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Leveling the Playing Field? Devaluation Through Accommodation

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Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein, and Rupp (2014) suggest that those with nonvisible stigmas fail to disclose due to (a) stigmatizing identity, (b) prejudice and discrimination, (c) age of the disabled, and (d) perceived negative reactions from peers. Though Santuzzi et al. offer a litany of reasons for the failure to disclose, they fail to address one of the underlying processes that lead to these negative responses. Specifically, anticipatory rationalization (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002) underlies much of the differing treatment the stigmatized are likely to experience following disclosure. Kay et al. (2002) argue that individuals rationalize anticipated unfavorable

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outcomes so that they are perceived in a more favorable manner.

While reading this article, I kept going back to the issue of devaluation, which is defined as a deliberate reduction in value. I found myself focusing on the parallels between Santuzzi et al.'s argument and the deflation of perceived intelligence that can occur when a person has a visible disability (Longmore, 1985).

In cases of visible disabilities, it is not uncommon for the individual with the disability to experience active, intentional social shunning (Harris, Milich, Corbitt, Hoover, & Brady, 1992), which can lead to an individual with a disability to perceive him or herself as subpar (Longmore, 1985). The very definition and many of the frequently used colloquial monikers refer to individuals with disabilities as subpar or less competent, capable, and proficient (Longmore, 1985). Though Langer, Fiske, Taylor, and Chanowitz (1976) argue that the shunning is really a byproduct of normative societal rules (being taught not to stare, etc.), this behavior fails to lead to an inclusive environment. We have to ask ourselves, if those with visible disabilities fair this poorly in perceptions by others, why would those with invisible disabilities expect to be treated any different?

According to Santuzzi et al.'s argument, individuals with invisible disabilities frequently bear the brunt of additional scrutiny. Situations in which an individual with a nonvisible disability requests accommodations can lead to negative reactions from coworkers (Colella, 2001), but the problem is more systemic than that. Once those accommodations are utilized, perceptions of fairness can lead coworkers to harbor negative feelings toward those that receive accommodations (Egan & Giuliano, 2009). They further argue that when an individual with a nonvisible disability receives an accommodation and outperforms an able body/minded individual who did not receive an accommodation, that able individual perceives the other individual in a negative manner such that the accomplishments of the disabled individual are perceived as unearned (Egan & Giuliano, 2009; Grossman, 2001; Paetzold et al., 2008).

Moreover, Egan and Giuliano (2009) suggest that when an individual receives an accommodation, others perceive the accommodated individual as having an unfair advantage, which leads others to perceive them as less intelligent (Paetzold et al., 2008), much in the same manner as those with visible disabilities (Longmore, 1985). Kay et al. (2002) argue that anticipatory rationalization, a combination of the coping mechanisms that occur in cognitive dissonance and system justification theory, leads fully abled individuals to devalue the accomplishments of an individual who is, by their definition, less. It is far more palatable to an able body/minded individual to attribute the accomplishments of someone they do not feel is on the same playing field as themselves to an unfair advantage. That seems to be an easier pill to swallow than suggesting that these individuals perceived as less (Longmore, 1985) could outperform those full bodied/minded individuals (Kay et al., 2002).

The purpose of accommodations is to increase performance in those that have disabilities, whether visible or invisible, and if past research (Egan & Giuliano, 2009; Paetzold et al., 2008) is to be believed, then there is no advantage to disclosing and accepting accommodations. Though a person's work performance may increase, their social interactions with coworkers will decrease. Furthermore, their coworkers will view the increase in performance as unfair and unearned (Grossman, 2001). In a similar vein, it would be interesting to investigate the perceptions of a supervisor issuing the accommodations, that is, whether they also devalue the disabled workers' output once they accept accommodations. Would the same findings hold true in a supervisory situation, where one person has a position of power over the individual requesting a ccommodations?

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