TURNING SHAME INTO PRIDE: RESHAPING STIGMA BY RAISING VOICES

Kim Snow & S.H. & K.S.

Introduction

This article discusses the stigma faced by young people growing up in state care. It presents an exploration of the concept of stigma and considers the potential economic, social, and political consequences of growing up with a public stigma. It then describes techniques that support the engagement of young care-leavers by providing a platform for the creation of multiple identities and re-conceptualizing the stigma for the self and for others.

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The Voyager Project is a peer-centred approach to improving access to and retention in post-secondary education for Toronto care leavers (Snow, 2012). Two co-authors, both members of the project, join in the discussion that follows with their reflections on transforming stigma into pride. Their comments are identified by their initials rather than their names in recognition of the potential for discrimination based on stigma and in this way each are allowed to claim their authorship or not depending on what is most comfortable for them. The first author undertook minimal edits of the co-authors' work for clarity, grammar, and sentence structure. Discussions with members of the Voyager Project and notes from the co-authors also inform this discussion.

Stigma and young people in and from care

Young people in and from care are those who, for one of several legislated reasons, are placed in the care of the state and grow up in residential and foster care placements. Numerous studies that have examined the experiences of care-leavers have identified a stigma associated with being in-care (Desetta, 1996; Snow, 2008). Stigma is a marker of identity. It is the identification of the "Other" or the other bad side of a good-bad coin. The process of "Othering" excludes and sets up structural forces that prompt discriminatory practices (Riggins, 1997). Exclusion by categorization is a form of marginalization and an act of violence (Young, 1990).

During interactions, individuals manage what Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) has referred to as the presentation of the self. Individuals present their identity to others, and through interactions identity is shaped and habits of interaction are formed (Goffman, 1959; Doidge, 2007). People manage situations through a process of "intersubjective attunement" or, as Charles Cooley (1922) termed it, through the "looking-glass self," whereby individuals' basic social emotions arise from self-monitoring and reflective self-

consciousness. Intersubjective attunement is essentially being in sync with the meaning and protocol of interaction with others.

An identity peg is a pre-imposed set of characteristics and stereotypes placed upon an individual by others (Goffman, 1963). Identity pegs are acquired through role (e.g., doctor) or by association (e.g., foster child). They shape others' perceptions of a person's identity, cue the interaction ritual, and affect the intersubjective attunement of the interaction. The individual holding the prejudicial stigma is miscued to the interaction, prompting the individual with the stigma to manage a presumptive identity or an identity that is prescribed by the stigma. People who come in contact with the individual with a stigma presume that they know about that individual because of perceptions created by the identity peg. As a result, the stigmatized individual must manage both the presentation of him- or herself as well as the presumed identity placed on him or her by the stigmatizing identity peg.

Shame and stigma

A stigmatized identity peg induces shame and prompts the need for shame management (Gardner & Gronfein, 2005; Goffman, 1963). Institutionalized shame is imposed on the individual by association. Being a foster or group-home child is an identity peg. Additionally, the process of being in care has features on a continuum leading from community setting to total institution and these institutional cues become interaction rituals for children in care. These factors, combined with the disruptions in attachments associated with being placed in care, challenge young people's ability to form enduring relations. Fundamentally, stigma is about not belonging. The need to belong is innate, and people develop a network of relationships formed by inclusion and exclusion (Christensen, 2009). Belonging is a social designation indicating acceptance and allegiance with a social group (Miller, 2006). Young people in care are faced with the intersecting categories of gender, ethnicity, and class, along with the imposed identity peg or stigma of being a foster home or group-home kid. One co-author makes note of this in the following comment on the shame generated by stereotyping. He argues that this prejudice is held not only by those in the care system but also by society at-large.

> Youth in care are a group of youth who, for whatever reason, have had the pleasure of carrying around a sense of shame. A sense of shame so great that the idea of talking about where we are from makes us cower in our chairs instead of being able to meet the idea with such poise as only the confident and the proud can possess. This sense of shame has been instilled within us from not only the system and peer groups but also from the general population who haven't been educated in any aspect of being a youth within the care system. (S.H.)

Alienation and avoidance

Young people growing up in care learn to attend to multiple perspectives and various degrees of presumptiveness about their identity and personal history. Anticipating prejudice and internalizing the negative stereotypes can lead to alienation and avoidance of social interactions. In a joint comment, the co-authors note that young people in care to try to find a sense of pride. They point out that the marginalization experienced can cause young people in care to have a distorted sense of pride and often find self-esteem in activities that ultimately evoke shame and further alienate them.

> A lot of youth in care are more comfortable with shame than pride. In order to understand the difference, let's explore shame. Pride can be present in a seemingly dormant manner. Some of the issues surrounding youth in care are the way they choose to find pride. This includes different and dangerous situations, sometimes involving problem drinking and consumption of drugs. Pride is found within gangs, sex, young parenthood and dangerous relationships. Pride comes from being accepting of the self. How can youth accept themselves when society has shown us a different face? (K.S. & S.H.)

Turning from shame to pride

While the shame that results from stigma can cause young people in care to avoid opportunities for engagement, it can also be used as a platform from which to engage them in challenging these stereotypes. Philanthropists wishing to engage with stigmatized groups are well served by forming an alliance to confront prejudice and challenge stereotypes. By doing so, young people are able to turn to agency as a source of pride and as a means of creating multiple identities.

Turning to agency

The Voyager Project engages young people as active agents of change. It does this by positioning young people as change agents who are capable of identifying issues and proposing solutions. By acknowledging them as experts in their own lives, their voice is given weight and their knowledge is recognized. From the standpoint of experts, they are able to engage with others in overturning prejudicial views and to present alternative images of young people in care. As one co-author notes in the next comment, through agency he was able to find a source of power.

> Through the struggles of dealing with the ongoing burden of this stigma, there exist programs or groups of people that congregate and talk about real-life situations. These groups are initiatives, such as the Voyagers Project, dedicated to redirecting that shame to pride through open and honest dialogue among peers and adult allies. Topics of discussion vary from understanding the stigma around youth in care, sustainable housing, and the idea that through struggle comes strength. Before I met the Voyagers Project, I never knew I was an expert within my life; that I could sit down with academia and professionals to discuss these same topics in working groups in order to create solutions. This new sense of pride has carried me through many dark and hungry days. Youth in care fight so hard every day for the basics of survival, yet we have found the power in our collective voice to reclaim our pride and to proudly proclaim we are youth in care. (S.H.)

Turning to belonging

An essential component of engagement is the creation of a safe space in which individuals feel free to be themselves. The other co-author makes note of a sense of freedom from engaging in a project where everyone is from care and shares the same identity peg.

> There is comfort in a space where everyone knows that we are all foster youth, where it is not something we seek to hide or are afraid to discuss as we do in other places where doing so might make others uncomfortable. (K.S.)

Belonging is a key component of any successful engagement strategy. Through mutual learning and interpersonal interactions, confidence is fostered and skills are developed. Strength from being part of a group is perceived and a sense of competence is internalized through the opportunities for engagement. The pride evoked by belonging bolsters a sense of competence and emboldens youth in their other social interactions. In this next joint comment, the co-authors clearly convey the sense of power achieved through being part of a collective.

> Being part of a peer group has allowed us to experience pride, not only in ourselves, but also in each other. This takes form by discovering pride through teaching and learning. Peer mentorship and discussions around belonging, aspiration, success, hope and post education brings pride. Being a part of the Voyagers Project, we are able to not only educate each other, but also in actuality educate the educators. People that we believed held the answers are now interested in finding the true answers from youth in care by working in collaboration with organizations and academia. Having a feeling of pride allows us to "come out of the closet" and share our experiences. Feeling pride within the Voyager Project creates a safe space where we can be supportive of each other. This sense of pride has carried us through many dark and hungry days. Youth in Care fight so hard every day for the basics of survival, yet we have found the power in our collective voice to reclaim our pride and to proudly proclaim we are youth in care. (S.H. & K.S.)

Turning to multiple identities

When one is prescribed an identity peg, there is an assumption that the stigmatized identity is one's only and true identity. However, all people create multiple identities through the various roles and opportunities that they have (Scheff, 2007). By allowing young people in care chances to engage, to develop skills and to foster a sense of belonging, space is opened up for them to create other identities and to showcase these identities as a way of countering and challenging the stigmatized identity. As one co-author notes, self-esteem is gained by engaging from a place of strength rather than of stigma. There is a need to educate the foster care system on ways they can improve and which may make a better environment for social workers, foster parents and the foster children. There is sense of pride in knowing that we, too, bring knowledge to the table. (K.S.)

Engaging for change

When seeking to engage with a marginalized population, it is essential to commit sufficient time in order to build capacity. This often means committing to longer-term funding so that a sense of community can be developed and capacity for action can be fostered. Through opportunities for skills development young people can try on different identities and engage with others through agency and strength rather than passivity and shame.

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