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Stigma from Psychological Science: Group Differences, Not Deficits—Introduction to Stigma Special Section

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Famed composer Judith Henderson observed that “our greatest strength as a human race is our ability to acknowledge our differences; our greatest weakness is our failure to embrace them.” As psychological scientists, we are experts at empirically identifying a vast array of distinctions among humans. But as psychological scientists, we can also fall prey to drawing invidious comparisons—contrasts and conclusions between groups of people that are made with either the explicit or unconscious goal of showing one group in a negative light (Cole & Stewart, 2001). Differences get framed as deficits, and such negativity enables stigma (Amundson, 2000).

During my term as president of the Association for Psychological Science, I used the opportunity to call attention to this risk. In a column titled “On Not Being Human,” I traced the historical practice by philosophers and theologians to deem some groups of humans as subhuman and the unfortunate contemporary practice by some psychological scientists to do the same (Gernsbacher, 2007c). In a column titled “The Eye of the Beholder,” I illustrated how a neurological marker—the relative thickness of one’s cortex, or thinness, if you prefer—has been deemed an asset or a deficit depending on which group of participants has it (Gernsbacher, 2007a).

In a column titled “Neural Diversity,” I illustrated how interpretations of brain imaging data are often susceptible to researchers’ bias (Gernsbacher, 2007b). For instance, activation in the amygdala is interpreted as reflecting the intense attachment, vigilant protectiveness, and empathy that characterize normal maternal attachment when the research participants are mothers looking at photos of their children (Leibenluft, Gobbini, Harrison, & Haxby, 2004), whereas activation in the same region is interpreted as identifying the regions involved in sexual/aggressive behavior when the research participants are boyfriends listening to sentences such as “my girlfriend gave a gorgeous birthday present to her ex-boyfriend” (Takahashi et al., 2006).

In another column, titled “How to Spot Bias in Research,” I recommended a solution to such interpretative biases: Swap the participant groups’ labels (e.g., mothers vs. non-mothers or boyfriends vs. non-boyfriends) to see whether the resulting interpretation makes sense; if it doesn’t, the interpretation was most likely predisposed.

For my Presidential Symposium, I gathered four of our field's top scholars to continue to address the problem of stigma from psychological science and to provide further solutions. Susan Fiske of Princeton University addressed the topic with regard to gender differences; Douglas Medin of Northwestern University reviewed cross-cultural research; James Jones of the University of Delaware reflected on race differences; and Gregory Herek of the University of California, Davis, discussed sexualities. I am delighted that each of these scholars agreed to document their excellent presentations in the special section that follows.

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