

1 Overview

I know that I was a different man at the end of the plague of AIDS than I was at the beginning, **just as so many gay men and many others were . . .** You have a choice: to submit to fear and go under, or to live with the virus and do what you can. **And the living with it, while fighting it, is what changes you over time; it requires more than a little nerve and more than a little steel . . .** I know also that the **AIDS epidemic, more than any other single factor, transformed the self-understanding of gay men and lesbians . . .** Within a couple of decades, out of the ashes, we had marriage equality, a new world of visibility and toleration.

- Andrew Sullivan, 2020 (emphasis added)

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise/ Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

- Maya Angelou, 1978 (emphasis added)

These opening excerpts highlight perspectives related to psychological selves – encompassing an individual's self-construal, motivation, and behavior – in the context of social identities and social inequalities. Specifically, the quotes underscore links between self-understanding and meaning tied to profound and long-term oppression such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its impact on LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer +) individuals and slavery and related systems of subjugation and their effect on Black/African Americans. Taken together, the perspectives reflected in the written words of Sullivan and Angelou highlight that social groups like LGBTQ+ individuals and Black/African Americans are not merely, or passively, marked by stigma and related negative consequences of oppression. Rather, the excerpts highlight that such social groups are also shaped in meaningful ways by such collective hardships and experiences; they are shaped in ways that foster resilient optimism (“I rise . . . I am the dream and the hope of the slave”) and require the resolve of strength (“it requires more than a little nerve and more than a little steel”).

This Element builds on these insightful perspectives to motivate the importance, both theoretical and applied, for researchers, leaders, and policy makers alike, of conceptualizing social identities and social inequalities in a fuller complexity. Specifically, we highlight the potential to leverage the complexity

in the psychological self that allows social identities to be associated not only with *stigma* but also, and relatedly, with *strengths*. We conceptualize stigma as the more direct experience of oppression. As such, stigma often serves to relegate marginalized groups like LGBTQ+ individuals and Black/African Americans to lower power and status positions that are associated with enduring and adverse consequences and conditions (e.g., Goffman, 2009; Major & O'Brien, 2005). We conceptualize strengths as active, adaptive, and creative responses to the negative consequences and conditions tied to stigma. As such, strengths can serve as resources that can buffer and protect against the determinantal consequences and conditions linked to stigma.

As captured in Figure 1, stigma and strengths are closely related yet not completely overlapping. That is, as illustrated by Sullivan's words in the opening excerpt, strengths can develop in response to the conditions and consequences created by stigma. For instance, having to contend with stigma and related oppression can fuel grit, determination, and resilience (e.g., "And

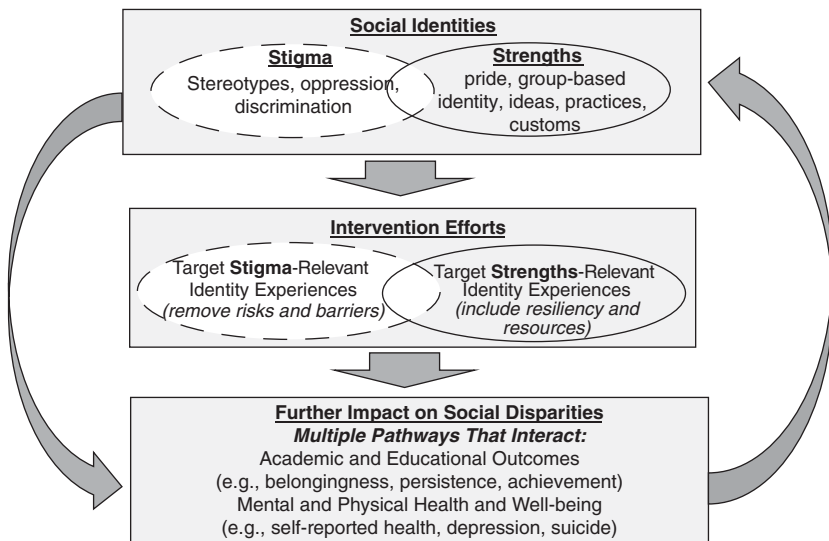


Figure 1 Stigma and strengths approaches to addressing social disparities. As depicted by the recursive arrows, social identities and social disparities are meaningfully linked. Intervention efforts that target social identities and how those social identities are tied to stigma and strengths are able to leverage the fuller complexity of those identities. Whereas, as shown by the dotted lines, approaches to social identities and intervention efforts that only target stigma are often effective yet can be incomplete, especially with regard to furthering impacts on social disparities.

the living with it, while fighting it, is what changes you over time; it requires more than a little nerve and more than a little steel”; see also Crocker & Major, 1989; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014a, 2014b; Sellers, Chavous, & Cooke, 1998). Yet, strengths can be harnessed by social groups with long-standing experiences of oppression through sources that extend beyond collective, contemporary, and/or historical experiences of marginalization. For instance, one source of resiliency that has been shown to buffer and dampen the negative effects of stigma and oppression on Black/African Americans is cultural interdependence. Accordingly, a sense of feeling connected with and close to other racial/ethnic ingroup members as well as to ideas and practices associated with one’s own racial/ethnic ingroup has been associated with resiliency effects in academic and well-being outcomes among Black/African Americans (e.g., Brannon & Lin, 2020; Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2015). Cultural interdependence associated with Black/African Americans has multiple roots. For example, it can stem from collective responses to oppression and marginalization, and it also can be traced to African cultures and proverbs that emphasize strength tied to a collective understanding of the self (e.g., West African proverbs like “I am because We are, and because We are therefore I am” and “If spiders unite, they can tie up a lion” (Boykin, Jagers, Ellison, & Albury, 1997; Mbiti, 1970; Nobles, 1991).

We integrate and build on insights tied to stigma as well as strengths associated with social identities and social inequalities to introduce a **stigma and strengths framework**. We propose and review evidence that a stigma and strengths framework can empower mainstream institutions to further intervention efforts to mitigate social disparities. That is, we reveal benefits that can be harnessed among historically disadvantaged groups and across social group lines to include socially dominant groups by enacting policies and practices that (a) reduce or minimize stigma and related adverse consequences and (b) recognize or include strengths and related advantageous consequences. Such policies and practices seek solutions that are twofold. On the one hand, they eliminate stigma – stereotypes, discrimination, and other negative identity experiences that mark difference tied to social identity, in ways tied to being devalued and excluded. And, on the other hand, they promote strengths – positive ingroup connections, pride, and other positive identity experiences that mark difference, tied to social identity, in ways tied to being valued and accepted. We examine theory and applied implications of stigma and strengths approaches using social groups that vary in status/power (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, sexual orientation minorities, and racial/ethnic and gender dominant group members), and we discuss the potential for such approaches to foster positive and recursive impacts on social inequalities.

2 Background: Motivating the Current Framework

When I first arrived at school . . . I was a little overwhelmed and a little isolated. But then I had an opportunity to participate in a three-week, on-campus orientation program that helped me get a feel for the rhythm of college life. And once school started, I discovered the **campus cultural center, the Third World Center**, where I found students and staff who came from families and communities that were similar to my own And if it weren't for those resources and the friends and the mentors, I honestly don't know how I would have made it through college. But instead, I graduated at the top of my class, I went to law school – and you know the rest.

-Michelle Obama, 2014 (emphasis added)

When I got to Princeton, I saw right away that a sense of belonging would not come easily. The community was much bigger than any I had known, bound by its own traditions, some of them impenetrable to women and minorities. And so I found my place where I could, working with **Acción Puertorriqueña and the Third World Center**.

– Sonia Sotomayor, 2013, p. 256 (emphasis added)

Social identities tied to racial/ethnic minority groups such as being Latino/a/x or Black/African American have long been linked to social inequalities in a variety of consequential life domains including educational access, attainment, and achievement (Ashkenas, Park, & Pearce, 2017; Levy, Heissel, Richeson, & Adam, 2016). Accordingly, social psychological approaches aimed at understanding and mitigating social inequalities in education, for instance, have prominently focused on social identities. Many of these approaches have considered how such social identities tied to membership in a racial/ethnic minority group can be associated with stigma, threat, and other vulnerabilities that can undermine a sense of belonging as well as academic persistence and performance (Steele, 2011; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011). Yet, as illustrated by the excerpts in which former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama and Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor recount their lived experiences as an African American and Latina American student, respectively, at Princeton University, the links between their social identities and the adverse social and academic experience of not feeling a sense of belonging are complex.

That is, both Obama and Sotomayor give voice to a lived experience in which their social identities are meaningfully tied to uncertainty about belonging, as a *problem* yet also as a *solution*. Thus, reflecting well-documented social disparities, their personal experiences echo extant findings in which Latino/a/x and Black/African Americans are at risk for experiencing belongingness uncertainty as well as perceiving academic settings as unwelcoming (Benner & Graham, 2011; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002;

Walton & Cohen, 2007). However, their personal narratives also highlight that the same social identities, which are linked to risk, can be associated with securing a sense of belonging through engagement with cultural centers and campus organizations (i.e., Third World Center, which was renamed the Carl A. Fields Center for Equality and Cultural Understanding, and Acción Puertorriqueña). Obama and Sotomayor link cultural centers and campus organizations, which are characteristically inclusive of ideas and practices tied to Latino/a/x and Black/African American culture, to providing connections to others and a sense of belonging. Research also upholds their personal reflections by showing the potential for participation in practices and organizations associated with racial/ethnic minority groups to promote belongingness and in turn a myriad of positive academic and health outcomes (e.g., Brannon et al., 2015; Brannon & Lin, 2020, in press; Rheinschmidt-Same, John-Henderson, & Mendoza-Denton, 2017).

This Element proposes and reviews evidence that selves can serve as powerful solutions to social inequalities. It furthers the insight that this potential tied to selves can be especially evident when theory-based intervention efforts to address disparities take the fuller complexity of social identities into account. The excerpts from Obama and Sotomayor highlight the complex implications of social identities tied to racial/ethnic minority group membership. In particular, in those excerpts, Obama's and Sotomayor's social identities are depicted as a source of stigma yet also a source of resilience or strengths. In the context of social groups with long and enduring histories of oppression and discrimination, we theorize that the experience of contending with stigma, prejudice, and other negative identity-relevant experiences can foster collective, group-based, adaptive, and creative responses. We theorize that these collective responses to oppression and discrimination that reflect historical and persistent shared experiences can encourage resilience and a sense of positive connection or interdependence with others who share the social identity; it can be a source of strengths.

Thus, in contrast to stigma that is characterized as a source of difference that can signal by virtue of social group membership that an individual is devalued (Goffman, 2009; Major & O'Brien, 2005), we conceptualize strengths as a source of difference that can signal by virtue of social group membership that an individual is valued. We also conceptualize strengths as contrasting with stigma in its consequences – that is, while stigma is often associated with negative consequences, strengths can be associated with positive consequences. This conceptualization of strengths tied to social groups that are stigmatized is consistent with research on racial/ethnic identity. Such literatures have noted that racial/ethnic identity is multidimensional (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley,

& Chavous, 1998; see also Phinney & Ong, 2007), and that it can reflect various aspects of daily life. Accordingly, racial/ethnic identity can reflect experiences of discrimination, cultural socialization practices in homes or religious institutions, and engagement with media and customs that celebrate and affirm shared experiences, and it can offer definitions of group membership that are positive and counter-stereotypical (Hughes et al., 2007; see also Markus, 2008; Taylor, Brannon, & Valladares, 2019). And, aspects of racial/ethnic identity such as racial pride, private regard, and racial centrality have been shown to be associated with advantageous, rather than adverse, social, academic, and health outcomes (Shelton, Yip, Eccles, Chatman, Fuligni, & Wong, 2005; see also Kiang, Yip, Gonzales-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006). For instance, in a meta-analysis Rivas-Drake (2014) and colleagues found that aspects of racial/ethnic identity tied to feeling a sense of positive affect connected to group membership (i.e., “happy,” “good,” “proud”) are significantly associated with outcomes linked to success and thriving across a number of academic and well-being outcomes among adolescents (e.g., lower depressive symptoms, greater academic achievement).

Further, we theorize and review evidence that a stigma and strengths framework can extend to sexual orientation minority groups. The following excerpt from Anthony Venn-Brown’s autobiography *A Life of Unlearning – A Journey to Find the Truth* (2007, p. 306, emphasis added) in which he reflects on his social identity as a gay man exemplifies collective responses to oppression and discrimination associated with group-based pride among sexual orientation minorities:

When you hear of Gay Pride, remember, it was not born out of a need to celebrate being gay. It evolved out of our need as human beings to break free of oppression and to exist without being **criminalized, pathologized or persecuted**. Depending on a number of factors, particularly religion, freeing ourselves from gay shame and coming to self-love and acceptance, can not only be an agonising journey, it can take years. Tragically some don’t make it. Instead of wondering why there isn’t a straight pride be grateful you have never needed one. Celebrate with us.

Venn-Brown’s words highlight numerous social disparities tied to possessing a social identity as a sexual orientation minority member (i.e., “criminalized,” “pathologized,” “persecuted”). He even acknowledges disparities tied to suicide (i.e., “tragically some don’t make it”); the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other national- and state-level surveys report that sexual orientation minority youth are two to three times more likely to contemplate suicide than their heterosexual peers (Perez-Brumer, Day, Russell, & Hatzenbuehler, 2017; Strauss, 2019). Venn-Brown’s words also proclaim the importance of Gay Pride as a collective response that is linked to asserting

a sense of humanity, “self-love and acceptance.” His words explicitly place celebrations of Gay Pride in the context of oppression and discrimination, including within mainstream institutions (i.e., “religion”), and in so doing he makes salient an adaptive need to be resilient and thrive despite such factors.

Moreover, Venn-Brown’s words underscore a distinction between social identities tied to long-standing and historic disadvantage and those that are associated with advantage, power, and status. That is, he suggests that individuals who identify as “straight” (e.g., a socially dominant group compared to sexual orientation minorities) do not share the explicit need for “pride” practices, and he invites such individuals to “celebrate” with those that do (e.g., to show allyship). Aligned with these insights, the Element examines the fuller complexities of stigma and strengths tied to the social identities of groups that have endured persistent oppression and discrimination (i.e., racial/ethnic and sexual orientation minority groups), and it also engages an intergroup perspective. It contrasts and reviews complexities tied to social groups that have been historically dominant and privileged (i.e., White Americans as a racial/ethnic majority group and men as a gender dominant group). It also highlights the implications for socially dominant groups, to borrow Venn-Brown’s words, of “celebrating with” disadvantaged groups or taking part in cultural ideas and practices associated with racial/ethnic and sexual orientation minority groups.

3 Current Framework: Toward a Stigma and Strengths Approach

Society is plagued by pervasive social disparities, which reflect intergroup inequalities across several consequential life domains. For instance, in the United States there are historical and consistent racial/ethnic achievement gaps in education; gender, salary, and leadership disparities in organizations; and sexual orientation inequalities in health (Graf, Brown, & Patten, 2018; Lee, 2002; Lyness & Grotto, 2018; Meyer & Northridge, 2007). The prevalence and persistence of such disparities reflect complex social issues and underscore the need for solutions that can mitigate disparities in “wise,” precise and strategic, and enduring ways (Walton & Wilson, 2018; see also Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012). Leveraging an integrated social psychological approach to identity and interventions, we theorize and review evidence that the psychological self when conceptualized and engaged in its fuller complexity can provide powerful solutions to social inequalities. Specifically, we highlight the potential to leverage the complexity in the psychological self that allows the same identities to be associated with both stigma and strengths. Thus, the same social identity when tied to a source of stigma or a source of strengths can

foster nearly polar opposite consequences – some adverse and undesired and others advantageous and valued – for daily life experiences as well as cumulative and intergenerational life outcomes (Brannon & Lin, 2020; Markus, 2008).

3.1 Overview of Sections

In the sections that follow, we first review research that examines social identities associated with low power/status groups that have an enduring history of contending with stigma and negative stereotypes and are often the targets of prejudice and discrimination. We provide evidence that approaches to reducing social disparities experienced by Latino/a/x and Black/African Americans as well as sexual orientation minority individuals that focus on stigma are efficacious yet incomplete (see Figure 1, which references stigma-only approaches and Figure 2).

Whereas approaches that focus on stigma as well as strengths, that more fully conceptualize and engage such social identities as tied to risks and resources, have the potential to benefit efforts to mitigate social inequalities in a number of ways (see Figures 1 and 3). Such approaches can directly benefit members of low power/status groups as well as incite positive intergroup implications that can further address and sustain reductions in social disparities (see Figures 4 and

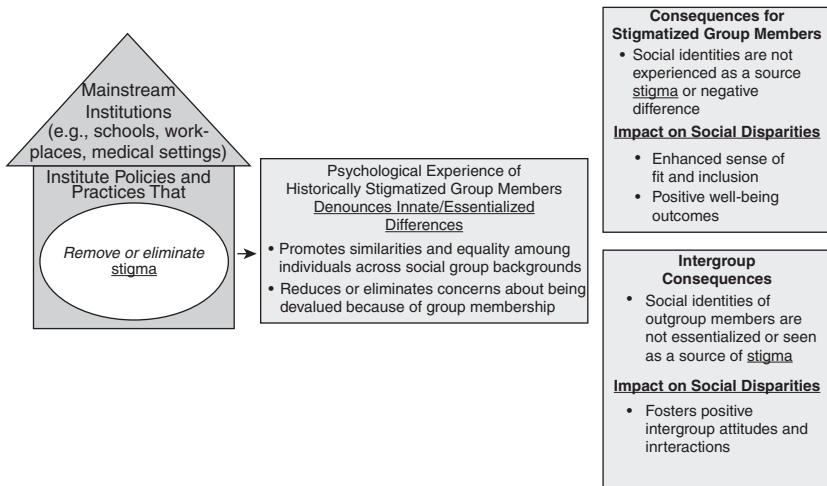


Figure 2 Conceptual model of policies and practices within mainstream institutions that target stigma. Such stigma approaches can have critical impacts on social disparities by affecting outcomes associated with stigmatized group members and across intergroup lines.

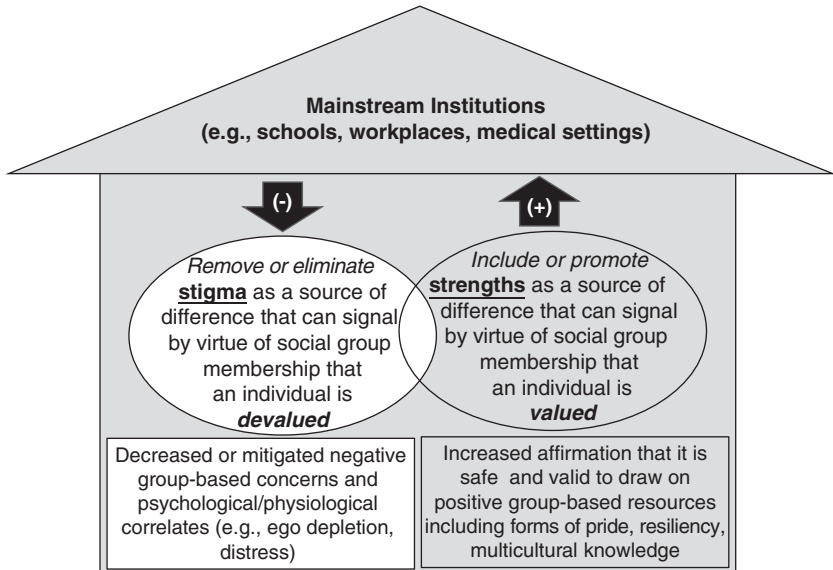


Figure 3 Mainstream settings leveraging stigma and strengths approaches. Applying stigma and strength approaches can impact social disparities through multiple pathways. As depicted, for example, such approaches can reduce negative consequences tied to social and cognitive resources that are adversely impacted by stigma and stigma-related experiences (e.g., distress) that undermine academic and well-being outcomes. Additionally, such approaches can increase or reveal positive consequences tied to social, cultural, and cognitive resources (e.g., resiliency, multicultural knowledge) that can promote thriving in academic and well-being outcomes.

5; Brannon, 2018; Brannon et al., 2015; Brannon, Taylor, Higginbotham, & Henderson, 2017; Brannon & Walton, 2013). Throughout, we discuss the implications for mainstream institutions of using stigma approaches (Figure 2) versus stigma and strength approaches (Figures 4 and 5).

Then, we review research that examines social identities associated with high power/status groups; we focus on whiteness and masculinity. We highlight that while power/status often creates meaningfully different needs and functions tied to stigma and strengths, it is fruitful for interventions aimed at reducing social disparities to consider a stigma and strengths framework in the context of socially dominant identities (e.g., whiteness and masculinity). For instance, although men relative to women are socially dominant and are associated with higher status and privilege, men do experience stigma and social disparities that can have adverse intra- and intergroup consequences. Hence, masculinity can be tied to stigma or stereotypical and narrow constructions that limit

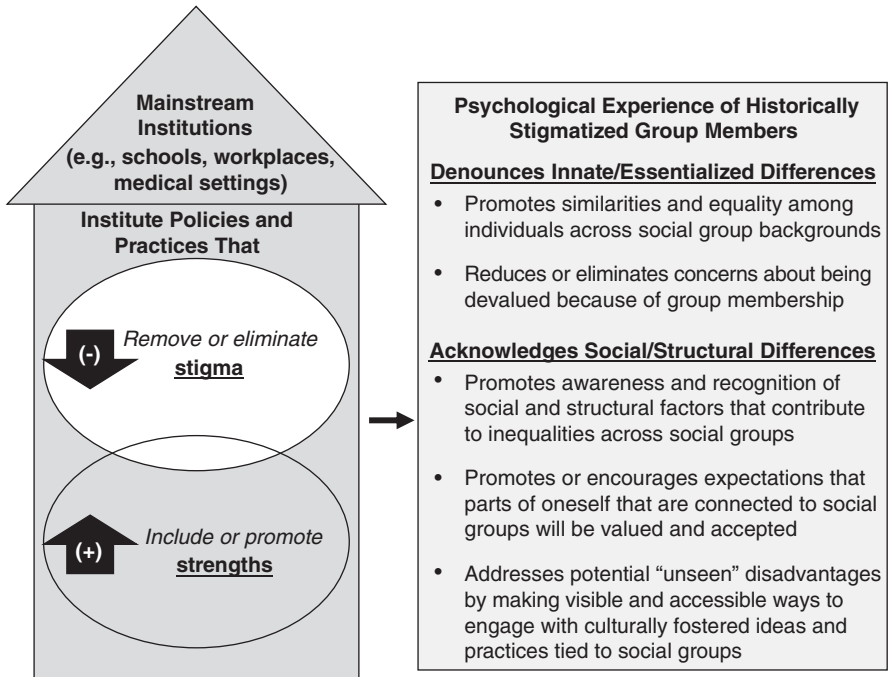


Figure 4 Consequences for stigmatized group members of policies and practices within m stigma and strengths