford, enabling her evasion of conventional identity work to directly manage stigma:

I don't have a lot to say [about stigmatized Romanian identities] because my company is really international, I don't think about my identity. (Corina, Social Policy Consultant)

In not having to think about her identity, Corina claims the privileges of invisibility afforded by her professional context *and* White ethnicity. We note that this passive blending into generic White professionalism is qualitatively different from assimilation (e.g. Roberts, 2005) which typically requires active efforts to 'fit in' (e.g. downplaying accent, changing one's name).

Our assertion is that being a White professional in the UK expanded participants' repertoire of alternative identities eschewing stigma management to make claims to 'European', 'international adult', 'professional expatriate' and 'global citizen' identities - options not typically available to working class Eastern European or non-White professional migrants. However, while respondents consciously and explicitly evoked professional status, they did not demonstrate similar awareness of their White ethnic privilege. Further, accounts also suggested that Whiteness did not confer unilateral privilege to Romanian migrants in the UK. For instance, Claudia reports that a British accent affords professional credibility, whilst the Eastern-European does not. Sorana's experience shows that it is easier to obtain Hungarian citizenship (and have the freedom

to work as a fellow European citizen in the UK) than to obtain a mere working permit as a Romanian professional in the UK, demonstrating a status hierarchy among White populations in the EU.

In summary, doublethink and dodging were unexpected but prevalent individual responses to stigma. The denial and neglect of stigma were especially surprising given the preoccupation we observed with challenging stigma at community level, as evidenced by our earlier reported observations from the Romanian embassy and contemporary media. Our findings suggest that being professional and White allow people to deal with stigmatized identities by offering resources to distance and even eschew the need to confront the stigma. Next, we discuss our findings in reference to implications for identity and privilege in organization studies.

## **Discussion**

Our study advances understanding of identity responses to stigma beyond current focus on how the stigmatized identity is confronted, or managed in isolation, exploring how stigmatized persons construct themselves more holistically, i.e. attending to both stigmatized and non-stigmatized identities. Core to our conceptualization of identity responses is the focus on what happens to the stigmatized identity. We examined stigma responses in light of interpretive identity theorizing that surfaces tensions and paradoxes within individuals' identities construction, including themes of incoherence and antagonisms as well as detachment from specific identities and identity minimalism. We also considered the privilege inherent in non-stigmatized professional and White identities to interpret broader identity responses in the face of stigma, thereby theorizing stigmatized identities in relation to often neglected privileged identities. Our findings reveal that while White professionals of Eastern European origin in the UK respond to stigma in previously theorized and predictable ways, they also engage in response patterns that side-step engagement

with stigmatized identities. We advance scholarship by revealing under-explored and under-theorized identity responses to stigma and, further, by exposing the role of privilege in enabling these responses. Our analyses indicate that privilege moderates responses to stigma among this group, providing additional tactics unavailable to non-professional White migrants or professional non-White migrants.

Our first contribution is to evidence fluid and contradictory understandings of the stigmatized self, thereby theorizing ‘doublethink’ as an identity response to stigma enabled by the privilege of being a professional. Organizational scholarship from more discursive traditions conceptualizes identities as sometimes fragmented and antagonistic (Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2017; Clarke et al., 2009; El Sawad et al., 2004; Gotsi et al., 2010) and acknowledges identity incoherence in how people make sense of their stigmatized identities in relation to other non-stigmatized ones. For instance, spoiled identities are swamped by a focus on preferred or alternate selves in which individuals draw selectively from “repertoires of simultaneously existing self-narratives” (Toyoki and Brown, 2014, p. 729). Yet, stigma theorizing across traditions implicitly assumes a relatively pervasive, uncontested (self) perception of the tainted identity itself. Our findings challenge this assumption, suggesting doublethink, a pattern of identity responses consisting of conflicting appraisals of being personally stigmatized in the context of acute awareness of one’s ethnic group’s public stigmatization. Here, stigma reactions were consistent in isolation, at the micro-narrative level, but conflicting in relation to each other, such that there was no overall coherence in the accounts the participants shared. This apparent simultaneous denial and acceptance of personal stigmatization bears conceptual resemblance to the psychological phenomenon of “personal-group discrimination discrepancy” (PGGD), whereby disadvantaged individuals report higher levels of discrimination against their group in general than against



themselves (Foster and Matheson, 1999; Quinn et al., 1999). Psychological theorizing also suggests that managing concealable stigmas leads to identity ambivalence, as individuals consciously struggle with inconsistencies between selves displayed in different contexts (Pachankis, 2007). While PGDD evidences conflicting perceptions of personal vs group discrimination (i.e. my group is stigmatized, but I am not), we evidence conflicting assessments about personal stigmatization (e.g. Greta explaining how she has been stigmatized when recalling some experiences, only to claim that she is not stigmatized later in the interview); we also find limited awareness about these inconsistent accounts regarding the stigmatized self, unlike the notion of identity ambivalence (Pachankis, 2007). Despite proposing that identities encapsulate antagonisms, organizational studies of stigma have failed to address identity incoherence in relation to stigma specifically. We extend interpretivist literature on stigma and identity by evidencing how identity antagonisms and incoherence play out in responses to stigma specifically, and elaborate on the very understandings of the stigmatized self as contested, fluid and incoherent.

Identity construction in the face of stigma has previously been theorized as stigma-directed, repairing or defending the stigmatized identity in response to (sometimes ongoing) threats and vulnerabilities. For example, Slay and Smith (2011) and Toyoki and Brown (2014) showed the facilitative role of non-stigmatized aspects of self in making sense of stigmatized self. This suggests engaging with stigmatized identities in some way as to (attempt to) reduce threat. In contrast, doublethink perpetuates contradictory accounts in which threat may be reduced locally but denied overall. That is, threats can be managed *in situ*, at the point of the stigmatizing experience, while not acknowledged as a broader, general consequence of being a Romanian in the UK. We speculate (drawing on Toyoki and Brown, 2014; El-Sawad et al., 2004; Clarke et al., 2009) that this response to stigma nevertheless provides safety not from achieving coherence or

repairing the blemished identity, but from sustaining parallel, if contradictory accounts of stigma that buffer individuals from the customary work associated with stigma. For this reason, we describe this identity response as not resolving contradictory stances related to the stigmatized self. We interpret this (partial) denial and ensuing contradiction as a process that allows Romanian professionals to evade constant engagement with stigma, while remaining apparently unreflective about these contradictions. Thus, this identity response to stigma suggests relatively less subjectively experienced tension compared to typical stigma-directed identity work, moderate sense-making effort and no overall coherence (see Table 4).

Further, we extend stigma theorizing by showing how the privilege of holding a professional identity buffered respondents from stigma and enabled them to sustain conflicting accounts of the stigmatized self (in addition to traditionally evidenced ways of constructing preferred occupational identities to trump stigmatized ones, e.g. Roberts, 2005). Our participants emphasized individual attributes such as skills, competence and professional achievements. They described themselves as “professional first and foremost”, thus leveraging professional privilege (Mavin and Grady, 2016) and dissociating themselves from lower skilled Romanian migrants, as evidenced by Morosanu and Fox (2013). Professional privilege emanates from the social advantage inherent in wealth, status and power associated with one’s professional status (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014). In contrast to assumptions that privilege is invisible and unconscious, our participants deliberately drew on their privileged professional status in an apparent buffer against stigmatized identity, thus sustaining doublethink. This visible discursive effort is perhaps reflective of their awareness of the effort and resources committed to attain such status in a foreign country. Slay and Smith (2011) found that African-American journalists sought to enact their careers in ways that counteract existing ethnic stigma, acknowledging and redefining

stigma as part of their professional identity construction. Our findings reveal a different pattern whereby Romanian professionals used their (privileged) professional status to sustain conflicting accounts of stigmatization and limit full engagement with stigma.

**[Insert Table 4 here]**

Our second contribution consists of conceptualizing dodging as a novel identity response to stigma, enabled by the privilege of being White, alongside or in conjuncture with professional privilege. Dodging entails a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon whereby participants indicated strong stigma awareness yet engaged in responses that entail evasion of stigma. Participants spoke knowledgeably about prevailing stigmatizing narratives, yet described stigma as a matter of fact reality remotely positioned from their lives, without a sense of identity threat. Dodging is similar to the notion of identity inhibition developed in psychological functionalist literature to describe how problematic identities can be deactivated when there is a clash between the norms and expectations of different social identities such that one identity is inhibited for another to take ‘centre stage’ (Hugenberg and Bodenhausen, 2004). In contrast, in our data, examples of dodging (of Romanian identity) is dissimilar to alternative, more restorative, identity work responses identified in the literature as it does not appear to require activation of another identity. Thus, we contribute to the literature by making visible the typically invisible, normalized, ‘non-work’ aspect of relying on Whiteness and ‘being professional’ to ‘get around’ having to manage stigma. Dodging implies isolating, rather than repairing, stigmatized identities, thus eschewing the tension and the sense-making typically associated with stigma responses. Identity minimalism (disengagement from identity construction processes, Alvesson and Robertson, 2015) is another similar yet different concept. Minimalism refers to the centrality of identity in people’s working lives, while dodging is more narrowly concerned with responses (or lack thereof) to stigma. Unlike

Alvesson and Robertson's investment bankers, there was greater salience of identity and stigma in our respondents' lives. The outcome of identity minimalism is little or no engagement with identity, while dodging as we conceive it leads to evading engagement with the stigmatized identity as a 'near miss' that is made possible for our sample by their being White professionals.

Drawing on interpretive identity and privilege scholarship, we extend stigma theorizing by showing that, perhaps surprisingly, the identity resources conferred by White and professional privilege were not deployed by our participants to challenge or repair the stigmatized ethnic identity directly, but rather used to preserve disengagement and construe the stigma as remote from the self. While stigmatized individuals often use positive distinctiveness to redefine and reclaim tainted identities (Toyoki and Brown, 2014; Slay and Smith, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvick, 2008), this identity work response was extremely rare in our study. The lack of positive distinctiveness strategies could of course be explained by the predominantly negative cultural discourses about Romanians in the UK, as macro cultural repertoires shape micro de-stigmatization strategies (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2011). But we also surmise that our participants had the luxury of ignoring and not reclaiming stigmatized national identities because White and professional privilege offered a wider range of less effortful responses such that they could invoke more privileged racial identities ('European'), or define themselves as cosmopolitan professional 'non-nationals' (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2017).

Dodging through privileged Whiteness and professionalism is dissimilar to active construction of a more favourable alternative identity, as seen in other studies of stigmatized individuals (Toyoki and Brown, 2014; Coupland and Brown, 2015). Since the very definition of identity work is centred around effort (Caza et al., 2018), examining stigma responses from the lens of conventional identity work necessarily focuses our attention on more laboursome aspects

of repairing the taint (Slay and Smith, 2011) or claiming more valued alternative identities (Roberts, 2005). In contrast, privilege scholarship offers a more static structural picture. Whiteness provides material resources and a system of inclusion even to those who do not seek to leverage racial bias (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014), reflecting the automaticity, inescapability and effortless nature of White privilege. Because White privilege is systemic, unearned and taken-for-granted (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Dyer, 2012; Phillips and Lowery, 2018), we surmise that Whiteness does not require the active and deliberate identity construction entailed in leveraging other favourable identities (e.g. prisoners actively using ‘good father’ narratives in Toyoki and Brown, 2014). Thus, while there is a degree of effort in constructing professionalism, evoking generic privileged White identities, alongside professional status, allowed participants to dodge stigma by neglecting rather than positively reframing ethnicity, as Whites are seen as ‘raceless’ (Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014). Prior studies examined how non-White professionals and migrants reconcile ethno-cultural specificity when faced with stigma; in doing so, they revealed engagement in some shape or form with ethno-cultural specificity (e.g. African-American journalists saw professional value in their stigmatized racial identities (Slay and Smith, 2011), migrant Muslim women customized cultural norms through identity work on professional identities (Essers et al., 2013). In contrast, our participants disengaged from ethno-cultural specificity, as privilege focuses attention *away from* powerful groups and their advantages (Pratto and Stewart, 2012). While doublethink captured contradictory accounts of stigmatization enabled almost exclusively by professional privilege, dodging stigma was enabled by the interplay of White and professional privileges, in a process less marked by tension and effort compared to other stigma responses. Thus, compared to sustaining doublethink through professional privilege, mobilizing White privilege (alongside professionalism) to dodge engagement with stigma seemed less effortful; there was no elaborate

meaning constructed around what it meant for our participants to be ‘European’ or ‘cosmopolitan professional’, nor were there lived experiences recalled to demonstrate how these broad White identities are claimed or actively enacted in their daily lives. Rather, these identities were ‘fall-back’ options participants invoked in a relatively abstract and disengaged manner, to apparently dodge engagement with stigma. By examining privilege and the more passive identity responses it enables, we are shedding light into a normative process of being that is ordinarily under-queried in studies of identity and stigma, addressing calls to provide alternative metaphors for identity processes beyond “identity work” (Brown, 2015).

Overall, the role of professional privilege in sustaining doublethink, and the interplay of White and professional privileges in sustaining dodging, reflect our participants’ “sometimes privileged” status, as White professionals with stigmatized ethno-cultural identities, who need to reconcile polarized experiences of privilege and disadvantage (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014; Mavin and Grandy, 2016). We also note the fluid interplay between different forms of privilege (Whiteness and professionalism) in enabling certain responses to stigma. Perhaps intersecting privileged and disadvantaged statuses demand a certain tolerance to contradiction, even distancing, leading to conflicting and disconnected accounts of stigma, as found in our data. Furthermore, scholars suggest a cocooning effect of privilege, such that it entails neglect of identity concerns, limited self-knowledge, distorted self-views and denial of emotions (McIntosh, 2012; Phillips and Lowery, 2018). Such processes may capture the buffering from, and evasion of, engaging with stigmatized identities we observed. Thus, privilege scholarship enables us to extend theorizing about stigma and identities by providing conceptual tools to examine identity responses to stigma more holistically, attending to individuals’ multiple positionality. We thereby address calls to theorize stigmatized identities in conjuncture to non-stigmatized ones (Toyoki and Brown, 2014)

and to tackle the role of privilege in ethnic minorities' identity work (Van Laer and Janssens, 2017).

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

We revealed that ethno-culturally stigmatized professionals manage their identities through identity work in theorized and predictable ways (such as displacing the stigma or embracing alternative identities), and also engage in atypical stigma responses not previously conceptualized in identity literature. In contrast to established identity construction in response to threat focused on correcting stigma and restoring blemished identities, we found that professionals also engage in identity doublethink and identity dodging, tantamount to sidestepping having to engage with stigma. These processes require less effort, provide less coherence and do not attempt to restore the blemished ethno-cultural identity. We also demonstrate that, by affording contradiction and distancing, the privileges of professionalism and Whiteness enable individuals to perpetuate inconsistent accounts of stigmatizing experiences or to sidestep stigma identity management altogether. In doing so, we draw attention to the largely neglected role of privilege (Pratto and Stewart, 2002; Sanders and Mahalingam, 2012) in identity and stigma literature, as well as in managerial practice. We expect that the experiences of EU migrants in the UK will become even more critical for scholarship and practice as the UK prepares to exit the EU, given the reported rise in xenophobic attitudes (Corbett, 2016). Stigmatization is endemic in the current political climate beyond UK (e.g. USA), making it vital for organizations to be equipped with understanding how individuals cope with stigma. Indeed, denial of personal stigmatization does not entail lack of bias in the workplace (as revealed by interviewees' accounts of ethnic banter) and apparent disengagement from stigma may not be effortless; the implications for professionals (such as White Romanians) having to "cover" stigmatized identities are yet to be explored and

addressed with relevant diversity policies. Furthermore, dodging through Whiteness may require less effort than dealing with other stigmatized racial identities but is unlikely to be entirely effortless. Through their focus on ‘visible’ ethnicity (BAME groups), UK diversity and inclusion policies implicitly assume that Whiteness is unproblematic in the workplace. Our data indicate that this is not the case, calling for a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of ethnicity and stigmatization in contemporary workplaces, that moves beyond White vs non-White binaries.

Regarding limitations, there are likely contextual and individual differences in professionals’ response to stigma (e.g. different levels of risk taking, self-monitoring and stigma consciousness, Clair et al., 2005). In particular, the patterns observed could represent our participants’ different positions in ethnic identity development as captured by salience, centrality, regard, and ideology (Sellers et al., 1998). It is also conceivable that respondents presented their accounts of contradictions as a storytelling device as part of narrative identity work in which they engaged during the interviews with us. Further research could interrogate the experiences of other professionals with invisible stigma to examine how different forms of disadvantage (e.g. accents associated with poor backgrounds, or religion) interact with racial or socioeconomic advantage to provoke holistic identity responses that extend beyond directly confronting the stigma.

For future research, tapping into the somewhat paradoxical and subtler responses to stigma we observed can be methodologically challenging. Our experience of abundant contradictions about experienced stigmatization in our transcripts and the uneven completion of diaries reminds us that identity researchers ought not to take data at face value and reflect critically on the manner in which participants engage with methodological tools. The field would benefit from novel conceptual lenses and methodologies to capture less conscious identity processes (Caza et al., 2018); this seems particularly important in extending scholarship on identity, stigma and privilege



as related Whiteness. Racial status and Whiteness are often murky and socially contested (see Roediger, 2006 on Whiteness in 20<sup>th</sup> century America), yet, with few exceptions (e.g. Samaluk, 2014), we know little about how the social and historical construction of Whiteness in Europe shapes individuals' experiences of stigma in contemporary workplace.

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**Table 1. Stigma and identities across research perspectives**

<b>Research perspective</b>	<b>Illustrative papers</b>	<b>Conceptualization of stigma</b>	<b>Identity responses to stigma</b>
Functionalist perspectives (psychological and organizational behavior studies)	Jones and King (2013) Major and O'Brien (2005) Patchankis et al. (2018) Roberts (2005)	An affixed identity mark held by individuals, to be confronted either through reconstitution or minimization for positive gains	Destigmatization attempts focused on working with/ confronting stigmatized identities such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selective disclosure</li> <li>• Social recategorization</li> <li>• Positive distinctiveness</li> <li>• Personal/group discrimination discrepancy</li> </ul>
Interpretivist and critical perspectives (organizational, sociological, and migration studies)	Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) Alvesson and Roberston (2015) Slay and Smith (2011) Toyoki and Brown (2014) Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy (2012) Lamont and Mizrachi (2012)	A fluid, constructed identity facet to be interwoven alongside other less stigmatized aspects of the self, and inscribed into broader macro-cultural discourses	Identity work practices focused on working with / confronting stigmatized identities such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redefining</li> <li>• Reframing</li> <li>• Recalibrating</li> <li>• Claiming coveted social identities</li> <li>• Tailoring local cultural repertoires to redefine and destigmatize aspects of the self and one's social group</li> <li>• (De)emphasizing ethnicity in constructing the self</li> </ul> Broader identity processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining antagonisms in identity construction</li> <li>• Evading engagement with identity construction (e.g. Identity minimalism)</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Overview of study participants**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Profession / job</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Time in the UK</b>
1.	Veronica	Head of Marketing	F	9 years
2.	Maria	Senior HR Advisor	F	3 years
3.	Claudia	Strategy Consultant	F	5 years
4.	Sorana	Architect	F	3 years
5.	Ana	HR Programme Manager	F	3 years
6.	Dana	Commercial Lead	F	4 years
7.	Sebastian	Manager	M	6 years
8.	Gabriel	Entrepreneur	M	6 years
9.	Marius	Professor	M	21 years
10.	Corina	Social Policy Consultant	F	10 years
11.	Clara	Lecturer	F	8 years
12.	Ina	Senior Lecturer	F	12 years
13.	Greta	Senior Lecturer	F	6 years
14.	Monica	Technical Product Lead	F	7 years
15.	Andrei	Academic Researcher	M	5 years
16.	Petru	NGO Activist	M	6 years
17.	Rares	Financial Analyst	M	6 years
18.	Alin	Software Developer	M	7 years
19.	Boris	Quantitative Analyst	M	4 years
20.	Victor	Medic	M	10 years
21.	Dorina	Marketing Consultant	F	5 years

**Table 3. Overview of the coding process**

<b>Initial coding stage</b>	<b>Intermediate coding stage</b>	<b>Final coding stage</b>
<p><i>Analytical focus:</i> discerning categories of episodes where participants' Romanian identity was salient.</p>	<p><i>Analytical focus:</i> categorising responses to identity-heightening episodes. Focus on 'traditional' stigma identity work. Atypical identity responses emerge: concurrent denial and acceptance of stigma, and disengagement.</p>	<p><i>Analytical focus:</i> further coding of atypical identity responses following iteration between data and literature, now coined doublethink (formerly 'contradictions/paradox') and dodging (formerly 'avoidance').</p>
<p><i>Illustrative initial codes:</i>            Career trajectory/UK arrival            Identity-heightening episodes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• administrative hurdles</li> <li>• work-related experiences</li> <li>• experiences as Romanian across countries (UK-other comparison)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Illustrative intermediate codes:</i>            Career trajectory/UK arrival            Stigma awareness            Stigma management / identity work strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hiding Romanian identity</li> <li>• claiming, embracing Romanian identity</li> <li>• recategorization (European, expatriate)</li> <li>• avoidance / disengagement</li> </ul> Contradictions / paradox	<p><i>Illustrative final codes:</i>            Career trajectory/UK arrival            Stigma awareness            Stigma management / identity work strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hiding Romanian identity</li> <li>• claiming, embracing Romanian identity</li> <li>• recategorization (European, expatriate)</li> </ul> Identity dodging Identity doublethink



**Table 4. Identity responses to stigma: restorative identity work, doublethink and dodging**

	<b>Confronting stigma through restorative identity work</b>	<b>Buffering stigma through doublethink</b>	<b>Evading stigma through dodging</b>
<b>Construal of stigma</b>	Stigma is explicitly acknowledged and perceived as identity threat in personal experience.	Stigma is both recognized and denied in personal experience.	Stigma is recognized in the abstract but expunged from everyday personal experience.
<b>Outcome on stigmatized identity</b>	Stigmatized identity is restructured, repaired, compensated for, reclaimed or dissociated from self. A relatively coherent account of the stigmatized self is produced.	Stigmatized identity is partially dealt with, partially denied. Contradictory accounts about the stigmatized self are preserved independently, rather than producing overall coherence.	Stigmatized identity is evaded, distanced from self. Stigmatized self is denied, general stigma and stigmatizing experiences construed in impersonal, abstract manner. Accounts focused on isolating personal implications and depersonalizing the issue.
<b>Process and subjective experience</b>	High tension/ discomfort Intentional and effortful Deliberate effort to cope with stigma	Medium tension/ discomfort Moderate effort Limited or no awareness of conflicting accounts of stigmatization	Medium to low tension/ discomfort Minimal effort Limited sense-making about stigma in relation to one's identity
<b>Role of privilege as enabling mechanism</b>	Provides resources for actively tackling stigma through deliberate effortful identity work (e.g. active construal of self as professional).	Provides resources to sustain antagonisms or paradoxes in making sense of/narrating in conjuncture stigmatized and non-stigmatized identities (e.g. invoking professional status to deny stigmatization).	Provides resources to distance oneself from stigma by drawing on both professional status and less visible White privileged identities (e.g. invoking cosmopolitan/European status).