

The Impact of Perceived Stigma Labeling and Work-Related Rumination on Employees' Organizational Citizenship Behavior: Based on Stigma Labeling Theory and Cognitive-Affective Processing System Theory

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Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which perceived stigma labeling influences employees' organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), focusing on the mediating role of work-related rumination and the moderating role of self-efficacy. Drawing from Labelling Theory and Cognitive-Affective Processing Systems Theory, the paper develops an integrated analytical framework that examines how self-stigma and social stigma perceptions shape employees' cognitive processing, emotional regulation, and behavioral outcomes. The discussion highlights how affective rumination intensifies burnout and reduces OCB, whereas problem-focused rumination can mitigate the negative effects of stigmatization through adaptive coping strategies. The study concludes by offering theoretical implications for organizational psychology and managerial practices aimed at fostering inclusive, resilient workplace environments.

Keywords: Work-Related, Organizational, Citizenship

Introduction

In the modern workplace, employees often encounter explicit or implicit social labeling that shapes their self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and job performance. Perceived stigma labeling—defined as an individual's awareness and internalization of negative social labels—represents a crucial yet underexplored psychological mechanism influencing work-related attitudes and behaviors. Such labeling may arise from formal performance evaluations, informal peer comparisons, or socially constructed stereotypes tied to roles, gender, age, or organizational status. Once internalized, these negative labels can distort self-concept, diminish confidence, and provoke defensive emotional responses that hinder adaptive functioning.

From a psychological standpoint, stigma labeling acts as a chronic stressor that activates self-referential processing and rumination. When individuals dwell on perceived inadequacies or social rejection, they experience heightened anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and impaired cognitive control. This internal conflict often reduces self-efficacy—the belief in

one's ability to perform effectively—which is a critical determinant of motivation, resilience, and prosocial conduct in organizations. Consequently, the interplay between labeling perception, ruminative thinking, and diminished self-efficacy can explain why some employees disengage from organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) or display subtle forms of withdrawal.

Existing research on burnout, workplace stress, and identity threat has provided valuable insights into emotional strain and coping mechanisms. However, there remains a conceptual gap in explaining how perceived stigma labeling translates into behavioral outcomes such as reduced engagement, diminished cooperation, or the erosion of OCB. Few studies have systematically integrated labeling theory with cognitive-emotional processes such as rumination or self-efficacy. Addressing this limitation, the present paper proposes an analytical framework that conceptualizes labeling perceptions as antecedents to ruminative self-processing, which in turn moderates self-efficacy and behavioral outcomes.

By integrating perspectives from social identity theory, labeling theory, and cognitive appraisal models, this framework seeks to enhance theoretical understanding of the psychosocial mechanisms underlying stigmatization in the workplace. Ultimately, this analytical approach not only advances academic discourse on employee well-being and motivation but also provides practical implications for designing interventions that promote inclusion, psychological safety, and sustained organizational citizenship.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Background

The conceptual foundation of this study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical perspectives—Labelling Theory and the Cognitive-Affective Processing Systems (CAPS) Theory—which together offer a multi-level understanding of how perceived stigma labeling influences employees' psychological processes and behavioral outcomes in the workplace.

1. Labelling Theory

Labelling Theory, originally proposed by sociologists such as Becker (2015) posits that deviant or stigmatized identities are not inherent attributes of individuals but are socially constructed through processes of categorization, judgment, and social reaction. Once a person is labeled whether as “deviant,” “incompetent,” or “problematic” that label carries powerful social meanings that can alter how others perceive and interact with the individual. In organizational contexts, labeling may emerge through performance appraisals, informal gossip, or managerial judgments that tag certain employees as “underperformers” or “difficult workers.” These social designations can lead to stereotype activation, social exclusion, and differential treatment, reinforcing a cycle of stigma.

Importantly, Labelling Theory highlights both external and internal dimensions of stigma. Externally, employees may experience biased evaluations or reduced opportunities based on the labels assigned to them. Internally, individuals may internalize these negative designations, reshaping their self-concept and aligning their behaviors with the expectations

of the label a phenomenon known as the self-fulfilling prophecy. Over time, the internalized stigma can erode self-esteem, diminish motivation, and increase susceptibility to psychological distress, ultimately impairing performance and citizenship behaviors at work.

2. Cognitive-Affective Processing Systems (CAPS) Theory

Complementing this sociological perspective, the Cognitive-Affective Processing Systems (CAPS) Theory (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) offers a psychological lens for understanding how individuals interpret and respond to stigmatizing experiences. CAPS proposes that human behavior results from the dynamic interactions among cognitive units (such as beliefs, goals, self-schemas, and perceived control) and affective units (such as emotions, moods, and physiological arousal). When individuals face stressors like stigmatization or negative labeling, their emotional reactions (e.g., shame, anger, anxiety) interact with their cognitive appraisals (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived fairness, attribution of cause) to shape behavioral outcomes.

According to CAPS, these interactions are context-dependent and person-specific. Some employees, when labeled negatively, may experience strong emotional arousal coupled with low cognitive control, leading to maladaptive responses such as rumination, withdrawal, or counterproductive behavior. Others, with higher self-efficacy or adaptive coping mechanisms, may reframe the experience constructively, engaging in resilient coping or maintaining prosocial behaviors such as Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). Thus, the CAPS model helps explain the intra-individual variability in reactions to perceived stigma—why similar labeling experiences can lead to burnout in some employees but growth or perseverance in others.

3. Integrative Framework

Integrating Labelling Theory and CAPS Theory provides a comprehensive framework for examining the psychological mechanisms through which perceived stigma labeling influences OCB. From the labelling perspective, social stigma acts as an external cue that triggers internal self-evaluative and emotional processes. From the CAPS perspective, these cues activate specific cognitive-affective units such as rumination (a repetitive focus on negative self-relevant thoughts) and self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to perform effectively) which mediate the relationship between stigma and behavioral outcomes.

In this integrated view, rumination represents the maladaptive cognitive-affective response that amplifies emotional distress and reduces engagement in discretionary, prosocial behaviors. In contrast, self-efficacy functions as a protective cognitive resource that buffers against the negative emotional impact of labeling, enabling employees to maintain OCB despite stigmatizing conditions. Together, these mechanisms elucidate how the interplay between external labeling processes and internal cognitive-affective dynamics shapes workplace behavior, providing a nuanced understanding of employee responses to perceived stigma.

Methodological Approach (Conceptual Design)

As a conceptual-analytical study, this paper does not rely on primary data collection or statistical testing. Instead, it adopts a synthesizing and interpretive orientation, drawing together a wide range of existing theoretical and empirical studies to construct a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between stigma labeling and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Rather than focusing on measurement or quantitative validation, the study aims to theorize and refine conceptual linkages among psychological and behavioral constructs that have been examined separately in prior research.

The analytical process proceeds through a systematic literature review and theoretical integration. Relevant studies were identified across the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and organizational behavior, focusing on key constructs that frequently emerge in discussions of workplace stigma and employee behavior—namely, stigma labeling, work rumination, burnout, self-efficacy, and OCB. By comparing, contrasting, and synthesizing insights from these fields, the study seeks to identify the conceptual mechanisms through which perceived stigma affects employees' cognitive and emotional experiences, which in turn shape their voluntary, prosocial behaviors at work.

This theoretical triangulation enhances the explanatory depth of the model. It allows for a more nuanced understanding of how stigma perceptions operate not merely as social categorizations but as cognitive-affective processes that influence motivation, emotional regulation, and ultimately behavioral outcomes. The proposed model conceptualizes these interconnections as a dynamic system: stigma labeling triggers internalized perceptions that heighten self-focused rumination and emotional exhaustion, which may subsequently erode self-efficacy and reduce engagement in OCB.

Methodologically, the study follows an interpretive and theory-building logic. It is not intended to test hypotheses but to generate theoretical propositions that future empirical research can examine. In doing so, it contributes to the cumulative development of theory by offering an integrative conceptual framework that explains how labeling and stigma dynamics shape prosocial conduct within organizational contexts. The design thus aligns with the objectives of conceptual inquiry—to refine understanding, highlight overlooked linkages, and stimulate empirical validation through future research endeavors.

Analytical Discussion and Implications

The analytical framework conceptualizes stigma labeling as a pivotal social-psychological antecedent that activates a chain of cognitive and affective processes influencing employees' work rumination and, subsequently, their engagement in organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Within workplace settings, stigma labeling occurs when individuals are categorized based on perceived deficiencies such as being “incompetent,” “unreliable,” or “nonconforming.” Such social labeling triggers self-conscious

emotions and cognitive evaluations that can either undermine or stimulate adaptive functioning, depending on how employees process and internalize these experiences.

When confronted with stigmatizing cues, employees often experience intrusive, repetitive thoughts about work-related incidents a process conceptualized as work-related rumination. Drawing from the Cognitive-Affective Processing Systems (CAPS) framework, rumination represents the mental rehearsal of emotionally charged experiences that sustain cognitive activation even beyond work hours. Two primary forms of rumination are differentiated:

Affective rumination entails perseverative emotional reflection, where individuals dwell on negative affective states such as embarrassment, anger, or shame. This process sustains physiological and emotional arousal, intensifying psychological fatigue, self-blame, and burnout. Consequently, affective rumination drains psychological resources, diminishing employees' willingness or capacity to engage in voluntary, extra-role behaviors the hallmark of OCB.

Problem-focused rumination, in contrast, involves analytical reflection oriented toward understanding causes, solutions, and self-improvement. Rather than amplifying distress, it facilitates cognitive reappraisal and learning-oriented adaptation. Employees who engage in this form of rumination are more likely to reinterpret stigmatizing experiences as opportunities for growth, constructive feedback, or behavioral adjustment, thereby potentially transforming stigma into a developmental experience that enhances OCB over time.

A critical moderating variable in this process is self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to organize and execute actions required to manage prospective situations. Self-efficacy determines how employees cognitively appraise and emotionally respond to stigma.

High self-efficacy serves as a psychological shield that enhances cognitive resilience and emotional regulation. Employees with strong self-efficacy are more capable of decoupling stigma from self-identity, perceiving it as a situational feedback rather than an enduring personal flaw. This mindset reduces the intensity of affective rumination and encourages problem-oriented coping, fostering constructive behaviors such as self-correction, collaboration, and altruism within the workplace.

Low self-efficacy, conversely, magnifies vulnerability to stigma by reinforcing negative self-schemas and emotional rumination. Individuals with low confidence in their capabilities tend to internalize stigmatizing labels, viewing them as confirmation of personal inadequacy. This perception amplifies helplessness, emotional exhaustion, and disengagement, suppressing motivation to perform beyond formal role expectations.

In sum, the framework posits a dual-path model: stigma labeling activates work rumination, which can evolve into either affective or problem-focused forms. The direction and outcome of this process depend largely on the individual's level of self-efficacy. Through the lens of the Cognitive-Affective Processing Systems Theory, self-efficacy operates as a

regulatory mechanism that shapes whether the stigma experience culminates in burnout and reduced OCB or in adaptive transformation and enhanced prosocial engagement.

This conceptual linkage highlights the need for organizations to address not only the structural origins of stigmatization but also the psychological resources that mediate employees' responses. Interventions that cultivate self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and reflective learning can thus convert stigmatizing contexts into catalysts for resilience and sustained organizational citizenship.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This conceptual analysis underscores the critical need to reconceptualize perceived stigma labeling not merely as a manifestation of social prejudice or interpersonal bias, but as a dynamic and recursive psychological process that continuously interacts with employees' cognitive appraisals, emotional regulation mechanisms, and perceptions of self-efficacy. Rather than viewing stigma labeling as a static condition imposed upon individuals, this framework positions it as a fluid construct that evolves through social interpretation, internalization, and behavioral response. Employees who perceive themselves as being stigmatized engage in complex meaning-making processes—evaluating the fairness, accuracy, and personal implications of such labels—which, in turn, influence their emotional states, self-concept, and subsequent work-related behaviors.

By integrating Labelling Theory and the Cognitive-Affective Processing Systems (CAPS) Theory, this study provides a nuanced theoretical lens for examining how external social judgments interact with internal psychological systems. Labelling Theory elucidates the mechanisms through which social identities are constructed and reinforced through collective perceptions and institutional practices, while CAPS Theory explains how these socially constructed cues activate cognitive-affective units that guide situational behavior. Together, these frameworks illuminate the interplay between social perception, emotional adaptation, and behavioral outcomes, revealing that stigma labeling can either undermine or, under certain conditions, stimulate adaptive coping and personal growth, depending on the individual's cognitive framing and self-efficacy resources.

From a practical standpoint, the analysis emphasizes that organizations must move beyond generic diversity or anti-bias initiatives toward stigma-sensitive human resource management (HRM) strategies. Such strategies should include structured efforts to recognize and mitigate implicit labeling tendencies in performance appraisal systems, feedback delivery, and team interactions. Furthermore, strengthening employees' self-efficacy—through empowerment-based interventions, mentoring programs, and participatory decision-making—can buffer the detrimental effects of labeling by enhancing perceived control and resilience. Building a psychologically safe organizational climate, characterized by open communication, empathy, and inclusive leadership, further reduces the likelihood that stigma labels will crystallize into long-term identity threats or disengagement.

Finally, this conceptual model opens several avenues for empirical validation. Future research could employ structural equation modeling (SEM) or multilevel path analyses to empirically test the hypothesized relationships among stigma labeling, work rumination, emotional exhaustion, and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB). Longitudinal designs would allow for the exploration of causal mechanisms and temporal dynamics, while qualitative approaches could uncover the subjective meanings employees attach to labeling experiences. Through such empirical inquiry, the theoretical propositions articulated herein can be refined and substantiated, advancing both scholarly understanding and practical approaches to managing stigma in organizational contexts.

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