

# Navigating Stigma and Group Conflict: Group Identification as a Cause and Consequence of Self-Labeling

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## Abstract

A crucial element of navigating group conflict is how group members manage stigma imposed on them by other groups. Across three experiments, we propose that group identification is a cause and consequence of self-labeling with stigmatizing group labels, a practice known to reduce stigma. Experiment 1 found that group identification increased self-labeling with a stigmatizing group label. In Experiment 2, individuals who self-labeled with a stigmatizing group label felt more identified with their group, which reduced the label's perceived negativity; they also persisted longer on an in-group helping task, an effect that was partially mediated by group identification. In Experiment 3, observers perceived self-labelers as more identified with their group and as viewing the label less negatively; perceived group identification mediated the relationship. Group identification is a critical component in reappropriating stigmatizing labels and provides insight into how highly identified members can navigate group conflict by negotiating their group's identity.

"I'm a piece of white trash, I say it proudly." Eminem, *8 Mile* (2002)

The benefits of diverse communities, organizations, and institutions are well established (Loyd, Wang, Phillips, & Lount, 2013; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). However, diverse settings also create the potential for a number of forms of intra- and intergroup conflict (Conlon & Jehn, 2009; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998), and the negative effects of conflict tend to fall most heavily on members of stigmatized groups. In conflict situations, members of stigmatized groups risk experiencing a barrage of derogatory slurs, often accepting them without challenge (Kaiser & Major, 2006; Stangor et al., 2003) and thereby reinforcing their disenfranchised state (Jost & Banaji, 1994).

However, members of stigmatized groups can utilize several strategies to challenge their stigma (Wang, Whitson, Anicich, Kray, & Galinsky, 2017). One key strategy that stigmatized individuals may employ is to reappropriate slurs by using them self-referentially (Galinsky et al., 2013). For example, being labeled *white trash*—a slur that implies low social class—can be a shame-inducing experience. Yet Eminem, in the quote that opens this article, uses the label to refer to himself with pride. This seemingly simple action provides a glimpse into one tactic used by members of stigmatized groups when navigating conflict with out-group members. Similarly, in the 1980s, members of the group Queer Nation encouraged the LGBT population to call themselves queer as "a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the

homophobe's hands and use against him" (Anonymous, 1990). Thus, individuals can seize control over slurs through self-labeling, neutralizing previously stigmatizing terms. This strategy of reappropriation is one of the crucial paths via which members of stigmatized groups negotiate the legitimacy of their group's stigma and navigate intergroup conflict. The current research extends prior investigations into reappropriation by highlighting a critical factor—group identification—that serves as a cause and consequence of self-labeling with a derogatory slur.

## Intergroup Conflict and Stigma

Throughout ancient Greece and Persia, people of degraded social standing, such as slaves and criminals, were tattooed or branded in visible places on their bodies. These *stigmas* marked them publicly for shunning or mistreatment. Although modern stigma does not take the form of a physical scar, its effects still scar people emotionally and psychologically (Goffman, 1963). Indeed, as Major and O'Brien (2005, p. 395) note, "people who are stigmatized have (or are believed to have) an attribute that marks them as different and leads them to be devalued in the eyes of others." Memmi (1968) theorized that stigmatizing labels, by devaluing a group, justify the abuse inflicted upon them, and help others rationalize their ill treatment. Stigma explains why qualities such as disability, sexual orientation, race, weight, and class, among many others, can lead to explicitly negative and damaging treatment (Bowman, 1987; Crandall, 1994; Devine, 1989; Fichten & Amsel, 1986).

Functionally, stigma links one or more negative attributes with a particular group, and "conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998, p. 505). The challenges faced by members of stigmatized groups are legion, and include negative stereotypes, interpersonal rejection, and economic hardship (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). For example, LGBT youth show a greater incidence of suicidal thoughts than straight youth (Crocker et al., 1991); African American students show lower academic performance than European American students (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006); and women receive lower pay and slower career advancement than men (Goldin, 2014).

Stigma often winds through situations of intergroup competition and intergroup conflict like a poisonous ribbon. Indeed, the construction and maintenance of in-groups and out-groups—which are the basis of intergroup conflict—are perpetuated through stigmatization (Brewer, 1999, 2001). Within organizational contexts, stigma can cause the segregation of people into particular occupations in a way that significantly influences their social and economic outcomes (England, Chassie, & McCormack, 1982; Mandel, 2013; Reskin, 1993). When occupations do open their doors to members of stigmatized groups, the reputation and value of the entire occupation often suffers. For example, Pfeffer and Davis-Blake (1987) observed that as the proportion of female college administrators increased, salaries for all college administrators regardless of gender decreased. Furthermore, when individuals who do not belong to the groups stereotypically employed in a particular profession seek to join that profession, they often face challenges to their sense of identity, as when men who enter stereotypically female occupations encounter challenges to their masculinity (Lupton, 2000). When members of stigmatized groups do share an occupation with out-group members, they may be more vulnerable to workplace bullying behaviors, a phenomenon that deserves more study by conflict scholars (Shallcross, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; Van de Vliert, 2010). Moreover, they must navigate organizational contexts that may highlight their stigmatization, as when pregnant women negotiate the risk of losing their professional legitimacy as the result of the stigma associated with their pregnancy (Greenberg, Ladge, & Clair, 2009).

At the societal and international level, group competition is one of the engines driving the use of stigmatizing labels and language more generally (see Allen, 1983; for a discussion). The language used in the wider culture to describe a particular group is also associated with policy and legal decisions affecting that group. Even though those with mental disorders were not more likely to be violent than a control group (Monahan et al., 2001), a study of newspaper articles on mental illness found that a full 39% of

the stories focused on violence and were more likely than other topic areas to end up on the front page (Carnaghi, Maass, Bianchi, Castelli, & Brentel, 2005). These stories reinforced inaccurate public perceptions of the mentally ill, contributing to the preference for forced legal action and coerced treatment (Pescosolido, Monahan, Link, Stueve, & Kikuzawa, 1999). Internationally, stigma can fuel ethnic conflict—for example, when people use analogical thinking (i.e., using existing similarities between present and past members of a group to reason that further similarities exist) to link current members of an ethnic group with past atrocities (Rydgren, 2007), or when stigma facilitated the transformation of the Tutsi people into social “others” and helped drive the Rwandan Genocide (McCordic, 2012). The role stigma plays as both a driver and result of intergroup conflict impacts lives, organizations, and societies. In our next section, we discuss social strategies employed by members of stigmatized groups to deal with that stigma.

## Stigma and Reappropriation

Stigmatized individuals may go to great lengths to avoid intergroup conflict by concealing their group membership. Catholics concealed their religious identities during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (Pollen, 1920), as do members of the LGBT community today when they choose to remain “in the closet.” Similarly, African Americans whose skin was lighter in color would sometimes pass as White after the American Civil War (Ginsberg, 1996). Americans with mental illness often do not seek out treatment for fear of being discriminated against (Corrigan, Druss, & Perlick, 2014). Beyond concealment, individuals can reduce the centrality of their group membership to their social identities in an attempt to weaken the personal impact of stigma (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, a woman lawyer may choose to identify more as a lawyer than as a woman. However, this concealment often comes with a high cost, and can result in emotional strain and illness (Pachankis, 2007; Smart & Wegner, 1999, 2000).

Both of these approaches—concealing and downplaying—do not alter the stigma itself. Stigma is socially constructed, and can therefore change over time. For example, many groups suffer from stigma today who were not stigmatized in the past, as with the gay community in ancient Greece, or overweight individuals in ancient China (Archer, 1985). Just as stigma has increased for certain groups, it has decreased for others—Catholics in modern England, for example, no longer need to conceal their religious group membership as they did in the days of Queen Elizabeth. Thus, stigma is not constant, but can be transformed over time. This opens the door for groups to influence the nature of intergroup conflict by employing strategies which might reduce or weaken the stigmatizing association with a group.

One strategy that allows individuals to negotiate their stigma involves a direct engagement with one of the most potent and compact symbols of stigma: slurs. Negative or stigmatizing labels for members of a stigmatized group highlight that group’s disempowered state (Mullen & Johnson, 1993). Negative labels reinforce and spread stigma through their use; as a group’s status decreases, the number of slurs applied to it rises (Palmore, 1962). This phenomenon has serious consequences. For example, as the number of slurs applied to a group increases, so too do suicide rates among members of that group (Mullen & Smyth, 2004). In short, slurs act as verbal brands or tattoos of membership in groups discredited or degraded in a wider culture. Unlike less tangible and subtler forms of stigma, the compact verbal form of slurs ironically makes them vulnerable to the creative social strategy of *reappropriation*, that is, taking possession of a slur or negative stereotype previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce a stigmatized group’s lesser status (Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom, & Bodenhausen, 2003; Wang et al., 2016).

One method of reappropriation is *self-labeling*, whereby stigmatized group members use derogatory slurs self-referentially. In this way, self-labeling is a type of competitive linguistic maneuver that stigmatized group members can use when negotiating their stigmatized group identity with the dominant outgroup. While research has found that communicators, versus those being communicated to, are seen as more powerful (Fink et al., 2003), in the case of self-labeling, observers see not only self-labelers as more

powerful but also the stigmatized groups to which they belong (Galinsky et al., 2013). Across a number of experiments, Galinsky et al. (2013) further found that self-labeling reduced the negativity of a label, both in the eyes of the labeler and of observers. For example, in one experiment, participants recalled a time in which they either referred to themselves using a slur that applied to one of their groups, or a time when a member of an out-group used a slur against them; participants in the self-labeling condition felt the recalled slur was significantly less negative than those in the other-label condition.

In this article, we seek to extend these initial findings related to reappropriation. One fundamental factor that exists in even the earliest theorizing about the meaning of group membership (e.g., Sumner, 1906) is the extent to which an individual's membership in a particular group is important to them—for example, one person who is ethnically Polish may consider their gender and profession far more central to their identity, while another might identify weakly with their ethnic heritage. This central construct has gone unexamined in relation to reappropriation. The current article seeks to boost our theoretical understanding of the relationship between reappropriation and group identification.

## Group Identification as a Cause of Self-Labeling

We propose that the likelihood and psychological effects of self-labeling are critically connected to an individual's group identification, that is, the importance of group membership to an individual's self-concept (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Group identification determines how important membership in a group is to one's identity. Self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) proposes that, for those highly identified with their group, actions with implications for one's group produce greater psychological impact, and the group's outcomes and welfare become intertwined with one's own sense of well-being (Brewer, 1991). Group identification also increases the need to see one's group positively (Sumner, 1906; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

We propose that group identification will increase the propensity to self-label. Group identification lends greater weight not only to the successes of a group, but also to its failures (Brewer & Weber, 1994; Crocker & Major, 1989; Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992; Turner, Hogg, Turner, & Smith, 1984). Relatedly, when membership in a group is important to an individual they will be more likely to defend the value of that group when it is directly attacked by an out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Thus, the use of negative labels by out-group members should loom all the larger in the minds of highly identified group members. Intergroup competition has been shown to boost the likelihood of group-level responses (Rothgerber & Worchel, 1997; Turner et al., 1984) and highly identified group members are more likely to support actions that challenge the legitimacy of the group's stigma (Kaiser, Hagiwara, Malahy, & Wilkins, 2009). Self-labeling is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the group's stigma because it decreases the label's negativity and increases stigmatized groups' sense of power (Galinsky et al., 2013).

Furthermore, group identification is associated with the salience of an out-group (Allen, Wilder, & Atkinson, 1983; Turner, 1981; Wilder, 1981). Importantly, self-labeling is an action that distinguishes one's group from out-groups; to self-label is to implicitly highlight the existence of an out-group. Because group identification is also associated with the desire to view one's group as distinctive (Oakes & Turner, 1986), to the extent that a group label distinguishes one's group from others, group identification should similarly be associated with the desire to self-label.

**Hypothesis 1:** Group members higher in group identification will be more likely to self-label.

## Self-Labeling as a Cause of Group Identification

We predict that group members who self-label with a stigmatizing label will in turn identify more with their group. Individuals identify with their group when they categorize the self at the group level (Hogg

& Turner, 1987; Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994) and increased salience of one's group membership can result in increased use of social categorization (Brewer, Weber, & Carini, 1995). A feedback loop exists such that actions (e.g., self-labeling) highlight and give meaning to specific identities, while those very identities in turn can fuel such actions (Kelly, 1993). As Reicher (1987, p. 201) notes, "social identity determines the form of social behavior and is at the same time changed through that behavior." Derogatory labels make intergroup contexts more salient (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), as does the act of self-labeling itself, which suggests that individuals will identify more strongly with their group following self-labeling.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Group members who have self-labeled will feel more identified with their group.

This heightened group identification has two important downstream implications. First, it will likely reduce how negatively the label is viewed by the self-labeler because individuals view their group more positively as the strength of their association with that group increases (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Additionally, signifiers of an in-group, such as labels that indicate one's group membership, increase positivity biases (Perdue, Dovidio, Gurtman, & Tyler, 1990). Thus, the choice to associate a label with both the self and one's group should work to reduce negativity associated with that label.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Group identification will mediate the relationship between self-labeling and label negativity.

The second important downstream implication is that this heightened group identification resulting from self-labeling may translate to increased in-group helping behavior. Social categorization helps individuals determine who they help and cooperate with, and in-group membership has been termed a way to manage "contingent altruism" (Brewer, 2001). This type of trust is depersonalized, and is extended generally to other in-group members (Brewer, 1981). Work by Kelly and Kelly (1994) shows that the level of in-group identification was correlated with involvement in more "difficult" or effortful behaviors to help the in-group. Given this work highlighting the role of group identification in driving in-group helping behavior, we further predict that:

**Hypothesis 2c:** Group identification will mediate the relationship between labeling and in-group helping behavior.

The identity redefinition approach to confronting discrimination (Shih, Young, & Bucher, 2013) suggests that stigmatized individuals, particularly those highly identified with their group, reframe negative stereotypes to create more positive associations for their identity. Given that highly committed group members are more likely to emphasize differences between groups (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999) and even display relatively high levels of self-stereotyping (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997), the choice to make group membership salient through self-labeling should reveal to observers that self-labelers are more identified with their group than other group members.

**Hypothesis 3a:** Observers who see group members self-label will perceive them as more identified with their group.

Moreover, because observers tend to believe that people who are more identified with their group will be more likely to act in ways that favor their group (Nawata & Yamaguchi, 2014), they may be more likely to conclude that a negative label is less negative after observing an individual willingly self-label with it. Work by Galinsky et al. (2013) supports this line of theorizing. For example, in one experiment, participants read a newspaper article in which a person either self-labeled or was labeled by another with the label *queer*. When participants were asked how negative they felt the label was, those who read about someone self-labeling with it, as opposed to being labeled by another, felt the label was significantly less negative (there were also two comparison conditions that involved nonstigmatizing labels, *LGBT* and *straight*, which found no differences between the self- and other-label conditions). Thus, because self-

labeling increases perceived group identification, it may lead others to evaluate the stigmatizing label less negatively.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Perceived group identification will mediate the relationship between labeling and label negativity.

The current article extends theory related to intergroup conflict, stigma, and group identification in several important ways. Specifically, we build on work that seeks to understand how individuals cope with their stigmatized identities (for a review, see Major & O’Brien, 2005; Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Because self-labeling may increase group identification, it may serve as a type of coping response grounded in visible action. Whereas past work on coping with stigma has largely focused on self-affirmation and other mindfulness interventions (for a review see Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016), the current work highlights the potential benefit of self-labeling as an intervention that directly confronts stigma by reappropriating the linguistic carriers of stigma themselves—slurs.

The current work also builds on Branscombe and Ellemers’ (1998) proposition that highly identified group members will pursue group-level coping strategies in response to discrimination that raise the status of the group or improve the group’s welfare through helping behaviors. Indeed, we propose that self-labeling with a derogatory group label leads to increased in-group helping behavior through increased group identification. Overall, the current article contributes to these literatures by exploring the role of group identification in determining the likelihood to engage in and the effectiveness of self-labeling.

### Overview of Experiments

Experiment 1 tested whether group identification increases the tendency to self-label with a stigmatizing group label (H1). Experiment 2 explored whether self-labeling increases group identification, reduces the negativity of the label, and increases contributions to the group (H2a, H2b, H2c). Experiment 3 explored whether dominant out-group observers perceive self-labelers as more identified with their group and as viewing the term less negatively (H3a, H3b). Overall, we predict that group identification will be a cause and consequence of self-labeling. Figure 1 provides an overview of our theoretical model and the hypotheses tested.

### Experiment 1

We tested whether stigmatized group members who identify more with their group will be more willing to self-label.

#### Participants and Procedure

One hundred and seventy-four Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) participants (76 women; mean age = 30.38, SD = 10.28) were recruited. In all three experiments, utilizing a power of .80 to achieve a medium effect

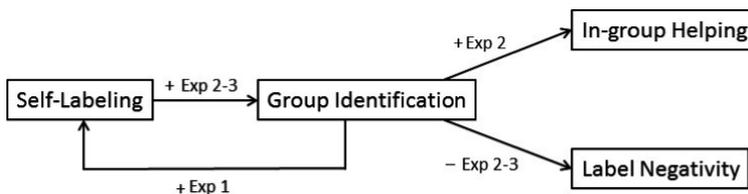


Figure 1. Group identification as a cause and consequence of self-labeling. Arrows are labeled with the experiment in which the relationship is tested. Relationships are noted with + (for positive) and – (for negative).

size (Cohen's  $d = 0.50$ ; Lakens, 2013; VanVoorhis & Morgan, 2007), we determined a minimal sample size of 128 participants, or 64 participants per condition.

### Label Selection

Participants were asked to think of social groups or categories that they belonged to and that people have described using a negative label. They were asked to list as many negative labels they could think of that had been used to describe their group(s). The majority of the groups chosen by participants fell into one of five categories: gender (12.6%, e.g., *women*), sexual orientation (6.9%, e.g., *lesbians*), race or ethnicity (29.3%, e.g., *Asians*), religion (10.3%, e.g., *Atheists*), or occupation (26.4%, e.g., *software developers*); the remaining groups each consisted of less than 5% of the sample; e.g., *overweight people*. Participants were presented with the list of labels they had generated and asked to choose one which members of their groups had applied to themselves. We did not restrict label choice for the participants because we wanted to maximize the likelihood that they could recall a time they knew someone who had self-labeled. Importantly, we did not ask participants to select a term they personally had used in the past, simply one that was meaningfully considered amenable to self-labeling by the larger group to which they belonged.

They were then asked to enter the group associated with the chosen label.<sup>1</sup>

### Group Identification

Next, participants in the *high-group-identification condition* recalled three ways in which they identified with their listed group. Those in the *low-group-identification condition* recalled three ways in which they did not identify with their group. All participants wrote out the three ways in which they did or did not identify with their listed group.

### Self-Labeling

Participants then completed a three-item willingness to self-label scale (e.g., "How likely would you be to call yourself [the label]?"; 1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very*;  $\alpha = .99$ ).

## Results

Table 1 contains the means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Table 1  
Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Study Variable Intercorrelations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Gender	–	–			
2. Age	30.38	10.28	.19**		
3. High-identifiers (1) versus low-identifiers (0)	–	–	–.02	.06	
4. Likelihood of self-labeling	4.09	2.22	–.03	.07	.15*

Note.  $N = 174$ .

\*\* $p \leq .01$ . \* $p \leq .05$ .

<sup>1</sup>Across the experiments, 16 of 593 participants (Experiment 2: 10 self-label, 6 other-label) were unable to recall a situation involving a slur. Twenty participants (Experiment 1: 5 low-identification, 1 high-identification; Experiments 2–3: 5 self-label, 4 other-label, 5 baseline) were completion time outliers (3 standard deviations below or above the mean completion time) and four participants (Experiment 1: 1 low-identification, 1 high-identification; Experiment 2: 2 baseline) did not follow instructions. Based on these factors, forty participants (6.7% of subjects) were dropped from the sample totals listed and excluded from all analyses.

### **Manipulation Check**

Two coders who were blind to condition read the statements generated by participants in each condition and indicated “How much do you think this person identifies with being a member of their group?” and “How much do you think this person identifies with their group?” on a scale of 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*. The two items were averaged ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and a *t* test confirmed that participants in the low-identification condition ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) produced statements judged to be lower in expressed group identification than did participants in the high-identification condition ( $M = 6.47$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ),  $t(172) = 18.61$ ,  $p < .000$ ,  $d = 2.80$ .

### **Willingness to Self-Label**

Supporting H1, high-group-identification participants ( $M = 4.40$ ;  $SD = 2.13$ ) were more willing to self-label than low-group-identification participants ( $M = 3.75$ ;  $SD = 2.29$ ),  $t(172) = -1.95$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = 0.29$ .<sup>2</sup>

## **Experiment 2**

Experiment 1 established that group members higher in group identification were more likely to self-label, in support of H1. Experiment 2 tested whether self-labeling increases identification with one’s stigmatized group (H2a), as well as whether identification mediates the relationship between self-labeling and decreased label negativity (H2b) and the relationship between self-labeling and in-group helping (H2c). We included a baseline condition to better understand the effects.

The focus of the current study, and of the process of reappropriation more generally, is on the experience of stigmatized group members. We selected participants who are associated with groups that are more likely to be seen as stigmatized (Henry, Butler, & Brandt, 2014), in this case, women, people of color, and members of the LGBT population, and therefore are most likely to experience the most harm from these labels (Mullen & Johnson, 1993; Mullen & Smyth, 2004).

### **Participants and Procedure**

One hundred and fifty-five M-Turk participants (114 women; mean age = 33.50,  $SD = 11.89$ ) who were members of stigmatized groups (i.e., women, people of color, or LGBT members) participated in this experiment. They were asked to list negative labels that were relevant to their identities as members of these groups.

### **Label Selection**

As in Experiment 1, participants first listed negative labels that were relevant to their identities as members of one or more of these stigmatized groups. They were then asked to think back to the negative labels they had just listed and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the *self-label condition*, participants wrote about a time when they referred to themselves using any of the labels they had listed (e.g., one participant wrote, “I called myself a dyke in company where there was a lot of homophobia as a political statement. People were saying lesbians were sort of soft and not willing to get into it with opponents, etc., so I said that I, as a dyke, had no issue standing up for myself”). In the *other-label*

<sup>2</sup>In Experiment 1, two potential confounds exist. First, it is possible that people may have more trouble thinking of ways in which they identify, or do not identify, with their chosen group, and this difficulty may influence their willingness to self-label. Second, members of different groups may be more willing to self-label than others. Thus, we ran analyses controlling for both the length of time it took participants to complete the identification manipulation and for the groups the labels applied to, and the results remain significant. While participants did take significantly longer to complete the manipulation in the low-identification condition, controlling for response time did not change the significance of the results.

*condition*, participants wrote about a time when any of the labels they had listed had been used against them (e.g., one participant wrote, “There have been times when males have made comments about my physical appearance or made assumptions about my constitution, intelligence, or sexual prowess. I have been called a “ho” or slut before. It is incredibly hurtful and insulting, especially when the label does not apply to me at all.”). We did not restrict label choice for the participants as a way to increase the likelihood that they could recall a time they had self-labeled or been labeled by another. Of the groups whose labels participants selected, 58.1% were women, 11% were LGBT, and 31% were racial or ethnic groups. In the *baseline condition*, a label was randomly selected from the list they had generated, but no writing task was required. Participants then noted the group to which the negative label was usually applied.

### **Group Identification**

Participants next rated how much they identified with their group (four items; e.g., “How much do you identify with your group?”; 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*,  $\alpha = .63$ ).

### **Label Negativity**

Participants rated how negative they felt the label was (two items; e.g., “Please rate how negative you feel [the negative label] is,” 1 = *not at all negative* to 7 = *extremely negative*,  $\alpha = .79$ ; Galinsky et al., 2013).

### **In-Group Helping Behavior**

Next, participants participated in a task intended to measure how much effort they were willing to expend to help a fellow in-group member. They were told that they would earn a cash bonus by working on a word unscrambling task and that earnings would be randomly assigned to benefit either them or a participant in a future cohort similar to them—for example, a woman would earn a bonus for another woman in a future study. The bonus earned would be determined by the number of words correctly unscrambled (four words worth \$0.25 each; Goldsmith & Dhar, 2013). In reality, all participants were told that they had been assigned to unscramble words for the future in-group cohort member. If they could not form a word or did not wish to continue working, they could click a button on the screen to advance to the next word.

The first three anagrams were increasingly difficult, but solvable (OOLSCH, SUEMO, DINSLA). The last anagram (FABELY) was intended to be unsolvable—no participants produced the correct solution (LBEFY). Thus, the longer participants spent working on the unsolvable anagram, the greater the amount of time and effort they were expending to benefit a fellow in-group member (as correctly answering would gain that fellow in-group member more money). Time spent on the unsolvable anagram (in seconds) therefore served as our measure of how much effort participants were willing to exert to help an in-group member.

## **Results and Discussion**

Table 2 contains the means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

### **Group Identification**

An ANOVA showed that self-labeling affected group identification,  $F(2, 152) = 4.46, p = .01$ .<sup>3</sup> Self-labelers ( $M = 4.27, SD = 1.11$ ) were more identified with their group than those who were other-labeled ( $M = 3.74, SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(152) = 2.14, p = .03, d = 0.45$ , and baseline participants ( $M = 3.56, SD = 1.25$ ),  $t(152) = -2.92, p = .004, d = 0.60$ . Other-label and baseline participants did not differ,

<sup>3</sup>In Experiment 2, we ran analyses controlling for the groups the labels chosen by participants applied to, and the results again remain significant.

Table 2  
 Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Study Variable Intercorrelations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	–	–					
2. Age	33.50	11.89	.25**				
3. Self-labelers (0) versus other-labeled (1) versus baseline (2)	–	–	–.02	–.01			
4. Group identification	3.82	1.24	.07	.17*	–.23**		
5. Label negativity	4.83	1.24	.07	–.06	.18*	–.37**	
6. In-group helping behavior (in seconds)	45.07	51.22	.01	.10	–.05	.10	.04

Notes.  $N = 155$ .

\*\* $p \leq .01$ . \* $p \leq .05$ .

$t(152) = -0.78$ ,  $p = .44$ ,  $d = 0.14$ . These findings support H2a, which predicted that group members who have self-labeled would feel more identified with their group.

### Label Negativity

An ANOVA showed that self-labeling affected label negativity,  $F(2, 152) = 4.47$ ,  $p = .01$ . Self-labelers ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) viewed the label less negatively than those who were other-labeled ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ),  $t(152) = -2.77$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $d = 0.58$ , and baseline participants ( $M = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ),  $t(152) = 2.48$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = 0.52$ . Other-label and baseline participants did not differ,  $t(152) = -0.36$ ,  $p = .72$ ,  $d = 0.06$ .

We tested whether group identification mediated the relationship between self- versus other-labeling and label negativity (see Table 3) using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). A bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) yielded a 95% bias-corrected interval that excluded zero [.06, .61]. In support of H2b, group identification mediated the relationship between labeling and label negativity.

### In-Group Helping Behavior

An ANOVA with in-group helping as the dependent variable was marginally significant,  $F(2, 152) = 2.62$ ,  $p = .08$ . Self-labelers ( $M = 55.71$ ,  $SD = 72.28$ ) exhibited greater in-group helping than those who were other-labeled ( $M = 32.83$ ,  $SD = 27.35$ ),  $t(152) = 2.21$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = 0.42$ , but not baseline participants ( $M = 48.17$ ,  $SD = 47.19$ ),  $t(152) = -0.74$ ,  $p = .46$ ,  $d = 0.12$ . Other-label and baseline participants did not differ,  $t(152) = 1.59$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $d = 0.40$ .

A bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) yielded a 93% bias-corrected interval that excluded zero [–12.15, –.05], indicating that group identification marginally mediated the relationship between self- versus other-labeling and in-group helping persistence (see Table 3), providing partial support for H2b.

These findings are an important extension of past work (i.e., Galinsky et al., 2013) because they provide evidence that self-labeling affects group identification, which then reduces label negativity (Galinsky et al., 2013). It seems that self-labeling may, through increased group identification, foster greater effort toward benefitting fellow in-group members.

## Experiment 3

Self-labeling occurs within a broader interpersonal context that includes dominant out-group members. Indeed, any analysis of group processes “is considered incomplete without a proper conceptual recognition of the fact that in-groups cannot exist without out-groups” (Hogg & Hains, 1996, p. 296). Therefore, Experiment 3 sought to complement Experiment 2’s results with an observer’s perspective. We

Table 3  
Results of the Group Identification Mediation Analysis for Experiment 2

Path	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>
Outcome: group identification			
Constant	4.27	0.18	
Self- versus other-label	−0.53*	0.24	
Model summary			.05*
Outcome: label negativity			
Constant	6.64	0.60	
Group identification	−0.58***	0.13	
Self- versus other-label	0.65*	0.32	
Model summary			.24***
	Effect	Boot <i>SE</i>	95% CI
Indirect effect of labeling on label negativity	0.31	0.14	[0.06, 0.61]
Outcome: in-group helping			
Constant	25.32	20.71	
Group identification	7.12	4.49	
Self- versus other-label	−19.10+	10.92	
Model summary			.07*
	Effect	Boot <i>SE</i>	93% CI
Indirect effect of labeling on in-group helping	−3.78	3.21	[−12.15, −0.05]

Notes. Reported regression coefficients are unstandardized. Confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated based on 5,000 resamples.

\* $p \leq .10$ . \*\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*\* $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed).

predicted that perceived group identification would mediate the relationship between observing a stigmatized individual self-label and the extent to which the observer thought the stigmatized actor viewed the label negatively.

## Participants and Procedure

One hundred and thirty-one Caucasian men who self-identified as heterosexual (i.e., dominant out-group members; mean age = 32.76 years,  $SD = 9.87$ ) from M-Turk were randomly assigned to read a scenario in which two high school students, Bill and Tom (one of whom was described as gay), passed each other in the hallway (adapted from Galinsky et al., 2013).

### Labeling Conditions

In the *self-label condition*, participants read that Bill stated, “I’m queer,” as he passed Tom in the hallway. In the *other-label condition*, participants read that Tom stated, “You’re queer,” as he passed Bill.

### Group Identification

Participants next shared their perceptions of Bill’s (i.e., the stigmatized individual) level of group identification using Experiment 2’s scale (adapted for an observer’s perspective;  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### Label Negativity

Participants indicated how negative and hurtful ( $\alpha = .97$ ) they thought Bill felt the label *queer* was, from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*.

**Results and Discussion**

Table 4 contains the means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables. Supporting H3a, participants viewed self-labelers ( $M = 5.83, SD = 1.09$ ) as more identified with their group than those who were labeled by another ( $M = 4.15, SD = 1.56$ ),  $t(129) = 7.11, p < .001, d = 1.25$ . Participants also believed that targets who self-labeled viewed the label less negatively ( $M = 2.18, SD = 1.41$ ) than targets who were other-labeled ( $M = 5.41, SD = 1.55$ ),  $t(129) = -12.44, p < .001, d = 2.18$ . Supporting H3b, a bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples (Shrout & Bolger, 2002) yielded a 95% bias-corrected interval that excluded zero [.67, 1.41], indicating that perceptions of group identification mediated the relationship between self- versus other-labeling and label negativity (see Table 5).

**Discussion**

Three experiments demonstrated that group identification is a cause and consequence of self-labeling with a stigmatizing group label. Experiment 1 found that high-identifying group members were more likely to self-label with a negative label compared to low-identifying group members (supporting H1). In Experiment 2, self-labeling increased group identification (supporting H2a), which in turn reduced label negativity and marginally increased helping of a fellow stigmatized group member (supporting H2b and

Table 4  
*Study 3: Descriptive Statistics and Study Variable Intercorrelations*

	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Age	32.76	9.87			
2. Self-label (0) versus other-label (1)	–	–	.04		
3. Group identification	4.98	1.59	.14	–.53**	
4. Label negativity	3.81	2.19	–.01	.74**	–.70**

Note.  $N = 131$ .  
\*\* $p \leq .01$ . \* $p \leq .05$ .

Table 5  
*Results of the Perceived Group Identification Mediation Analysis for Experiment 3*

Path	<i>b</i>	SE	$R^2$
Outcome: perceived group identification			
Constant	7.50	0.37	
Label	–1.68***	0.24	
Model summary			.28***
Outcome: perceived label negativity			
Constant	3.41	0.70	
Group Identification	–0.59***	0.08	
Label	2.23***	0.26	
Model summary			.68***
	Effect	Boot SE	95% CI
Indirect effect of labeling on perceived label negativity	0.99	0.19	[0.67, 1.41]

Notes. Reported regression coefficients are unstandardized. Label was coded as 0 for self-label and 1 for other-label. Confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated based on 5,000 resamples.  
+ $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$  (two-tailed).

partially supporting H2c). In Experiment 3, we used an established scenario design (Galinsky et al., 2013) and demonstrated that dominant out-group members thought stigmatized self-labelers were more identified with their group and this led them to perceive self-labelers as seeing the stigmatizing label as less negative (supporting H3a and H3b).

### Theoretical Contributions

Overall, we theorized and demonstrated that one critical factor in determining how people react to their group's stigma is the strength of their identification with their group. High-identifiers are more likely to take words intended to demean and transform them into prideful proclamations of their group membership. Self-labeling leads both stigmatized group members and others to view the stigmatized group members as more highly identified with their group, cyclically reinforcing the process. Importantly, our findings extend previous work (Galinsky et al., 2013) by examining the role that group identification plays in the process of reappropriation. Reappropriation stands out as a form of coping with stigma which involves interacting directly with labels (and other signifiers of stigma) in a way that not only increases group identification, but reduces the negativity of the stigmatizing labels themselves. Identification is thus a key cause and consequence of reappropriation, and is integral to how group conflict is negotiated between members of stigmatized groups and others.

More broadly, this work is the first to theoretically and empirically link self-labeling and group identification with stigma reduction, thereby helping to expand the body of research which seeks to understand ways in which individuals cope with their stigmatized identities (e.g., see Major & O'Brien, 2005). This research helps pave the way for further exploration into the emerging topic of reappropriation.

### Implications for Practice

Our findings also have several practical implications for organizations and their members. For minority professionals, gaining inclusion in the workplace can be particularly challenging. Our work suggests that by taking hold of negative labels, these organizational members can develop a sense of group pride, thereby blunting the labels of their ability to harm, and reducing the negative connotations formed about these groups. Tajfel and Turner (1986) bring up the "Black is Beautiful" movement as an exemplar of the phenomenon. By confronting and attempting to overwrite the negative connotations of the word "Black" as a label for African Americans, people sought to change not only the value of the label, but also the standing of the social group to which it was applied. This movement has organizational implications: Black professionals who proudly self-label may increase their perceived standing with majority coworkers and supervisors, which can ultimately aid in the inclusion, success, and retention of these professionals.

Managers may be able to leverage these findings in the context of employee onboarding and socialization procedures. Specifically, managers may foster a sense of solidarity by highlighting a stigmatized attribute of the organization in an attempt to reappropriate it as a distinctive and valuable marker of the organization's identity. By doing so, organizational leaders may shift employees' focus away from stigmatized attributes at the employee level that may cause intergroup strife and toward a source of collective identification at the organizational level (i.e., employees' shared connection to the organization's stigmatized attribute). Over time, this may help strengthen the organizational culture.

Self-labeling can even be used at the level of organizations and institutions to stimulate identification, increase their acceptance, and enhance their reputation. For example, at their inception mixed martial arts (MMA) organizations were stigmatized as lawless, dangerous institutions that should be regulated or outlawed. However, this stigma was co-opted by the very organizations it was intended to demean and used to gain the attention of key audiences; for example, one organization marketed its events as

“Banned in 49 States,” and declared, “There Are No Rules!” (Helms & Patterson, 2014). This strategy was successful, leading to widespread acceptance of the sport, which is now regularly broadcast on cable television.

A similar effort was embraced by the city of Portland, whose unofficial slogan—*Keep Portland Weird*—has become a source of collective identification among residents, serving to promote local businesses and to demarcate Portland from other, less weird, cities. Finally, the historically derogative term for Singapore—*little red dot*—was originally intended to highlight the nation’s small geographical size, but over time has become a source of great pride for residents, many of whom now embrace the phrase as an expression of Singapore’s oversized success. Thus, managers should consider how seemingly derogatory group characteristics at the organizational level may be leveraged to galvanize organizational identification and reduce perceived negativity associated with those characteristics.

### Limitations and Future Directions

One challenge with the current research is that it is inherently difficult to experimentally test hypotheses related to the use of negative labels without subjecting research participants to potentially hurtful slurs, which may partially explain why self-labeling and other-labeling have been understudied in the stigma literature. This research therefore relied exclusively on self-report and scenario study designs, but scholars interested in these topics should seek to further develop methodologically novel paradigms that are conducive to responsibly testing these and related hypotheses. It remains an open question whether reappropriation is more effective for some stigmatized groups or labels than for others. As illustrated in an experiment by Galinsky et al. (2013), reappropriation is effective for stigmatized labels, but not for neutral labels (e.g., self-labeling as a *woman* does not influence the label’s valence in the eyes of observers). But it is possible that echelons of stigmatizing labels exist, such that some are more productively reappropriated than others.

While these studies provide a crucial first step in showing the influence that group identification has on reappropriation, and vice versa, there is also value in future studies that explore how this dynamic plays out over time in specific contexts of intergroup conflict. On one hand, self-labeling arising from increased group identification could lessen conflict between groups, because the stigma is reduced and legitimization of the stigmatized group increased (Creed & Scully, 2000; Hampel & Tracey, 2016). Conversely, as self-labeling causes observers to see the self-labeler as more identified with their group, intergroup conflict may actually be increased (Nawata & Yamaguchi, 2014). Work by Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (2009) found that Whites expressed more negative attitudes toward racial minorities who were strongly identified (vs. weakly identified) with their group (see also Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). In situations of extended and strenuous intergroup conflict, downstream behavioral effects of self-labeling, such as helping of other in-group members may take on darker forms such as increased favoritism of in-group members or greater aggression against out-group members. In sum, stigmatized group members may face an uncomfortable Catch-22—highly identified individuals reap more personal benefits when self-labeling (e.g., reduced perceived label negativity and in-group helping), but may also face the sobering reality that destructive intergroup conflict may arise. Future work should explore specifically how contexts of intense or extended intergroup conflict may moderate the relationships between self-labeling, group identification, and downstream behaviors of both in- and out-group members.

Thus, future research can also examine the net impact of self-labeling at the organizational and societal levels to determine when self-labeling perpetuates or ameliorates intergroup conflict. For example, self-labeling may be most beneficial when done among in-group members, but not in the presence of dominant out-group members. Further, past research has found that members of stigmatized groups are more likely to fall prey to stereotype threat—for example, women passing up the opportunity to negotiate compensation, a stereotypically masculine strategy (Bear, 2011). Highly identified women who self-label

may be less sensitized to the stereotype threat and therefore choose to negotiate. Qualitative evidence suggests this may be the case: Women going through menopause participating in an online message board called “Power Surge” showed a greater willingness to negotiate workplace accommodations when openly labeling themselves as menopausal (Putnam & Bochantin, 2009). This willingness may not only improve their own financial outcomes, but over time, also reduce the perpetual wage gap between men and women (Babcock & Laschever, 2009).

## Conclusion

Overall, this work has important implications for how groups manage conflict in organizations and in society by exploring how members of stigmatized groups strategically weaken the tools used to disempower and demean them. Self-labeling and reappropriation represent active resistance to subordination at the hands of dominant out-group members. They serve to confront and defuse stigma—transforming individual victims into collectively identified challengers of stigma.

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