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Journal of Applied Social Theory | Article

Advancing Research on Character Assassination and Stigma Communication: A Dynamics of Character

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Vol 1, No 3 (2021), 134 – 157

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Documented occurrences of character assassination and stigmatization like those seen during the COVID-19 outbreak are not unique to the era of COVID-19. In fact, these forms of communication are ancient and ubiquitous in human society. Yet they have gained the sustained attention of communication scholars only in the past few decades. Although stigma communication and character assassination have much in common, they largely have been studied separately. Research on how character is attacked and why some attacks become social facts has not progressed as quickly as needed because these two bodies of scholarship have not shared insights and because character as a concept has gone largely uninterrogated. In this essay, we begin the process of sharing insights across the two bodies of scholarship. Further, by visiting with three ancient conceptions of character, we describe a theory of character dynamics: a process of exclusion in which an evolving, agentic character (*tropos*) becomes established (*ēthos*) and fixed (*χarakter*) by others, ephemerally and sometimes longitudinally.

Keywords

character assassination, *ēthos*, stigma communication, character

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On March 28, 2020, “Chinese virus” was found spray-painted on a jetty on the Northwestern University campus in Evanston, Illinois (Mittu, 2020). The next day four teenage girls in the Bronx, New York, harassed and attacked an Asian woman with an umbrella, saying, “You caused coronavirus, bitch” (Barone, 2020). The next day, near the other coast of the United States, an Asian restaurant in Yakima, Washington, was vandalized with graffiti that included an ethnic slur and a message that read, “Take the corona back” (YakTriNews, 2020). These are three of hundreds of similar reported incidents (Anti-Defamation League, 2020). In the wake of the arrival in early 2020 of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, at least one in three American citizens blamed China rather than the pathogen itself for the global disaster (Ipsos, 2020; Miller, 2020). Misinformation about the origins of the pathogen that causes COVID-19, some of it fueled by the U.S. government itself (Sanger, 2020), combined with hegemonic white supremacism to cast blame on "Asians, Jews, Muslims and others for the virus" (Allam, 2020, 0:30). Despite confronting the pandemic with unanimous global scientific expertise, the World Health Organization has been subjected to cyberattacks (Gallagher, 2020), and the head of the WHO, Ethiopian microbiologist Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has received personal attacks, racist abuse, and death threats (Feuer, 2020).

This kind of scapegoating, character attacking, and stigmatization is not unique to the United States (Kakissis, 2020), nor is it new (Chang, 2020; Samoilenko, 2019a; Smith, 2007). Indeed, *stigma* and *character assassination* have much in common: Both incorporate social construction and cause some form of social death. Scholars have made use of this overlap, explaining how stigma is invoked sometimes to attack character (e.g., Samoilenko, 2020b) and how character assassination can be the means by which stigma is socially constructed or enacted interpersonally (e.g., Biernat & Dovidio, 2000; Jones et al., 1984). Research on how character is attacked and why some attacks become social facts has not progressed as quickly as needed because these two bodies of scholarship have not shared insights. The two bodies of scholarship have much to learn from each other about *how* character is attacked and *why* some attacks diffuse and become social facts.

For us, this reflective activity also revealed the need for a richer understanding of character. Although it is the weft thread in the fabric of research on character assassination and stigma communication, character has itself remained largely uninterrogated in these bodies of work. What is character? What does it mean to discredit or kill character? In their book on theory construction, Jaccard and Jacoby (2020) argue

that to “clarify, refine, or challenge the conceptualization of a variable/concept” (p. 37) is a critical strategy for making a theoretical contribution. By interrogating the concept of character, we have a stronger basis from which to understand its relationship to communication choices and its outcomes for those who are being characterized. To that end, we take as its point of departure three ancient conceptions of character, and illuminate the processes through which an evolving, agentic character (*tropos*) becomes established (*ēthos*) and fixed (*χarakter*) by others, ephemerally and sometimes longitudinally. We begin by considering the intersections of character assassination and stigma communication, then we turn to three ancient Greek conceptualizations of character. After we delineate synthetic attributes of character, we articulate a theory of character dynamics.

Stigma Communication and Character Assassination

Goffman (1963), in his famous explication of stigma, argued that when people meet, we use available information to categorize each other and impute the other’s character: “a characterization… *a virtual social identity*” (p. 2, emphasis in original). For Goffman, stigmas are tied to a specific process of categorization and imputation that “makes him [*sic*] different from others in the category of persons available for him [*sic*] to be, and of a less desirable kind … deeply discrediting … reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one … not quite human” (pp. 4-5). Although he saw categorization as part of the human condition, Goffman argued that the categories—their boundaries and associated attributes—were socially constructed, with communication playing a leading role in the process of creating and enforcing stigmas.

In a largely separate line of research, character assassination has been defined as “a deliberate and sustained effort to damage the reputation or credibility of an individual … [which is] selectively applied to social groups, institutions, and corporations” (Samoilenko, 2016, p. 115; see also Icks & Shiraev, 2014). Stigma and character assassination overlap in fundamental ways: both incorporate social construction of character, social response, and profound, long-term damage. As Samoilenko (2016) argued, “the process of character attacking may resemble an annihilation of a human life, as the damage sustained can last a lifetime" or even endure "for centuries” (p. 115; see also Samoilenko, 2020a). Similarly, Goffman claimed that due to stigma “we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce [the stigmatized person’s] life chances” (p. 5).

Distinctions and Intersections

Although the two concepts overlap, stigma and character assassination are not the same. Stigmas are social facts (Durkheim, 1982) or collective norms (Rimal & Lapinski, 2015): they are the simplified, standardized descriptions of the perceived profound disgrace of a particular social group and its members that have diffused within a larger community (Smith, 2007; Smith, Zhu, & Quesnell, 2016). Stigmas, then, operate at the societal level and have their own power to influence people's beliefs and actions. If people enact stigmatization without the stigma in place, then they may be punished by the community for dehumanizing others (Thompson & Seibold, 1978). In contrast, if a stigma exists and people do not enact it (also referred to as norm enforcement; Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008), then they may be punished as traitors (Thompson & Seibold, 1978). Stigmatization, in contrast, refers to the performance of devaluation (Smith et al., 2016), which may include the expression of personal prejudice or the enforcement of (social) stigma.

Character assassination, as a term, has been used to refer to the process by which communicative acts destroy another's credibility or reputation, generally referred to as character attacks, and to the outcome of such acts (e.g., damaged credibility; Icks, Shiraev, Keohane, & Samoilenko, 2020; Samoilenko, 2020b). The communicative attacks are described as deliberate, public (Icks et al., 2020), effortful, attempts to "trigger a public reaction … and subsequently undermine the social standing of the subject" (p. 16). Icks and Shiraev (2014) categorized forms of character attacks into their scope (individuals or groups), timing (during one's life or postmortem) and momentum (spontaneous or premeditated). For example, *name-calling* involves "a quick, short insult; ridicule; or application of specific demonizing labels" (Samoilenko, 2016, p. 116). In contrast, *smear campaigns* are "intentional, premeditated efforts to undermine an individual's or group's reputation and credibility … consist[ing] of *ad hominem* attacks in the form of unverifiable rumors and distortions, half-truths, or even outright lies … often propagated by gossip magazines and websites" (Samoilenko, 2016, p. 117).

The two lines of scholarship have much to learn from each other. We identified three opportunities. First, an immediate intervention for stigma research is to create the (missing) typology of stigmatization (Smith et al., 2016). Character assassination research has a rich catalog of mechanisms (e.g., Icks et al., 2020), and many mechanisms of character assassination (e.g., name-calling) may be heuristic for creating a typology of stigmatization. A compelling example is the character assassination strategy of silencing:

“the attacker attempts to erase their public record from the collective memory,” often post-mortem (Samoilenko, 2016, p. 116; also referred to as erasing; Icks et al., 2020). Although it is not labeled as such, there are multiple examples of erasure of stigmatized communities, such as nonconsensual de-transitioning of transgender people after death (e.g., Whitestone, Giles, & Linz, 2020) and rejection of people who died of AIDS-related illnesses from funeral homes altogether (e.g., Wojcik, 2000) so no memorial exists.

Second, the two lines of research provide competing explanations for why people engage in acts of character assassination and stigmatization. One view is that people attack others’ character in order to gain access to social or material rewards by reducing others’ access or exacting revenge for a perceived injustice (Icks & Shiraev, 2014; Icks et al., 2020). Goals for deploying character attacks include “to win political battles, discredit unwelcome news, or settle personal scores" (Icks & Shiraev, 2014, p. 3). Stigmatization, in contrast, has been considered as (a) value-expressive (Herek, 2000), allowing stigmatizers to express their personal stigma beliefs and emotions (Herek, 2000), or as (b) communicative, as people attempt to balance the tensions between their personal prejudices and normative pressures to act humanely (Thompson & Seibold, 1978). It seems reasonable that there are times in which people engage in stigmatization in order to exact revenge, or they engage in certain forms of character attacks in order to avoid social punishment for acting inhumanely. By considering a range of goals or motives, drawn from both areas of research, we may gain greater insight into why and how people engage in types of character assassination and/or stigmatization.

Third, although both stigmas and character attacks gain social force through diffusion, only stigma research presents a model for predicting the diffusion process. We consider it next.

Modeling Stigma Communication

The model of stigma communication (MSC, Smith, 2007; Smith, Zhu, & Fink, 2017) emerged as a theory to explain why some expressions of personal prejudice (which could present as character attacks) diffuse within a community, becoming social facts (Durkheim, 1982) that entomb groups, members and sympathizers, as inhuman without access to human rights. Stigma communication, then, is not the performance of an existing stigma (i.e., stigmatization), but the messages that (newly) socialize community members to recognize and to devalue a group of people. Direct exposure to stigma communication leads to cognitions and emotions that, in turn, result in stigma-related outcomes, including stigma beliefs, interpersonal stigmatization, and support for policies

regulating stigmatized people's access to community resources and human rights. Furthermore, to generate diffusion, the messages need to have qualities that encourage people to share them with others.

Stigma communication includes four types of content to achieve these messages' effects (direct adoption and social transmission): marks, labels, etiology, and peril (Smith, 2007, 2011; Smith, Zhu, & Fink, 2017). *Marks* are nonverbal cues that identify members of a stigmatized group. To be most potent, marks are visible and gross; these qualities allow marks to be recognized quickly and remembered more easily (Smith, 2007, 2011). *Labels* are the terms used to refer to a stigmatized group (e.g., Link & Phelan, 2001). Labels, in general, support social categorization: constituting the stigmatized as a distinct social group and promoting stereotyping of them. *Etiology* is the description of people's agency, awareness or opportunity to choose to join or to be associated with members of the stigmatized group. For example, etiology content describes the stigmatized person's voluntary decision to violate basic social contracts and engage in taboo activities. *Peril* is the description of the social or physical costs of the stigmatized group to the community. Together, the four types of content frame a group of people as fundamentally dangerous: as able and likely to harm the rest of the community by their presence and actions (Smith, 2007, Smith et al., 2017). This person-oriented danger appraisal (Smith et al., 2017) includes perceiving the stigmatized people as dangerous and feeling threatened by them, which can cascade into feeling disgust, anger and fear toward those who are perceived as threatening the community's wellbeing.

According to evolutionary psychology, humans developed mechanisms to detect threats to physical safety and health in order to survive (Neuberg & DeScioli, 2015). As a species, humans faced recurring threats to survival, such as predators, starvation, and exposure (e.g., freezing in the cold). Humans are a social species who need to rely on each other to survive. At the same time, humans' greatest threat to survival is sometimes other humans. The generalized detection system, then, further evolved to recognize environmental (e.g., snakes, rotten food) versus human threats (e.g., cheaters, foes) and to mount relevant responses (Cosmides & Tooby, 2015; Neuberg & DeScioli, 2015). One difference between the responses is the relation to other humans: befriending everyone to manage environmental threats (e.g., to get to safety during a fire or flood; Taylor, 2011), or identifying friends to fight foes (e.g., cheater detection; Neuberg & DeScioli, 2015). The two overlap: People built coalitions to survive, and stigma functioned to cull human threats to effective group functioning (Neuberg & DeScioli, 2015).

A primary assumption of the MSC is that communication can set off the threat-detection system. The theory's central claim (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2017) is that the four features of stigma communication activate the person-oriented danger appraisal, which, in turn, causes local changes in the recipient's cognitions (e.g., stigma beliefs) as well as behavioral activation to ostracize stigmatized people (e.g., separation of stigmatized persons through policy and interpersonal distancing) and to share the meme with others. At this point, multiple empirical studies (e.g., Malterud & Anderson, 2016; Riles, Behm-Morawitz, Shin, & Funk, 2019; Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2018; Underhill, Ledford, & Adams, 2019; Yang & Parrott, 2018; Zhuang & Bresnahan, 2012) have revealed compelling evidence for the MSC's causal logic on a variety of topics (obesity, religion, infectious disease, mental health) in classrooms, newspapers, and online forums in multiple countries.

One implication is that we now have guidance on how to avoid creating new stigmas when constructing messages about community threats. A different implication is that the MSC may explain why some 'smear campaigns' facilitate "spread horizontally between ordinary people through individual networks" (Samoilenko & Karnysheva, 2020, p. 200), and thus, may be more successful in undermining their targets' reputations within a community, their support base, and their access to community resources, including votes for public office (e.g., *swiftboating*; Samoilenko, 2016, p. 117).

Stigma communication and character assassination have many similarities. They both include processes of caricature and devaluation in the social sphere. They also include processes of diffusion: promoting widespread adoption of the caricature so that it has social force. The two bodies of scholarship also have much to learn from each other: stigma research can benefit from learning about how character is attacked; character assassination research can learn why some attacks diffuse and become social facts. There may be reasons to integrate these lines of research: for example, some effective forms of smear campaigns may, in fact, be explained by the model of stigma communication. But there may be many reasons to keep these communicative acts separate. Character attacks (vs. stigmatization) may be a broader form of hurtful messages that manage various *power dynamics* (e.g., maintaining existing power, acquiring new power) between people and groups (rivals, enemies, bullies). Stigmatization, in contrast, is specific (dehumanization of a group) and predicated on a stigma already in place.

What is missing from both is a richer understanding of character. Samoilenko (2016) noted in passing that "character assassination practices stem back to ancient times" (p. 115). Considering a concept in different linguistic systems, cultures, and

historical time periods, such as ancient Greco-Roman references, can inspire reinvention. Indeed, in their explication of character assassination, Icks et al. (2020) directly mention the Greek and Roman references to *ēthos,* though there is "no single Latin word directly corresponding to (the ancient Greek word) *ēthos"* (May, 2014, p. 5). In addition, the word *stigma* has Greek origins (Smith et al., 2016; Webb, 1883). We returned to ancient understandings of character and drew on not only theories from the most canonical—indeed, hegemonic—ancient figure, Aristotle, but also accounts from two lesser-known figures, Isocrates and Theophrastus. Together, these three ancient authors' conceptions of character—here considered together for the first time—enable us to articulate a dynamics of character. We thus proceed to interrogate three ancient Greek conceptions of character—*ēthos, tropos,* and *χarakter*—to theorize a dynamics of character in the context of stigma communication and character assassination.

Defining Character

For reasons good and not so good, scholars and teachers of communication have tended to use Aristotelian *ēthos* as a fundamental concept for understanding character. Reducing character to *ēthos* has too often limited scholars' discussions of character to the bounded autonomous subject, to the atom instead of the molecule, to the stationary instead of the dynamic. Sometimes, too, the reduction of character to *ēthos* has resulted in fundamental scholarly mistakes, such as in a book with "character" in its title: The book links that titular term to a quote from Aristotle's older contemporary Isocrates and goes on to claim that the Greek word Isocrates used for "character" is *ēthos* (Keränen, 2010, pp. 181-82) when it is, in that particular case and almost 90 percent of the times Isocrates uses or implies words that are translated into English as “character,” not *ēthos* at all but *tropos*, not dwelling but turning. Building on interpretations of Isocratean *tropos* as an alternative to *ēthos* for understanding some elements of character (Eberly & Johnson, 2018), this section of the article provides three ancient conceptions of character—*ēthos* from Aristotle; *tropos* from Isocrates (a rival of Aristotle's teacher, Plato); and *χarakter* from Theophrastus (Aristotle's successor in the Lyceum and author of the first complete work on character in western thought). These three ancient yet approximately contemporaneous terms are offered as starting points for a theory of character dynamics.

Aristotelian *ēthos* is by far the best known of the three ancient western conceptions of character; thus we begin our discussion of character with Aristotle, born in Stagira ca. 384 B.C.E. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, *ēthos* is character constructed in a communicative act through good will (*eunoia*), good sense (*phronesis*) and good moral character (*arete*).

Ēthos is "an audience's view of a (rhetor's) moral and ethical dimensions" (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 133). Further, *ēthos* is one of the three main *pisteis* or means of persuasion; *pathos* and *logos* are the other two. Rhetors can make strategic choices when they attempt persuasion. For a rhetor to display *ēthos* is to "make his [*sic*] own character look right and put his [*sic*] hearers ... into the right frame of mind" (Roberts, 1954, p. 90). That said, Aristotle's theorization of *ēthos* suggests "dwelling and consistency" (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 132; see also Hyde, 2004): "Aristotle assumes the knowledge of the Athenian fore-structure of *ēthos* as dwelling place and then reinforces the notion of dwelling place to present a rhetorical understanding of *ēthos"* (C. R. Smith, 2004, p. 2). Rhetors make choices with the hope of swaying the audience's initial construction of the rhetor's dwelling place, because the audience is likely to keep that initial impression. Informed by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *ēthos* in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* prescribes a stable, ethically sound character in the speaker. This theory of agent-patient relationship is also influenced by Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. Though many of his works and ideas were preserved by Islamic scholars Ibn-Sīnā (whose name was Westernized as Avicenna) (Gutas, 2016), Ibn Rušd (whose name was Westernized as Averroës) (Pasnau), or Jewish commentator Maimonides, elements of Aristotle's thought became influential—even hegemonic—via centuries of teaching in the Catholic church (Trouve, 1998). Significantly, Aristotle saw good birth or "excellence of race" (*eugenes*) as a key contributor to good character (Roberts, 1954, pp. 126-127) and seemed not to consider women fully human (Stauffer, 2008). Nonetheless, Aristotle's account of *ēthos* as character has persisted across millennia, continents, languages, and disciplines.

Lesser-known figures, however, also have the potential to revolutionize thought and scholarship. "We need to reconsider formerly minor figures because they often worried over theoretical problems that (major figures) abandoned without solving, but that return to haunt us today" (Bizzell, 2003, p. 117). It is to two of these lesser-known figures that we now turn.

Unlike Aristotle's account of *ēthos* as dwelling and of character as stable, the word that Isocrates (born in Athens in 436 B.C.E.) used when "character" appears in English translations of his work is almost never *ēthos* and almost always *tropos*. In all of Isocrates' works, *ēthos*—Norlin's translation renders it as "true character"—"is used 6 times and *tropos* 117 times" (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 135). *Trop-*, the same morpheme at the root of *entropy* and *heliotropic*, suggests "turning and mutability" (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 132), perhaps even dizzying spin (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 132). In short, *tropos* allows that character—and perception of character—can change. The realization that

character is mutable helps explain Isocrates' emphasis on public education (*paideia*) across his work; Isocrates, the most influential educator of his day, believed that a state was only as good and healthy as the education its students (i.e., male citizens) received. Character as *tropos* also resonates with Fleeson's (2004) conceptual and Nesselroade and Molenaar's (2010) methodological approach to intra-individual variability across the lifespan, making suspect the conclusion that humans are substantially "the same person" from birth, through life and unto death—and perhaps thereafter (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 133).

For both Isocrates and modern psychology, there seems to be the potential in humans for "intraindividual otherness" (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 134). Isocrates' idea of *tropos* seems to have been informed by the epithet used most often to describe Odysseus, the titular character of the ancient Greek epic poem *The Odyssey*. The Homer-poet describes Odysseus as *polutropos*, "of many turns"; but the word is also translated as well-traveled, wily, cunning, and even mendacious (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 135). Isocratean *tropos* also allows that individuals may have agency to change personas, to "don masks to change character" (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 144). *Tropos* makes equally possible a situation in which an individual's or a culture's character may change in the view of a beholder. Isocrates' writings about the Spartans provide an ancient example; their character is seen at some times as virtuous and literate and at other times as base and ignorant (Hodkinson & Powell, 1994).

What we are discussing as Theophrastus's conception of *χarakter* comes from his work *Xarakteres,* the first complete work on character in Western thought. The student whom Aristotle chose to succeed him in the Lyceum—the best known student of a massively more well-known teacher—Theophrastus (born in Lesbos in 370 B.C.E.) wrote about character among many other subjects, ranging from biology and sensation to stones and fire. Theophrastus's *Xarakteres* extended Aristotle's descriptions of types of *ēthe*, the plural of *ēthos*, in *Rhetoric* Book 2, Chapter 12-17, where Aristotle discusses "the nature of the characters of men according to their emotions, habits, ages, and fortunes" (Roberts, 1954, p. 121). What Aristotle described, Theophrastus illustrates in language, perhaps for the purpose of teaching his own students how to write engaging character sketches and even, perhaps, to perform them: *these are the kinds of things a character of this type would say and do*. Theophrastus thereby captured common stereotypes of his time and place and culture, 4th-century B.C.E. Greece. Unlike *tropos*, which suggests turning, but similar to *ēthos,* which suggests dwelling, *xarakter* suggests a stamp or cast, in wax or metal, an entity determined and determinate.

To describe the textual history of Theophrastus's *Xarakteres* as complicated is to engage in understatement (Diggle, 2005; Pertsinidis, 2018; Rusten & Cunningham, 2003). Nonetheless, *Xarakteres* as we have it, and as it came to us through medieval manuscripts, contains three main elements: a table of contents, a preface, and 30 chapters, each describing a character type living in Athens in the 4th century B.C.E. and each characterized by a negative trait. Each character is illustrated by speech and behavior. Each of these characters or characterizations is of a middle- to upper-class male citizen, some but not all who owned slaves. Each chapter also contains the title of the character or behavior; a definition in abstract terms of the quality of the character; an illustration of each character, the longest part of each chapter, introduced by "the X man is the sort who..." and continuing with a series of infinitives giving characteristic actions; and finally, in some cases, an epilogue with moralizing generalizations, probably added centuries after Theophrastus' death.

Some translations of *Xarakteres* (e.g., Diggle, 2005) keep the grammar of the chapter titles in the nominative, as types: The Dissembler, The Toady, The Chatterbox, The Country Bumpkin, The Obsequious Man, The Man Who Has Lost All Sense, The Talker, The Rumour-Monger, The Shameless Man, The Penny-Pincher, The Repulsive Man, The Tactless Man, The Overzealous Man, The Obtuse Man, The Self-Centred Man, The Superstitious Man, The Ungrateful Grumbler, The Distrustful Man, The Offensive Man, The Disagreeable Man, The Man of Petty Ambition, The Illiberal Man, The Boastful Man, The Arrogant Man, The Coward, The Oligarchic Man, The Late Learner, The Slanderer, The Friend of Villains, The Shabby Profiteer. The other path is to render the Greek of *Xarakteres* into English as behaviors or descriptions of character as performed (e.g., Rusten & Cunningham, 2003): Dissembling, Flattery, Idle Chatter, Boorishness, Obsequiousness, Shamelessness, Garrulity, Rumor-Mongering, Sponging, Pennypinching, Obnoxiousness, Bad Timing, Overzealousness, Absent-mindedness, Grouchiness, Superstition, Griping, Mistrust, Squalor, Bad Taste, Petty Ambition, Lack of Generosity, Fraudulence, Arrogance, Cowardice, Authoritarianism, Rejuvenation, Slander, Patronage of Scoundrels, Chiseling. Whether nominative or performative, type or behavior, *Xarakteres* covers 9 of Aristotle's 26 vices. "Aristotle provides the seed from which Theophrastus's descriptions grow [, though] instead of abstract circumstance (as in Aristotle), Theophrastus gives us a real occasion and instead of an anonymous agent, a real individual" (Diggles, 2005, p. 7). Whereas Aristotle *tells* us about kinds of character deficiencies, Theophrastus *shows* us. In any case, with *Xarakteres*, concludes Diggles

(2005), "A new type of work came into existence, owning something to the ethical theorizing of the Lyceum and something to the comic stage" (p. 9).

Finally, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.) points out, the etymon of the English word "character," is the "ancient Greek *χαρακτήρ* [meaning] die, stamp, impress, distinctive mark, characteristic, feature," and "in Hellenistic Greek [*χαρακτήρ* is] also [an] instrument for marking or graving, engraver, letter, symbol, brand, … style" (Definition 1, Etymology). *Xarakter* thus, along with each individual and distinctive letter making up each word as you read it, is also the X that serves as signature—the characteristic, determinate mark.

Attributes of Character

By looking back to ancient Greek authors, we notice three attributes that vary across types of character: flexibility, agency, and centralization. Character can be seen as stationary, with the constancy of *ēthos* and the stamp of *χarakter*, or as continually turning, with *tropos*. Character as a dwelling or stamp is fixed into place and ultimately inflexible; however, as a turning, character is flexible, fluid and ever-changing. This dimension is highlighted by Fleeson (2004): "How can we talk about the way a person typically acts if that way is always changing?" (p. 83). Ironically, Fleeson (2004), a psychologist, asks that question at the beginning of an essay on new developments in psychology to move from a debate on whether personality traits or situations best predict behavior (because both do imperfectly) to consider (and ultimately quantify) 'typically' as patterns of within-person change as constant adjustments due to traits and to situations. Personality, then, may be best considered as the pattern of turning; it "consists of differences between individuals in how they react to situations, rather than in general ways of acting" (p. 84). This turning appears in the relatively recent concept of post-traumatic growth: "the experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas, has surpassed what was present before the struggle with crises occurred … [it] is not simply a return to baseline … [it] has a quality of transformation" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 4).

Regarding agency, character can be seen as afforded to the person by others (i.e., being-acted-upon) in *ēthos* and *χarakter*, or as a choice made by people as they craft their persona for others. *Tropos* gives the person a voice about their character, but *ēthos* and *χarakter* give others the power to determine a person's character. For example, the perceiver carves and creates the speaker's "stamp" (*χarakter*). Furthermore, *tropos* can be negotiated with multiple roles and audiences; people can change their own persona

among settings, scenes, and partners, and over the course of time, instead of there being one audience that determines another's *ēthos* or *χarakter*.

The last attribute is centralization. Character can be construed as centralized (*ēthos* and *χarakter*) or as decentralized (*tropos*). For *ēthos* and *χarakter*, character is centralized in a person or body, becoming unified and essentialized. For *tropos*, in contrast, character exists "without a centralized 'person' or body to unify various performances" (Eberly & Johnson, 2018, p. 132). This distinction also appears in Sampson's (1985) writings about personhood as a concept in psychology that can be defined as an "integrated unity" (p. 1203), or as a "decentralized, multifaceted ensemble whose coherence as a being is sustained only by virtue of its continuous becoming" (p. 1206). Sampson (1985) notes that a unified notion of ego and identity, popular in American psychology from the 1950s, characterized unification as a means by which to have a sense of self, and identity diffusion as a dangerous condition in which people could not settle into, or find order and coherence in daily life. Indeed, Faigley (1989) argues that the idea of the self as an autonomous, individual consciousness inheres in the structure of the grammars of European languages: "In European languages the fact that *I* or *yo* or *je* or *ich* refers indexically to the speaker of the utterance suggests that the speaker possesses an autonomous consciousness and at the same time is aware of that consciousness. The unified, individual consciousness coterminous with the physical body turns out not to be the 'natural' self but a Western version with specific historical and economic origins" (pp. 396-397). In contrast, for non-western concepts of personhood and for developments in physics to consider nonequilibrium theory, the "self-contained, in-itself integrated (i.e., singular/unitary) entity … describes a dead and fundamentally incoherent universe, not one that is alive, evolving, and orderly" (Sampson, 1985, p. 1206).

One part of the "decentralized, multifaceted ensemble" (Sampson, 1985, p. 1206) is social: "representations of important relationships and roles share the self-space with abstract traits, abilities, and preferences" (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, p. 791). This notion of an interdependent self, according to Markus & Kitayama (1991), "cannot be properly characterized as a bounded whole, for it changes structure with the nature of the particular social context" (p. 227). Indeed, an ensemble may confer legitimacy. As Samoilenko (2019b) notes, "legitimate social actors are expected to negotiate multiple shifting identities in order to manage an array of expectations and obligations in various social structures … a legitimate social actor is therefore *un homme pluriel*, or a plural man" (p. 47, emphasis in original).

Theorizing a Dynamics of Character

Interrogating different senses of character invites us to consider character as turning, agentic, complex, and decentralized, or as fixed, acted-upon, unified, and essential. Indeed, we argue that a central process in stigma communication and character assassination is to move from one extreme to the other, resulting in *social death*. To be clear, not every character attack or stigma communication has these intrinsic message features; when they do, this work explains why they are so deadly. There are three dynamics in which this occurs. We do not order them in sequence: we do not mean to imply that any message or sequence of messages moves in a linear order from one dynamic to another.

The first dynamic we consider is *attribution*: using communication to shift the perception of the basis of a moral failing from an act of "a particular moment, behavior, or action" (*tropos*) to an act that represents fundamental flaws (*χarakter)*. Character assassination and stigma communication can frame acts not as deviations, but as manifestations of the deviant. This dynamic connects to Goffman's (1967) idea of a "stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his [*sic*] inferiority and account for the danger he [*sic*] represents" (p. 5). The accounting does not locate cause within a moment, or a situation, or an external event; instead, it locates cause in the essential nature of the stigmatized. Targets do not have the choice to change the "stigma-theory" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5)—the flaws and ideology are perceived and determined by others, like Theophrastus wrote chapters of *Xarakteres*. Indeed, Phelan (2005) argued that increased efforts to attribute stigmatized health conditions to genetics, an effort to reduce blame for something out of a person's control, may create greater problems. If people think of genes as the basis of human identity (genetic essentialism), then promoting a genetic basis could increase perceptions of fundamental difference, which would exacerbate stigma beliefs and stigmatization. Her experiment (Phelan, 2005) showed that participants perceived health conditions with genetic attributions (versus environmental) as more serious, perceived those living with the health condition as more fundamentally different from most people, and believed there to be a greater likelihood that the condition would persist in the target, and appear, eventually, in related family members. The consequences of this dynamic are profound: acts of the particular inspire communal change (Eberly & Johnson, 2018); acts of the fundamental inspire ostracism or culling of the failed (e.g., Smith, 2007; Smith & Hughes, 2014). There is no room for learning or rehabilitation; there is only removal.

The second dynamic we consider is *unification*: using communication to shift character from complex and decentralized (*tropos*) to simplified and unified (*ēthos* and *χarakter*). When character assassination and stigma communication frame the target's (person or group) character as coherent and unified around a profound disgrace or taint, it makes it essential to who they are. Labeling creates a unified character for targeted group, enhancing perceived entitativity of the group. Entitativity is the property that makes a collection of individuals into a group—a coherent, intact (Campbell, 1958), distinct (Crump, Hamilton, Sherman, Lickel, & Thakkar, 2010), cohesive social unit (Campbell, 1958; Crump, Hamilton, Sherman, Lickel, & Thakkar, 2010; Welbourne, 1999) structured with boundaries and members who share a common fate (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Hogg & Reid, 2006). This process, then, stresses that the targeted group is an entity that can be differentiated from the rest of society. Together, this dynamic creates a fixed, centralized, essential stamp for the target's character. Indeed, it can be carried out to such a degree that the target may be framed as no longer human, thus no longer eligible for human rights.

The third dynamic we consider is *fixity*: using communication to shift character from dynamic (*tropos*) to stationary (*ēthos*) to fixed (*χarakter*). Messages have the potential to frame character as no longer evolving, moving, and changing, but as stationary (at rest or at equilibrium; *ēthos*) and, ultimately, fixed and determinate (*χarakter*). Goffman (1963) described the discrepancies between virtual social identity, or "the character we impute to the individual" (p. 2), and actual social identity, or "the category and attributes he [sic] could in fact be proved to possess" (p. 2). Goffman (1963) argued that as people note such discrepancies, they may reclassify or reconsider the attributes another person's virtual social identity. Efforts to manage these discrepancies (e.g., avoid discrediting ones) were considered in depth by Goffman. In this third dynamic, alteration based on noted discrepancies no longer occurs. The process "permanently arrest[s] one's rhetorical ethos" (Johnson, 2010, p. 463): the caricature sustains across time and place, immutable to social relationships, different settings, or different stages of a lifespan. For character assassination, this may explain an aspect of the most powerful smear campaigns: those campaigns fix character so it is resistant to change and counter-campaigns. The attacks and stigma communication have the potential to create a dwelling (*ēthos*) that, with social force, becomes fixed: a permanent tomb for a social death.

Indeed, the dynamics of attribution, unification, and fixity directly connect to *stereotyping*, which is the common foundation of prejudice, racism, and stigma.

Stereotypes are fixed, simplified descriptions of a group and its members (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). In fact, the history of the word *stereotype* resonates closely with *χarakter*. A French printer named Didot, in 1798, coined the term *stereotype* to describe the "use of fixed casts of the material to reproduced" (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981, p. 1). A century later, the term *stereotypy* emerged in psychiatry circles to refer to fixed, unchanging, repeated, persistent behavior, and this rigidity was considered pathological (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981).

Implications for Character Assassination and Stigma Communication

The dynamics of character, then, present shifts from turning, agentic, complex, and decentralized to fixed, acted-upon, unified, and essential. We see three immediate implications of this model. First, it advances our understanding of how character assassination and stigma communication can (re)constitute character. Icks et al. (2020) argue that character assassination "is not harming character per se, but altering the way character is perceived and judged by others" (pp. 12-13); this model reveals how communication shapes that alteration.

For character assassination, identifying the types of character attacks that alter these facets of character can help to explain silencing. To have character, even the stamp, is to exist. When character attacks have navigated all three character dynamics, there may be the basis for complete elimination.

For stigma research, our new model may provide insights into why, despite all the efforts to eliminate existing stigmas, a reliable, consistent, effective means to do so has not been found. Corrigan and colleagues (e.g., 2012) have conducted multiple meta-analyses of anti-stigma efforts and categorized the efforts into three types: protest, education, and contact. Protest efforts attempt to shame stigmatizers into stopping; they are largely ineffective and sometimes produce an unintentional "rebound" (Corrigan et al., 2012, p. 964). Indeed, through the lens of power struggles, the attempt to shame may result in (counter) character-attacks to destroy the accuser's credibility and social base (Samoilenko, 2020b), an activity that could further bond and embolden stigmatizers (Smith, 2007). Education efforts attempt to change mistaken beliefs about stigmatized groups with contradictory factual information; they produce small effects. Contact efforts attempt to shake up social categories and stereotypes through interpersonal contact; in the right conditions, they can produce bigger effects, but they are unstable and short-lived. Through the dynamics of character, we can see that these efforts to eliminate

stigmas take on the stereotype and its legitimacy, but that does not reconstitute character as flexible, agentic, complex, and decentralized.

Third, it may explain why both character attacks (Samoilenko, 2020b) and stigmatization can lead to feelings of shame. With all the documentation of character attacks and stigmatization through the COVID-19 epidemic, it is not surprising the lived experiences of those in COVID wards or with COVID-related symptoms center on shame (Daniel et al., 2020; Sahoo et al., 2020). As a person feels "disgraced" (Izard, 1977, p. 386) by their failings or shortcomings, they experience shame. Indeed, shame is so tied to self-perceptions that Izard et al. (2000) argued that "shame cannot emerge until the child has developed a sense of self" (p. 24). In fact, some scholars (e.g., Planalp et al., 2000) explicitly distinguish shame from guilt based on character: "shame involves *being* whereas guilt involves *doing*" (p. 4, emphasis original).

Relatedly, it may help to explain why a stronger sense of meaning in life, self-acceptance and purpose in life, and stronger identity anchors predicts resisting stigmatization (Smith & Bishop, 2019), supports stigma resistance (Firmin et al., 2017), and promotes resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). These social and psychological resources likely bolster agency of character. A question is whether they can also bolster a decentralized and evolving character. A second is whether these resources can also promote resilience and resistance to character attacks.

Conclusions

In this essay, we have considered the intersections of character assassination and stigma communication, and explicated a dynamics of character unfolding in these phenomena. Our focus should not be considered an endorsement: we do not endorse the use of character assassination or stigma communication, or the dynamic shifts in character unfolding within them. We shine light on them in this paper to illuminate them: to see them when they are used, and to lead to novel, effective forms of resistance and eradication. As Samoilenko (2020a) wrote of studying character assassination, "we must understand the disease to know how to counter-act it and fight against it" (p. 278). There is much work left to be done.

Indeed, writing this essay during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need to advance our scholarship of stigma communication and character assassination. Samoilenko's (2020a) argument that character assassination is becoming "a systemic norm" (p. 269) highlights the exigency for scholars to attend to these ancient and ubiquitous forms of communication (Samoilenko, 2020a; Smith, 2007; Smith et al.,

2017). The opportunities for insight by considering the intersections between them and unique advances made in each body of scholarship abound. For us, the activity showed us the need to theorize a dynamics of character, and we took on the challenge. By visiting with three ancient conceptions of character, we described a process of exclusion in which an evolving, agentic character (*tropos*) becomes established (*ēthos*) and fixed (*χarakter*) by others, ephemerally and sometimes longitudinally. The model inspires many questions, some of which we have raised already. We end with these: assuming a turning, agentic, complex, and decentralized character provides people their best shot at health and well-being, should everyone have a right to that kind of characterization? If it is what makes us human and, even more, allows us to flourish, is it a human right? Do we understand how to craft messages in ways that allow people to see themselves and others in such a light? We ultimately hope that our essay raises many questions for all of us to consider, with the hope that by knowing better, we can do better.

Acknowledgments

We thank Sergei A. Samoilenko for his editorial support, and Xun Zhu for his comments on feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

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