The Formation Mechanism and Countermeasures of Stigma: From the Perspective of Information Processing

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Abstract: *Stigma as a negative label, will have a great negative impact on personal mental health and social harmony. Scholars in the fields of sociology and psychology have made a lot of discussions on stigma, but the theoretical research on the formation mechanism and countermeasures of stigma is a little insufficient. Therefore, taking the perspective of information processing in cognitive psychology as the theoretical basis, this paper aims to sort out and review the formation mechanism of stigma and the coping streategies. Besides, this paper also tries to clarify the relationship between stigma and other related concepts like stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. Finally, this paper presents how the stigmatizer and the stigmatized process information about stigma, and proposes the future research direction.*

Keywords: *Stigma; Information Processing; Formation Mechanism; Countermeasures*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the transformation of Chinese society has been accompanied by the emergence of stigma. All kinds of stigma do harm to the physical and mental health of the stigmatized people, and affect the construction of a harmonious society. In real life, a great number of people experience stigma to a certain extent, and even if they do not, they can also be influenced by stereotypes. While stereotypes may not always be negative, they can distort perceptions of others and hinder communication and communication.

Stigma is so harmful to people's life that it becomes a hot topic in the fields of sociology and psychology. A great number of scholars try to find out how to deal with stigma and reduce the negative impact of stigma on people. From the perspective of sociology, different scholars probe into the coping strategies of different stigmatized groups, such as AIDS stigmatization, mental illness stigmatization, migrant worker group stigmatization and so on. However, few scholars interpret the formation mechanism of stigma from the perspective of cognitive psychology and put forward corresponding countermeasures. The core of cognitive psychology is to study cognitive activities from the viewpoint of information processing. Therefore, this paper tries to analyze the formation mechanism and countermeasures of stigma from the perspective of information processing by reviewing researches on stigma from the perspective of cognitive psychology.

2. Review on Stigma and Related Concepts

The term "stigma" was first proposed by Goffman, an American sociologist, in 1963, which has aroused the research interest and enthusiasm of many scholars in sociology, psychology, linguistics, political science and so on. The study of stigma in China began with anthropologist Xie Shizhong, who borrowed the term "stigma" to describe the status quo of discrimination against Aborigines in Taiwan and translated it as "Wuming". Since then, the phenomenon of stigma has been in-depth discussion among China's academicians who have been combining stigma with Chinese specific social and cultural background. This part will systematically review the definition of stigma from different perspectives, and introduce the concepts of prejudice, stereotype and discrimination which are closely related to stigma. Then by summarizing the status quo of researches on stigma, it leads to the urgent need to study stigma from the perspective of information processing.

2.1. Related Concepts

Scholars in different research fields have given the definition of stigma from their academic perspectives. However, because of the contradiction, complexity, ambiguity, variability and diversity of stigma itself, it is often mixed up with other concepts. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the definition of stigma and the clarification on stigma and other concepts are of great significance to the theoretical studies and the applications of stigma.

2.1.1. Stigma

Goffman [1] argued that stigma was a "disgraceful trait" that often stemmed from physical, personality, or ethnic attributes which were undesirable or unpleasant. As a result of being recognized and distinguished from others in social interactions, the parties concerned become tainted and lose part of their values, which leads to corresponding damage to their status and identity in social relations, and further causes mental distress or difficulties in life. Goffman's groundbreaking definition has laid the foundation for subsequent studies, and most of scholars have followed his basic definition of stigma.

Based on the definition of Goffman on stigma, Link and Phelan [2] had their own opinions on how to define stigma. They redefined stigma as "the common embodiment of its constituent elements including labels, stereotypes, segregation, loss of status, discrimination". These elements lead to the process of stigmatization with the participation of certain powers. This definition focuses on multiple social factors and takes the prespective of power into consideration. Besides, it has received a great deal of attention and citation. However, it regarded stereotypes and other concepts closely related to stigma as part of stigma, which hadalso been questioned by some scholars. The reason of disagreement is that such a statement exposes the limitations of the understanding of stigma and they just seen stigma as a disadvantaged condition in the current social process.

This paper finds that the concepts of prejudice, stereotype and discrimination, though closely related to stigma, still have their own connotations, and it is not appropriate to regard them simply as part of stigma. So the following part will continue to clarify the relevant concepts including prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, stigma for the distinction, as well as to find their internal links.

2.1.2. Prejudice, Stereotype and Discrimination

Prejudice is not only a cognitive structure, but also a fixed psychological tendency. It equals to the adamant attitude held by people to other individuals or groups based on the wrong idea of others.

Stereotypes mainly refer to the sweeping generalizations or implicit concept about some individuals or some groups based on gender, race, age, occupation, and so on, which is usually related to some characteristics and behaviors. Stereotypes are neutral. It can be either positive ("all Chinese people can do kung fu" and so on) or negative ("girls do poorly in science" and so on). It can be seen that both prejudice and stereotypes are subjective and partial cognition.

Discrimination refers to the unfair and unreasonable negative behavior conducted by some individuals or groups to individuals or groups who are considered as the object of prejudice. It inclusdes racism, sexism, and so on.

2.1.3. Relationships between Concepts

Since Goffman's definition, stereotype has been an important key concept and theoretical perspective in the understanding of stigma. Prejudice with a high degree of social approval is usually described as a stereotype. Discrimination is a behavioral manifestation of prejudice and negative stereotypes. Stigma is the result of discrimination and discriminationary discourse practice. Once the stigma is formed, it will be extended to a wider range of identity through cognitive communication, which in turn will further participate in the practice of widening discrimination. Stigma caused by discrimination is the process of pre-stigmatization, while stigma promoting discrimination is the process of post-stigmatization), both of which together constitute the whole process of stigmatization. As shown in Figure 1:

Stigma is mostly caused by prejudice and discrimination, however, more attention should be paid to how the prejudice related to stigma is produced, formed, diffused and reproduced for the reason that it often exposes cognitive problems and needs to be explained from the perspective of cognitive psychology.
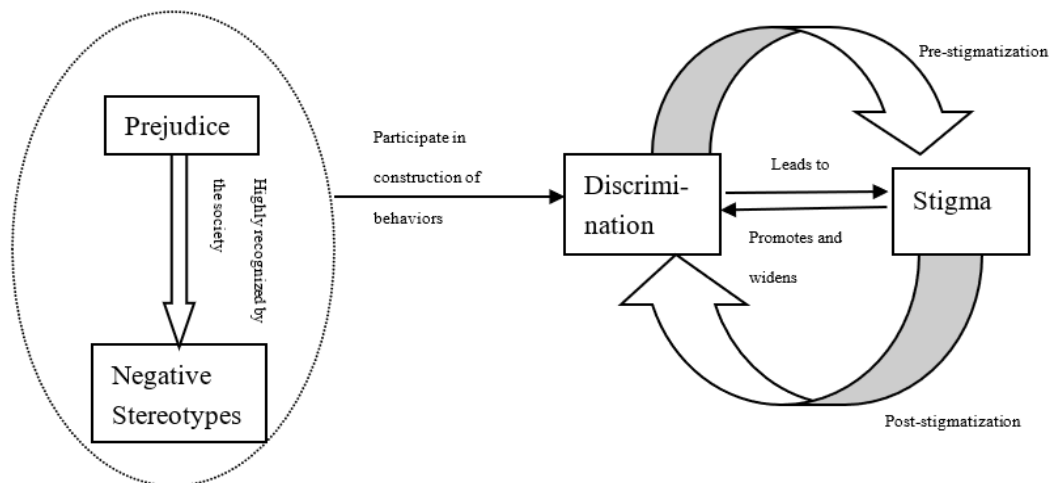
Figure 1: Relationships between prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, and stigma (source: drawn by this article)

2.2. A Summary of the Current Status of Stigma Research

In recent years, the study of stigma mostly focuses on the field of sociology, from the macro perspective of social psychology to discuss the emergence, development and change of stigma. Besides, in the field of psychology, most scholars apply the term "stigma" to applied researches, such as the psychological effects of stigma [3] and stigma of mental illness [4]. There are also a few scholars who have made theoretical researches on stigma from the perspective of interdisciplinary studies, such as Guan Jian [5] who has combined psychology and sociology to construct a multidimensional model of stigma, and creatively put forward "cognitive theory" as the theoretical basisof stigma studies from the perspective of cognitive psychology.

3. The Formation Mechanism and Countermeasures of Stigma from the Perspective of Information Processing

3.1. Theoretical Basis: Cognitive Theory

From the perspective of cognitive psychology, information processing is an important basis for understanding stigma. Cognitive theory regards the brain as a carrier of complex cognitive systems and structures, which can represent knowledge structures at different levels and help people acquire and transform new information. This allows people to quickly categorize other individuals or groups (the standards of categorization include but are not limited to, how others look or behave). After categorizing, people will compare it to an existing image which might lead to stigma in their minds and decide their cognition and behavior [5].

The typical theoretical models guided by cognitive theory include prototype model, sample model and mixed model. Among the three models, prototype model is the best model to explain the formation mechanism and contermeasures of stigma. It holds that the abstract information of typical groups' features is stored in the perceiver's brain, and the perceiver judges the similarity between the individual and the archetype. The researchers found that it's much easier to evaluate and categorize other individuals or groups using pre-existing schemas than it is to actually understand and learn them. In other words, for perceivers, stigma can simplify information and avoid risk [6].

3.2. The Formation Mechanism and Countermeasures of Stigma

Stigma can be divided into two types: public stigma and self stigma, in which the public stigma mainly refers to the stigma held by the public to the stigmatized groups, while self stigma refers to the stigma held by the stigmatized individuals themselves [7].

According to this classification, we can find that the process of stigmatization consists of two main bodies: those who impose the stigma (stigmatizer) and those who accept the stigma (the stigmatized) .

The key to understanding stigma and the process of stigmatization is to distinguish between different perceivers and to understand the experience of the stigmatizer and the stigmatized. They have different needs, goals, and motivations which can further influence how they perceive and interpret information in different ways. Therefore, this section will analyze how stigma form and how to cope with it from two perspectives: stigmatizers and the stigmatized, as well as come to the conclusion of information processing model of stigma from the view of the cognitive psychology.

3.2.1. The Formation Mechanism of Stigma (From the Perspective of the Stigmatizer)

When constructing the multidimensional model of stigma, Guan Jian [5] pointed out that the stigmatizer stored the prototypical information in advance, and judged individuals or group members in the similarity comparison between individuals and prototypes, and if the candidate shares enough features with one of the prototypes, it can fall into that stigmatized category.

In addition, stigma cognition held by stigmatizers is related to the acquisition of stereotype and related schema. Once the cue appears, the schema quickly affects the perception, attention content, and explains the attention content to help form the behavioral response. Based on the general structure of an information processing system, the information processing of the stigmatizer is shown in Figure 2:
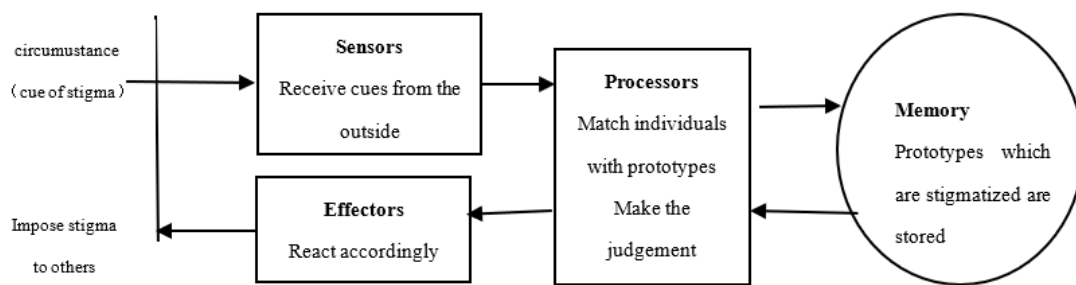

Figure 2: The information processing progress of the stigmatizer (source: drawn by this article)

3.2.2. Countermeasures of Stigma (From the Perspective of the Stigmatized)

Stigma has a negative impact on both the stigmatized and the social atmosphere, so how to cope with is becoming a hot topic in the field of stigma research. This part will analyze the information processing from the perspective of the stigmatized.

It is found that those who are stigmatized are not passive receivers because they can explain, coping with and react to the stigma imposed by others [8]. Some stigmatized people interpret stigma as discrimination [9]; some stigmatized individuals or groups choose to attribute it to themselves, creating self stigma [10]. What's more, some stigmatized people may stop working hard in their areas when they find that their identity is threatened, such as when the society stigmatizes women's ability to do math, some women themselves may choose to give up studying math [11]. Some stigmatized female leaders will stay away from groups that have been stigmatized (other female leaders in their organizations) when they are faced with stigma, in other words, queen bee syndrome [12]. To be more specific, some female leaders, in order to conform to the patriarchal culture within their organization, actively distance themselves from their female colleagues or subordinates, they may even put obstacles in their promotions.

Many scholars often neglect the information processing of the stigmatized when they study the information processing of stigma, therefore, this section attempts to conclude the information processing of the stigmatized according to the general structure of the information processing system (as shown in Figure 3):
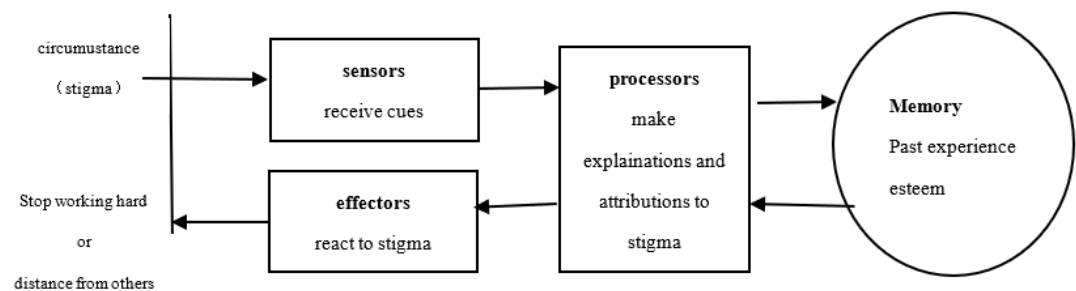

Figure 3: Information processing for the stigmatized (source: drawn by this article)

4. Conclusion

This paper reviews and try ro analyze the process how stigma is formed and how to counter with stigma from the perspective of information processing, as well as constructing a model of the information processing conducted by the stigmatizer and the stigmatized. This paper attempts to make the study of stigma more abundant in a more visual way.

The field of psychology is more concerned with cognitive and motivational models of stigma. However, local scholars still need to improve their understanding of the mechanism of stigma's development and change. Future researches may attempt to construct a two-mode interactive network of "stigmatizer-stigmatized" when combining with the background environment with Chinese characteristics. In this way can academics find out the cognitive psychological mechanism behind stigma and make corresponding theoretical contributions to mitigate the negative effects of stigma.

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