UBER'ING AWAY STIGMA: THE IMPACT OF SHARING TECHNOLOGY ON STIGMATIZED OCCUPATIONS

Overview

Stigma is a negative social evaluation (Devers et al., 2009) that is "deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1963: 4), and has been applied to individuals, organizations, industries, and occupations. Within the organizational literature, stigma research has emphasized how organizations must manage the impact of stigma on social evaluations (Blithe & Wolfe, 2017; Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2014; Lyons et al., 2017; Roulet, 2015; Toyoki & Brown, 2014; Tracey & Phillips, 2016). Central to this understanding of stigma is that it sticks and spreads. That is, an occupation or group that has been categorized as "dirty" or stigmatized often remains so over time, and this stigma will transfer to those who enter or affiliate with the stigmatized occupation or group (Goffman, 1963; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Stone et al., 1992). Thus, current theorizing predicts that new entrants to an occupation will become just as stigmatized as those currently in the occupation, and that this stigma is likely to persist.

However, at the organizational level, some scholars have recently revealed how stigmatized organizations can reverse perceptions of stigma (Hampel & Tracey, 2017). In turn, while it is reasonable to consider that perceptions of occupational stigma might evolve, this possibility has been under-researched. Even less explored has been the idea of the avoidance of stigma transfer. Recently, these gaps in the literature have become concerning as the emergence of the sharing economy and the new entrants to existing occupations and fields it has triggered, raise questions regarding the accuracy of these core assumptions about occupational stigma. For example, can new entrants to stigmatized occupations avoid the stigma existing workers face when they do so as part of the sharing economy movement? We suggest that this surfaces the question that we seek to address in this paper: *how do technology-driven changes, specifically those driven by sharing technologies, influence stigmatized occupations?*

In this paper, we aim to answer this question via a qualitative (Locke, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994) case study of the emergence of sharing technologies and their impact on taxi-driving, an occupation stigmatized by members of society (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007) and workers themselves (Turchick-Hakak, 2014). Specifically, we study the context of Uber's entrance into and legalization in the taxi-driving occupation in Toronto, Canada, and draw on a rich collection of interviews (n=55) with drivers (Uber and taxi) and media articles (n=976) covering a 4-year period (2013-2016) to examine how sharing technology, and the new entrants it triggers, impacts existing perceptions of stigma in this occupation.

Summary of findings

Our analysis revealed that technology-driven change embraced by new entrants to a stigmatized occupation first created *categorical ambiguity,* then enabled *stigma deflection* by the new entrants (Uber drivers), the *exacerbation of social evaluations* of incumbents (taxi drivers), and the *occupational stratification* of a stigmatized occupation. At the most basic level, our findings illustrate how Uber and taxi drivers received two different social evaluations even though they conducted the same work. Specifically, we highlight how the categorical ambiguity of new entrants enabled stigma deflection and the exacerbation of social evaluations, which led to the emergence of a stigma faultline between Uber and taxi-drivers that was reinforced by partitioned regulatory reforms and resulted in occupational stratification—that is, segmentation that created a within-occupation social strata and differentiation in a homogeneous occupation.

Implications for theory

Overall, our study helps to identify the mechanisms underlying stigma deflection, the exacerbation of social evaluations, and technology-driven occupational stratification. More specifically, however, in addressing this apparent anomaly, we advance research on stigma by building theory on the conditions under which stigma may not transfer within a stigmatized occupation. Our findings enable us to theorize why and how technology-driven disruptions, such as sharing technologies, can enable new entrants to a stigmatized occupation to deflect the transfer of stigma to themselves, and simultaneously exacerbate the stigma facing existing workers. Furthermore, our findings reveal that this deflection of stigma by new entrants and the exacerbation of stigma for existing workers results in the stratification of the occupation, leading to heterogeneity in the social evaluations made on occupational members.

Existing research on stigma suggests that when a group, industry, or occupation is stigmatized, new entrants will become stigmatized by affiliation, association and proximity to the stigmatized occupation, because stigma is sticky and transfers easily (Bergman & Chalkley, 2007; Goffman, 1963; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). However, our findings indicate that stigma may not always transfer to those entering a stigmatized occupation, and that in some cases, new entrants may be shielded from stigma transfer, deflecting the stigma attached to an occupation. In this way, this paper is one of the first to point to conditions under which stigma may not transfer to those who become affiliated or associated with a stigmatized occupation or group.

At the same time, our research, more broadly, allows us to contribute to the broader literature on social evalutions by revealing mechanisms through which alternate social evaluations for actors engaged in the same activity may emerge (e.g., Zavyalova et al., 2017). Similarly, it allows us to contributes to the literature on technology-driven change in occupations (e.g., Barley, 1986; Nelson & Irwin, 2014), which has tended to focus on socially valued occupations. Lastly, our research contributes to the emerging literature that seeks to better understand the sharing economy and its impact on the nature of work and employment, business, and existing scholarship more generally (e.g., Barley et al., 2017; Davis, 2013; 2016; Sundararajan, 2016).

References

Ashforth, B., & Kreiner, G. (1999). '"How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity'. *Academy of Management Review,* **24**, 413-434.

Ashforth, B., Kreiner, G., Clark, M., & Fugate, M. (2007). 'Normalizing dirty work: Managerial tactics for countering occupational taint'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **50**, 149-174.

Barley, S. (1986). 'Technology as an occasion for structuring: Evidence from observations of CT scanners and the social order of radiology departments'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **29**, 78-108.

Barley, S., Bechky, B., & Milliken, F. (2017). 'The changing nature of work: Careers, identities and work lives in the 21st century'. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, **3**, 111-115.

Bergman, M., & Chalkley, K. (2007). '"Ex" marks the spot: The stickiness of dirty work and other removed stigmas'. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, **12**, 251-265.

Blithe, S., & Wolfe, A. (2017). 'Work-life management in legal prostitution: Stigma and lockdown in Nevada's brothels'. *Human Relations*, **70**, 725-750.

Davis, G. (2013). 'After the corporation'. *Politics & Society*, **41**, 283-308.

Davis, G. (2016). *The vanishing American corporation: Navigating the hazards of a new economy*. Ann Arbor, MI: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Devers, C., Dewett, T., Mishina, Y., & Belsito, C. (2009). 'A general theory of organizational stigma'. *Organization Science*, **20**, 154-171.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes of the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Hampel, C., & Tracey, P. (2017). 'How organizations move from stigma to legitimacy: The case of Cook's Travel Agency in Victorian Britain'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **60**, 2175-2207.

Helms, W., & Patterson, K. (2014). 'Eliciting acceptance for "illicit" organizations: The positive implications of stigma for MMA organizations'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **57**, 1453-1484.

Hudson, B., & Okhuysen, G. (2009). 'Not with a ten-foot pole: Core stigma, stigma transfer, and improbable persistence of men's bathhouses'. *Organization Science*, **20**, 134-153.

Hudson, B., & Okhuysen, G. A. (2014). 'Taboo topics: Structural barriers to the study of organizational stigma'. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, **23**, 242-253.

Locke, K. (2001). *Grounded theory in management research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Lyons, B., Pek, S., & Wessel, J. (2017). 'Toward a "sunlit path": Stigma identity management as a source of localized social change through interaction'. *Academy of Management Review*, **42**, 618-636.

Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). *An expanded sourcebook: Qualitative data analysis* 2nd edition. London: SAGE.

Morozov, E. (2014). 'Our innovation fetish'. *New Republic*, **245**, 8-9.

Nelson, A., & Irwin, J. (2014). 'Defining what we do-all over again: occupational identity, technological change and the librarian/internet-search relationship'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **57**, 892-928.

Roulet, T. (2015). 'What good is Wall Street? Institutional contradiction and the diffusion of the stigma over the finance industry'. *Journal of Business Ethics*, **130**, 389-402.

Stone, E., Stone, D., & Dipboye, R. (1992). 'Stigmas in organizations: Race, handicaps, and physical unattractiveness'. In K. Kelley (Ed.), *Advances in Psychology*. Amsterdam, NL: Elsevier, **78**, 385-475.

Sundararajan, A. (2016). *The Sharing Economy: The End of Employment and the Rise of Crowd-based Capitalism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Toyoki, S., & Brown, A. (2014). 'Stigma, identity and power: Managing stigmatized identities through discourse'. *Human Relations*, **67**, 715-737.

Tracey, P., & Phillips, N. (2016). 'Managing the consequences of organizational stigmatization: Identity work in a social enterprise'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **59**, 740-765.

Turchick-Hakak, L. (2014). 'Professionals in disguise: Identity work in situations of downward occupational transition'. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, **1**, 17144.

Zavyalova, A., Pfarrer, M., & Reger, R. (2017). 'Celebrity and infamy? The consequences of media narratives about organizational identity'. *Academy of Management Review*, **42**, 461-480.