Stigma, Sympathy, and the Double Edge of Strong Ties: Social Capital Activation in Job Searches

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Abstract
Job search is a core process that links individuals to organizations and that often gives rise to labor market inequality. Given that many job seekers bear marks—such as physical deformity or history of socially disapproved behaviors—that are potentially stigmatizing, we examine a fundamental question concerning people’s decisions to activate their social capital to help a job seeker with whom they have a preexisting relationship but who bears a potentially stigmatizing mark. Such marks might limit the extent of help provided to a job seeker because of concerns about courtesy stigma; yet they might also facilitate help by triggering sympathy. Contrary to intuitive predictions, we argue that—subject to scope conditions—sympathy will dominate stigmatization in such situations. We also illuminate the double edge of strong ties in this process: while these ties increase the motivation to help, they simultaneously intensify the risk of courtesy stigma arising from identity stains. Thus, when the job seeker is perceived to be responsible for acquiring a stigmatizing mark, strong ties provide no more socially observable help—in the form of social capital activation—than do weak ties. Using a mark that facilitated causal identification (an accident-related burn scar), an experiment with a diverse population of 510 employed adults validated these propositions. Interviews with twenty informants further illuminated the mechanisms behind these results. We discuss implications for organizational research on labor markets, social capital, and stigma.
INTRODUCTION

Job searches, which link people to organizations, play a critical role in status attainment and frequently take center stage in research on organizations, occupations, and labor markets. A long line of research, starting with Granovetter’s ([1974] 1995) groundbreaking work, has examined the role that access to social capital plays in job search success (e.g., Castilla 2005, Fernandez et al. 2000, Mouw 2003). Recent work in this tradition has drawn attention to the distinction between the potential contacts to which a person has access and the actual contacts mobilized in a given situation (Lin 2001, Perry and Pescosolido 2012, Pescosolido 1992, Renzulli and Aldrich 2005, Smith 2005). That is, there is a critical difference between social capital, defined as “the resources that actors have access to by dint of their connection to others,” and social capital activation, defined as “the point at which these resources are shared—when one or more actors provides instrumental or expressive aid to others” (Smith 2005, p. 4). Accordingly, while earlier studies established the importance of social ties in getting a job, scholars have recently argued that even when an individual is connected to others who could provide job-related information and influence, he or she may be unable to mobilize these ties for help (Smith 2005). This is an important insight because it implies that social capital activation can have significant consequences for individuals’ careers and status attainment. Yet, despite the importance of social capital activation, scholars are only beginning to explore when it is more or less likely to occur.

We address a fundamental question in this regard, examining the conditions under which people activate their social ties to help a job seeker with whom they have a preexisting relationship but who bears a potentially stigmatizing mark. Because stigmatizing marks, such as physical deformity or history of socially disapproved behaviors, are widespread and studied broadly (e.g., Pager 2003, Saguy 2013), when and how such marks lead to social exclusion and when they do not is a critical question in the study of labor market inequality. It is also a question fraught with conceptual ambiguity.

On one hand, a stigmatized help-seeker might elicit disapproval and distrust (Goffman [1963] 1986), thus reducing the likelihood of social capital activation. Moreover, potential help-givers might be hesitant to activate their ties because of concerns about “courtesy stigma” or “stigma by association”
As Goffman pointed out, individuals who are “related through the social structure to a stigmatized individual…. are all obliged to share some of the discredit of the stigmatized person to whom they are related,” and this “proves a reason why such relations tend either to be avoided or to be terminated” ([1963] 1986, p. 30). On the other hand, sociological and social psychological research suggests that a stigmatized person’s plight might, in fact, trigger sympathetic reactions—especially if one is socially connected to the stigmatized person (e.g., Gibbons et al. 1980, Goffman [1963] 1986, Scheier et al. 1978). As Goffman ([1963] 1986, p. 51) noted, it might be that “impersonal contacts between strangers are particularly subject to stereotypical responses, [but] as persons come to be on closer terms with each other this categoric approach recedes and gradually sympathy, understanding, and a realistic assessment of personal qualities take its place.” Thus, whether stigmatization or sympathy will dominate decisions about job search help remains an unresolved question.

To provide greater conceptual clarity on this question, we make three distinctions. First, we disentangle (a) socially observable forms of job search help (i.e., those that involve the activation of the help provider’s other network ties to assist the job seeker with information or referrals) and (b) more personal types of help (i.e., assistance that does not require the cooperation of others, such as providing feedback on the job seeker’s résumé). Second, we distinguish the degree of responsibility a person bears for acquiring a potentially stigmatizing mark. That is, we consider differences in judgments that help providers make about whether or not a job seeker’s mark was acquired as a direct consequence of his or her own choices and actions.¹ Third, we differentiate between different types of relationships between the help seeker and help provider: strong ties, which exist between close, intimate friends; and weak ties between mere acquaintances (Granovetter [1974] 1995). We argue that these distinctions are critical to resolving the theoretical ambiguity in Goffman’s account of the conditions under which feelings of sympathy will prevail over the tendency to stigmatize.

Contrary to arguments emphasizing the negative consequences of stigmatizing marks in other domains, we argue that sympathy will be dominant in decisions about job search help for contacts with whom a person has a preexisting relationship—as long as the mark does not directly affect the help
seeker’s ability to perform the job. Thus we hypothesize that those with a stigmatizing mark will tend to receive more help from their contacts than those without such a mark. In this sense, a mark that leads to stigmatization in general may foster sympathy within the context of a particular social relationship. We emphasize, however, that important contingent factors are at work in this process. In particular, we illuminate the double-edged nature of strong ties. While these ties lead to greater motivation to help and hence serve as pipes through which social support flows, they also provide effective prisms (Podolny 2001) for courtesy stigma, whereby help providers acquire a mark of social disgrace because of their close association with the help seeker. We argue that courtesy stigma can arise from concerns about the potential transfer of identity stain, and this mechanism operates independently of human capital concerns about the job seeker or worries about the potential adverse consequences of making a referral for the help provider’s own job reputation (Smith 2007). Contrary to the conventional view of strong ties as primary conduits of social support, we expect that, when a job seeker is considered responsible for acquiring a mark, the propensity to provide socially observable help to a strong-tie contact will be attenuated due to these concerns about potential identity stain spillovers.

Using a novel experimental design that allowed us to disentangle the two mechanisms, we demonstrate that concerns about identity stain can dampen support from strong ties even in the absence of human capital concerns. We chose to focus on a particular kind of stigmatizing mark—accident-related scars, with varying degrees of implied responsibility—for two reasons. First, it enabled us to study two of the theoretically most important forms of stigma highlighted in the literature—physical marks and stains of character (Goffman [1963] 1986). Second, it allowed us to control for the influence of human capital and cleanly manipulate the attribution of responsibility. Taken together, the findings from this study highlight the counterintuitive dominance of sympathy over stigmatization in job search support; illuminate the double-edged nature of strong ties; and have important implications for research on social capital activation in labor markets and its consequences for inequality.
THEORY

Stigma, Sympathy, and Job Search Help

Abundant research suggests that individuals bearing a stigmatizing mark face social rejection, ostracism, and distrust. According to Goffman’s classic statement, an individual with such a mark is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one ([1963] 1986, p. 3), and hence we “impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one” ([1963] 1986, p. 5). As a result, “we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances” ([1963] 1986, p. 5). In the job search context, this argument implies a strong negative effect of stigmatizing marks on the amount of help received. A second factor reinforcing this negative effect is potential help providers’ likely concern about the risk of acquiring courtesy stigma, which is attached to those who are associated with a stigmatized person (Goffman [1963] 1986). Concerns about courtesy stigma are often powerful because, as Goffman argued, “the individual with a courtesy stigma may find that he must suffer many of the standard deprivations of his courtesy group” ([1963] 1986, p. 31).

Both these arguments—about the negative social consequences of stigma and about the spread of courtesy stigma—have been borne out in many subsequent studies. A profusion of research has described the negative consequences of various stigmatizing marks in employment, housing, health, legal cases, social interactions, and other domains (e.g., Brownell 2005, Causey and Duran-Aydintug 1998, Pager 2003, Pescosolido et al. 2008). As Link and Phelan (2006, p. 528) summarized, “Stigma processes have a dramatic and probably under-recognized effect on the distribution of life chances.” Likewise, scholars have documented the effects of courtesy stigma on a range of groups, from the children of alcoholics and the mentally ill (Burk and Sher 1990, Mehta and Farina 1988) to the friends of gays and lesbians (Neuberg et al. 1994) to the dating partners of the disabled (Goldstein and Johnson 1997). Indeed, this research suggests that stigma can spread through even just mere association or proximity. In a study of the “Red Scare” in the U.S. film industry between 1945 and 1960, for example, Pontikes, Negro, and Rao (2010) found that even casual association with co-workers who were blacklisted as communists
significantly damaged artists’ employment chances in feature films. Even a single instance of past association with a stigmatized individual could impair future work prospects, and not even high-status individuals who had previously won public recognition were immune to this effect. Consistent with this finding, numerous studies have documented the quick spread of stigma and its power to disgrace actors by mere association and to dissolve preexisting ties (e.g., Adut 2005, Jensen 2006, Jonsson et al. 2009). Courtesy stigma can, in fact, be inflicted upon individuals who are simply seen in the presence of a stigmatized person, even in the absence of any social relationship between them (Pryor et al. 2012). For instance, lab studies show that job applicants are evaluated in a more negative way if they have been previously seen seated next to an overweight person (Hebl and Mannix 2003).

Taken together, the above studies suggest a plausible negative effect of stigmatizing marks on job search help because of social rejection of stigmatized persons and potential help providers’ concerns about courtesy stigma. Yet, once we unpack these arguments, compelling reasons emerge to the contrary. Negative reactions toward the stigmatized are not the only responses at play, even when judging strangers. In particular, social psychological research consistently “indicates that negative feelings and stereotypes toward the stigmatized are often mixed with positive feelings of sympathy and concern” (Blaine, Crocker, and Major 1995, p. 889). Laboratory experiments suggest that people often behave more positively toward those with a disability than those without one and, in some cases, might react more favorably toward members of stigmatized racial minority groups than toward non-members (e.g., Carver et al. 1978, Linville and Jones 1980). Indeed, recent research suggests that “members of stigmatized groups have a peculiar kind of persuasive ‘power’ in face-to-face interactions with non-stigmatized individuals” (Norton et al. 2012, p. 261). This research has found that non-stigmatized persons were more persuaded by face-to-face appeals for donations or a change in attitudes when the appeal came from stigmatized individuals (disabled persons and African Americans) than when it came from non-stigmatized individuals.

As feelings of sympathy and the persuasive power of appeals from the stigmatized clearly surface even in interactions between strangers, positive reactions to help requests are even more likely in situations where help seekers are socially connected to potential help providers—for example, in the case
of job search help solicited from friends and acquaintances. In the presence of such a social connection, the motivation to be of assistance is stronger because of positive affect, trust, and possible expectations of reciprocity within the relationship (e.g., Granovetter [1974] 1995, Wellman and Wortley 1990). As a large literature on social support has shown, social ties channel “stable and adaptive support…. [and] serve as principal means whereby people acquire resources…. to deal with daily life, seize opportunities, and reduce uncertainties” (Wellman and Wortley 1990, pp. 558-559; for reviews, see House, Umberson, and Landis [1988] and Faber and Wasserman [2002]).

Thus, given the role of sympathy even in interactions with stigmatized strangers, when a socially connected other bears a stigmatizing mark, his or her plight will likely foster a particularly strong motivation to provide support. While a stigmatizing mark could, in general, lead to either negative reactions or sympathy, when a social tie exists between the help seeker and the potential help giver, a positive response is more likely, reflecting sympathy for the stigmatized person and his or her plight. In this sense, the very same mark that leads to stigmatization in general might foster sympathy and a positive response within a particular social relationship. That is, we contend that the social context in which a mark is evaluated powerfully influences whether feelings of sympathy overcome a baseline tendency to stigmatize. Therefore, in decisions about providing job search help for a contact with whom a person has a preexisting relationship, we expect that sympathetic, positive responses will dominate negative reactions—assuming the stigmatizing mark does not directly impair the help seeker’s ability to perform the job.iii Thus we predict that, other things being equal, people will provide more job search help to a contact who bears a stigmatizing mark than to one who bears no such mark. This general prediction applies to both (a) socially observable help, that is, help in the form of social capital activation, whereby help givers reach out to their other contacts to provide job search assistance; and (b) personal help, which does not involve assistance from anyone other than the help provider—for example, privately reviewing and providing feedback on job application materials. We therefore expect:
**Hypothesis 1**: In the context of job search, individuals will provide (a) more socially observable help and (b) more personal help to a contact who bears a potentially stigmatizing mark than to a contact who does not bear such a mark.

**The Double Edge of Strong Ties**

To refine our first proposition, we now turn to additional factors that influence decisions about job search help and shape the effects of stigmatizing marks in those decisions. We focus, in particular, on the role of tie strength because it highlights an important tension. On the one hand, abundant research suggests that strong ties—those between close, intimate friends, rather than mere acquaintances—will positively influence help behaviors. Because “strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance” (Granovetter 1983, p. 209), they constitute a critical source of support in a wide range of endeavors (e.g., Festinger et al. 1950, Krackhardt 1992, Seibert et al. 2001), including job searches (Bian 1997). Accordingly, strong ties have been shown to be “reliable and flexible providers of support resources” (Wellman and Wortley 1990, p. 564), and studies have found that people “get most of their social support—of all kinds—through their small number of strong ties. Although strong ties are a minority of all active ties, they are a majority of active supportive ties” (Wellman and Wortley 1990, p. 566, see also Allan [1979] and Wiseman [1986]). Consistent with these arguments, data from the General Social Survey (Davis et al. 2006) show that while 13.5% of Americans found out about their current job from an acquaintance, more than 20% learned about it from a close friend—the single most important source.

On the other hand, the risk of acquiring courtesy stigma also increases with tie strength, hence potentially reducing the willingness to help stigmatized contacts. As Goffman pointed out, courtesy stigma travels through social structure such that the “problems faced by stigmatized persons spread out in waves…. [with a] “tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections” ([1963] 1986, p. 30, emphasis added). Thus, strong ties are effective conduits for both social support and stigma by association, suggesting that people may, in some cases, be less willing to help a strong tie contact.
Smith (2007) has already identified one important mechanism that can account for the reduced motivation to support strong tie contacts. If a job seeker has less desirable human capital characteristics—for example, a poor track record of following through on referrals or reliably showing up for interviews—a help provider may be less willing to help the job seeker because doing so might cause the former to suffer reputational harm arising from the latter’s counter-normative or even inappropriate behavior. In other words, the risk of a negative reputation spillovers is likely to dampen people’s motivation to support strong tie contacts whose reliability or fitness for a job are in question.

We propose a second mechanism, identity stains, that can also dampen the tendency to provide job search assistance to strong tie contacts and that operates independently of any human capital concerns about the job seeker or the risk of negative spillovers to the help provider’s job reputation. Whereas the withholding of support for a strong tie contact with human capital blemishes is based on deliberative calculation, we propose that concerns about the transfer of identity stain from strong tie contacts arise in more automatic fashion. Moreover, these worries can manifest even when the potential help provider has no concerns about the job seeker’s human capital. In other words, we propose that identity stains associated with a potentially stigmatizing mark represent a second, heretofore overlooked, reason that people might withhold job search support to their strong tie contacts.

We further argue that concerns about courtesy stigma arising from identity stains are most likely to be operative when two conditions hold: the help provided is both (a) observable by others and (b) given to a person who bears a stigmatizing mark for which he or she is responsible. In the absence of the first condition, the support that the help giver provides does not become known to others, which significantly reduces or even eliminates the risk of courtesy stigma. In the absence of the second condition, the help seeker is either non-stigmatized or bears a mark for which he or she is not responsible. In the former case—if the help seeker bears no stigmatizing mark—then there are naturally no concerns about courtesy stigma. And, if the help seeker has a mark that is not due to any fault of his or her own, then the tainting influence of courtesy stigma is likely to be considerably weaker than in the case of assisting a stigmatized person who is culpable for her situation. Indeed, when the help seeker bears a stigmatizing mark for
which he or she is responsible, strangers tend to respond with feelings of blame and negative moral judgment (e.g., Weiner et al. 1988), which can readily taint the social identity of the help giver as well. But, when the help seeker bears no responsibility for the mark, the reaction of strangers is likely to be less negative, reducing the risk of courtesy stigma for the help giver.

In contrast, when both of the above conditions hold—when the help provided is both socially observable and given to a person with mark for which they bear responsibility—we expect that concerns about courtesy stigma will offset the strong-tie contact’s greater motivation to help. That is, contrary to the conventional view of strong ties as the key conduits of interpersonal support, we expect that the propensity of strong ties to motivate the provision of socially observable help will be attenuated when job seekers bear a stigmatizing mark for which they are seen as responsible. In the case of personal help, however, social unobservability eliminates the danger of courtesy stigma, and hence the positive effect of tie strength on personal help will not diminish even if the stigmatizing mark is one for which the job seeker bears responsibility. In sum, we predict:

*Hypothesis 2:* In the context of job search, individuals will provide (a) more socially observable help and (b) more personal help to a strong-tie contact than to a weak-tie contact; (c) however, when the job seeker is considered to be responsible for acquiring a mark, the propensity to provide socially observable help to a strong-tie contact will be attenuated.

**METHODS**

Testing these hypotheses with observational data, common in social network research, would make causal identification infeasible. For example, those exhibiting more sympathy toward a stigmatized individual are also more likely to form a relationship with that person, making it exceedingly difficult to untangle selection into a relationship from the choice to activate social capital. Moreover, with such data, the difficulties in separating the effects of stigma from human capital factors, and in distinguishing between marks involving more or less responsibility, would raise profound concerns about endogeneity. For example, it would be difficult to isolate the effects of stigmatization on social capital activation if those who bore responsibility for their mark sorted into fundamentally different kinds of social relationships.
than those not responsible for their mark (e.g., Pescosolido 1992). To facilitate causal identification, a randomized experiment may be a suitable alternative, but that approach would undermine external validity if it focused on activation choices in the abstract or involved participants who might lack relevant social networks (e.g., typical university undergraduates). Moreover, research strategies common in laboratory settings—for example, the use of confederates—are not well-suited to manipulating relationship characteristics such as tie strength in the context of pre-existing relationships (as opposed to one-off interactions among strangers).

In response to these empirical challenges, we conducted a randomized vignette-based experiment on a diverse sample of full-time employed adults with relevant networks to activate and used a survey method that allowed participants to indicate activation choices with reference to their own actual social networks. These features of the experimental design allowed for causal identification while helping to preserve external validity (see Willer et al. 2013). As prior research has shown, this general approach—a vignette-based experiment in which participants are from the relevant population of interest—is especially useful when observational data are problematic, a field experiment is infeasible, and a lab experiment with a convenience sample of college students would undermine external validity (e.g., Castilla and Benard 2010, Christakis and Asch 1993, Horne et al. 2013).

Building on this literature, we tested our hypotheses using an experiment with a diverse sample of working professionals who had relevant networks and were asked to make a choice about which of their actual ties they would activate in response to an experimentally manipulated vignette. This method facilitated causal identification through random assignment while also providing a reasonable level of external validity due to the focus on actual network ties among members of the relevant population. The random assignment accounted for all unobserved differences among participants—for example, personality traits, gender, the baseline tendency to stigmatize or sympathize with others, and whether the person herself bears or knows others who bear potentially stigmatizing marks—that could affect their propensity to activate social capital and therefore eliminated the need to control for these factors in our statistical analyses (Willer and Walker 2007).
Our experiment focused on the effect of accident-related burn scars with different degrees of implied responsibility. Visual burn scars provoke intense, visceral responses in others, making this form of stigma appropriate for the study of courtesy stigma arising from concerns about identity stains. As explained below, the focus on accident-related marks also allowed us to control for the effects of human capital while cleanly manipulating the attribution of responsibility. To inform our interpretation of the results, we also conducted interviews with 20 informants deeply familiar with this empirical context, including burn survivors and their relatives as well as professionals who work in nonprofit organizations and hospitals serving the burn survivor community. Although these personal accounts are more illustrative than conclusive, they are important because a key element of “theorizing involves describing what abstract concepts or relationships might look like on the ground, in the particular context one is studying” (Espeland 2009: 65). Thus, after presenting our experiment, we describe how its results and the theoretical relationships they imply mesh with themes that emerged in our interviews.

Sample of Experimental Participants

Subjects in the experimental study included working professionals between the ages of 25 and 65 who were employed in establishments with at least 25 employees. The sample was well-suited to the objectives of this study because it included professionals with relevant social networks that could potentially be activated to aid in a contact’s job search. We gained access to this sample through a survey research company that maintains a national online survey pool. Subjects were paid $6 for completing the study. After rescreening subjects to ensure that they met our age and employment status requirement, we obtained a sample of 510 individuals. The sample included a diverse cross-section of employed adults and had the following characteristics: mean age = 43.7 years (standard deviation = 11.51); mean tenure in the current organization = 9.01 years (standard deviation = 7.80); proportion of females = .60; proportion of white participants = .80; proportion currently married = .54; proportion of participants working as individual contributors (rather than in supervisory or management roles) = .47; proportion working in establishments with fewer than 500 employees = .73; and proportion with a college or advanced degree = .64.
**Experimental Procedure**

The experiment involved a 3 x 2 factorial design. The potentially stigmatizing mark, a burn scar, was either: (1) not present; (2) present and described such that the job seeker bore some responsibility for acquiring the mark; or (3) present and described such that the job seeker bore no individual responsibility for acquiring the mark. For each of the cases, we also varied whether the job seeker was a (1) strong tie contact or (2) a weak tie contact. Each subject was randomly assigned to one of these conditions and received a unique link to a web survey corresponding to their assigned condition. We selected a between-subjects experimental design, as compared to a within-subjects design, to reduce the possibility of social desirability bias. In a within-subjects design, respondents could draw inferences about socially appropriate responses to social capital activation questions and adjust their behavior during the course of the experiment. The between-subjects research design and use of respondents’ real network ties reduced concerns that social desirability bias influenced our results. We revisit concerns about the role of social desirability bias with the discussion of our results.

In addition, although our theory does not suggest a hypothesis about how the visibility of the scar might matter, we followed Goffman’s ([1963] 1986) distinction between the “discredited” and the “discreditable” and used two variants of the manipulation: one in which the mark was described and depicted as a scar on the person’s face that was always visible and one in which it was described as a scar on the person’s back that was concealed by clothing. There were no significant differences in our results across these conditions. In the analysis below, we collapsed these variants for ease of presentation.

**Manipulation.** Subjects were presented with a picture of the job seeker, shown in Figure 1, and a text-based manipulation. We selected the picture from a set of options gleaned from past stigma research and conducted extensive pre-testing of the options with lay subjects to ensure that the selected picture was about average in several perceived traits (e.g., attractiveness, intelligence, and trustworthiness). When overlaying the burn scar onto the job seeker’s picture, we consulted medical professionals to ensure that the resulting image was realistic.

- **Figure 1 about here** -
In developing, pre-testing, and refining the manipulation, we took pains to avoid sending an inadvertent signal about the job seeker’s human capital. For example, permanent disfigurement from a facial scar could potentially affect the job performance of a customer-facing employee or influence the nature and quality of relationships he builds with coworkers. We therefore constructed the scenario such that the physical appearance of the job seeker in no way affected his expected job performance or likely effort in following up on the referral. This manipulation allowed us to distinguish help providers’ concerns about a job seeker’s human capital from other concerns that could influence help provision. Critically, controlling for human capital concerns about a job seeker enabled us to isolate and identify our hypothesized mechanism of courtesy stigma arising from identity stains. The text below describes the responsibility (versus no responsibility) and strong tie (versus weak tie) conditions. The baseline conditions were identical, except that all references to the accident and scar were removed.

You have just received a phone call from [Strong Tie: a close friend of yours / Weak Tie: an acquaintance], John (pictured above), whom you have known well for [Strong Tie: a long time / Weak Tie: some time]. [Strong Tie: You and John are very close to each other and frequently spend time together / Weak Tie: You consider John an acquaintance, rather than a close friend.]  

Several months ago, John was a victim in a fire, [Responsibility: which was triggered by a specialty appliance that he left on. The appliance came with a warning of potential fire risk if it were left on too long. John had heeded this warning in the past but on this one occasion forgot to turn off the appliance. John’s actions therefore contributed to the accident. / No Responsibility: which was triggered by faulty electrical wiring in a neighbor’s apartment. The fire was deemed a freak accident, for which the electrical company took full responsibility. Investigators determined that both John and his neighbor were blameless. John’s actions did not contribute to the accident.]  

John has now fully recovered from the accident, except for some permanent scarring. Before the accident, John worked for a large company as a back-office professional. In this job role, people work independently from a home office and have no face-to-face
interaction with colleagues or clients. Instead, they communicate with others by email or by phone.

While John was recovering from the accident, the company decided to outsource all of its back-office operations to another country. As a result, everyone in John’s position was laid off. John’s accident played no role in him losing his job.

Having recovered from the accident, John is now looking to get a job very similar to the one he previously held—one in which he can work independently from a home office without having face-to-face interaction with colleagues or clients.

Because John and you are [Strong Tie: very close friends / Weak Tie: acquaintances], he has reached out to you for help in his job search. In particular, he has requested your help in identifying people you know who might have, know about, or could find out about potential job opportunities for him. You have every reason to believe that John is a qualified, reliable, and conscientious worker who has considerable prior experience in the desired job role. John’s skills are also highly transferable across industries and sectors of employment (e.g., for-profit companies, non-profits, government agencies).

_Socially Observable Help—Social Capital Activation._ Subjects received the following instructions: “As you recall, John has requested your help in identifying people you know who might have, know about, or could find out about potential job opportunities for him. In the boxes below question that follows, please list the initials of the people you know from whom you would solicit help for John.” Then we asked a standard name generator (Burt 1984): “Among the people you know, list the initials of those you would be willing to contact to find out about potential job openings that might suit John and / or put in a good word for him.” That is, we asked subjects to make a purposive choice about which actual network ties to activate in response to the experimentally manipulated situation.

Because prior research has shown that—in self-administered web surveys—the number of names a respondent provides can be especially sensitive to question wording (e.g., “list up to ten contacts”) and even display format (e.g., the number of text boxes shown) (Vehovar et al. 2008), we did not prime
subjects with a particular number of names to provide. Instead, we programmed the survey to dynamically adjust the number of boxes displayed. That is, one box was initially displayed. Once subjects began typing in that box, another box appeared below. Although subjects were not told of the limit, they could in practice enter up to thirteen initials per question. Only five subjects (1%) reached the name limit. Following the name generator was a series of name interpreters about each contact listed—for example, the sex, ethnicity, and educational attainment of the contact.

**Personal Help—Time Spent.** For personal help, we asked the following: “In addition to asking you to reach out to your contacts, John has also asked for your help in reviewing and providing feedback on his job application materials (e.g., resume, cover letter), which he will be using to apply to jobs posted online and in newspapers. You can provide this feedback via email or a phone conversation. How much time (in minutes) would you be willing to spend reviewing John’s job application materials?”

**Respondent Background and Attitudes.** The final section of the survey included questions about the respondent’s background: age, sex, ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status, country of origin, tenure with the current employer, size of current employer, and organizational rank. In addition, we collected data on salient individual differences that could potentially color the choice to provide personal or socially observable help: autonomous and controlled motivation to help (Weinstein and Ryan 2010) and motivation to control prejudice (Dunton and Fazio 1997).

**Measures and Estimation**

For socially observable help, the dependent variable was a count of the number of ties activated, while for personal help, it was the minutes of time the subject was willing to spend. To test Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we included an indicator, *Burn Scar*, which was set to 1 for the conditions in which the scar was present and to 0 for the baseline conditions. To test Hypotheses 2a and 2b, we used an indicator, *Strong Tie*, which was set to 1 for subjects in the strong tie conditions. For Hypothesis 2c, we used (a) two indicator variables, *Responsibility* and *No Responsibility* (with the baseline conditions serving as the reference category), (b) the *Strong Tie* indicator described above, and (c) the interaction terms *Responsibility × Strong Tie* and *No Responsibility × Strong Tie*. 
Because the dependent variable for socially observable help was a count measure and not normally distributed, we tested hypotheses related to this variable using a form of Poisson regression. This estimator is consistent so long as the conditional mean is correctly specified; it makes no assumptions about the conditional variance or distribution of the data (Wooldridge 1997). For hypotheses related to the personal help variable, we estimated Ordinary Least Squares models.

RESULTS

We first assessed the efficacy of our responsibility manipulation and found that subjects in the responsibility condition did indeed ascribe greater responsibility for the accident to the job seeker than did subjects in the condition with no responsibility (3.76 versus 1.14, respectively, on a five-point responsibility scale; p < .0001). Next we assessed our tie strength manipulation (Marsden and Campbell 1984) using three items (alpha = .932) and found that subjects in the strong tie condition did indeed report having a closer tie to the job seeker than did subjects in the weak tie condition (11.95 versus 5.8, respectively, on a 13-point tie strength scale; p < .0001). Finally, we assessed whether the main manipulation—that is, the presence of a scar—might have inadvertently sent an adverse human capital signal. Subjects in the burn scar conditions did not hold the job seeker more responsible for losing his job than did subjects in the baseline conditions. Moreover, subjects correctly inferred that the mark of a burn scar had no bearing on the job seeker’s ability to perform the role he sought. We used a three-item measure (alpha = .756; sample item: “How well suited are John’s skills to the requirements of the job he is seeking?”) to assess subjects’ beliefs about the suitability of the job seeker’s skills and personal characteristics to job requirements. We found that subjects in the burn scar conditions did not rate the job seeker as any worse on human capital characteristics than did those in the baseline conditions. Taken together, the manipulation checks indicated that subjects correctly interpreted the manipulations without drawing any unintended inferences about the job seeker’s human capital.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix. For socially observable help, the mean number of ties activated was 2.20 (standard deviation: 2.21), while for personal help, the mean
minutes of time spent was 31.86 (standard deviation: 29.57). The correlation coefficient between social and personal help was .14 (p = .002).

- Table 1 about here -

Table 2 presents results that pertain to Hypotheses 1a and 1b—that the mark will elicit a sympathetic, rather than stigmatizing, response to requests for help from a job seeker. In Model 1, which predicted the extent of social help provided, *Burn Scar* had a positive and significant coefficient. Subjects activated 1.77 ties for the unscarred job seeker and 2.33 ties for the scarred job seeker. This is a difference of 32%, which is a sizable effect considering that people typically reach out to numerous contacts in each job search. If each contact activates 32% more contacts for the job seeker, then the cumulative consequences for access to social resources are substantial. Similarly, in Model 2, which considered the extent of personal help provided, *Burn Scar* had a positive and significant coefficient. Subjects were willing to spend 27.7 minutes to provide personal help when the job seeker bore no mark and 33.1 minutes (19% more minutes) when the job seeker bore a potentially stigmatizing mark. In both cases, the presence of the burn scar mark produced a sympathetic, rather than stigmatizing, response from potential help providers. Thus we found support for Hypotheses 1a and 1b.

- Table 2 about here -

Results pertaining to Hypotheses 2a and 2b are presented in Table 3. *Strong Tie* had a positive and significant coefficient in Model 3, which considered the provision of socially observable help. Subjects activated 1.94 ties to help a job seeker with whom they had a weak tie and 2.45 ties (26% more ties) to help a job seeker with whom they had a strong tie. Along the same lines, *Strong Tie* had a positive and significant coefficient in Model 4, which focused on the provision of personal help. Subjects were willing to spend 27.6 minutes to help a job seeker with whom they had a weak tie and 36.0 minutes (30% more minutes) to help a job seeker with whom they had a strong tie. In both cases, strong ties led to the provision of more help than did weak ties. Thus, we found support for Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

- Table 3 about here -
Table 4 reports findings related to Hypothesis 2c—that the effects of tie strength on network activation are contingent on whether or not the job seeker is considered to be responsible for acquiring the stigmatizing mark. Model 5 focused on socially observable help and considered the main effects of Responsibility, No Responsibility, and Strong Tie. All three coefficients were positive and significant. Model 6 included the relevant interaction terms. Consistent with our arguments about the double edge of strong ties, No Responsibility × Strong Tie had a positive and significant coefficient, while Responsibility × Strong Tie had a negative but not significant coefficient. When the job seeker bore no responsibility for acquiring the mark, subjects in the weak tie condition activated 1.70 ties to aid the job seeker, while those in the strong tie condition activated 2.56 ties (51% more for strong ties than for weak). By contrast, when the job seeker was responsible for acquiring the mark, the number of ties activated between the weak and strong tie conditions was nearly identical (2.31 versus 2.26, respectively; not significant). In other words, the positive effects of strong ties on the propensity to provide socially observable help were contingent on the nature of the mark the job seeker bore. Relative to weak ties, strong ties only enhanced the tendency to provide socially observable help when the job seeker was believed to bear no responsibility for acquiring the scar. When the job seeker was deemed responsible for the scar, strong ties led to the provision of no more socially observable help than did weak ties. We therefore found support for Hypothesis 2c.

Turning to personal help, in Model 7, the main effects of No Responsibility and Strong Tie were both positive and significant. Model 8 included the relevant interaction terms. Consistent with the notion that personal help is less observable and therefore less susceptible to concerns about courtesy stigma than socially observable help, the coefficient for neither Responsibility × Strong Tie nor Responsibility × Strong Tie was significant. That is, unlike the case of socially observable help, the nature of the mark did not moderate the effects of strong ties on the provision of personal help. This difference between socially observable and personal help provides further suggestive evidence that the mechanism underlying the double edge of strong ties is concern about courtesy stigma, which is operative in the former case but not in the latter.
Overall, these findings were consistent with our theoretical framework. It is worth emphasizing that these results were based on a diverse sample of employed adults in establishments ranging from 25 employees to over 10,000 employees. Our results were robust to the inclusion of all control variables—the respondent’s sex, age, ethnicity, country of origin, marital status, educational attainment, motivation to help others or to control prejudice, as well as tenure, organizational rank, and size of the employer.

Addressing Two Empirical Concerns

Two empirical concerns arise from these findings. First is the threat of social desirability bias. Insofar as participants believed that the socially appropriate choice was to activate more ties to aid a person with a burn scar, then social desirability bias could contribute to the domination of sympathy over stigmatization (that is, the results pertaining to Hypotheses 1a and 1b). At the same time, as noted earlier, this threat is somewhat reduced given our between-subjects design, and it is also worth noting that social desirability bias would not clearly explain our result regarding Hypothesis 2c. Moreover, our other results provide reason to doubt that social desirability played a major role in participants’ choices. Recall that we had two versions of the manipulations—one in which the scar was described as existing on the job seeker’s face and shown in the picture and one in which the scar was describing as existing on the job seeker’s back and not visible because it was concealed by clothing. If social desirability concerns were driving participants’ choices, we would expect to see a stronger sympathetic response to the first version of the manipulation—that is, the one in which the scar is clearly visible and therefore more consequential for the job seeker. Yet, responses to the two manipulations were nearly identical, suggesting that social desirability concerns were not paramount in participants’ responses.

The second, related concern arises from our use of a hybrid vignette study—one in which participants list actual network ties they would activate in response to a hypothetical scenario—that does not include a purely behavioral outcome measure. If participants perceived no real cost to activating social capital, there might be concerns about the external validity of the findings. Smith (2007), for example, shows that in real-world settings, people often perceive significant costs to activating social
capital. We addressed this concern by conducting supplemental qualitative interviews with burn survivors and their support community (described below). It is also important to note that, although the costs of activating social capital in our experiment were admittedly smaller than those involved in the real-life situations, they were not insignificant. In the social capital activation question, participants were instructed to list the initials of contacts and advised that they would then be asked a series of follow-on questions about each contact they listed. So they still incurred costs in the form of time when deciding how many ties to activate to aid the job seeker.

**Qualitative Evidence**

Our findings and the theoretical relationships that they imply are also consistent with what we learned from our exploratory interviews with burn survivors, relatives, and helping professionals. Reflecting the theoretical ambiguity that motivated our study, nearly all our interviewees noted the significant tensions that arise when one of the individuals in an existing social relationship suffers a burn injury and acquires a potentially stigmatizing mark as a result. For example, as a male burn survivor working in the engineering industry explained, “They were very sorry that it happened because they never experienced a burn injury—a friend with a burn injury before. So for them it was like, ‘Oh my gosh, does it hurt?’…They didn’t know how to interact with me. They didn’t know what was sensitive. They couldn’t even ask me questions about how I was feeling.” Such reactions were the opposite of what this survivor had hoped for: “I wanted it to be normal. I wanted our interactions to be like it was before. I wanted that sense of normalcy.” Indeed, even seasoned helping professionals who provide support services to the stigmatized community reported feelings of distress and discomfort. As a member of the leadership team at a nonprofit that serves burn survivors reported, “I’m not a burn survivor and it’s taken me personally a long time, and I hate to say this, but to feel comfortable around them…Years ago if I saw a burn survivor I would, you know, you get a feeling of anxiety, you don’t wanna talk to them or make contact.”

Yet, despite these feelings and in line with our first hypothesis, the majority of our interviewees have emphasized that sympathy still tends to dominate stigmatization when a burn survivor reaches out for job search help through a preexisting social tie. One respondent, who leads and moderates several
burn survivor support groups, described his thought process behind his decision to help burn victims with their job search: “My belief is: What if I am the last person that this person is [asking for help]…[and] this person is about to give up. I don’t want to be that last person when it’s not a huge sacrifice for me to parcel out 15-30 minutes of my time. That person will be better for it, and I can get back that 30 minutes later in the evening.” As the above-quoted nonprofit leader summarized, “People look within themselves and that’s what creates the sympathetic [response]. Oh, look at what this person has to live with.”

Consistent with the experimental results, however, the extent of job search help provided seems to depend on the interplay between tie strength and the nature of the stigmatizing mark. On one hand, a common theme in our interviews was that a preexisting strong tie between a help seeker and a potential help giver often implies a greater willingness to provide assistance with the job search. As a male burn survivor who is now a social worker summarized, “It would take someone to know someone really well to know whether or not to, you know, refer them for a job.” The role of strong ties in providing referrals and advocating for the job candidate was particularly clear in the account of an interviewee who was a blameless victim in a severe burn accident as a child and lost most of his fingers as a result. Strong ties played a critical role in helping him find his first job, which involved manually assembling PC board layouts at a small electronics company—a position for which he was severely disadvantaged because it required the intense use of hands and fingers. While this survivor emphasized the role of strong ties in socially observable job search help, particularly referrals (see Hypothesis 2a), others also highlighted personal forms of job search assistance that strong ties may facilitate (see Hypothesis 2b). As the support coordinator of a large regional burn unit noted, “Do you need a new suit? Do you need a ride? Do you need help with your resume? Those are the things that…close friends do a huge amount of time.”

On the other hand, several respondents recognized that the effect of strong ties was often more complex, and their dark side surfaced in several interviews. A particularly important theme was that, in the wake of a burn accident, the close friends of a victim must face the reality that they are now closely connected to a severely stigmatized person. As a female social worker at a burn treatment unit explained, “For some close friends, it’s maybe paralyzing, and the relationship suffers… It’s a shock because you are
close to that person, and now your friend has these [burn] scars, and that can freeze you up… There is stigma, and for you, the friend—now suddenly you have to live with that, too. You’re the friend of that person…of a person who is now stigmatized.” Survivors’ accounts were consistent with this conclusion, emphasizing the potentially negative consequences of strong ties. As a male burn survivor noted, when it comes to providing “good referrals” for jobs, “the more somebody knows somebody, the worse off it is. Whereas a stranger wouldn’t know them and they’d start fresh.” Another adult male burn survivor described his own experience, noting that “for the friends…the closer they are to you, the more it affects them,” and that this might even lead to the termination of social support or even the tie itself. As this respondent explained, “One of my best friends, early on, he was there for me. But, after about a year or so of getting out of the hospital, as much as I reached out for him, he never contacted back… My only thought is that he is busy with work and busy with the two kids and just, maybe just discomfort… He is not comfortable.”

In particular, consistent with H2c and our experimental results, the majority of the helping professionals we interviewed recognized that the dark side of strong ties is most likely to surface when a burn victim bears responsibility for the injury. For example, the previously quoted support group coordinator, who has nearly thirty years of experience with burn survivors, stressed that attribution of responsibility for the mark—for example, whether it results from blameless action or illegal and self-destructive activities—is a powerful determinant of how much social support will be provided through strong ties:

There is a huge amount of stigma…that is perceived with the cause of the accident when it comes to adult burn injuries. That the families and closest friends…If there was something illegal or suicidal about what happened to you, don’t count on them to visit you in the burn unit. Don’t count on them to help you out afterwards.

This interviewee suggested that, for strong-tie contacts, concerns about stigma by association loom large. For example, when hospitals contact the close friends of a burn survivor with an injury for which they bear responsibility, friends often downplay or outright deny their close association with the survivor:
“They won’t be their friends anymore. ‘No, we are not friends anymore.’ Or they say things like ‘Oh you’re mistaken. We’ve never had a really close relationship.’ Or ‘Oh we severed ties months ago’... ‘That’s mistaken information. I haven’t seen him in weeks or months’.” Being identified as a close friend of person responsible for their own mark often triggers protestations rather than social support.

In sum, the narratives and examples that emerged from the interviews were broadly consistent with our experimental results. Both survivors’ and helpers’ accounts pointed to deep tensions between stigma and sympathy, suggesting a complex interplay between tie strength and responsibility for acquiring a mark in determining whether social capital activation occurs. In the context of preexisting social relationships, sympathy often dominated, and strong ties tended to provide more help; yet the double-edged nature of strong ties was also evident, suggesting that these ties may function not only as channels of social support but also as potential conduits of stigma by association.

**DISCUSSION**

The dynamics and outcomes of job search have generated considerable and unwavering interest over the past several decades, and this trend is likely to continue. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) reports, for example, that Americans, on average, engage in eleven job searches between the ages of 18 and 46. Understanding job searches is thus critical to understanding inequality and the status attainment process. Our goal was to provide new insight into the job search process by clarifying important questions regarding the role of stigma, sympathy, and tie strength in social capital activation.

Reactions to the stigmatized in American society are inherently ambivalent because they are imbued with competing cultural values (Katz et al. 1986). This ambiguity stems from the simultaneous effect of, on one hand, egalitarian values and, on the other, individualism based on the Protestant ethic. As Crocker et al. (1998, p. 512) noted, “The value of egalitarianism fosters sympathy for the stigmatized, identification with their needs and aspirations, and efforts to improve their lot... The value of individualism fosters negative affect resulting from the beliefs that the stigmatized are responsible for their own fate, dependent, insufficiently self-supporting, and unwilling to work to improve their own
situation.” Our study helps unpack this ambivalence by identifying the conditions under which sympathy or stigmatization will prevail in social capital activation in the labor market.

Our first core result is that, subject to some scope conditions, sympathy dominates in social capital activation decisions in the job search context. Indeed, it is precisely the presence of a potentially stigmatizing mark that triggers sympathy. This is an important finding because, as noted above, the baseline expectation of stigmatization is intuitively compelling and plausible. Prior work, for example, has highlighted potential help givers’ intense worries about assisting a potentially stigmatized person (Smith 2005) and demonstrated that mere association with a stigmatized person, or even just sitting next to such a person, can produce courtesy stigma (Hebl and Mannix 2003, Pontikes et al. 2010). Much of Goffman’s ([1963] 1986) classic work on stigma leads to the same expectation, predicting that a mark of social disgrace will readily disqualify its bearer from social acceptance and suggesting that courtesy stigma will be easily inflicted on the stigmatized person’s associates. Against this compelling null hypothesis, we have proposed and found support for an alternative hypothesis in the context of job search help within a preexisting social relationship.

An important aspect of our study for research on the social psychology of stigma is that we have examined the effect of a stigmatizing mark on helping behaviors within an existing social relationship, rather than in interactions between strangers, as is common in much prior research. These are two fundamentally distinct social contexts, and the influence of stigmatizing marks is unlikely to operate in parallel ways across them. When interacting with strangers, for example, as a job applicant or customer, a stigmatizing mark often leads to negative reactions. As a college graduate with cerebral palsy, quoted by Goffman ([1963] 1986, p. 34), put it, “I was often bogged down by the medieval prejudices and superstitions of the business world. Looking for a job was like standing before a firing squad.” Similarly, Hochschild (1983, pp. 51-52) noted that customers bearing a stigmatizing mark may be even seen as spoiling the experience of other customers, such as other passengers on airplanes, for whom airlines strive to create a welcoming “stage set” on board: “At Delta Airlines, for example, flight attendants in training are advised that they can prevent the boarding of certain types of passengers—a passenger with ‘severe
facial scars,’ for example…. The bearer of a ‘severe facial scar,’ then, is not deemed a good prop.’” The effects of such marks, however, may be quite different in the presence of a preexisting social tie, and we began to explore these effects and how they depend on tie strength and the nature of the mark in question.

Our second set of findings pertains to the complex role of tie strength in social capital activation. Much has been written about the benefits of strong ties in interpersonal help behaviors, particularly resource sharing (e.g., Festinger et al. 1950, Granovetter 1983, Krackhardt 1992, Seibert et al. 2001, Wellman and Wortley 1990). Thus a compelling baseline hypothesis is that strong-tie contacts will generally provide more help. Strong ties serve as effective conduits of not only social support but also stigma by association. Whereas Smith (2007) has importantly shown one mechanism—concern about a job seeker’s human capital and its potential consequences for the help provider’s job reputation—that can dampen the tendency to provide assistance to strong ties, we propose and show support for an alternative mechanism—identity stain that is unrelated to a job seeker’s human capital—that produces the same effect. Our results suggest another way that those who may be in the greatest need of help—those who face social exclusion and rejection due to stigma for which they are considerably responsible—may receive relatively limited socially observable help from their closest, most trusted associates.

Beyond investigating the questions that motivated our study, our results suggest several additional implications for organizational research on job search, labor markets, and social support. First, our research complements an important sociological literature on the role of social networks in job searches and referrals, one stratifying mechanism of entry to organizations and occupations. While much of this work has focused on the consequences of job referrals through informal social networks (e.g., Castilla 2005, Fernandez et al. 2000), we illuminate an earlier part of the causal chain, exploring why or why not social capital activation choices lead to referrals and other job search assistance in the first place.

Second, our finding that sympathy tends to dominate stigma when people activate ties for a job seeker in their network has important implications for audit research that examines the next stage in the job search process: the submission of an application and résumé in response to a job posting. The audit literature has shown that potentially stigmatizing marks—such as being openly gay (Tilesik 2011) or
having a criminal record (Pager 2003, Pager et al. 2009)—can lead to severe discrimination against job applicants. Yet our work suggests that, under certain conditions, such marks trigger more help at the pre-application stage of the job search process, which may provide some stigmatized job seekers with more referrals, more information about vacancies, or more personal help than what is available to their non-stigmatized counterparts. Thus sympathetic responses within an existing social relationship at the pre-application stage may help partially compensate for discrimination experienced at the subsequent, application-screening stage. To what extent this offsets the effects of discrimination by employers is, of course, an empirical question, but this finding suggests that interpretations of audit studies should take into account potential differences in job seekers’ access to information and referrals through informal social contacts. While stigmatizing marks have negative consequences at the formal application phase, their influence is far from obvious at the pre-application stage.

Third, the distinction we draw between personal and socially observable help has important consequences for research in medical sociology and the sociology of disasters on the dynamics of social support following disruptive life events, such as a mental illness diagnosis (Perry and Pescosolido 2012), divorce (Milardo 1987), or a natural disaster (Hurlbert et al. 2000). This line of work has shown how the size and nature of support networks changes across stages of a person’s adjustment to disruptive events (Pescosolido 1991, 1992, 2006). For example, Perry and Pescosolido (2012) report evidence of substantial attrition in the networks of people diagnosed with a mental illness but also find that their networks become more functional over time in that they provide broader forms of support. Yet the forms of support that this literature has typically considered—for example, listening, providing emotional support, and helping with chores and transportation—are mostly personal in nature. Future work in this vein should also consider how the provision of socially observable help (e.g., help that requires the activation of social ties to third parties) might change in response to disruptive events. Our findings suggest that, when people experience disruptive events that cause them to bear a stigmatizing mark, courtesy stigma concerns arising from identity stains may make their support networks less functional.
Finally, it is worth emphasizing that we imposed key scope conditions on our theory and bounded the empirical test so that we could cleanly identify the effects of sympathy and stigmatization on social capital activation: (a) the mark had no consequences for a job seeker’s human capital; (b) the job seeker used in the experiment was an average-looking white male; and (c) the mark was accidentally acquired. We see tremendous promise in future research that seeks to understand the implications of relaxing each of these conditions. For example, does the tendency to sympathize with a job seeker increase or decrease when the mark he bears also makes him less capable of performing a desired job role? How do race, gender, class, and the intersection of the three amplify or dampen the double edge of strong ties effect? How do social capital activation choices vary across different forms of stigma, such as obesity, history of incarceration, minority sexual orientation, or involvement in work that is deemed to be socially unworthy? Our theory lays out a framework for studying these issues, highlighting the tensions inherent in the dynamics of stigma, sympathy, and social capital activation, and our empirical test provides an important baseline against which to evaluate these dynamics.
REFERENCES


FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1:
Images Used in the Experiment
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<td>2.21</td>
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<td>2. Personal Help - Minutes Spent</td>
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<td>3. Burn Scar</td>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.08</td>
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<td>6. Strong Tie</td>
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<td>7. Age</td>
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N = 510
Table 2: Regressions of Socially Observable and Personal Help on the Presence of a Burn Scar (H1)

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<th>Model 1: Socially Observable Help (Poisson)</th>
<th>Model 2: Personal Help (OLS)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Burn Scar</td>
<td>.276** (1.07)</td>
<td>5.403* (2.564)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.568*** (.094)</td>
<td>27.678*** (2.013)</td>
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<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>6.717</td>
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<td>.036</td>
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* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001
Table 3: Regressions of Socially Observable and Personal Help on Tie Strength (H2a, H2b)

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Model 3: Socially Observable Help (Poisson)</th>
<th>Model 4: Personal Help (OLS)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strong Tie</td>
<td>.233** (0.088)</td>
<td>8.401** (2.586)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.663*** (0.064)</td>
<td>27.580*** (1.495)</td>
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<td>( \chi^2 )</td>
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<td>prob&gt; ( \chi^2 )</td>
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<td>.001</td>
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* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001
Table 4: Regressions of Socially Observable and Personal Help on Responsibility for the Burn Scar, Tie Strength, and Interaction Effects (H2c)

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<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>.264* (.118)</td>
<td>.310 (.191)</td>
<td>4.086 (.2815)</td>
<td>5.914 (3.709)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Responsibility</td>
<td>.294* (.117)</td>
<td>.012 (.188)</td>
<td>6.899* (3.112)</td>
<td>5.923 (3.469)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Tie</td>
<td>.235** (.087)</td>
<td>.081 (.195)</td>
<td>8.389** (2.566)</td>
<td>9.036* (3.925)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility × Strong Tie</td>
<td>-.103 (-.087)</td>
<td>-.103 (-.087)</td>
<td>-3.691 (-3.925)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Tie</td>
<td>(.240)</td>
<td>(.195)</td>
<td>(.240)</td>
<td>(.623)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Responsibility × Strong Tie</td>
<td>.471* (.234)</td>
<td>.471* (.234)</td>
<td>1.869 (1.632)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.439*** (.115)</td>
<td>.525** (.165)</td>
<td>23.301*** (2.314)</td>
<td>22.964*** (2.575)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>11.366</td>
<td>23.697</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prob &gt; $\chi^2$</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001
ENDNOTES

i Falk (2001) uses the terms “existential” and “achieved” to describe differences in the degree of responsibility a person bears for acquiring a mark. Existential marks are those for which a person bears no responsibility, while achieved marks are those for which a person is responsible. We make the same conceptual distinction but opt not to use Falk’s terms because their meaning can be ambiguous in certain contexts.

ii Other potentially stigmatizing marks, such as a history of unworthy work (Newman 1999) or obesity (Ferraro and Kelley-Moore 2003), are difficult to study in a vignette-based experiment of this kind because manipulations of the stigmatizing mark often simultaneously send unintended human capital signals to subjects.

iii Although we anticipate that feelings of sympathy would also exist in cases where the stigmatizing mark can affect job performance, the choice to activate social capital in such cases would also be influenced by concerns about the quality of the match between the job seeker and the position he is seeking. This assumption allows us to conceptually and empirically focus on the effects on social capital activation of a job seeker bearing a stigmatizing mark—indeed, independent of human capital considerations related to that mark.

iv We do not hypothesize a main effect of responsibility for acquiring a mark because—unlike prior studies that have examined how this distinction leads to a sympathetic or negative response among strangers (e.g., Weiner et al. 1988)—our focus is on helping behaviors within a preexisting relationship. Whereas strangers tend to have a negative response to a mark for which the person is responsible, a past history of exchange might serve to mute this response in the case of a preexisting relationship (Kollock 1994, Uehara 1990). Indeed, concerns about the negative response from strangers could lead the help provider to adopt a particularly sympathetic stance toward a stigmatized job seeker with whom she has a prior relationship. Thus, in the context of an existing relationship, the main effect of responsibility for acquiring a mark is conceptually ambiguous.

v We recruited interview participants by contacting two burn centers and three nonprofit organizations that assist burn victims in two North American cities. In total, we interviewed 20 participants deeply familiar with burn accidents, burn injuries, and the associated stigma: 12 adult burn survivors and 8 support providers, such as burn victims’ relatives, social workers, and nurses who assist burn survivors. Nearly all participants were employed at the time of the interview. Our interviews were conducted in person (13 interviews) or by phone (7 interviews) and were typically 60-90 minutes long.

vi The net effect of “discredited” versus “discreditable” stigma is also conceptually ambiguous. On one hand, a discredited (i.e., always visible) mark might be expected to amplify the positive response due to sympathy for the stigmatized person’s plight and hence lead subjects to activate more ties. On the other hand, it might also be expected to intensify concerns about courtesy stigma and lead subjects to activate fewer ties.

vii Comparable results to the ones reported below were obtained using negative binomial regression models.