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YES, BUT . . .
RUMINATIONS ON DISCOUNTED MEMBERSHIP AND REFERENCE
GROUP RATIONALIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Reference group theory posits that people attempt to identify themselves with groups that are esteemed in order to enhance their sense of self-worth. However, it is not uncommon that actors may find themselves being identified with, or identifying with, stigmatized groups or categories. In order to avoid the personally pejorative implications of these associations, these actors often engage in various strategies that take a form similar to accounts which attempt to neutralize possible stigma. Two fundamental normalizations, disidentification and deflected stigma are presented and compared to previous articulations in the literature of stigma management.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years we have seen self-esteem (or lack thereof) proffered as an explanation for various forms of behavior in realms ranging from pop psychology to social policy. More scientifically, it has been convincingly argued that the desire to optimize the evaluative component of our sense of self is a primary motive of social action/interaction (Wells & Marwell 1976). Indeed, reference group theory suggests that we attempt to identify ourselves with groups or social categories that enhance our sense of self-worth (Abrams & Hogg 1988; Mannheim 1966; Sherif & Sherif 1964; Sherwood 1965; Singer 1981). Specifically, Eitzen (1985, p. 106) has noted the tendency for a ". . . psychological identification with the groups to which individuals belong (membership groups), or to which they want to belong (reference groups)." Also, Abrams and Brown (1989, p. 311) assert: "When a particular social categorization is salient, the individual will be motivated to maintain or raise his or her self-esteem by promoting or enhancing evaluation of that category . . ."

However, for one reason or another we often find ourselves identified with, or identifying with, groups or categories that are not especially esteemed--indeed, these groups may be stigmatized in one sense or another. When the criterion for presumed identification with these groups or categories is based on appearance, it can be particularly pernicious (Stone 1986b). Under these circumstances, we may seek to manage this stigma using one or another verbal/linguistic neutralizations (Goffman 1963; Sykes & Matza 1981).

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to articulate and elaborate two types of these normalizations which we like to refer to generically as "yes, buts." After presentation of germane theoretical perspectives and the essence of these neutralizations, a comparison will be made with other such attempts to engage in what Goffman (1968) referred to as "face-work" that are already extant in the literature relevant to potentially stigmatizing identifications.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In a basic discussion of status processes, Hyman (1942) posited that actors compare their own social positions to reference groups, other actors, categories, and collective others. The result of this comparison process has implications for future behavior as actors will, through this process, determine how close their own status matches that of the referent(s). The assumption is that actors focus on their referents as exemplars of desired status and consciously direct their behavior toward that displayed by the referents. While not directly suggested by Hyman, the inference can be drawn that this status emulation will be noted by others and that actors' successes (or lack thereof) in this will be assessed by others.

Of the types of referents delineated by Hyman, that of the reference group has been utilized most frequently in the theoretical and empirical literature (Hyman & Singer 1968; Schmitt 1972). In a tome that discussed the multiple reference other concepts which had been employed in past works, Schmitt (1972) noted the point that multiple concepts offered an overlying reference other orientation with the possibility of producing a number of reference other theories linking referents to behavior.

The reference group as a concept is defined as a group that influences an actor's overt or covert behavior (Schmitt 1972). Groups in which the actor has no membership can also serve as reference groups (Shibutani 1961), while groups in which actors have membership may have no influence over their behavior. While the reference group need not have an empirical existence (see Rokeach 1964), it is defined as a group by actors and, once defined as such, influences their behavior. The reference group, as defined by any actor, is a socially constructed reality, not exclusively an empirical phenomenon (Schmitt 1972).

Membership status in a reference group is defined as being recognized as having a membership affiliation with that group (Schmitt 1972). While Merton (1957) made it clear that both the actor and others must recognize the actor as a member of the group, Schmitt leaves the question of recognition by others of the actor's membership rather uncertain. Yet for many groups that are socially defined, membership is determined for most by physical characteristics (race, gender, age, etc.) or assumable characteristics (e.g. attire, symbols and demeanor) that have obvious meanings. These characteristics are recognized by others which makes it possible for actors to be considered by others as members of specific groups which these actors may not identify, and from which they may not draw their values.

Singer (1981) suggests that for greater clarity the concept of reference group should be limited to action that deals with self- and social evaluations. Self- and social evaluations are used by actors in two ways. First, the evaluations expressed by others are applied by actors to themselves and second, the reference groups are used

the actors as a means of evaluating either the self or others through a process of comparison. In order for an actor to accept the evaluations of others, those others must be accepted as normative and evaluative referents. In other words, in order to be accepted, those evaluations must come from a source that the actor accepts as having the ability to make meaningful evaluations. These evaluations, whether from specific others or the evaluation process generally, can then influence the future behavior of the actor. Again, the implication is that actors determine their referents, and accept those others as having the ability to pass judgment on these actors' behaviors.

Consequently, evaluations that actors accept as meaningful can affect their self-esteem (see Rosenberg & Simmons 1972). Positive evaluations can be said to increase their self-esteem, while negative evaluations may very well decrease self-esteem (Singer 1981). As Gecas (1991) and others suggest, self-esteem can be considered a motivation for behavior (Wells & Marwell 1976). Working from the assumption that having a self produced by reflexive action leads to behavior that is intended to maintain and enhance its state, Gecas posits three motivations for behavior: self-esteem, self-efficacy, and authenticity. He asserts that self-esteem is the most responsive to the interpersonal domain of reflected appraisals. Ergo, evaluations of the actor's behavior, and therefore of the actor's self, affect that actor's self-esteem which, in turn, calls out overt or covert behavior intended to either maintain or increase a level of self-esteem. Negative evaluations, especially when determined to be coming from a respected source, may well elicit behavior intended to alter the effect of this evaluation on the actor's self-esteem (Crosby 1976; Singer 1981).

Pejorative evaluations may also affect behavior when these evaluations assume group membership for an actor. As previously noted, group or category membership is not always a choice for many actors, and may be ascribed. Others may ascribe membership for certain actors by noting physical or assumed characteristics, and judge these actors by reference to the groups or categories in which membership is presumed. When actors are indeed members of the group used by others as a referent, negative evaluations may affect their self-esteem, irrespective of whether or not they themselves tend to personally identify with this category or group, or use it as a source of self-evaluation and/or values.

As mentioned in the before, actors seem to prefer to be identified as members of groups or categories that will enhance their sense of self-worth (Abrams & Hogg 1988; Mannheim 1966; Schmitt 1972; Sherif & Sherif 1964; Sherwood 1965; Singer 1981). Psychological identification with groups to which actors belong was noted by Eitzen (1985). When the reference group or category becomes salient, actors may be motivated to maintain or increase their self-esteem by raising the social evaluation of the group itself (Abrams & Brown 1989). This suggests that when judgments offered of the membership group are pejorative, actors may be motivated to deal with these evaluations whether or not they accept this membership group as a referent other.

In their discussion of status characteristics and expectation states, Berger and associates (1985) note that various social groups and categories are both differentially defined and evaluated. Physical characteristics such as race and gender are fairly easily defined and rated as more or less desirable. While other definitions based on acquired or assumable characteristics such as clothing or behavior may also

be used in making such identifications and evaluations, these are less readily apparent in either their status or value. Nevertheless, accepting that actors' self-esteem may stem from their group or collective identifications, placing a negative evaluation on these actors as a result of identifying them as a member of a disparaged group may require some reaction on their part in order to manage the potentially damaging effect on their self-esteem.

While these reactions could take a number of forms (a change in behavior, a change in cognitions, etc.), as other authors have done, we will focus on reactions that are essentially verbal attempts to neutralize these potentially pejorative identifications (Hall & Hewitt 1970; Hewitt & Hall 1973; Scully 1990). Now, for the first of the "yes, but(s)."

DISCOUNTING MEMBERSHIP IN DISPARAGED GROUPS

Certainly there are groups or categories within our society that actors may be part of, yet which due to the low esteem in which these groups are generally held, those actors may, as much as possible, eschew identification with these very same groups. Therefore, we like to refer to this "yes, but" as disidentification.

Prior to the advent of the "Black Pride" movement of the 1960s, it was not uncommon to find people who, though they would be considered black by members of the dominant racial category in the United States, were able (and actively attempted) to "pass" as white due to their uncharacteristically black features (Goffman 1963). These actors also tended to be characterized by disavowal of such membership in that racial category and behavior that was more stereotypically "white." On a related note, the first author remembers one of his students who, while it was abundantly clear that this student's race was black, behaved in a stereotypically "white" fashion and disavowed membership in that racial category since he was adopted into and raised by a white family, and said that he was nothing like "those" people. Indeed, he expressed typically racist attitudes toward blacks (e.g. they're lazy and have criminal tendencies).

Similarly, we've found that many college women seem to believe that it is necessary to tell others that "I'm not a feminist." Apparently their age and social status lead others to automatically cast them in that role, and with the long-time public opinion being somewhat disparaging of feminists (and recent populist demagogues like Rush Limbaugh referring to them as femi-nazis) they feel a need to verbally neutralize their possible association with this category of women.

Currently, there is a considerable amount of evidence that the aged in our society are disparaged, and that age is considered a weak stigma at the present time (Matthews 1979). Consequently, we can see assorted attempts by older persons to "disidentify" with that age status by dressing and behaving "young", purchasing products that purport to reverse or minimize the physical signs of aging (Oil of Olay and Grecian Formula). Stone (1986a) has certainly noted the importance of age and appearance as they relate to the perception of the self. Those attempting to deny their actual age status may also eschew some apparent benefits that go with accepting the designation of old (e.g. senior citizen discounts etc.). Furthermore, older actors with the intent of disidentifying themselves with an apparently stigmatized age group

often engage in verbal neutralizations of their membership in this category (e.g. "You're only as old as you feel"). Finally, studies of older persons which have asked them to categorize themselves in terms of their age status have found that most do not rate themselves as old until long past the age at which they are considered old by either social policy or convention (Bultena & Powers 1978; Baum & Boxley 1983).

This tendency toward disidentification seems to be a reflection of the older actors' health, whereby those who are chronologically, but not physically old, may attempt to pass for a more esteemed age status. Indeed, a study of the attempted integration of two groups of older persons concluded that one group manifest this disidentification in its resistance to such integration due to the fact that the other group was more stereotypically old (sicker and poorer). Thus, integration of these groups would have made it more difficult for the members of the healthier one to continue to deny their own agedness (Magnuson-Martinson 1991). Recently, a study of nursing homes asserts that organizations themselves are stigmatized--largely due to their clientele, the old and the sick (Schrader 1993, Wolfe 1994).

Others who have notable health concerns may also be stigmatized. Attempts to "pass" and disidentify in various ways have been noted by researchers examining people living with AIDS (Sandstrom 1990; Weitz 1980). Indeed, Sandstrom notes that some try to disidentify by pointing out that they are "innocent victims" of this disease, having contracted it through legitimate behavior (e.g. transfusion or heterosexual relations), rather than having exposed themselves to it through homosexuality or intravenous drug use. Similarly, Cain (1994) notes that AIDS service organizations themselves are stigmatized.

Toward the other end of the life course, those in later adolescence often feel a need to disidentify with their parents in some fashion, since through their lives to this point they have generally been perceived and treated as if they are simply extensions of their progenitors. Additionally, those adolescents who, perhaps non-normatively, do not rebel against their elders may believe that it is necessary to verbally normalize their position by averring as they are not like those teenagers who are looked down upon by older, and presumably more respectable, members of the community.

Speaking of respectable members of the community, in their study of the homeless, Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1349) quote from one of their respondents who seems to be engaging in this type of verbal neutralization. "I'm not like the other guys who hang out down at the Salvation Army, If you want to know about street people, I can tell you about them; but you can't really learn about street people from studying me, because I'm different."

Similarly, while not specifically noted in our read of Scully's (1990) book on the linguistic neutralizations of convicted rapists, a disidentification approach would sound like this. "Yeah, well I'm not like those other guys. I didn't jump out of the bushes and attack some unsuspecting woman. I'm in here because this girl I asked out was leading me on and then said no. But she really meant yes. So what if it got a little rough. How was I to know her roommate was going to walk in--then the girl screams rape. I'm not a real rapist like those other guys!"

A variation on the issue of attempting to avoid the potential stigma associated with some of one's membership groups or categories may be found in some of the

accouterments of popular culture, particularly those which announce the message: "Don't blame me, I" The bumper stickers, buttons and knit pullover tops with slogans of this sort seem to have as their whole purpose the attempt to disidentify oneself with a group or category that may be subject to stigma due to some action attributed to that association, and these accouterments can be seen as what have been referred to as identity documents or, particularly, disidentifiers (Goffman 1963). Such announcements seem to implicitly proclaim: "I may look like one of them, but I'm really not!" Consequently, these would seem to be a form of presentation of the self (Goffman 1959) in appearance that reflects the "yes, but" of disidentification. Blinde and Taub (1992) note that in female athletes' attempts to manage the stigma of presumed lesbianism they often present stereotypically "feminine" appearances.

While the aforementioned disparaged status of the aged (or other stigmatized groups) in our society may contribute toward discounting one's membership in a social category, there is another possible response to that potential stigma--redefining the status of the disparaged groups. Older actors who respond to questions about their age by stating: "I am 65 (or so) years young" are apparently attempting to renegotiate either their eligibility for the label of old, or the meaning of the status itself. Elliot and associates (1990) make note of similar normalization attempts. Attempts such as this bring us to the next neutralization technique.

RATIONALIZING IDENTIFICATION WITH DISPARAGED GROUPS

In the previous section we explored the normalization technique of disidentification as used by actors who wished to negate their potentially stigmatizing association with groups of which they actually were part. In this one, we will examine how actors may attempt to renegotiate the potentially stigmatizing status of categories with which they do identify--even if they are not actually members of those groups.

Sometimes we find that actors who may be part of a group or category which bears some sort of stigma may engage in verbal or behavioral clarifications that attempt to redefine the esteem (or lack thereof) in which the group itself is held. Those older actors who evince the verbal technique noted at the end of the last section, as well as those who might provide "facts and figures" about the contributions of "elders" in our society--especially as compared to other age categories--are asserting a different value than is generally conceded to this group by other age categories. Thus, they are attempting to undercut the generally inferred stigma of the age status with which they identify.

Under other circumstances, actors may (for one reason or another, e.g. self-consistency) choose to identify with groups of which they are not part, yet be aware that those groups are not generally held in high esteem--at least at that point in time. As Hewitt and Stokes (1986, p. 367) note: "Expressions of a different sort are employed when the individual knows the outcome of his act will be discrediting, but is nevertheless strongly committed to the act." Such acts can be something as simple as wearing the paraphernalia of a local sports team. Much has been made of the tendency of sports fans to identify with successful teams and thus, enhance their own self-esteem by basking in "reflected glory" (Burger 1985; Cialdini *et al.* 1976; Sigelman 1986). But (loyalty aside--see Farris 1994), what is it that enables die-hard

fans of teams such as the Chicago Cubs to root for their hapless heroes ad infinitum? After all, some (Ecenbarger 1995, p. 4E.) have asserted that ". . . the fans of consistently losing teams can go through something similar to the five stages of death-related grief. . . ."

Beyond the fact that unsuccessful sports team may have a more everyman or plain folks appeal to them, it would seem that the ability of these fans to successfully "deflect stigma" would enable those who identify with these to teams to continue to do so without having their self-esteem suffer too tremendously. It would be hard to say whether this might be indicative of the first (denial) or last (acceptance) stage of death-related grief.

The first author remembers being personally elated several years back when the Denver Broncos lost their fourth Super Bowl in four attempts. This elation was not so much the result of being the conference loyalist that he is (and thus, providing the opportunity to bask in reflected glory) as it was the opportunity to once again reveal his identification with the Minnesota Vikings who, while stigmatized nationally because they had lost four Super Bowls in four attempts (see Reusse 1995, Souhan 1995), had come much closer to the winner's score in each case than had the Broncos. Ergo, he had a rejoinder to deflect stigma if anyone should disparage his identification with his local professional football team. At the initial writing of this paper he was eagerly hoping that 1994's Super Bowl would be both a rematch and repeat of 1993's, so that he could favorably compare his Vikings with Buffalo's Bills, who would have lost four consecutive Super Bowls under those circumstances. At least his Vikings didn't lose four in a row! As we all should know by now, his patience was rewarded, and his ability to neutralize this potentially pejorative identification was enhanced.

Other such examples from popular culture can be found in the recent troubles of such celebrities as Michael Jackson and O.J. Simpson. If something like anti-conformity (Levin & Levin 1988) induces actors to identify with Guns 'n Roses' singer Axel Rose (a convicted felon), they can deflect the stigma that might be attached to this by noting that: "At least he didn't bugger boys like Michael did!" Or if one of our beloved Vikings runs afoul of the law, our rejoinder can be that: "At least he didn't whack his wife" (in several senses of that word). As has been noted, "Happiness is typically associated with comparing favorably with others. . . ." (Stephan & Stephan 1990, p.175).

Finally, Sandstrom (1994) notes that persons unaffected by AIDS may identify with its victims by virtue of being family, friends, or advocates for the afflicted. Ergo, they may attempt to deflect the stigma otherwise directed at those who have it.

Consequently, when identification with a potentially stigmatized group of which one is not a member would generally result in personal stigmatization and thus, pejorative effects on one's self-esteem and not the reflected glory which usually is the basis for identification with groups of which one is not a member, and one is able to somehow redefine the esteem in which this category one identifies with is held, then this "yes, but" is most appropriately referred to as "deflected stigma." We believe that the old notion of "misery loves company" may play a minor part here, but it would seem more important to be able to point to someone who has reason to be even more

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miserable if one is to be effective in managing the potential stigma of identifying with disparaged groups or categories.

While this neutralization is very similar to that which characterizes attempts to redefine the disparaged status of groups of which one is part, identification with one's membership groups is not quite the same thing as that which goes on in "reflected glory", and so lacks the specific circumstances necessary to provide for the symmetrical linguistic polarity inherent in the designation "deflected stigma." Ergo, we have deemed the two "yes, but" concepts articulated herein, "disidentification" and "deflected stigma" to be similar, but somewhat different.

RELEVANCE OF "YES, BUTS" TO RELATED CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Both of these are, for the most part, linguistic devices which attempt to manage the stigma possible due to real or presumed (on either the actor's or the observers' parts) identification with less-than esteemed groups or categories. Thus, as linguistic devices that attempt to manage stigma, they share some characteristics with such previously articulated concepts as accounts (Scott & Lyman 1986), techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza 1981), and disclaimers (Hewitt & Stokes 1986).

While Scott and Lyman (1986, p. 357) write that: "Every account is a manifestation of the underlying negotiation of identities;" they also note (p. 343) that: "An account is a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to evaluative inquiry." Therefore, the "yes, but" of disidentification would not quite be the same--due to it being the result of the actor being automatically identified with some group or category based on personal appearance rather than action. While attempts at deflected stigma follow an action that is reflective of one's identification with a group or category, it is the identification with that group or category that is stigmatizing, not the action itself. Therefore, while deflected stigma is more like a "justification" type of account than is disidentification, it seems to not be quite the same thing.

Sykes and Matza's (1981) "techniques of neutralization" similarly are attempts to verbally normalize actions performed by juvenile delinquents. However, unlike deflected stigma, where the initial actions reflect the actor's identification with a reference group or category, the actions of these youngsters qualify them for membership in the juvenile delinquent category. Again, our other "yes, but" of disidentification is the result of one speaking or acting in ways which indicate that one chooses not to be considered part of a group or category into which one would otherwise be automatically cast, simply on the basis of some aspect of physical appearance. Thus, once again, while there are similarities between our fraternal twin concepts of disidentification/deflected stigma and the techniques of neutralization, they appear to not entirely overlap.

Finally, Hewitt and Stokes (1986, p. 364) write that ". . . disclaimers are prospective, defining the future in the present, creating interpretations of potentially problematic events intended to make them unproblematic as they occur." While the normalizations used to deflect stigma may be seen in this light, deflected stigma revolves mostly around identifications rather than actions, and therefore, seems to

agnuson-Martinson and Baker: Yes, But...Ruminations on Discounted Membership and Reference Group remain a bit different from the notion inherent in the definition of disclaimers. Again, disidentification is predicated on attempts to linguistically neutralize attributions that are automatically based on one's present appearance, apparently not some future appearance, and is, therefore, seemingly different from a disclaimer.

Consequently, while the herein articulated "yes, buts" are like previous typifications of linguistic attempts to manage potentially problematic identities, they seem to bring something new to the language of "facework". If our esteemed and more learned colleagues fail to share our opinions on (and assertions of) this, we can probably maintain our self-esteem by retreating to some of the existing typologies to manage any stigma that might fall on those failing to provide convincing scholarly evidence and argument for their claims. Sykes and Matza's (1981) "condemning the condemners" would seem to be a likely rejoinder!

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