

# Taboo Topics: Structural Barriers to the Study of Organizational Stigma

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## Abstract

Studies of organization stigma have become increasingly prominent. Yet these studies are not uncontroversial; structural barriers to the study of organization stigma still exist within the profession. We argue for the study of stigma, highlighting its importance. We then explain how structural barriers threaten the study of organization stigma by imposing inappropriate boundaries on scholarly inquiry, and by threatening the validity of the findings derived from such studies. We also outline the sources and consequences of the structural barriers that impose these obstacles. We end by suggesting ways that such studies can be reframed in an effort to overcome or lessen the taboo nature of the stigma studies.

## Keywords

organizational stigma, knowledge taboos, professional barriers, cultural barriers, philosophy of science, organization theory, institutional theory

“Where are the homeless in our studies?”

—(Lawrence, 2008, p. 190)

## Introduction

In this article we make two arguments. The first is that there is great scholarly value in examining topics that management researchers may find distasteful or undesirable; topics that involve organizational stigma. Organizational stigma involves the discrediting of organizational participants, organizational activities, and organizations themselves (Sutton & Callahan, 1987). And the study of organizational stigma often involves the examination of distasteful—and occasionally objectionable, despicable, and disgusting—activities, work, and organizations. We argue that in spite of its potentially repellent nature, organizational stigma is worth discussing as it exposes areas of social life that remain otherwise hidden. However, the nature of stigmatized topics also makes them taboo, and our experience as researchers suggests that our field erects structural barriers that discourage their examination. Our second argument, then, is that these taboos and structural barriers that inhibit the study of these topics are detrimental to knowledge creation and accumulation and deserve to be breached.

Our perspective is that of two scholars who, having studied the activities of men’s bathhouses (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009), inadvertently became part of a hidden world of authors where the stories of obstacles and challenges to studying some topics were common. As part of this world, we heard the story of an editor who requested that authors

leave descriptive but possibly unpleasant details about sexual behavior out of a manuscript. We also know of a senior editor who questioned an action editor’s decision to accept a manuscript due to its subject matter. Far into the review process, other authors faced a request to replace a central construct which, in its very essence, indicted the privilege of a majority with one perhaps less objectionable but which the authors felt was quite misleading. An anonymous reviewer also challenged a friend’s intent by arguing that a manuscript, which rendered a discriminated minority as worthy of study, constituted activism, not research. We also know of a study of adult toys that, in spite of fascinating insights into the relationship between visual language and consumption, the author felt “could never be published.” Stories of departmental and college disapproval, suggestions that such research be delayed until the safety of tenure is achieved, claims that these are not “business” topics, denial of funds for such projects, and other stories, abound in this community. The conversations we mention cut across scholarly areas and continents, and are but a few of the instances in which scholarship risks corruption due to the nature of the topic and data.

As authors engaged in this work we have found the prevalence of these stories surprising and offensive. Yet it is also

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clear to us that these stories are symptoms of a larger challenge, one where these events are the product of social and structural barriers within our field. Although these barriers are not absolute, within our context they are ever-present, persistent, and constraining. Our purpose is to call attention to structural barriers that inhibit the study of organizational stigma so they may be lowered, and to argue for the value inherent in the study of stigmatized organizations and organizational activities, especially the most stigmatized or extreme cases.

To make our arguments, we begin by outlining the importance of studying organizational stigma. We then point out that some unique difficulties in engaging and publishing such work are inherent in their content matter: examinations of organizational stigma are often considered taboo, outside of the social conventions of propriety and acceptability in scholarly discourse, because their contents are taboo. The difficulties in such study, though, are also due to management scholars' reluctance—as academics acting in the roles of authors and gatekeepers—to cross the socially constructed boundaries of propriety and acceptability that we import into our work from the broader society, and which we label knowledge taboos. We argue that this reluctance is not merely a passive action. Rather, it reinforces these boundaries by silencing some sources of knowledge and unnecessarily limits our understanding of the full range of organizational life. We end by suggesting paths to overcome those taboos, and encourage more fearless study of taboo topics.

## Why Study Organizational Stigma

We begin with the premise that, for scholars, no organizational phenomenon is unworthy of exploration, no organizational phenomenon or topic is off-limits, and no topic of inquiry should be taboo. Thus, if we are concerned with explaining the full range of organizational life, we must be willing to touch the full range of organizational phenomena through our work. At the most fundamental level, studies of organizational stigma are important because stigma is a fact of organizational life (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009; Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach, 2008).

The study of stigma within organizations is obviously important when we consider that members suffer negative effects from stigma (DeJordy, 2008; Herek, 1998). When organizational participants are stigmatized within or by organizations due to characteristics such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, family commitments, or other reasons, workers suffer “diminished life chances” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). Members can also suffer when particular organizational activities are stigmatized, sometimes constituting dirty work for workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006). Members also suffer when an organization is stigmatized through their association with it, through stigma transfer (Hudson & Okhuysen,

2009; Sutton & Callahan, 1987), because such stigmatization can restrict access to resources and constitute a threat to organizational survival (Devers et al., 2009; Hudson, 2008; Warren, 2007). As organizational stigma reduces resources, it can result in the loss of benefits, wages, employment, and friendship ties for owners, managers, and workers. Those who identify with stigmatized organizations (Dukerich, Kramer, & McLean-Parks, 1998; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994) or find meaning within them (Weick, 1979; Zilber, 2002) can also suffer from that stigmatization through challenges to their own identity and sense of meaning. And these deleterious outcomes can also extend to the organization's external stakeholders such as suppliers and customers (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009).

In spite of the likelihood of these and other effects of stigma, we cannot know *a priori* everything that the study of organizational stigma can tell us. However, we can be certain that we cannot understand the full range of organizational life if we allow barriers and taboos to steer us to selectively examine some areas and avoid others; we cannot discover and understand the personal and organizational consequences of stigma unless we look under the rocks where the stigmatized lies hidden. Below we speculate on some areas where peering under the rock can lead to theoretical insight and nuance, presenting exemplars from organizational research. We have selected, as examples, areas that focus on macro-level processes viewed through the lens of institutional theory to highlight the larger societal dynamics that affect organizational life. Naturally, we do not suggest these examples are comprehensive or exhaustive, but rather that they are illustrative of how different areas of study can be enriched by the study of organizational stigma. We begin by arguing that stigma is a phenomenon that demonstrates the contested nature of organizational activities, and that its study can help us explore the processes involved in that contestation. We also suggest that the study of stigma can help incorporate power and the role of audiences into conversations related to contestation. We also discuss how a focus on contestation can aid the study of specific types of stigmatized organizational activities, including the so-called dark side of organizations. We elaborate on each of these below.

## Contemporaneous Contestation

One area where the study of organizational stigma can shed light is contestation. The organizational literature has long recognized that organizations need to achieve some level of socially defined approval or appropriateness for social comprehension and to gain access to resources (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995). Yet while organizational legitimacy has been extensively examined (Bitektine, 2011; Deephouse, 1996; Elsbach, 1994; Stinchcombe, 1997; Stryker, 2000), we know less about alternative situations or different potential ways in which organizations can survive.

But by examining organizational stigma, we can begin to examine processes, such as the absence of legitimacy (Zuckerman, 1999, p. 1399) and “negative” legitimacy (Hudson, 2008, p. 253) that are less well understood. That organizations and organization members can be stigmatized shows how social approval is often elusive or even impossible (Hudson, 2008). Furthermore, studying organizational stigma highlights the nature of social evaluations (Anteby, 2010; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Hudson, 2008) because stigma brings to the foreground the “breaches, deviant events, or conflicts that reveal the usually undiscussed boundaries of taken-for-granted understandings” (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006, p. 214), precisely pinpointing processes of contestation.

Organizational stigma also alerts us to the characteristics of social sites of contemporaneous contestation. Institutional theory, for instance, has focused attention on the multiplicity of social institutions as well as ongoing contests between them (Friedland, 2002; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Seo & Creed, 2002). Most such studies examine long-term processes from an historical perspective (Dunn & Jones, 2010; Jones, Maoret, Massa, & Svejnova, 2012; Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006; Reay & Hinings, 2009). In such cases, of course, the outcomes of this contestation are interpreted through the retrospective and current lens of the researcher, rather than the situated lens of the participants, creating a gap in our understanding of these processes. As noted by Schneiberg and Clemens (2006), archival and historical data can be problematic when the debates and political processes involved in the contestation are settled, because the discourse and rhetoric of the losing side may be missing. Such challenges suggest that a worthwhile approach to understand contestation should involve the study of contemporaneous contestation, and situations where stigmatizing activity takes place, currently, reveal sites where conflict is occurring. Thus, stigma alerts us to locations where organizational members and others—including those stigmatized, those stigmatizing, and those falling into neither category—respond to competing institutional pressures. In other words, studying organizational stigma, while a worthwhile effort in and of itself, may further allow us new or more nuanced ways of studying other organizational processes.

**Mechanisms of power.** One important element in processes of contestation is the role of power. In spite of its importance in processes of organizational control and the relations between organizations and their environment (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), many suggest that our understanding of power remains misspecified (Hardy & Clegg, 2006). Furthermore, we know little about its role in processes of contestation (Lawrence, 2008). But a focus on stigmatization can naturally reveal the power disparities between the stigmatized and the stigmatizing, and how

power positions and alternative forms of power affect contestation processes. Examinations of stigma can help us directly observe forms and uses of power and aid in addressing the lack of attention to power within institutional theorizing (Hardy & Clegg, 2006; Lawrence, 2008; Lawrence, Winn, & Jennings, 2001). For instance, those with power are able to label, name, and define what is “normal”—and thus to determine status, access to resources, and outcomes (Hardy & Phillips, 1998) for the stigmatized through the process of stigmatization.

The taken-for-granted cognitive assumptions that underpin what is “normal” are, however, not a given; they are enforced and reinforced by those with power (Lawrence, 2008). And examining organizational stigma can reveal literal and symbolic “technologies of power” (Friedland & Alford, 1991), mechanisms of coercion (Scott, 2007), “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 1972/1977), and even literal violence used to enforce and reinforce those assumptions and prescriptions that are central to contemporaneous contestation. In other words, in alerting us to contemporaneous sites of contestation, organizational stigma also alerts us to the ways power is used, and to those who use their positions of power to stigmatize or to resist stigmatization.

**Multiple audiences.** The exploration of stigma as a site for contemporaneous contestation also highlights the role of social audiences in processes of organizational legitimation. Although the presence of multiple audiences is both widely acknowledged and known to shape the activities of organizations (Fleming, Darley, Hilton, & Kojetin, 1990; Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1992; King & Fine, 2000), little work has examined the roles and positions or the alternative practices of these audiences. Further study is warranted to clarify the definition of the “audience” construct and to further examine the dynamics by which audiences form, coalesce, and interact with one another, as well as to understand the influence of audience participation on organizational activities. But contestation in the form of stigmatization is created by the presence of multiple audiences, who are in turn embedded in multiple institutional configurations. It is this contradictory and conflicting approval and disapproval, from different audiences, that results in stigmatization. For us, what is important is that examinations of stigma naturally force attention to the role of multiple audiences, potentially shedding light by placing them in high relief. By studying stigmatized organizations and practices where the role of multiple audiences is highlighted, we may better understand the impact they have on organizations.

**Organizational misbehavior.** Last, the study of organizational stigma can also aid in the examination of unethical organizational misbehavior, organizational misconduct (Greve, Palmer, & Pozner, 2010; MacLean & Behnam, 2010), or the “dark side” of organizational life (Dukerich et al., 1998;

Griffin & O'Leary-Kelly, 2004). While the harm caused by organization misconduct is often documented (e.g., Vaughan, 1999), some of the processes that lead to organizational misconduct are less well understood. By studying such activities as stigmatized, and thus sites of contestation, we might uncover additional processes that make these activities possible. For instance, because stigmatization is the result of contested definitions, what appears unethical in one circumstance may conform to an acceptable social standard in another circumstance, highlighting the challenges for people making sense of contradictions in their institutional environments. By avoiding the imposition of an *a priori* definition of some activities as "bad," we can examine unethical or illegal activities as the sites for contested meanings, and we may find how activities that look like problems from the outside are solutions for those participating in those activities. We are not suggesting a value-free ethic or standard of organizational action. Rather, we are suggesting that examining these activities from the viewpoint of contested or stigmatized activities can open our perspectives to the processes and circumstances that facilitate them. Perhaps examining illegal or unethical organizational activities as stigmatized may help us see the perverse incentives that construct unethical activities, giving us greater insight into what at first or in hindsight appear to be dysfunctions. Then, when activities are judged as detrimental to individual, organizational, and social outcomes, a better understanding of the processes by which they occur will help eliminate, minimize, or ameliorate them.

In summary, the study of organizational stigma is inherently worthwhile, but is also valuable for its potential to shine further light on processes of contestation, power, multiple audiences, and organizational misbehavior. The potential in these exemplar areas suggests that, as a community of management scholars, it would be fruitful to engage this type of study to further our understanding of organizational life. No doubt there are many other perspectives and potential areas of insight to be gained by studying organizational stigma. Again, we cannot know what we may learn from the study of stigma until we actively pursue this agenda, but taboos and social and structural barriers can clearly limit our ability to do so. We discuss these barriers next.

## Barriers to Studying Organizational Stigma

Earlier we described how those of us studying organizational stigma have faced barriers—including disapproval, denials of funding, as well as unwarranted criticisms of and interference with our work—that have led to criticism, delays, and even the abandonment of research projects on organizational stigma. We argue that these barriers have at their root a seldom-acknowledged source: The cultural norms that we as a community of scholars bring into our work from broader society that imperceptibly yet persistently cause us to avert

our eyes from stigmatized and stigmatizing behavior and situations. The effects of these cultural norms on our research are particularly perverse due to their subtle yet inescapable nature affecting every aspect of the work. For not only do these norms delineate which research topics are appropriate, they also construct for us which topics are inappropriate, which are taboo. By understanding the nature of these cultural taboos and the potentially negative impact they have on our field, and by recognizing their existence as social constructions, we begin the work to overcome them.

Our argument is that as researchers and institutional gatekeepers, we are "cultural creatures" and operate based on "taken-for-granted" cultural values and taboos. The cultural taboos we carry influence our decisions and actions, large and small, as we navigate the scholarly enterprise. These unspoken values affect the questions we ask, the data we collect, and the situations we attend to in our research sites. Such taboos also cause us to apply judgments, often unconsciously, about the things we see and the people we interact with, all too often leading us to avoid stigmatized or stigmatizing behavior and situations.

The challenge of these knowledge taboos, which are specific instantiations and expressions of taboos from the broader culture brought into the research enterprise, is evident when examinations of stigmatized workplace activities and of stigmatized organizations reveal unpleasant or even indecent details. For instance, examinations of race in the workplace can reveal the existence of racist views and the way in which people hold on to them—dearly. This can force us, as researchers, to acknowledge and document the experiences of victims, but also to give voice to racist people. And giving voice to such points of view, which we might find odious or detestable, is not necessarily something we are comfortable with. Similarly, descriptions of sexual activities may be uncomfortable, yet research into sex clubs can require descriptions of sexual practices, bodily functions, and bodily fluids that are integral parts of that context.

In other words, our own cultural embeddedness produces knowledge taboos, causing us to find particular situations and settings uncomfortable or otherwise off-putting, and to evaluate them negatively. Knowledge taboos lead us to pay attention to some features of organizational life but not others, to ignore some activities and privilege others that are seemingly normal, and to subsequently document, conceive of, and theorize about some aspects of organizational life but not others. The practical consequence for management scholars is the pursuit of topics that are considered appropriate and which resonate with "the attitudes we normals have" (Goffman, 1963, p. 5) within our scholarly community. These knowledge constructions delineate "what counts as knowledge and what doesn't" (Meyer, 2008, p. 524).

Thus, management scholars generally focus on topics deemed normal, but where "normal" means polite, well-bred, or courteous. For example, firm behavior and firm

level outcomes, valuing topics such as firm strategies, knowledge, innovation, employee performance, firm asset development and deployment, and the effects of organizations on their environments are seen as the natural or appropriate purview of management research. Furthermore, industries and organizations deemed relevant for study typically fall within a delineated mainstream, whether hospitals, public schools, daycare centers, banks, or insurance firms. In this very process, knowledge constructions in our scholarly communities define and reinforce some categories of knowledge as acceptable while, simultaneously, other forms of knowledge are deemed to be off limits, inappropriate, improper, or unworthy of knowing.

Knowledge taboos pose a threat to scholarly inquiry by inhibiting us as researchers through unthinking self-policing. Knowledge taboos are maintained in part due to our fears of contagion with the stigmatized activities and organizations we might examine (Brewis, 2005; Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014). We can be afraid, even unconsciously, that if we participate in or allow for the examination of the stigmatized aspects of organizations in our journals, somehow we as individuals, as a scholarly community, will be contaminated, defiled, and made impure. If we examine the ways that racism, sexism, and heterosexism serve the interests of particular people or groups within or across organizations, we may be seen as racist, sexist, or heterosexist ourselves or, if we reject them, as having an agenda of advocacy against these phenomena. Or our professionalism may be discounted or stigmatized through contagion if we are also members of a stigmatized group we are studying. Thus, if we study or allow into publication stigmatized aspects of organizations, we fear becoming stigmatized ourselves.

The perverse nature of knowledge taboos in our scholarly endeavors becomes evident when we consider the ways scholarly activities reinforce and sustain cultural taboos. As we noted, when we engage in research programs that examine taboo topics we must contend with the difficulties of overcoming our own discomfort with some forms of knowledge. In addition, we must also contend with a broader professional field that can be embarrassed or disgusted by discussions of topics that transgress broader social norms. Thus, breaking the boundaries of acceptable topics into transgressive ones, to study stigma, can be deemed taboo in our departments and journals. In these situations, we as management scholars, as department chairs, editors, reviewers, and other gatekeepers, act as cultural guardians: We reinforce the broader cultural norms that prevent inquiry into the full spectrum of organizational life by policing against transgressions. It is the perverse nature of knowledge taboos that, while seeking to police knowledge from impurity, they pose a unique threat of corruption to our broader understanding of organizational life, which we outline below.

### ***Incomplete Knowledge and Accounts Resulting From Knowledge Taboos***

Knowledge taboos threaten the development of knowledge by leading researchers to ignore potentially important aspects of the contexts we study. For instance, in our qualitative fieldwork we are taught to pay attention to subtle cues to try to understand the social world. Thus, we know the details about personal artifacts and décor in corporate offices (Elsbach, 2004), professional attire in hospitals and medical settings (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997) and airlines (Hochschild, 1983), and uniforms in military, civilian, and religious settings (Schlosser, 2003). We know what people have for lunch in work settings (Dewhurst & FitzPatrick, 2007) and the operational routines of bill collectors, banks, airlines, insurance companies, health care organizations, and automobile manufacturers.

These accounts focus on important aspects of organizational life by attending to detail in the contexts we study. However, we are often left to wonder what is left out in these descriptions and, from our standpoint, what elements of the context might have been too tasteless or inappropriate to include, either in the data collection or in the reports from these settings. For instance, although we know that people engage in consensual sexual relations at work, and that these can have important effects on organizations (Burrell, 1984), we seldom see them documented. Moreover, we see few explicit descriptions of distasteful aspects of work, such as the disposal of feces or urine in hospitals, or of aborted fetuses in clinics. The absence of these details is, no doubt, comforting for readers. But the absence of such details may do a disservice to the participants, for whom such details are important. And their absence, which is a consequence of knowledge taboos, may render the settings incomplete.

In some cases, the desire to avoid contact with stigmatized activities may also cause us to systematically ignore aspects of organizations that provide a more complete picture of organizational life. For instance, hospitals may simultaneously provide services that are considered worthy and normal, such as pediatric care or heart surgery, and others, such as abortion services, which are stigmatized. If as researchers we focus only on the seemingly positive activities, we will miss elements of the complexity of such organizations. Similarly, a grocery store chain may operate in middle or upper class neighborhoods as well as in neighborhoods where poor or homeless people reside. In such situations we may unintentionally favor data gathering in the “nicer” locations, which blinds us to the full range of organizational practices. We may presume, incorrectly, that such firms make no modifications to their practices to address their presence in stigmatized social locations. We may remain ignorant of alternative security mechanisms to prevent theft or alternative payment processes for the poor. In such cases, knowledge taboos can blind us to the complexity

of organizations that operate in varied environments. In other cases our data collection may simply ignore industries, such as check-cashing and payday loan businesses, that exclusively operate in poor or low-income neighborhoods. Yet from a theoretical standpoint, these organizations' activities serve as a complement to those provided by more "normal" organizations such as banks and credit unions, again blinding us to the full range of activities of organizations within an organizational field.

As we have noted, the absence of such details may be due to a researcher's own discomfort, causing them to avoid documenting or examining distasteful aspects of a setting. In other situations, the researcher may fully account for all aspects of the context, including distasteful ones, in their own analysis, but those details may be absent in a manuscript, perhaps, as in one of the examples we provided above, at the behest of the journal referees or on advice from colleagues. Here the researcher can still use such details in the analysis and interpretation, but their absence in the presentation may lead readers to inappropriate conclusions regarding the interpretation of findings or other aspects of the work. The lack of detail is a general problem, of course, but it is particularly problematic in situations where novel research settings are involved. In these cases, thick description (Geertz, 1973)—"the complete and literal description of the incident or entity being investigated" (Merriam, 2009, p. 43)—is critical. The presentation of contextual details, no matter how distasteful, is essential to assure an adequate interpretation and understanding of the social setting under study. And although the absence of detail may seem like a particular concern for qualitative studies, it can also be a factor in quantitative analysis. Consider, for instance, the possibility of a network analysis that does not account for intimate relationships and sexual liaisons at work. In both cases the absence of detail can render the context for a given phenomenon incomplete.

Although the consequences we have noted so far apply to the work of authors, the influence of knowledge taboos also affects and is reinforced through the activities of referees and editors, as well as others within our research enterprise. Well-meaning mentors may suggest to authors that they refrain from exploring stigmatized organizations, activities, or populations lest they become stigmatized themselves. Aiding in this well-meaning conspiracy is the widely held belief of the inherent superiority of the indifferent scholar, one who remains neutral and dispassionate about the topics and findings of his or her inquiry (Anteby, 2013; Merton, 1942/1973). This illusion of an idealized scholar (Gouldner, 1962) gives critics tools to undermine the exploration of stigmatized topics as it casts suspicion on the motives of those that explore them. For instance, the fiction of the indifferent scholar can enable critics to label as prurient those who study sex venues or sexual activity, or their interests as salacious (Brewis, 2005). In other cases, the fiction may cast suspicion

on scholars' findings and motivations. For instance, studying venues where the poor congregate may yield evidence of discrimination or social injustice. In this case, the research may be criticized for the absence of objectivity, or because their analysis reads as advocacy, both of which would be deemed inappropriate for our fictionally indifferent scholar.

Knowledge taboos can also affect the presentation of findings in our journals through the intervention of reviewers and editors, and can have consequences for the development of our conceptual and theoretical understanding. When some forms of knowledge are taboo, there is a temptation to ask for the use of euphemisms in their description (Keith & Burrige, 1991) to avoid offense and transgression. However, the unwillingness to accept clear and specific language may compromise construct validity and adequacy. For instance, discomfort at confronting racism in organizations may lead to calls to label it something else, such as unfairness or injustice, due to the ugly associations that the language of racism has and the history it connotes. In such cases, we may unwittingly deny or diminish the existence of the problem while also introducing confusion into the research process because polite language can obscure the true nature of the phenomenon. In the case of sex between workers in the office, there may be a temptation to use a label such as "interoffice relationships," even as such language obscures the fact that some sexual activity does not involve a relationship, and that some relationships do not involve sex. Even subtle pressures to use existing theoretical language, which carries its own historical baggage of appropriateness, risk sowing confusion. For instance, describing the difficulties of gay or lesbian individuals in the workplace may sometimes be due to homophobia. In other cases, it may be due to heterosexism. However, the construct of homophobia is better understood, more widely used, and even glorified due to its acknowledgment of a civil rights struggle. Heterosexism, on the other hand, is more uncomfortable because it challenges the privilege of a majority and brings it to account, potentially offending most of the readers and referees of our journals. The result is that there may be a temptation to simply cast the phenomenon from a perspective that is more acceptable, obscuring a new, interesting, and more precise theoretical finding.

Indeed, by avoiding the unpleasant, the tasteless, the offensive, and the taboo, as a field we tend to privilege and reinforce the lives of the respectable, the middle and upper class, the clean, and the powerful, wittingly and unwittingly becoming complicit by becoming the police who perpetuate and protect knowledge taboos. Not paying attention to check cashing firms devalues low-wage workers and their struggles. By covering up or ignoring sexual activities in the workplace we discount the meaning and value that such activity has for workers. In other words, by studying only acceptable organizations as settings, or only acceptable activities within those settings, we reinforce the stigmatization of the underclass, the marginalized, the voiceless, and

the less powerful. By only focusing attention on the organizations that are filled with people like us, that serve people like us, and that we interact with, we are actively demonizing and making others into the “stranger” (Alexander, 2004; Simmel, 1921), and discounting those organizations that serve or even prey on them. And the fact that these last two sentences may read as advocacy even as they are merely descriptive illustrates the challenge; by seeking or desiring more neutral language and descriptions we enact knowledge taboos.

One final difficulty that knowledge taboos impose on our scientific endeavor stems from the fact that different cultures create different taboos. This means that taboos and stigmatized activities in one culture may not be so judged in others, and research steeped in different cultures will reflect those varying knowledge taboos, privileging different aspects of organizations while ignoring or obscuring different ones as well. Such differences also become enacted in the acceptability or appropriateness of content and description of topics between, say, North American and European management and organizations journals. Because knowledge taboos are culturally produced, and vary across both regions and academic disciplines, what emerges in our scholarly production is a body of non-comparable knowledge. A resolution requires that every discipline and geographical location make possible a full exploration of stigmatized activities and organizations. Without it, knowledge is threatened by difficulties in translation, impeding the circulation and expansion of knowledge across regional and academic communities.

Interestingly, by calling attention to the stigmatization, barriers, and limitations associated with knowledge taboos, we are also able to see the perverse nature of knowledge taboos more generally. As cultural and knowledge taboos are created to protect and police the purity and definitions of acceptable scholarly endeavors, these same taboos in turn create violations of other socially constructed norms and systems of meanings. In the case of knowledge taboos, their very existence makes some forms of knowledge off-limits and violates the institutionalized practices of knowledge creation and dissemination that we hold dear as scholars. Taboos are supposed to protect us from corruption, but, in the case of knowledge taboos, they corrupt us.

### **A Call Toward Stigma: Let a Thousand Stinkweeds Bloom**

We have discussed the barriers to studying stigmatized or taboo topics in management science, and we have shown that significant problems arise from the presence of these barriers. Below we suggest three bridges that we believe our academic community can use to transverse these barriers and alleviate or minimize the effects of knowledge taboos. While we are fairly certain that some form of knowledge taboos will always inhibit our understanding of organizational life

(we are all human, after all), our hope here is to suggest ways to at least partially offset the threats they represent. Below we suggest that researchers of stigmatized organizational actions might take advantage of insider status. We follow that with the oft-sounded call for greater reflexivity in our scholarship, but expanding that call to not just include an increased awareness on the part of researchers, but on the rest of our community as well. We end with suggestions for knowledge completeness, or reframing both normal and stigmatized settings, to gain a fuller awareness of organizational life.

### ***“Interested Scholarship” and Insider Status***

Earlier we noted that the cultural and knowledge taboos related to stigmatized organizational activities create barriers for researchers who may either fear contagion from studying taboo topics by being identified as a participant in those stigmatized settings and/or by being seen as violating the idealized norm of the indifferent scholar. We would like to suggest that the identification of a scholar as an insider, as one who is stigmatized in ways similar to the stigmatized subject under consideration, should be considered an advantage rather than a deterrent for pursuing this type of work. We argue for this perspective for two reasons: an augmented need for theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and access to data (Anteby, 2013; MacLean, Anteby, Hudson, & Rudolph, 2006) in studying stigmatized settings.

Theoretical sensitivity is an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of research topics and research sites. Such sensitivity enables the researcher’s ability to both look for and to interpret subtle or otherwise easily overlooked sources of information or cues and hints of previously underexplored activities and processes. Membership and identification with the research subject can enhance that sensitivity, allowing for both a more complete process of data collection and a more informed and perhaps insightful interpretation of that data. An insider may be more able to understand and interpret the nuances of context, jargon, and other forms of knowledge contained in these settings. Such access helps the researcher observe and see things that might remain hidden to others, as well as allowing for richer interpretation of the data, which can provide a more grounded understanding of the context and more valuable theorizing.

Insider status can also facilitate access to sites and interview subjects that might otherwise remain structurally difficult to access, since stigmatized organizations may try to hide from public view (Hudson, 2008; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). In some cases, insider status may simply be achieved by the body of the researcher—it would be difficult or impossible for a woman to gain entry into men’s bathhouses to see their operation. Moreover, insider status can create opportunities to make connections, including initial introductions and participant samples (Anteby, 2013; MacLean et al.,

2006), by providing access to those in less-noticed or noticeable communities who can become sources or that can direct the researcher to others who can become sources. Also, insider status allows subjects to identify with the researcher, allowing the researcher to gain confidence and trust of subjects, and to become vulnerable during the research enterprise. Such trust and vulnerability are essential in the examination of hidden and taboo topics, since participants are inherently exposed to judgment and stigmatization for their participation or awareness of such activities.

Considering the advantages that added theoretical sensitivity and access to data bring, we would argue that, quite the opposite of the general fears of contamination and violation that the indifferent scholar fiction proposes, insider status is both a benefit and a method for studying organizational stigma. To us, insider status and interestedness is not a flaw or diminution of the research relationship; it is a benefit.

### *Reflexivity*

A second bridge to overcoming the barrier of taboo topics is built through the engagement of greater reflexivity within our research community. Reflexivity is

conducting research in a way that turns back upon, and takes account of, itself (e.g., Chia, 1996; Hardy & Clegg, 1997; Holland, 1999), and typically emphasizes the inclusion of the researcher in the subject matter he or she is trying to understand. (Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001, p. 532)

For authors, the focus is on authenticity in the research process and awareness of our membership in our culture as well as an often privileged position as academics (Hardy & Clegg, 1997). Reflexivity requires and allows researchers to understand that we do not stand apart from our research interests and subjects nor from the cultural values that we bring to the research. Again, for researchers of organizational stigma, our membership in a marginalized or stigmatized community and subculture affords us the privilege of insider status. Our greater access and sensitivity to stigmatized settings colors our interpretation of those settings. This double status then gives us a greater need for and awareness of reflexive consciousness in our work.

However, this increased awareness of and calls for reflexivity in our research (Hardy & Clegg, 1997) must also apply to referees, editors, and others to substantively change our field's perspectives on stigma research. The practices of journal referees and editors in the gatekeeping role and in the crafting of published research have been much extolled and lamented (Bedeian, 2003, 2004, 2008; Miner, 2003). We argue that the work to resist and challenge culturally defined, socially constructed taboos that impede our understanding of organizations and of organizational stigma must be a

collective effort. Indeed, when we act as referees, we also find ourselves in contested terrain as we evaluate work on organizational stigma. To advance our knowledge and understanding of organizations as a field, we must not only study, describe, and account for aspects of organizations that repulse or disgust us, but we must also allow their publication. In our writing of this manuscript, we have occasionally used imagery to evoke disgust and avoidance precisely to highlight the challenge that readers and reviewers face in this journey to actively dispute knowledge taboos. Only by disputing them do we fully advance our knowledge of organizations, and gain insight into the fullest range of organizational life.

We have added department chairs, college administration, grantees, tenure and promotion committees, and even our friendly reviewers and colleagues to the list of those policing and enforcing the boundaries of appropriate knowledge. To engage in reflexivity collectively and in each of our roles, we need to be aware of our own cultural embeddedness and boundedness; to critically examine and challenge the cultural, disciplinary, and professional boundaries that capture us in the same web of rules of what is and is not permissible; to examine what counts as knowledge and what does not; and to beware the taboo and the desire to police and bolster the boundaries of propriety. All of us must become more aware, more reflexive, as we participate in the production of organizational knowledge.

Undeniably, some of the pressure for greater reflexivity on the above list of malefactors that police the barriers of acceptable knowledge must come from those of us who seek to expand knowledge in taboo directions, those of us who do stigma research. And we admit that, particularly when these barriers involve department chairs and journal referees, our friends and we have dreamt of approaches that would make Robespierre or Stalin blush. But in general this, like most change, may have to come from the bottom up. Much has already been written on methods to reform the publication process, including for journal referees and others to be more open to innovative research and to resist the temptations to "man the gates" to defend the status quo (Astley, 1985; Bedeian, 2003; Hillman, 2009). We have noted here an additional set of problems and structural barriers to organizational scholarship that exist throughout our research community and suggest that, in addition to other reform efforts, the voices and actions of those engaged in research on taboo topics should join the conversation.

### *Subverting Knowledge Taboos*

Embracing insider status and engaging reflexivity throughout the research community will enhance our ability to overcome the structural barriers associated with the taboos of studying organizational stigma. But we also present here two more immediate and practical ways to enhance the

production of research on organizational stigma while the more systemic changes necessary to remove knowledge taboos wind their slow pace throughout our scholarly community. One strategy can be pursued by those directly studying stigmatized organizations, and one for those studying organizations that are not socially or morally contested, but who are allies in the effort to try to overcome knowledge taboos.

**Reframing knowledge about extreme cases.** In studying stigmatized organizations, reframing extreme or contested cases as theoretically similar to more “normal” organizations is one powerful tool in the quest to break through knowledge taboos. Presenting the theoretical similarity between more- and less-stigmatized organizations in terms of internal processes, external relations, or other attributes allows researchers to link their work to that of others in the research community, drawing parallels and comparisons that might otherwise go unnoticed.

It is important to note, however, that this search and presentation of theoretical similarity is not rooted in concerns for politeness, and that this is not a call to “normalize” extreme cases. In fact, it is critically important that the stigmatized elements of the phenomenon remain in the foreground, as these are the characteristics that can yield theoretical insight. But within that description, it is just as important to recognize uncontested and normal elements, those that might otherwise be overlooked and remain hidden. It is in the execution of normal processes, such as meeting payroll, developing advertising, and dealing with customers, that stigmatized organizations survive and thrive (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Sutton & Callahan, 1987). By accounting for these normal aspects in our documenting and theorizing, we also reframe the stigmatized, to describe it in an understandable way, a way that renders it less taboo. By providing sufficient theoretical and empirical details, so that cases can be conceptually linked to other organizations, we can simultaneously join a scholarly conversation and gently and persistently subvert knowledge taboos.

An additional approach available to scholars studying stigmatized organizations is to emphasize the pervasiveness of stigmatization. In this case, the emphasis of the study is on the processes that lead to stigmatization or activities that occur in response to those processes. These are processes of contestation that are evident in stigmatized situations but in other situations remain in the background, hidden, although they are still present. Stigmatized organizations or activities may be considered normal, acceptable, or even positive when understood from the perspectives of alternative audiences. In this way, we can understand that the processes that lead to stigma can be reframed as appropriate, non-taboo, forms of knowledge. By reframing the examinations of organizational stigma into acceptable categories of meaning, we may simultaneously uncover aspects of organizations that

are otherwise missed and overcome the barriers that knowledge taboos present.

**Reframing knowledge about mundane cases.** While one strategy to overcome knowledge taboos is to reframe extreme cases, a second strategy is to reframe mundane or “normal” cases as sites where stigma processes also occur. Although extreme cases of stigma and taboo accentuate processes that occur in unusual contexts, “normal” cases demonstrate the ubiquity of stigmatization processes across a variety of organizational settings.

It is the case that every organization and every organizational activity is evaluated negatively by some audience, somewhere, sometime. Although these processes may not reflect the same type of broad-based stigmatization that other organizations face, they can highlight the low intensity processes that underpin more intense forms of stigma. For instance, the increased usage of technology to perform routine tasks and achieve operational efficiencies in organizations may be critiqued for displacing skilled workers and “hollowing out” middle-class workers. Customer data management and customer relationship practices are similarly criticized as invasions of privacy. The achievement of market power and scale efficiencies by large retailers and service providers are often blamed for driving out local competition and family and small business owners, thereby reducing competition, stifling innovation, and driving up prices. Industry consolidation and merger and acquisition activity is often seen as anti-competitive, anti-small business, and as driving decreases in customer service and differentiation activities in a “race to the bottom” (Porter, 2001). All of these activities take place in “normal” organizations and industries, yet are stigmatized by some audiences. Examining stigma in these more “normal” settings draws attention to these perhaps minority—but very real—audience perceptions. This examination then draws our attention to the challenges that organizations experience in facing the multiplicity of audiences in their context. And studying them from the perspective of stigma and stigmatization can also enhance our understanding of these processes and aid in the subversion of knowledge taboos.

## Concluding Comments

We began this essay by indicating that structural barriers to the study of organizational stigma still exist. We have much to gain from the continued study of stigma but barriers, in the form of knowledge taboos, impede that study. The ways in which knowledge taboos are constructed and may lead to faulty conclusions in studies of organizations are important to understand. However, reframing the study of stigma around knowledge taboos may help to overcome some of these barriers.

The processes we have outlined here have implications for the sociology of knowledge literature (Astley, 1985;

Barry & Elmes, 1997; Bedeian, 1997, 2004; Meyer, 2008). While we may understand the social processes by which knowledge is constructed, we perhaps do not fully understand how “not-knowledge” is constructed socially. The social construction of “blind spots” (Krysan & Bader, 2009; Moberg, 2006; Ng, Westgren, & Sonka, 2009; Nord, 1980; Weick, 1980; Zajac & Bazerman, 1991) and of organizational “white spaces” (O’Doherty, De Cock, Rehn, & Lee Ashcraft, 2011) is not well understood. Perhaps by focusing attention on knowledge taboos—knowledge that we are forbidden to know or we do not want to know—we may gain insight into other processes of not-knowing. Limits on knowledge, whether socially constituted, structurally enacted, or self-imposed, clearly impede our understanding of organizations. Understanding the processes of the limitations on knowledge may help us to overcome those limits and to enhance our understanding of organizations.

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