

## Dr. Simon Pek



Lyons, B.J., Pek, S. & Wessel, J.L. (2017). Toward a “Sunlit Path”: Stigma Identity Management as a Source of Localized Social Change Through Interaction. *Academy of Management Review*. 42(4): 618-636.

Drawing on theories of negotiated order, identity threat and stigmatized identity management, Dr. Simon Pek and his co-authors built on a multi-disciplinary research base to expand theoretical understanding of how stigmatized identity is negotiated in the workplace. Examples of stigmatized identities include individuals with mental illness; individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender; and individuals who have occupations perceived as ‘dirty’.

This paper, in contrast to previous research, emphasizes bottom-up destigmatization by exploring how individuals can be agents of change and influence perceptions of a stigmatized identity in a local context (such as a team at work).

Building on the idea that stigmatized identities are social constructs that take on meaning through interactions with others, the paper presents a theory categorizing how communication can in fact cause these stigmas to be reconsidered in a number of significant ways.

“Someone with a stigmatized identity can choose to challenge how that identity is perceived by their co-workers,” says Pek. “This can be termed ‘making a claim’ about one’s identity. People are choosing every day whether or not to make a claim that might challenge the established power dynamic in the workplace.”

The paper documents the types of claim an individual with a stigmatized identity could make. If a claim is ‘resonant,’ an individual is assimilating with the dominant identity in ways that downplay differences, making this claim less threatening to recipients than some other types of claim. An ‘oppositional’ claim, on the other hand, is one that challenges the group’s established idea of an identity. Oppositional claims can be ‘expansive’—claiming that the identity is equal in value, but not more valuable than, those with power in the accepted hierarchy—or incompatible, in which a person claims that their stigmatized identity makes them more valuable to the group than those at the top of the established pecking order. In response to a claim, co-workers could reject the claim or renegotiate the meaning of the stigmatized identity within their group.

“What’s important here is not only how an individual with a stigmatized identity communicates about their identity, but also how recipients of this communication respond to their co-worker’s claims about identity. There’s a lot at stake here—if recipients feel their own identity is threatened by the claim being made, they may not be as open to reconsidering the stigma.”

This conceptualization of stigma identity claims, how they are received, and the renegotiations that can result set the stage for future study of how individuals can be bottom-up agents for social change within their organizations.

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