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Stigma and Rawlsian Liberalism

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1 | Introduction

Stigma can be deeply morally troubling. For many Rawlsian liberals, the appropriate stance for the state to adopt is one of *anti-stigma*.[1] By this I do not simply mean that the liberal state should seek to mitigate the downstream consequences of stigma—though it should certainly do that too.[2] Stigma is, plausibly, objectionable independently of such consequences. Rather, the view I have in mind is that the liberal state should aim at undermining the very stigmatizing attitudes and associated social norms that account for the presence of stigmas in the first place.[3]

On the face of it, it can seem puzzling that Rawlsian liberals would commit themselves to this position. After all, a distinguishing feature of Rawlsian liberalism is that it imposes demanding restrictions on what counts as legitimate justification for government action:

Reciprocity Principle: When making political decisions, citizens must rely only on considerations that they can reasonably expect all reasonable people to accept.[4]

But there often is reasonable disagreement about stigmatizing attitudes. Many people believe, for example, that it is immoral to sell sex. The persistence of such beliefs and associated social norms is, we might suppose, implicated in the ongoing stigmatization of sex work. But our objections to this belief, insofar as we have them, cannot themselves count in favor of using the state to undermine public support for the belief. This is precisely the sort of consideration that the Reciprocity Principle is meant to exclude. So how then can the liberal state be justified in opposing stigmatizing attitudes in general, given that many of them (including some that are implicated in the most morally troubling stigmas) are subject to reasonable disagreement?

The literature furnishes us with two strategies. First, there is the strategy inspired by Rawls himself (1999 [1971]): the problem with stigma is that it threatens the "social bases of self-respect" via the production of shame. Call this the "Self-Respect Strategy." Second, some Rawlsian liberals argue that stigma should be rejected because of its dependence on hierarchical social relations, which are independently objectionable (e.g., Anderson (1999)). Call this the "Hierarchy Strategy." The promise of such strategies is that they offer us reasons for opposing the *patterning* of stigmatizing responses within a community without requiring us to take a stand on the content of stigmatizing attitudes themselves. When lots of people within a community take up and communicate stigmatizing attitudes, that can threaten putatively uncontroversial liberal values in ways that do not depend on the content of such attitudes being objectionable.

In this paper I will argue that whilst both strategies have something going for them, neither is fully satisfactory on its own. Whilst the Self-Respect Strategy identifies a compelling reason why Rawlsian liberals should oppose stigmas it leaves many pressing questions about the strategy of opposing stigmas unanswered. For starters, some stigmas are more troubling than others. Amongst the stigmas that seem most morally urgent are those which, for example, target racialized, sexual, or religious minority identities. But there are also stigmas which target anti-social behavior of

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various kinds, wealthy and powerful individuals who are guilty of personal moral failure, or even (in some quarters) those who are themselves responsible for perpetuating, for example, racist stigmas. Whilst Rawlsian liberals can maintain that all of these stigmas are (as such) problematic, we still need some guidance as to where our political priorities should lie.[5] It is not clear how far a general appeal to self-respect can get us on its own.

By contrast, the Hierarchy Strategy helps orientate us with respect to the question of priority. Those stigmas which depend on the most morally troubling social hierarchies also seem to be amongst the most pressing cases from a political perspective. The trouble with the Hierarchy Strategy is its underlying normative concern with relating as social equals. Whilst we do have a clear sense that some hierarchies are deeply morally problematic, it is less clear that this is *because* they involve some agents relating as socially inferior to others. After all, there are many unequal social relations—such as between teacher and student—that are not obviously objectionable. Of course, we cannot reject out of hand the various solutions in the philosophical literature that have been offered to this challenge.[6] The point is simply that any solution which rests on an appeal to a general complaint against relating as socially inferior to others will be highly contentious. It would be desirable, from a political perspective, to avoid such grounds.

The solution, I argue, is to find a new role for considerations of hierarchy within the justification for opposing stigmas. We should hold, with the Self-Respect Strategy, that our basic normative concern with stigma is the threat that it poses to our self-respect. But we need some guide as to when this threat is most pronounced. Attending to considerations of hierarchy supplies us with just such resources. Threats to self-respect are often most pronounced when the targets of stigma occupy a low position within a social hierarchy, in virtue of the stigmatized trait they are taken to bear, and this hierarchy has a fairly pervasive reach within their social world.

The article proceeds as follows. In section 2 I handle some preliminaries. What is stigma? What would it mean for the liberal state to adopt a politics of *anti-stigma*? What limits does the Reciprocity Principle impose on the justification that could be given for such a politics? In Section 3 I discuss the Self-Respect Strategy and its limitations as it stands. In Section 4 I address the Hierarchy Strategy. I highlight the intuitive promise of appealing to considerations of hierarchy but also criticize the way in which proponents of the Hierarchy Strategy have made use of them. Finally, in Section 5, I develop my own strategy that appeals to considerations of hierarchy in a new way that helps address the limitations of the Self-Respect Strategy. I also explore what this account might imply for our approach to stigma and anti-stigma in contexts where many of those who contribute to stigma are themselves marginalized in some respects. The account is thus amenable to broadly "intersectional" considerations.[7]

2 | Preliminaries

This section handles preliminaries that will be important for the argument moving forwards.

i. What is stigma?

There are a number of descriptive accounts of stigma which can be found in the philosophical, sociological, and criminological literature.[8] For my purposes it is not necessary to choose between them. It will suffice to point to some fairly uncontroversial features of stigma that any complete account of stigma should accommodate—and, indeed, support for the claim that stigma possesses these features can be found in many leading accounts. These features will explain why stigma would constitute a target for the Self-Respect and Hierarchy Strategies discussed in Sections 3 and 4.

First, stigmas bear a constitutive relation to certain *stigmatizing responses*. When a person is taken to bear a stigma, she is the target of acts of shaming, revulsion, derision, ridicule, and so on, on the part of (at least some) other members of her community. For example, Thomason holds that "Stigmatizing is similar to shaming..." (2018: 182). Relatedly, Nussbaum claims that "social behavior tells [the putative bearers of stigma] that they ought to blush to show themselves in the company of the "normal" [and] when there is no visible brand, societies have been quick to inflict one, whether by tattooing and branding or by other visible signs of social ostracism and disapproval" (2004: 174). It is not clear that in the absence of such stigmatizing responses, the mere belief that putative bearers of a certain trait are shameful would be sufficient for stigma (Allison (2024: 864)).

Second, stigmatizing responses cast the putative bearer of stigma as in some way *deviant* by the lights of her community's norms. Thus, Goffman writes that "not all undesirable attributes are at issue, but only those which are incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be" (1963: 13). Similarly, Braithwaite points out that stigmatization "divides the community by creating a class of outcasts" (1989: 55). This in turn explains the normative pressure that other community members are sometimes placed under to enact the stigmatizing responses in question: deviation from some social expectation often comes with associated expectations to sanction such deviation.

Finally, the kinds of act that in certain contexts qualify as stigmatizing responses are not, as such, sufficient for stigma. For example, not all shaming (even shaming that aims to sanction violation of the community's norms) is stigmatic. Intuitively, shaming in light of norms that are local to a high school clique is usually not sufficient for stigma—but shaming that focuses on some racialized identity, which is the target of systematic societal oppression, usually is. This points to a demand, to put it very roughly, for a restriction that concerns the salience of one's stigmatized traits throughout one's social world.[9] Only traits that are sufficiently salient within sufficiently many spheres of one's life are possible targets of stigma. This point needs to be developed in greater detail, but that *some* such restriction is needed is suggested, for example, by Viehoff's remark that "social status hierarchies" (including, presumably, those on which stigmas depend) are "a feature of a society as a whole, rather than of a particular relationship" (2019: 12).[10]

ii. A politics of anti-stigma

With this minimal conception of stigma on the table, what would it mean for the state to adopt a politics of anti-stigma in the sense which is under consideration here? The issue can be approached by noticing that there are many wrongful acts which are related to stigma—but opposing them does not necessarily commit the state to a politics of anti-stigma in my sense. For example, a person might be wrongfully discriminated against, denied a job opportunity say, because of their stigmatized identity.[11] But from the fact that the liberal state can legitimately erect antidiscrimination laws against such practices, it does not follow that it can also legitimately adopt a politics of anti-stigma in my sense. This is because we could imagine a scenario in which such laws are perfectly adhered to, but in which huge amounts of informal stigma persists outside the legitimate scope of such laws.

To be committed to a politics of anti-stigma in my sense, the liberal state would not only oppose wrongful acts associated with stigma, but also take *as its aim* the goal of eradicating the patterns of stigmatizing responses that are constitutive of stigma. This ultimately means challenging the very stigmatizing attitudes and associated social norms that explain them.[12] Enforcing antidiscrimination laws and a range of other measures aimed at alleviating the social disadvantages suffered by stigmatized groups may contribute something toward this aim.[13] But such an aim would presumably license other policies too—most notably, public education programmes directed at shifting stigmatizing attitudes and norms. Of course, there are lots of bad ways in which such programmes could be implemented—and I do not commit to any particular model for such a programme here. I merely register my assumption that some programme of this kind could be reconciled with general worries about freedom of speech and conscience, as well as concerns about the need to involve members of stigmatized groups themselves in the design of such programmes, and so on.

iii. Rawlsian constraints on political justification

Thus framed, the politics of anti-stigma presents some obvious challenges for Rawlsian liberals. These challenges result from the demanding constraints that such liberals take there to be on legitimate forms of political justification. Such constraints arise on their view from the conviction that modern liberal societies are characterized by reasonable disagreement amongst citizens—and that this is an intractable feature of them. By providing the conditions for free deliberation, liberalism itself guarantees that citizens (left to their own devices) arrive at deeply opposing positions on the most pressing matters for the state, as well as much else. Hence, there is a question of how political justification should respond to reasonable disagreement, ensuring the stability of the liberal state in a way that is still (in some sense) agreeable to all. For the purposes of this discussion, I am going to assume that Rawlsian liberals accept the following as a starting point to guide us through these challenges:

Reciprocity Principle: When making political decisions, citizens must rely only on considerations that they can reasonably expect all reasonable people to accept.

The discussion that follows is ecumenical between competing accounts of how this principle is justified as a response to the challenges posed by reasonable disagreement.[14]

The Reciprocity Principle establishes a distinction between "political values" or "public reasons" on the one hand and "controversial" considerations on the other. The latter category is classically taken to include religious convictions (e.g., that Jesus is the son of God), many moral beliefs (e.g., that selling sex is wrong), and other evaluative commitments (e.g., that graffiti should be valued as a form of artistic expression). The Reciprocity Principle says that citizens may not appeal to these considerations to justify their preferred policy, either in an official capacity (e.g., as a member of parliament) or simply as a voter. The Reciprocity Principle could apply quite generally in such contexts or only to deliberations concerning a narrower set of questions, perhaps "constitutional essentials."[15] I assume the former interpretation here.

Instead, the Reciprocity Principle says that citizens should rely, in such contexts, only on public reasons ("considerations that they can reasonably expect all reasonable people to accept"). These are classically taken to include core liberal values such as freedom, equality, and fair social cooperation, as well as many of the findings of science. The idea is that there is some set of considerations which reasonable citizens may not *actually* accept—but which other reasonable citizens can reasonably *expect* them to accept. The reasonableness of citizens is partly cashed out in terms of their acceptance of these considerations—which citizens can thus rely on for the purposes of political justification consistently with the demands of the Reciprocity Principle.[16,17]

The challenge that such restrictions on justification present for the politics of anti-stigma can thus be stated as follows. The politics of anti-stigma requires us to take a direct interest in the reduction of stigmatizing attitudes in the community. Suppose that lots of people in the community believe that it is immoral to sell sex—and this explains a range of associated social norms and stigmatizing responses that are enacted in the community. In short, it is deeply implicated in the stigmatization of sex work.[18] But the view that selling sex is immoral is also a paradigmatic case of a moral belief that is subject to reasonable disagreement. And so, insofar as we reject that belief, this cannot itself count in favor of using the state as a vehicle for undermining support for the belief. The Reciprocity Principle excludes controversial considerations like this from political justification.[19] The present challenge generalizes under the assumption that many stigmas (though perhaps not all) are tethered to stigmatizing attitudes with controversial contents. These include many stigmas that are deeply morally troubling. I take the stigmatization of sex work to be such a case.

This sets the ground for the sorts of consideration that Rawlsian liberals might lean on in support of a general commitment to the politics of anti-stigma. We are often unable, for the purposes of political justification, to appeal to the content of stigmatizing attitudes as the grounds for our objections to stigma. We must instead identify features of stigma that threaten important *political* values which we can reasonably be expected to agree upon

independently of our disagreements about particular stigmatizing attitudes. This can supply us with *public* reasons to aim directly at reducing stigmatizing attitudes within the community—not because such attitudes are objectionable, but because of the role they play in sustaining stigma. In the next two sections I will discuss and raise some worries about two prominent arguments of this kind.

3 | The Self-Respect Strategy

The first argument (the Self-Respect Strategy) holds that the reason the liberal state should adopt the politics of anti-stigma, and thereby seek to reduce stigmatic attitudes in the community, is that stigma is a threat to the *social bases of self-respect*. This argument has a Rawlsian heritage. Rawls claims that self-respect is "perhaps the most important primary good" (1999 [1971]: 386). By "primary goods," Rawls means goods that "normally have a use whatever a person's rational plan of life"—and the distribution of these is governed directly by the principles of justice (ibid: 54). Self-respect is a primary good in this sense because "Without it nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them" (ibid: 386). Reasonable citizens can thus reasonably be expected to agree upon the importance of self-respect, despite their disagreement over a range of other evaluative beliefs (including those which are implicated in stigmas).

It would be inappropriate and probably not feasible, I take it, to be concerned with citizens' self-respect in any more direct way than with what Rawls calls its "social bases." That is, for example, the fact that citizens experience diminished self-respect merely on account of taking themselves to have violated a personal moral norm does not raise issues of justice. By contrast, when a person's self-respect is threatened by political subordination (e.g., state-sponsored apartheid), the bases of one's self-respect that are threatened are "social" in the relevant sense, raising issues of justice.

Stigma often seems to occupy a middle ground between these cases. The threat it poses to the bases of one's self-respect need not by sustained by the state itself, or even by the political community as a whole. Nonetheless, it is always sustained by the social norms that are operative in the (sub-) community of the putative bearer of stigma, against which they are judged deviant. The challenge that this presents for our self-respect is that a belief in our own worth, or (what may come to the same thing) a belief in the worth of our life projects, is partially constitutive of that self-respect (Rawls (1999 [1971]: 386)). And it is usually (empirically) necessary for this belief to be sustained, amongst other things, that we find "our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others who are likewise esteemed and their association enjoyed" (ibid.). Stigma erodes this condition because it involves stigmatizing responses of the kind mentioned. The putative bearer of stigma thus becomes vulnerable to shame and corresponding harms to their self-respect.[20,21]

This argument (which is not Rawls's, but Rawls*ian*) is slightly complicated by Rawls's insistence that for the satisfaction of this condition "It normally suffices that for each person there is some association (one or more) to which he belongs and within which the activities that are rational for him are publicly affirmed by others" (ibid.). The challenge is that whilst the putative bearers of stigma are held in poor regard by members of some wider community to which they belong, we might reasonably assume that there is (usually) some subcommunity to which they belong in which they do receive the kind of positive affirmation that is usually (empirically) necessary to support a person's self-respect. This may be, for example, their family or a community of people who share their stigma.[22]

I think we should only be troubled by this observation up to a point. First, we have some reason to think that Rawls has overstated how much of a security blanket such associations provide against shame—at least if the well-documented experiences of shame amongst putative bearers of stigma are anything to go by.[23] Second, even if stigma is rarely an all-encompassing feature of one's social environment, it is always a fairly pervasive one. This follows from the third feature of stigma that I insisted upon in the previous section, namely that only traits that are sufficiently salient within sufficiently many spheres of one's life are possible targets of stigma. So, being taken to bear a stigma at the very least places the social bases of one's self-respect in a far more precarious position than those of one's fellow citizens. This remains true even if some individuals are in fact protected against harms to their self-respect by certain (non-stigmatizing) associations of theirs.

This points us to a more general issue. When assessing threats to self-respect, we need to be concerned with *both* self-respect "frustrating" conditions and with self-respect "enabling" conditions.[24] My response to the preceding objection can thus be summarized in the following way. Whilst certain self-respect enabling conditions can be in place even when a person is taken to bear a stigma (e.g., they receive positive affirmation from some non-stigmatizing association), these are rarely sufficient to secure the social bases of one's self-respect given the presence of stigma as a frustrating condition. Of course, since assessing threats to self-respect involves this complex weighing of enabling and frustrating conditions, we should not deny that such threats can admit of degrees—even in the case of stigma. I will return to this point in Section 5.

The argument that I have been examining looks promising. If we can reasonably be expected to agree on the importance of self-respect, and stigma threatens the social bases of that good, then this gives us a reason to seek to reduce stigmatic attitudes within the community even when those stigmatic attitudes themselves (e.g., selling sex is immoral) are ones that we can reasonably disagree about. The problem with this argument, in its current state of development, is that it does not yield answers to some important questions about the politics of anti-stigma.

The most general way of stating this issue is that stigmatized traits come in many forms—and not all stigmas strike us as politically or morally urgent to the same degree.[25] Some of the most troubling cases are those which target racialized, sexual, religious, and other minority identities. But it is worth remembering that there are also stigmas against seriously immoral behavior, such as murder (Sangiovanni 2017: 75). Now, it is

certainly tempting to say that such cases do not strike us with the same sense of urgency because the bearers of stigma have themselves violated central standards of the political community. So we might hold that they have to some extent forfeited their right to complain about such treatment.[26] But even if we are tempted to say this in such cases, the more general strategy of pointing "to valuable moral and public norms, norms to which it seems good for all human beings and societies to aspire" in order to distinguish the more troubling cases of shame from the less troubling ones (Nussbaum (2004: 212-13)) will not get Rawlsian liberals very far. This is because there are cases of stigma that do not seem politically or morally urgent to the same degree as the cases mentioned, but where the shame threatened is not tethered to such public norms. A good example here is the case of a wealthy or powerful individual who is treated as a bearer of stigma because of some alleged private moral failure.[27]

Now, it may be true that Rawlsian liberals ought to adopt a principled opposition to *all* stigmas on the grounds that it threatens the social bases of self-respect. They could thus hold that the liberal state should at the very least refrain from *indulging* all the cases of stigma discussed so far.[28] But the politics of anti-stigma that I am trying to vindicate commits the liberal state to more than this. The liberal state ought to actively aim at reducing stigmatic attitudes within the community. It seems here that the issue of priority cannot be avoided. What is it about stigmas against racialized, sexual, and religious minority identities that generates a greater claim on the state's resources? The idea that stigma as such threatens the social bases of self-respect does not give us any purchase on this issue.

The general issue of priority is related to a more specific problem. There seem to be cases in which the stigmatized trait is precisely the trait of stigmatizing others. Consider that (in some quarters) *being a racist* is a stigmatized trait. A Rawlsian liberal may hold that as a case of stigma this practice is (as such) less than ideal and would better be replaced with some other practice of protest or blame.[29] But we should not deny that the practice may also play a role in securing some important goods, including the very goods that motivate the politics of anti-stigma itself. Stigmatizing racists might help secure the self-respect of those very citizens belonging to racial minorities that racists seek to treat as inferior. It might do so by providing a clear demonstration to members of racialized minorities that their standing as equal citizens should be respected by all. Left only with the general claim that stigma threatens the social bases of self-respect, it is not clear where we should begin in separating the different threats to self-respect at play here and adjudicating which has a greater claim on the state's resources.

Let me conclude this section by emphasizing that I do not take these objections to be decisive against the Self-Respect Strategy. Rather, they point us toward the need to develop it in more sophisticated directions. This is the task of Section 5. In a nutshell, the way to solve these questions of priority within the Self-Respect Strategy is to begin to identify where the *greatest* threats to self-respect lie. In one sense, this invites an enquiry of a basically empirical character. But theoretical considerations can also help to orientate our thinking. In order to make this case though, I first need to discuss one other strategy for vindicating the politics of anti-stigma within Rawlsian liberalism.

4 | The Hierarchy Strategy

The second argument (the Hierarchy Strategy) in support of the politics of anti-stigma from within Rawlsian liberalism draws on recent work on "relational egalitarianism."[30] Relational egalitarians hold that unequal social relations (or hierarchies) are at least sometimes objectionable in themselves, independently that is from their downstream consequences, such as their effects on an egalitarian distribution of goods. The relational egalitarian view thus invokes a particular interpretation of the value of equality, which is amongst the core liberal values we can reasonably be expected to agree upon for the purposes of political justification.

From this kind of commitment to equality, a simple argument can be run in support of the politics of anti-stigma. The problem with stigmas on this view is that they depend on a certain kind of unequal social relation. That is, they depend on social norms that cast some members of the community as deviant (and hence inferior) relative to those who are taken to satisfy the norm.[31] But if such hierarchies are intrinsically objectionable, then we have reason to aim at reducing the prevalence of attitudes within the community that feed into those norms which sustain hierarchical social relations—and thus make possible the stigmatizing treatment of those cast as inferior. Criticism of so-called "hierarchies of esteem" of the kind at issue here is well-established within the relational egalitarian literature.[32] This argument, like the previous one, does not depend on an objection to the content of the stigmatizing attitudes themselves.

The argument also has some advantages when it comes to the questions of priority just raised in connection with the Self-Respect Strategy. Significantly, many of the most troubling stigmas also depend on some of the most intuitively problematic cases of hierarchy, including hierarchies of race, gender, caste, and so on. If the explanation of what is so morally troubling about these cases of hierarchy appeals to the intrinsically objectionable inequality at the heart of such relations, then we can use normative arguments rooted in a concern with equality to explain why some stigmas (namely those which depend on such hierarchies) are more morally and politically pressing than others.

But relational egalitarian arguments face a common challenge. That is, the underlying normative concern with hierarchy must be defended against the observation that there are many unequal social relations that are not obviously problematic. For example, many people are not troubled by the fact that teachers wield certain kinds of power over their students. That there will be cases that elicit such intuitions seems inevitable given some general features of the dialectical situation. First, as Viehoff writes, picking out social hierarchies "is not, in the first instance, a moral inquiry but a conceptual one: an attempt to identify, and properly characterize, core features of a particular social phenomenon" (2019: 11). Second, according to the dominant theories of the nature of social hierarchy that are available

in the philosophical literature, social hierarchies encompass an incredibly broad range of social relationships. These include the relations between master and enslaved person or between the members of "higher" and "lower" castes (which Kolodny refers to as "paradigms" (2023: 90–91)). But they also include workplace command hierarchies, hierarchies of military rank, and hierarchies of academic, sporting, or artistic prestige, to name only a few other cases.[33] Given this, it does not seem plausible to hold that we have a complaint, anywhere and everywhere, against relating as socially inferior to others.

This objection has been pressed before by many philosophers, both sympathetic and unsympathetic to the general project of understanding the value of equality in relational terms.[34] Relational egalitarians have thus sought to address the challenge in various ways. Most notably, they have turned to the strategy of identifying conditions under which unequal social relations are intrinsically objectionable. For example, many relational egalitarians have emphasized that some of the most problematic social hierarchies are those which are in a certain sense *socially salient*.[35] The point of raising this objection here is thus not to forgo any of the solutions that relational egalitarians have offered. Rather, it is simply to highlight that the objection is a major obstacle to utilizing relational egalitarian premises within a Rawlsian liberal framework. Of course, the fact that equality is in some sense an uncontroversial political value should not foreclose the possibility that it has some surprising implications. But any solution to the preceding challenge that depends on a complex specification of the conditions under which social inequality is intrinsically objectionable (e.g., in virtue of its social salience, and so on) will be hugely contentious. Moreover, there is no guarantee in advance that the resulting commitment to equality will line-up with a plausible politics of anti-stigma.

In sum, what I want to extract from this discussion of the Hierarchy Strategy is that, intuitively, considerations of hierarchy have some relevance for how we should develop a politics of anti-stigma. Nonetheless, it would be preferable from the perspective of Rawlsian liberalism if we could bring such considerations to bear in a way that does not depend on positing a general complaint against relating as socially inferior to others. This is the task of the next section.

5 | A New Role for Considerations of Hierarchy

Let me summarize the argument so far. In order to endorse the politics of anti-stigma, Rawlsian liberals must identify political values that are threatened by stigma, where making this case does not depend on objecting to the content of stigmatizing attitudes themselves. The Self-Respect Strategy identifies a promising candidate value but lacks the resources on its own to settle questions about which stigmas are most morally and politically urgent. The Hierarchy Strategy, on the other hand, intuitively captures an important feature of these urgent cases—namely their dependence on certain kinds of social hierarchy. But the strategy also draws on a highly contentious interpretation of the value of equality that it would be better to avoid for the purposes of political justification. I am now ready to put the pieces of a concern with self-respect and considerations of hierarchy together in a way which avoids these challenges.

The view that I endorse is in one sense a version of the Self-Respect Strategy. This is because it begins from an observation that proponents of that strategy should, on pain of inconsistency, accept. If what troubles us about stigmas is the threat they pose to self-respect, then we should be *most* troubled by the stigmas that pose the *greatest* threat to self-respect.[36] The challenge is to identify considerations that are relevant to picking out such threats. I suggest that we take our lead from what seemed promising in the Hierarchy Strategy. Intuitively, some of the most troubling cases of stigma are those that depend on certain kinds of social hierarchy. But the explanation for this is not, as the Hierarchy Strategy would have it, the intrinsic objectionability of the hierarchies in question.[37] The view that I will sketch thus differs from several positions that have been taken in the literature. Other philosophers have argued that considerations of hierarchy are important for the normative assessment of stigma and neighboring practices of (dis)esteem. But for many of these philosophers, it is our objections to hierarchy which constitute our fundamental normative concern.[38] On my view, the significance of considerations of hierarchy in the normative assessment of stigma is rather their role in sustaining especially pronounced threats to self-respect, which are independently objectionable. Many philosophers have also noted that harms to self-respect are amongst the core moral risks posed by social hierarchy.[39] My discussion here extends this insight by engaging in a closer examination of the ways in which social hierarchies can help sustain especially pronounced threats to self-respect, via the production of shame. This will yield new possibilities for answering the questions of priority raised in Section 3 about our political response to stigma.

The basic idea which lies behind this view is that our position in social hierarchies significantly modulates the threat that stigma poses to our self-respect. To motivate this idea, consider the differences that feminists have identified in the kinds of shame experienced by women and men respectively. For example, Bartky writes that in women shame "has a different meaning in relation to their total psychic situation and general social location than has a similar emotion when experienced by men... Some of the commoner forms of shame in men, for example, may be intelligible only in light of the presupposition of male power, while in women shame may well be a mark and token of powerlessness" (1990: 84).[40] The explanation of this difference, according to Bartky, is that this kind of shame experienced by women is rooted in the many forms of "demeaning treatment," such as "consistent shaming behavior," to which they are subject on account of their gendered identity (ibid: 90). And because this identity is a salient marker of social inferiority within widespread gendered hierarchies, shame of this kind is "not a discrete occurrence, but a perpetual attunement, the pervasive affective taste of life" (ibid: 96). There is some intuitive reason to think that shame of this kind is particularly threatening to self-respect in virtue of its especially globalizing character.[41] There is thus also some reason to hold that stigmas that target traits which are implicated in such experiences of shame risk reinforcing the dynamics of such shame.

If this is along the right lines about shame and gender, then I suggest a generalizing move. We should be especially alive to profound threats to self-respect when the targets of stigma occupy a low position within a social hierarchy, in virtue of the stigmatized trait they are taken to bear, and this hierarchy has a fairly pervasive reach within their social world.[42,43]

What would this hypothesis imply when it comes to the questions of priority raised earlier in light of the Self-Respect Strategy? And if this hypothesis can be sustained, how closely would these implications map onto our pre-theoretical intuitions about which stigmas are most morally and politically urgent? Start with the case of a wealthy or powerful individual who is taken to bear a stigma on account of some private moral failure. Why does the goal of challenging this sort of stigma seem to have less claim on the state's resources than the goal of challenging those stigmas that target racialized, sexual, or religious minority identities? The strategy that I defend offers a simple answer. The traits that are the target of stigma in the latter cases also place their alleged bearers in low positions within fairly pervasive hierarchical social relations. Because of the mechanisms identified by Bartky, this raises the specter of especially severe threats to self-respect. But the same cannot be said for wealthy or powerful individuals who are taken to bear a stigma on account of some private moral failure. Whilst such individuals are treated as inferior simply on account of being taken to bear a stigma, this trait does not place them in any pervasive network of hierarchical social relations comparable to those of race and gender, say. So, the shame to which they are vulnerable will not be of the kind that Bartky identifies as "a mark and token of powerlessness" but rather the kind that "may be intelligible only in light of" other privileges that one possesses. They are not vulnerable to the threat to self-respect that is characteristic of stigmas that target racialized, gendered, or religious minority identities.[44]

Now, consider cases in which the stigmatized trait is the trait of stigmatizing others. The present strategy invites us to see this cluster of cases as coming in more and less challenging varieties. In the simpler cases, the fact which stands out is that the trait of "being a racist," say, does not primarily situate one in a *low* position within a widespread system of hierarchical social relations. On the contrary, especially when the perpetrators of racism belong to a group that systematically dominates another racialized group, being stigmatized as a racist can signal that one possesses certain kinds of social privilege. So, for reasons outlined already, there can often be good reasons to deprioritize stigmas against racism (for example) within a politics of anti-stigma—especially when the stigma itself is a form of "speaking truth to power."

But clearly this characterization involves an oversimplification for many kinds of oppression. There are plenty of cases in which the stigmatizers who the putative bearers of stigma most frequently encounter are themselves quite marginalized along some dimension—perhaps an economic one. Would the fact that some anti-Black racists are themselves economically marginalized whites speak against the kind of deprioritizing move suggested above? On the one hand, it seems that this should not follow, since the stigmatized trait in question is *being a racist* not *being economically marginalized*. But we might worry that even this involves an oversimplification in those cases where the popular images of "being low-class" and "being racist" are quite strongly associated. And moreover, we might wonder how much the correct characterization of the stigmatized trait really matters if indeed one's self-respect is already placed in a quite precarious position, perhaps because of one's economic marginalization, say.

Here again, as in Section 2, it becomes clear that an assessment of the severity of any given threat to self-respect will depend on a complex weighing of the various self-respect enabling and frustrating conditions that are in play. Notably, one's privileges along certain axes of social oppression (such as race, gender, and so on) can operate as enabling conditions insofar as they insulate one against certain (especially morally troubling) forms of shame. But so too can other disadvantages that one encounters (economic disadvantage, say) function as frustrating conditions. To this already complicated (and inexhaustive) mix, we can finally add the enabling conditions discussed in Section 2—namely, whether one has access to non-stigmatizing associations in which one receives positive affirmation from others.[45] Stigma as a frustrating condition need not, of course, interfere with this enabling condition to the same degree in every case. It seems likely, for example, that stigmas which target the members of systematically oppressed groups often erode this enabling condition in especially extensive ways. And so too, it seems, occupying a position of privilege along certain axes of oppression (e.g., race) can increase one's access to these forms of association—and thus potentially interfere (to some extent) with the frustrating condition of stigma.

The case-by-case weighing of these conditions that is necessary for setting political priorities does not admit of a simple resolution and seems to invite further empirical enquiry. Still, it is a virtue of the present framework that it helps identify considerations, including the broadly intersectional ones above, that are relevant to solving the questions of priority raised in connection with the Self-Respect Strategy. We should be especially concerned with those stigmas (amongst others) where the stigmatized trait places one in a low position within a network of fairly pervasive hierarchical social relations since there are general theoretical reasons to worry that they will introduce severe threats to self-respect. There is also an especially strong case for deprioritizing the "stigmatization of stigmatizers" within a politics of anti-stigma when the stigmatizers themselves occupy positions of social privilege and power. Both of these conclusions, it seems to me, chime with our pre-theoretical intuitions.

6 | Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that considerations of hierarchy can help Rawlsian liberals to develop their opposition to stigmas. But this is not by adopting a fundamental normative concern with social hierarchy of the kind found in the literature on relational egalitarianism. Rather, they should see the dependence of stigmas on social hierarchies as pointing us toward some especially severe threats to self-respect, such as those that are characteristic of stigmas targeting racialized, sexual, religious, and other minority identities.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] For example, see Anderson (1999) and Nussbaum (2004).

[2] For example, the consequences of "fat stigma" include that "Fat students are less likely to attend college because their high-school counselors offer them less encouragement compared to their thinner peers, and their families tend to offer them less financial support for higher-education pursuits" (Nath (2019: 577)). It may not be possible in practice to separate the task of addressing such harms from the more fundamental task of destigmatizing. See Anderson (2010) on the strategy of desegregation in the United States—which seems to be envisioned as both mitigating harms contingently associated with the stigmatization of Blacks, and as partially undermining the stigmatization itself.

[3] Nagel takes a basically opposing view: "the persistence of private racism, sexism, homophobia, religious and ethnic bigotry, sexual puritanism, and other such private pleasures should not provoke liberals to demand constant public affirmation of the opposite values" (1998: 30). Setting "constant public affirmation" aside, the view I have in mind would advocate various public attempts to shape individual attitudes in ways that are conducive to anti-stigma. Nagel argues that a public culture like this (whether supported by the state or not) "takes a stand" on more issues than a stable public culture needs to take a stand on. In doing so, it risks social conflict and undermines valuable forms of privacy.

[4] This statement of the principle is taken from Leland and van Wietmarschen (2017). For important accounts of political liberalism in this spirit see Larmore (1996) and Rawls (2005 [1993]).

[5] It should be emphasized that rejecting stigma *tout court* would not mean rejecting all forms of moral criticism. See Braithwaite (1989) and Nussbaum (2004) for work that is instructive in advocating for forms of public criticism that fall short of stigmatization. Rawlsian liberals who want to hold this line could also presumably grant that there will be feasibility constraints on the project of *eradicating* stigma, given that it may be a contingent but stubborn consequence of enforcing some morally good norms.

[6] For a version of the challenge, see Arneson (2010). For a systematic attempt to spell-out our complaints against relating as socially inferior to others, see Kolodny (2023).

[7] For seminal work in the literature on intersectionality, see Crenshaw (1989, 1991).

[8] See Allison (2024), Braithwaite (1989), Goffman (1963) and Thomason (2018: 182-84).

[9] For an account of social salience, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2014: 30-36).

[10] See also Allison (2024: 863-64).

[11] Some writers tie the concept of wrongful discrimination, in various ways, quite closely to phenomena in the neighborhood of stigma. See Hellman (2008), Lippert-Rasmussen (2014), and Sangiovanni (2017).

[12] For a sophisticated account of the dependence of social norms on individual attitudes, see Bicchieri (2017).

[13] We should also *avoid* policies that are likely to inflame stigma. Consider, for example, the role that the design of social security systems plays in the stigmatization of people labeled "benefit cheats." See Wolff (2015: 222-24) for relevant discussion.

[14] For the view that something like the Reciprocity Principle is justified by appeal to a principle of respect for persons—that if citizens appeal to "controversial" considerations to justify their preferred policy, that disrespects their fellow citizens—see Larmore (1999) and Nussbaum (2011). For criticism, see van Wietmarschen (2021). For the suggestion that the Reciprocity Principle can be justified by the value of political community, see Leland and van Wietmarschen (2017).

[15] The latter seems to have been Rawls's view (2005 [1993]: 227–30).

[16] I will not offer an account of what licenses this conception of reasonableness—suffice to note that it is quite a demanding conception.

[17] The Reciprocity Principle concerns the conditions that the deliberations of citizens must satisfy in political contexts. It thus cuts across a distinction in the literature between "consensus" and "convergence" views which concerns the conditions that political decisions themselves must satisfy (see Vallier (2011)). According to consensus views political decisions can only be justified by considerations that all reasonable citizens can reasonably be expected to accept. So, the same considerations justify the decision to each citizen. Convergence views, on the other hand, claim that political decisions can be justified so long as they are justified in some terms to each citizen—even if they are justified by different considerations to different citizens. So, political justification is not restricted to the subset of considerations that all reasonable citizens can reasonably be expected to accept. Endorsement of even the latter view would, if usage of the term in the literature is anything to go by, also qualify one as a (non-Rawlsian) "political" or "public reason" liberal. Such accounts are not my focus here, but rather only those Rawlsian views which endorse the Reciprocity Principle specifically. I leave the reader to draw their own conclusions about how the distinction between convergence and consensus views bears on the issues raised in the discussion.

[18] In reality, a more complicated cluster of attitudes is probably implicated in the stigmatization of sex work. But this situation is certainly imaginable.

[19] Of course, it also follows that the belief, on the part of stigmatizers, that selling sex is immoral cannot itself be appealed to in support of any government policy.

[20] Thus, for Rawls, shame necessarily involves a kind of negative self-evaluation. For an account of shame that shares this feature see Taylor (1985). For criticism see Deigh (1983).

[21] There is a general difficulty, which I am glossing over here, of how to present the threat to self-respect in a way which continues to affirm the agency of oppressed people and does justice to the many ways in which they seek to counter such threats. See Webster (2021a) for relevant discussion.

[22] See Goffman (1963: 31-45).

[23] See for example Fanon (1986 [1952], ch.5). See also Cordelli (2015: 104) for a point related to the one in the main text. There have been a number of attempts to provide a philosophical account of shame that makes sense of these experiences, for example, Manion (2003). Admittedly, not all of this work agrees that such experiences involve diminished self-respect. See for example Bartky (1990: 93); Calhoun (2004: 135-38); O'Brien (2020: 549-50); Velleman (2001: 44-47); and Webster (2021b).

[24] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to explicitly make use of this distinction and to clarify its role in my argument, both here and in Section 5.

[25] The more radical view, which I do not commit to here, is that shame and stigma are sometimes morally unproblematic or even desirable. So, a society that sought to mitigate all shame and stigma would be "shameless" (in the pejorative sense). See Arneson (2007) and Flanagan (2021). See also Jacquet (2016) for what she takes to be some "good" cases of stigma.

[26] Relatedly, Brettschneider (2010) argues that the liberal state has a duty to publicly criticize beliefs that deny the entitlements of citizens to be treated as free and equal.

[27] See for example Nussbaum's (2004: 243–44) discussion of a politician who is shamed for his heavy gambling.

[28] Nussbaum (2004, ch.5) is for example especially concerned about the illegitimacy of *state-sanctioned* shaming.

[29] It is also possible, in some of these cases, to lean on the sort of "forfeiture" rationale outlined already to argue that it should not be a priority to destigmatize. Whether or not this is viable within the framework of Rawlsian liberalism will depend on the stigmatic attitudes in question, and whether expressing them itself violates central standards of the political community. Relevant cases which do not have this feature are, at the very least, imaginable.

[30] It is noteworthy that amongst the seminal contributions on relational egalitarianism in the recent literature, one author endorses premises from Rawlsian liberalism (Anderson (1999)), and another author attempts to situate Rawls's work within the relational egalitarian framework (Scheffler (2003)).

[31] See van Wietmarschen (2022) for a general account of social hierarchy in which social norms play a constitutive role.

[32] See for example Fourie (2015).

[33] For accounts of social hierarchy that have the implication of broadness, see for example Fourie (2012); Kolodny (2023); and van Wietmarschen (2022).

[34] See for example Arneson (2010), van Wietmarschen (2024: 341) and Zuehl (2023: 328).

[35] See for example Kolodny (2014: 303-307).

[36] By arguing in this way, the strategy I endorse shares in one of the virtues of the Self-Respect Strategy. Namely, it does not depend on objecting to the content of stigmatizing attitudes. This is true so long as the considerations that allow us to identify a threat to self-respect as especially severe do not themselves make recourse to such objections. By focusing on considerations of hierarchy, the strategy avoids this challenge.

[37] Or at least this is not the *only* possible explanation. Again, I do not want to reject such objections to hierarchy out of hand, only to bracket the issues they raise for the purposes of developing a politics of anti-stigma within Rawlsian liberalism.

[38] See for example Kolodny's (2023, ch.6) treatment of "disparities of regard."

[39] See for example Scheffler (2005: 19).

[40] Bartky's description of some "commoner forms" of shame experienced by men seems to fit the shame that some men feel in relation to difficult emotions or mental health problems. Such shame is often premised on the expectation that men should comport themselves in ways that befit a certain image of them as socially powerful agents. Since such shame can be reinforced by stigma, I suspect that this case is usefully approached though the intersectional perspective discussed below.

[41] It is important to register here that Bartky rejects the idea that shame necessarily involves a threat to self-respect. But if we follow Rawls in taking them to be fairly closely related, then I think Bartky's discussion provides some resources for sustaining the point in the main text. See also fn23.

[42] Of course, these considerations are unlikely to exhaust the explanation of threats to self-respect, even at a general level. For example, it also seems to matter how profoundly the hierarchies in question are characterized by various forms of demeaning treatment. More generally, assessing the severity of any given threat to self-respect will rest (as discussed in Section 3) on a complex weighing of the various self-respect enabling and frustrating conditions that are in play. I do not mean to overlook this. Still, it is helpful to simplify in order to make the essential point that a combined strategy has something compelling to say about difficult cases of stigma, leaving some of this complexity for a later stage.

[43] Relational egalitarians have emphasized that the most morally troubling hierarchies are often those which are most socially salient. See for example Kolodny (2014: 303-307). This point is related to the hypothesis in the main text but differs insofar as it is motivated by a fundamental normative concern with hierarchy rather than by the role that the social salience of a hierarchy plays in the severity of threats to self-respect. Theorists of social hierarchy have also sometimes suggested that any social hierarchy needs to possess a certain level of social salience to qualify as a hierarchy in the first place. See for example the remarks from Viehoff cited earlier in the paper (2019: 12). Whether or not this is true, social hierarchies certainly vary in the extent to which the traits that mark some people as inferior and others as superior are salient features of greater spheres of a person's life.

[44] There are of course plenty cases of wealthy and powerful individuals who are utterly broken by stigmas of the kind which I am suggesting we deprioritize. This often has something to do with the all-encompassing gaze that certain high-profile individuals are placed under, whether as deviants or indeed as celebrated icons. See Velleman on shame amongst celebrities (2001: 49). The point is not to downplay the significance of this or to suggest that the state should indulge such stigmas. Rather, it is simply to highlight that such cases do not share the troubling feature that isolates a range of other cases as especially morally urgent. In this connection, we should also remember that wealthy and powerful individuals possess resources that sometimes allow them to mitigate against threats to their self-respect. These can be of a very trivial sort, such as resources that enable them to simply avoid, for most purposes at least, groups of people who might threaten their self-respect. For relevant discussion, see Allison (2023: 755–56). See fn42 for a more general point about self-respect enabling and frustrating conditions.

[45] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I also explore the significance of this condition here.

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