Spoiled Group Identities and Backstage Work: A Theory of Stigma Management Rehearsals

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How do persons with a stigmatized identity learn potential responses to discrimination and harassment? Drawing on three and a half years of ethnographic data, this paper demonstrates how members of a group of Muslim American youth are socialized in locally dominant stigma management strategies through stigma management rehearsals. Stigma management rehearsals are small group interactions through which leaders and members encourage their peers to adopt certain responses to stigma. I identify two rehearsal types. In direct preparation rehearsals, individuals anticipating a stigmatizing encounter are quickly taught the locally preferred response. In deep education rehearsals, stigmatizing incidents set in the past or hypothetical future are used to teach the reasons underlying local responses and to allow for the private display of publicly inappropriate emotions. Both types work to persuade members to adopt the locally favored response to stigma – in this case, a peaceful and passive one.

SETTING AND METHODS

As part of a larger project exploring the everyday lives and religion of Muslim American teenagers, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at a mosque in a major American city for
three and a half years, focusing primarily on the activities and members of the City Mosque’s weekly Muslim Youth Program.1 Like most Muslim American communities, the City Mosque membership was negatively impacted by the post-9/11 social and political climate in the US, with Muslim youth facing increasing harassment at schools, adults being questioned and/or detained by federal law enforcement and immigration officials, and members having the general sense that they were under suspicion because of their religious identity.

The Muslim youth of the City Mosque are not constantly suffering the effects of stigma, but they are often in a situation of potential stigmatization. As a result, there is a hyper-awareness within the community of Muslim stereotypes and their possible negative consequences, as well as consideration of how to avoid or respond to harassment. It is within this context that mosque leaders and youth group members utilize stigma management rehearsals to teach preferred responses to stigma.

From January 2007 to August 2010, I spent 5–10 hours per week at the mosque or with mosque members offsite, volunteering and participating in youth group meetings and field trips, prayer sessions, interfaith programs, community forums, and other events, as well as informally interacting with youth from the program both inside and outside of the mosque. I spent approximately 900 hours in the field on this project and amassed over 1500 pages of single-spaced typed field notes. To analyze my data, I utilized a modified grounded theory approach, which emphasizes allowing patterns to emerge from the data, rather than seeking to prove or disprove a pre-existing theory (Glaser and Straus 1967;
Timmermans and Tavory 2007). This approach yielded a data-driven analysis in which local meanings of the research subjects took center stage.

STIGMA MANAGEMENT REHEARSALS

A stigma management rehearsal is a private interaction among members of a stigmatized identity group in which a real or hypothetical incident of stigmatization is discussed and possible strategies for responding are considered. Stigma management rehearsals take place in settings that participants consider to be safely “backstage” (Goffman 1959) relevant to public social life, and therefore allow members to openly discuss strategies, and express emotions, in ways normally curtailed by their everyday stigma management concerns. I identify two types of stigma management rehearsals. In direct preparation, the anticipation of an impending interaction with outside stigmatizers spurs group leaders and other members to coach an individual in the locally dominant stigma management strategy. In deep education, leaders use backstage time and space to educate members about the underlying justifications for the locally dominant stigma management strategy, and to permit the expression of a wide range of potential stigma responses and emotions. Both rehearsal types work to socialize group members in the same approach—the dominant stigma management strategy of the group. A dominant stigma management strategy, as I term it, is the specific approach to managing stigma that is most often recommended and utilized among the members of a small group of stigmatized persons.
Stigma Management Rehearsals: The Basic Form

The basic ingredients of a stigma management rehearsal are the presentation of a real or hypothetical incident of stigmatization and the consideration and/or promotion of strategies for responding to the stigma. These elements were evident during a stigma rehearsal that took place one afternoon at the mosque when Yusef, a youth group member who attends City College, approached Abdul, a youth staff person, as they left a youth group meeting together:

Everyone walks down the stairs, out the door, and onto the front stoop. I follow them out. Yusef talks to Abdul with others looking on: “So, you heard about this thing, they’re having it at our school, called Islamo Fascism Week?” “Yeah,” Abdul says, nodding his head. “They’re having that at a lot of schools.” Yusef says, “Yeah, I think it’s next week at City or something. But, man, why are they trying to hate on us like that? I’m gonna have to go over there and . . .” He raises his arms with fists clenched as if preparing to fight. “But you know,” Abdul says. “I think going to protest those people doesn’t help that much. It might be better just to leave them alone, because if people go and act crazy, then other Muslims don’t want to get involved. They look at the Muslims protesting and acting crazy, and then say, ‘I don’t want to get involved in this.’ So maybe we should just ignore those people.” Yusef says, “Yeah, I won’t do anything crazy, I’ll just handle it . . . But if I see those people at City, I’m gonna be like . . .” He mimes walking over to
someone, punching them out, then, while they’re on the floor, pulling out a
gun, holding it turned sideways and shooting them. Then he breaks his act
and smiles: “Nah.”

The primary purpose of stigma management rehearsals—to socialize members in locally
approved stigma responses—can be seen here, as Abdul actively intervenes to dissuade
Yusef from pursuing his implicitly proposed aggressive response, suggesting instead that
“maybe we should just ignore those people.” The passive and peaceful response to
stigmatization advocated for by Abdul is consistent with the approach continually
promoted by the leaders, and most members, of the City Mosque. Stigma management
rehearsals like this serve as the mechanism through which the locally preferred strategy is
transmitted and achieves dominance within the small group. In each of the dozens of
stigma management rehearsals I observed at the City Mosque, one or more members of
the group always argued in favor of this passive approach to stigma response.

Direct Preparation Stigma Rehearsals: Pre-Game Coaching

In direct preparation rehearsals, group leaders and members focus on instructing one or
more other members in the locally dominant stigma management strategy in preparation
for an upcoming interaction with perceived stigmatizers. Because it is oriented towards a
specific and temporally approaching event with potentially high social stakes for the
group, a direct preparation rehearsal is like the pre-game coaching of an athlete. The
sense of an impending and consequential encounter with outgroup members triggers the
focused instruction of one or more ingroup members in the locally dominant strategy.

One such direct preparation rehearsal took place on a Sunday morning as I sat and talked with twenty-four-year-old youth group coordinator Maryam, seventeen-year-old group member Sarah, and sixteen-year-old member Zeina, as we waited in the youth room of the mosque for other members to arrive.

Sarah tells Maryam, “I saw this book called the *Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam* and it was really messed up . . . It was saying that Mohammed is a prophet of war and that non-Muslims aren’t safe anywhere in the world, even in America!” “Did you see it at a bookstore?” I ask her. “Yes,” she says. “And they were recommending it! One of the staff people named Edward wrote a note that said, ‘Sometimes you have to choose between the ugly truth and being politically correct.’” Maryam shakes her head disapprovingly. “So,” Sarah says. “I walked up to the counter and said, ‘Is Edward here?’” Maryam and I laugh. Sarah continues, “And they said, ‘No he doesn’t work here today.’ And I said, ‘Well, I need to talk to him so I can set him straight about Islam.’” Zeina says to Sarah, “But if you say something to them, it will just create more anger.” Sarah says, “But we need to do something!”

As can be seen here, direct preparation rehearsals involve the consideration of a specific, impending encounter with outgroup members (Sarah’s potential confrontation with the
bookstore employee) and the triggered coaching of one member (Sarah) by another member (Zeina) in the locally dominant strategy (peaceful passivity). When Sarah proposes an assertive approach to responding to the stigmatizing experience—i.e., directly approaching Edward and “setting him straight about Islam”—Zeina counters by recommending the passive strategy, saying that Sarah’s approach will just “create more anger.” While Sarah may not be fully convinced to alter her approach by the end of the exchange, the socializing forces at work in the rehearsal are evident in the lack of support expressed for Sarah’s assertive approach by the other members and by Zeina’s direct counterargument. Through such interpersonal signals, direct preparation rehearsals serve to encourage members to learn and adopt the locally dominant stigma management strategy while simultaneously working to dampen their enthusiasm for the use of alternate, locally unacceptable strategies.

Deep Education Stigma Rehearsals: The Training Ground

In contrast to direct preparation, deep education rehearsals provide members with more in-depth stigma socialization experiences, including instruction in the reasoning behind the locally preferred strategy as well as opportunities to more carefully consider and demonstrate stigma responses considered inappropriate public expression. Rather than being triggered by a recent incident of stigma, deep education rehearsals are initiated by group leaders and address stigmatizing incidents and response encounters set in either the remote past or hypothetical future. The perceived temporal distance between the considered incidents of stigma and the immediate group gathering means that group
leaders can prioritize other aspects of stigma management socialization besides direct coaching, including the teaching of justifications for stigma strategy and the solidifying of ingroup bonds through collective emotional release and shared frustration at stigmatization. In this way, deep education rehearsals are like a training ground—a location where members receive a broad education in locally dominant stigma management approaches via a range of teaching strategies.

In deep education rehearsals, mosque leaders commonly use one (or both) of two instructional techniques to encourage members to adopt a peaceful and nonaggressive approach to stigma response. The first is to use the discussion of a real or hypothetical incident of stigma and response as an opportunity to explain the religious, moral, or strategic reasoning underlying the locally dominant response. One example of such instruction took place during a Sunday youth group discussion. Adult youth group leader Omar asked the group if anyone had ever been bothered for being Muslim and, if so, what they did about it. During the conversation, a tall Arab American girl named Farah said:

“I remember a bunch of us were at a picnic area one day, and there were some mujahaba there [older women wearing headscarves], and some younger girls wearing scarves, including Asma [another girl in the youth group]. And there were a group of skater guys skating at the park. And they kept looking at us and laughing. And this one guy actually came down and sat in front of one of the girls and pretended to meditate. We just walked away, but they were
really, really rude.” Omar says, “Do you know what the Qur’an says do to in this specific situation? The Qur’an says [he recites in Arabic and then translates]: ‘When ignorant or stupid people speak to them’—and here the subject is the righteous person—‘they reply only “peace.”’ That doesn’t mean they have to actually say the word peace; it just means that what they say is not fighting words. They just brush it off; they are not affected. When you have confidence, you don’t have to worry about it.”

As can be seen, deep education rehearsals work to supply group members with the thinking behind the locally preferred response, so that they may emerge more richly educated stigma managers. When leaders at the City Mosque use deep education rehearsals to explain the reasoning behind the locally preferred stigma response, they most often provide—as can be seen in the above excerpt—a religious reasoning for the strategy. Sometimes, though, moral and strategic justifications for dominant stigma management approaches are provided during deep education rehearsals. Moral justifications include the basic notion that passive approaches to stigma management are simply “good” and “right” and aggressive ones are “wrong.” Strategic justifications include the argument that a passive response to stigma will combat stereotypes of Muslims as violent and aggressive.

The second instructional technique used by leaders during deep education rehearsals is to permit the emotional expression of normally unacceptable responses to stigma without immediate correction from group leaders or other members. As was
previously demonstrated, members sometimes express inappropriately aggressive stigma responses during direct preparation rehearsals, but in such cases leaders and other members quickly counter these proposals with direct coaching in the approved peaceful response. In contrast, in deep education rehearsals leaders allow members’ expression of alternate stigma responses to stand without direct and immediate opposition, permit other members to briefly express support for these options, and sometimes even signal their own sympathy with these publicly taboo strategies and emotions.

One deep education rehearsal emphasizing the open expression of normally unacceptable responses took place during a Sunday youth group meeting. An adult staff member named Kim led a workshop on the “Theater of the Oppressed,” a type of dramatic exercise in which small groups of participants act out social problems and the entire group discusses potential solutions (Boal 2008). The skits presented by each group reflected social issues that most urban teenagers face—gang violence, drugs, rumors/gossip, peer pressure—but the group addressing racism and discrimination presented a skit directly related to Muslim stigma:

As the skit begins, Yusef and Layla are sitting next to each other. The other kids in the skit walk over and say things like, “You guys are a bunch of terrorists!” “Why don’t you guys go bomb another building?” “Why don’t you just go back to Iraq?” Yusef says to Layla, “Man, those guys are getting me mad, but I don’t want to do anything. But I feel like I should beat them up.” He stands up and walks over as if preparing to fight them. People
laugh. Kim says, “OK, what’s another way to solve this?” Yasmin comes in and says to the group of harassers: “Why are you going to say stuff about Muslims when you don’t know anything about it? You haven’t read the Qur’an. How would you know anything about it?” People applaud. Another kid, Waseem, goes up. He tells the group: “Why would you fools call me a terrorist? You (to Ali) you look like Chewbacca! And you, you look like a piece of bleep!” People laugh a lot, and Kim laughs too. Then she says, “Is that a good way to solve it?” Everyone says, “NO!” Next Adam volunteers to step in: “You don’t know anything about Islam. You don’t know who their families are or where they are from! How do you know they’re terrorists?” People nod approvingly. Kim says, “So, you should defend yourself, but not in a violent way.”

As seen here, deep education rehearsals allow group members to express and enact a variety of “officially” inappropriate approaches to stigma response. In this example, group members act out multiple possible stigma management strategies, including aggressive violence and name-calling, and these normally unacceptable strategies are initially met with enthusiastic laughter from other group members, as well as group leader Kim at one point. Rather than objecting directly to these suggestions, Kim allows these expressions to be voiced and then gently guides the group towards the appropriate response by asking questions like “Is that the right response?” In effect, Kim capitalizes on the sense of group cohesion created by the brief, emotional expression of enthusiasm
for aggressive responses and redirects this collective energy in service of supporting the appropriate response and denouncing the inappropriate ones.

CONCLUSION

Using inductive analysis of ethnographic data gathered at an American mosque, this article has demonstrated the specific ways that individuals sharing a social stigma work together to manage their spoiled identity while in private space. Through two types of backstage stigma management rehearsals – direct preparation and deep education – group leaders and members work to socialize other members in locally preferred stigma management strategies. Both rehearsal types allow, to different degrees, the venting of publicly inappropriate emotions regarding stigma and the construction of the groupness of the collective based on the stigmatized identity and shared preferred response. Ultimately, in the current case at least, both types reinforce the prominence of a dominant stigma management strategy within the small group. A sample of qualitative studies of stigmatized persons demonstrates that stigma management rehearsals are present across groups of people with different kinds of stigma, including racial minorities (Duneier 1999), economically disadvantaged persons (Spradley 1970), and those with medicalized stigmas (Edgerton 1967; Schneider and Conrad 1980; Miall 1986).

What role, if any, do stigma management rehearsals play in larger processes of social change and destigmatization? Depending on the ideology and social position of leadership, as well the perceived severity of consequences for identity assertion, stigma management rehearsals promoting an assertive or aggressive stigma response could work
towards broader social change by teaching stigmatized persons how to openly challenge their stigma. In contrast, rehearsals teaching passive approaches might actually work against social transformation by facilitating the private release of anger that might otherwise be directed at powerful parties and institutions that serve to perpetuate the stigma in the first place. While the former, assertive approach is reflected in a few of the rehearsals documented in the literature (Schneider and Conrad 1980; Herman and Musolf 1998), the great majority of stigma rehearsals identified in studies of the stigmatized, as well as in the present case, are utilized to promote a passive approach to stigma management. This suggests the interesting possibility that, while capable of challenging stigma, stigma management rehearsals generally serve as a socially disciplining mechanism (Elias 1978) through which stigmatized persons are taught to tone down and control their emotional and potentially more aggressive responses to stigma. The question of the relationship of stigma management rehearsals to broader social change processes will be most effectively investigated though an approach to studying stigma that includes the consideration of backstage as well as public interactions.

NOTES

1. Pseudonyms are used for all organizations and persons discussed in the paper.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR BIO

John O’Brien is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at UCLA. His dissertation project is a multiyear ethnography of a group of Muslim teenagers growing up and practicing their religion in an American city.