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Erasmus University Rotterdam
Making Minds Matter

ORGANIZATIONS AS STAGES: A DRAMATURGICAL THEORY OF THE SOCIETAL INTEGRATION OF STIGMATIZED GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

This paper theorizes how organizations enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups. Drawing on Goffman's (1956, 1963) relational perspective on stigma and his dramaturgical metaphors, we conceptualize organizations as "stages" on which stigmatized groups are presented to diverse audiences. We identify two fundamental forms of staging – concealing and normalizing – through which organizations can reduce sanctions from stigmatizing audiences and elicit acceptance among more supportive ones, thereby ultimately enabling societal integration. Our model specifically specifies the structural antecedents that shape the likelihood of each form of staging, offering a nuanced understanding of when organizations adopt them as well as the tensions that may arise from doing so. Based on this, we extend research on organizations' management of stigma by advancing a dramaturgical theory of the societal integration of stigmatized groups. Whereas prior work has largely assumed that managing the stigmatized attributes of groups is central (and often sufficient) for their broader integration, we demonstrate that integration ultimately depends on the management of audiences and must therefore be understood as an inherently audience-focused process.

Keywords: Audiences; Dramaturgy; Organizations; Societal integration; Stigma

INTRODUCTION

A growing number of organizations are seeking to interact with stigmatized groups, often as employees, customers, or clients (Mitchell, Maley, Boyle, & Gu, 2024; Selling & Wettstein, 2025; Wang & Tracey, 2024). While such efforts were historically concentrated in the domain of nonprofits and social enterprises – for example, Goodwill Industries, which provides jobs and affordable clothing to stigmatized groups, helping them to feel accepted in their communities and society at large (Gibbons & Hazy, 2017) – growing awareness of stigma's harmful effects has led organizations across a wide range of sectors to engage more directly with these groups (Ghumman, Ryan, & Park, 2024). Companies such as Walgreens and JPMorganChase exemplify this shift: Walgreens' Retail Employees with Disabilities Initiative trains and employs individuals with disabilities (Walgreens, 2025) while JPMorganChase's Second Chance Agenda reduces employment barriers for people with criminal records (JPMorganChase, 2025). Other organizations focus on developing products (Srivastava, Satyavageeswaran, Dubelaar, & Nanarpuzha, 2024) and services (George, Chaturvedi, Corbishley, & Atun, 2024) tailored to the needs of stigmatized groups. Starbucks, for example, has implemented its "Third Place" policies to create welcoming store environments for all customers, including those experiencing homelessness (Choi, Guzman, & Small, 2024). Meanwhile, Ben & Jerry's integrates advocacy into its branding, championing causes such as racial justice, LGBTQIA+ rights, and refugee support (Ben & Jerry's, 2025).

While these initiatives vary in their motivations – whether social, economic, or political – and scope – from employing members of stigmatized groups to actively contesting stigma – they collectively reflect growing organizational engagement in supporting stigmatized groups, mitigating stigma's negative effects, and fostering societal integration.

Curiously, however, the scholarship that has examined these kinds of organizational initiatives has largely focused on how *organizations themselves* can navigate the challenges and (potential) downsides of engaging with stigmatized groups (Hampel & Tracey, 2017; Helms & Patterson, 2014). That is, prior work has primarily explored how organizations engage with stigma in ways that legitimize and create acceptance for their own goals, practices, and services in the context in which they operate. For example, research has shown how organizations can co-opt the stigma attached to the groups they interact with to educate others and garner acceptance for their initiatives (Helms & Patterson, 2014). A specific example is Tracey and Phillips' (2016) study on how a UK social enterprise leveraged the stigma associated with migrant workers to win backing from local stakeholders for its community development work. Yet, an organization's ability to secure legitimacy and successfully garner public approval for its own work with stigmatized groups does not necessarily translate into tangible benefits for the *stigmatized groups* themselves (Rao, Elshafei, Nguyen, Hatzenbuehler, Frey, & Go, 2019). Indeed, even when organizations are praised by the general public for their advocacy, stigmatized groups often continue to face negative evaluations and sanctions, making societal integration difficult to achieve (Hein & Ansari, 2022).

This disconnect exposes an important oversight in the literature: while much attention has been paid to how organizations navigate the stigma of the groups they engage with for their own benefit (Hudson, Patterson, Roulet, Helms, & Elsbach, 2022; Zhang, Wang, Toubiana, & Greenwood, 2021), less attention has been given to how organizations engage with stigmatized groups in ways that promote such groups' societal integration, i.e., the groups' own benefit. In particular, despite Goffman's (1963) original focus on how stigmatized groups and those who interact with them form bonds that enable integration in various settings, there remains a lack of

theoretical development around how *organizations* can enable the societal integration of the stigmatized groups they interact with.

Addressing this oversight, i.e., moving beyond literature that primarily focuses on how organizations leverage their relationship to stigmatized groups for themselves to instead theorizing how organizations can intentionally and purposefully benefit those groups, we argue, requires a shift in how scholars think about managing stigma. Building on Goffman's (1963) insights that the integration of stigmatized groups depends on the formation of generative relationships between them and societal audiences, we argue for a shift towards a *relational* approach to stigma management, one that centers on how organizations can enable stigmatized groups to "pass as normal" among diverse audiences – i.e., among those "diverse but key individuals and organizations with whom (…) actors must interact or risk the withdrawal of their necessary support" (Helms & Patterson, 2014: 1456) – in ways that promote such groups' societal integration. This echoes one of Goffman's (1963: 3) central insights, that a "language of relationships" is essential for understanding and navigating stigma, because stigma does not stem from an attribute that is inherently negative but from how audiences evaluate it. Audiences, therefore, are central to addressing stigma and enabling integration.

To this end, we build upon Goffman's (1956, 1963) core insights that the integration of stigmatized groups into society is a relational process and develop a *dramaturgical theory* of how organizations "stage," i.e., present, stigmatized groups to societal audiences in ways that shape their integration. Such audiences may be stigmatizing and hostile or more supportive and sympathetic towards the stigmatized and exist both within and outside of organizations (Helms, Patterson, & Hudson, 2019). We argue that a dramaturgical lens is essential for conceptualizing

whether and how organizations can enable such groups' integration, viewing organizations as "stages" on which these groups are presented to stigmatizing and/or more supportive audiences.

Specifically, we theorize that such staging can take on two primary forms: *concealment*, which "cloaks" and shields groups from exposure to stigmatizing audiences, reducing their vulnerability to social and economic sanctions, and *normalization*, which seeks to "spotlight" and validate stigmatized groups publicly, eliciting acceptance among more sympathetic and supportive audiences. By theorizing the antecedents that give rise to these forms of staging and their consequences, we offer a structural framework for understanding how organizations enable the societal integration of the stigmatized groups with whom they have ties.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

ORGANIZATIONS AND THE SOCIETAL INTEGRATION OF THE STIGMATIZED

To build theory on how organizations

[1] can enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups, we adopt a relational perspective on stigma. This view is rooted in Goffman's (1963) foundational argument that stigma is not a fixed attribute of individuals but is constituted through social interactions and relationships with others in society. At its core, navigating stigma is therefore not about the *attribute* itself but about how different *audiences* perceive it and decide whether to stigmatize, sanction, or accept it. As Goffman (1963: 3) noted:

> *The term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself.*

Building on this foundation, recent organizational scholarship has emphasized that a relational understanding of stigma requires attention not only to how organizations manage attributes of stigmatized groups, but to the diverse audiences inside and outside of organizational boundaries that may stigmatize or support them. As Aranda, Helms, Patterson, Roulet, & Hudson (2023) note, organizations operate within a complex relational terrain in which stigma is shaped through ongoing interactions between stigmatized groups and a variety of audiences – both those that are more stigmatizing and those that are more supportive of groups.

Conceptualizing the Societal Integration of Stigmatized Groups

To theorize how organizations enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups, it is essential to first clarify what we mean by *societal integration*. We define societal integration as the process through which stigmatized groups – i.e., groups whose attributes are socially devalued or morally discredited (Goffman, 1963) – are able to participate in social life without experiencing exclusion, marginalization, or disproportionate sanctioning. At its core, societal integration is thus about enabling stigmatized groups to "pass as normal" (Goffman, 1963) in everyday interactions, both inside and outside of organizations. When groups cannot pass as normal and face discrimination, this undermines their ability to participate fully in society (Link & Phelan, 2001).

From this perspective, societal integration involves two interrelated components. First, it requires a *reduction in sanctioning* by stigmatizing audiences – those who perceive certain attributes or groups as deviant and respond through labelling and sanctioning (Aranda et al., 2023). Reducing these sanctions is critical, as social and economic penalties, such as discriminatory hiring, denial of housing, or exclusion from public services, directly influence stigmatized groups' access to essential resources and societal participation (Morris, 2005; Schram, Soss, Fording, & Houser, 2009). For example, a key marker of integration is when formerly incarcerated individuals

can secure stable employment and interact with colleagues and external actors without being socially ostracized for their criminal record (LeBel, 2012). This reflects a reduction in sanctioning and a shift towards greater integration through being able to pass as normal. Mitigating hostile, stigmatizing audiences' capacity to punish thus opens the door to fuller societal integration.

Second, societal integration also depends on *eliciting acceptance* among generally more supportive audiences – those who perceive certain attributes as less problematic and regard groups holding them as broadly worthy of social and economic exchange and inclusion (Aranda et al., 2023). As prior work suggests, experiences of integration are rarely achieved by targeting highly stigmatizing audiences and pushing them to accept stigmatized groups because their entrenched biases are extremely difficult to alter in ways that enable meaningful integration (Corrigan, 2016; Morgan, Reavley, Ross, San Too, & Jorm, 2018). Instead, integration is more likely enabled when organizations mobilize more supportive audiences and shift them from a passive sympathy and tolerance to an active acceptance (Helms & Patterson, 2014). As a result of the eliciting of such acceptance, more supportive audiences may start to express their endorsement of groups more publicly, facilitate stigmatized groups' inclusion in community events, or engage in other practices that visibly affirm the rights and worth of stigmatized groups (Heijnders & Van Der Meij, 2006). For example, when a company publicly celebrates the contributions of LGBTQIA+ employees during Pride Month, it signals a normalization of their presence, positioning the group as valuable and deserving of broader inclusion and equipping supportive audiences to become more vocal allies. Such acceptance is essential because it empowers stigmatized groups by affirming their identities and social worth (Shih, 2004).

Together, these two processes – sanction reduction and the eliciting of acceptance – constitute the dual pathways through which societal integration can unfold by allowing stigmatized

groups to "pass as normal". Crucially, a relational perspective highlights that integration is ultimately shaped not (only) by the inherent nature and management of a group's attribute but by how *different audiences* are managed and thus come to perceive and evaluate stigmatized groups. Thus, while organizations may seek to support groups, if these efforts do not engage and help to manage audiences from which many of the consequences of stigma stem, societal integration will be difficult and may even be rendered futile. The relational lens thus places audiences and their perspectives at the center of understanding stigma management and determining whether organization efforts to integrate stigmatized groups into society succeed.

Importantly, organizations and stigmatized groups rarely encounter homogeneous settings composed of entirely stigmatizing or supportive audiences (Aranda et al., 2023). Rather, they operate within fragmented environments where both distinct stigmatizing and more supportive audiences coexist, meaning societies are neither completely "for" nor "against" a certain group. As such, societal integration should be understood as a dynamic, ongoing process of navigating simultaneous exposure to both stigmatizing and more supportive audiences. As Goffman (1963) noted in his account of "mixed contacts," interactions involving the stigmatized often occur in settings where divergent audience perspectives co-occur, creating tension and complexity. It is precisely within these ambiguous relational environments that organizations can play a powerful role – not only in trying to manage their own standing among audiences as a result of interacting with stigmatized groups, but in promoting more inclusive and enduring forms of societal integration for the stigmatized.

Understanding the Management of Groups' Stigma

Building on the preceding observations, we argue that theory on how organizations enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups must shift towards how *organizations* engage with

the distinct audiences in their contexts – both those that stigmatize and those more inclined to be supportive of stigmatized groups. Given the frequent, simultaneous presence of such audiences in society (Aranda et al., 2023; Goffman, 1963), achieving integration ultimately requires conceptualizing how organizations can reduce or evade the sanctioning of groups by stigmatizing audiences and promote greater acceptance among more sympathetic and supportive ones.

As discussed above, organizational research has often focused narrowly on how organizations manage *their own* exposure to stigma and its implications (positive or negative) when engaging with stigmatized groups. This work has identified two predominant patterns: first, organizations hiding stigmatized attributes to limit detection and avoid sanctions (e.g., Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009) and second, organizations strategically reframing attributes to garner acceptance (e.g., Hampel & Tracey, 2017). Put differently, while organizations employ a variety of stigma management tactics, most fall into two overarching approaches: *concealing* stigmatized attributes to avoid sanctions and *normalizing* stigmatized attributes to secure acceptance (Lavin & Barnes, 2020; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015). While much of the literature has, to date, examined these approaches in isolation, more recent work suggests that treating them as binary may be overly limiting. Helms and Patterson (2014: 1470), for example, argue that organizations may need to "speak out of both sides of the organizational mouth," i.e., engage in both approaches simultaneously to address divergent audience concerns and expectations. Yet, and crucial for our argument, while this emerging research points to how organizations may protect *themselves* from stigma through (a dual application of) these approaches, we know little about how they may utilize such approaches to enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups in complex audience environments.

From this, we suggest that understanding how organizations, through their actions, can enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups requires closer attention to the nature of

stigma itself. This is important because stigmas vary widely across settings – not only in how aware audiences are of them but also in how threatening they are perceived to be (Goffman, 1963). Additionally, from a relational perspective, stigmas differ in the degree to which they are institutionally protected or contested (Helms et al., 2019). While some stigmatized groups are openly subjected to prejudice and lack legal, regulatory, or professional safeguards, others benefit from partial or even substantial institutional protection (Hudson, 2008; Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009). For example, while homosexuality continues to be stigmatized in some circles in North America, it is protected by anti-discrimination laws, professional codes of conduct, and affirming media portrayals that depict the day-to-day lives and struggles of LGBTQIA+ communities.

Understanding how organizations can enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups therefore requires a more differentiated theoretical approach – one that accounts for the variation in the salience of stigmatized attributes associated with groups, reflects the degree to which stigmatized attributes of groups have been institutionalized, and considers how these factors shape organizational approaches for presenting, or, in other terms, staging, stigmatized groups to enable their societal integration. This matters because approaches that are effective for advancing the integration of one stigmatized group into a given context may fail or even backfire when applied to another in another context. It is therefore essential to conceptualize not only how organizations protect and support stigmatized groups in general, but also how they do so across diverse stigmatized groups that vary in both the salience and the institutionalization of their attributes across settings.

A Dramaturgical Lens on Organizational Efforts to Integrate the Stigmatized

Finally, to theorize how organizations enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups, we suggest that it is important to adopt a *dramaturgical lens*. Rooted in Goffman's (1956, 1963)

observations, a dramaturgical lens conceptualizes social life as a series of staged performances in which actors adopt roles to influence how others perceive them. For stigmatized groups, such performances often involve deliberate efforts to manage awareness and present their stigmatized attributes in ways that mitigate stigma and sanctions and allow them to pass as normal (McCormick, 2007; Ritti & Silver, 1986). In particular, Goffman (1956) showed how individuals "stage" themselves across different settings: the frontstage, where stigmatized individuals perform roles for specific audiences in order to give off impressions that align with audience expectations, and the backstage, where stigmatized individuals can step back from performances, relax, and express a more authentic self that may contradict their frontstage presentation.

While prior research has paid considerable attention to how the stigmatized themselves stage performances to manage stigma (Fawkes, 2015; O'Boyle, 2022), far less attention has been paid to how *organizations* shape these performances. This is a critical oversight because such performances that the stigmatized enact to navigate their attributes rarely occur in isolation. Rather, they often take place in and around organizations (Chemers & Ferris, 2008). In particular, a dramaturgical lens highlights that the "stage" on which these performances occur profoundly influences both how stigma is experienced by groups and how audiences construct and perceive it (Shulman, 2017). Staging thus matters because, as argued above, the negative consequences of stigma are not inherent to groups and their attributes (Hudson, 2008) but arise from audience evaluations (Markowitz & Engelman, 2017) meaning that although these evaluations are often deeply rooted (Corrigan, 2004) they can sometimes be manipulated (Hampel & Tracey, 2017).

To understand how organizations can enable the integration of stigmatized groups into society, we thus suggest that it is essential to theorize how organizations function as stages on which they present groups in ways that influence different audiences' perceptions. In so doing, we

suggest that it is crucial to extend Goffman's (1956) staging metaphor from the individual to the organizational level. For example, in some situations, organizations – such as in the context of sex-work (Wolfe & Blithe, 2015) or drug-injection sites (Lawrence, 2017) – may use their stage in order to "cloak" stigmatized groups, whether customers or employees, hiding them entirely from audiences in order to protect these groups from discrimination and other social sanctions. In other contexts, organizations may create stages on which stigmatized groups are "spotlighted" – openly presented and embraced – in order to promote such groups' acceptance (Goodrick, Bagdasarian, & Jarvis, 2022; Tracey & Phillips, 2016). For example, some organizations use their settings to publicize their ties to formerly incarcerated individuals by celebrating and promoting their positive contributions to organizational life and society as whole (Lodge, 2020). Overall, by extending the dramaturgical lens from individuals to organizations, in the theorizing that follows, we highlight the pivotal role that organizations play in staging the stigmatized and in shaping their societal integration.

A DRAMATURGICAL THEORY OF THE SOCIETAL INTEGRATION OF STIGMATIZED GROUPS THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL STAGING

We now develop an organizational staging theory of the societal integration of stigmatized groups. Here, we conceptualize *organizational staging* as the way in which organizations present stigmatized groups – those groups, such as employees, customers, or clients, with whom organizations have ties and who are subject to audience evaluation – to diverse audiences situated both inside and outside of their boundaries. This staging, so we suggest, involves efforts to make stigmatized groups "pass as normal" (Goffman, 1963) and unfolds in two analytically distinct ways: through *concealing* and *normalizing*.

Theorizing how and why different forms of staging enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups requires examining how organizations navigate the stigma of groups in their contexts. On the one hand, following our earlier arguments grounded in a relational perspective of stigma, integration often requires mitigating the risk of *sanctioning* by stigmatizing audiences – those who perceive certain attributes and groups as deviant (Aranda et al., 2023) – which can be achieved through concealing stigmatized groups from such stigmatizing audiences to reduce exposure. On the other hand, integration also hinges on *eliciting acceptance* from more sympathetic and supportive audiences – those who perceive certain attributes as less problematic and view groups holding them as (at least) worthy of social and economic exchange (Aranda et al., 2023) – which can be undertaken through normalization to build public support.

Building upon Goffman's (1956) insights into how stigmatized groups navigate social interactions through frontstage and backstage performances to "pass as normal," we now extend this dramaturgical metaphor to the organizational level. Just as stigmatized individuals may find themselves alternating between frontstage visibility or backstage privacy – but often must engage in both to manage stigma – we conceptualize concealing and normalizing as two distinct yet often co-occurring forms of organizational staging. Concealing and normalizing, in other words, lie on separate continua, grounded in different contextual pressures, which can frequently coincide. Concealing tends to arise in settings where minimizing exposure reduces risks, operating in a more protective (backstage) manner. It involves obscuring stigmatized groups to limit public awareness and scrutiny, thereby shielding the stigmatized group from harm (i.e., sanctions). This can include organizations downplaying associations with groups (i.e., through symbolic imagery), using generic rather than group identity-specific language when talking to or about them, or relocating interactions to less visible settings. Normalizing tends to emerge in settings that make it possible

to present stigmatized groups as accepted members of society. Here, these groups and organizational ties with them are framed as ordinary, legitimate, and worthwhile, shifting audiences' perceptions towards inclusion. For example, some organizations publicly highlight stigmatized groups, portraying them as productive but also, in a sense, unremarkable (Mak & Tsang, 2008; Otolok-Tanga, Atuyambe, Murphey, Ringheim, & Woldehanna, 2007). This form of staging can be seen in organizations such as Walgreens and JPMorganChase in the United States (JPMorganChase, 2025; Walgreens, 2025) or Virgin Trains and Timpson in the United Kingdom (Timpson, 2025; Virgin, 2018), all of which have presented such groups publicly.

Importantly, while we develop both forms of staging as conceptually distinct below, it is important to recognize that they are neither strictly orthogonal nor mutually exclusive in practice (a point we expand on in our discussion). We argue that because organizations often operate in environments where risks of sanction and opportunities for acceptance coexist (as, for example, demonstrated by Helms & Patterson's (2014) work on Mixed Martial Arts), their engagement in these distinct forms of staging is shaped by different underlying structural factors and that adopting one does not preclude the other. For example, an organization employing the long-term unemployed, an oft stigmatized group (Pinker, 2017), might publicly advocate for their acceptance (normalizing) while simultaneously withholding information about their backgrounds (concealing). Similarly, an employer of individuals recovering from substance addiction may avoid explicit disclosure of this group and their attribute (concealing) yet still normalize through anonymous testimonials or support for broader narratives about recovery and second chances.

Having outlined the forms of staging, we now turn to the question of what determines which form of staging organizations will engage in to present stigmatized groups. In other words, to build theory on whether and how organizations can integrate stigmatized groups into society,

we believe it crucial to theorize the factors that drive organizations to engage in concealing or normalizing. In what follows, we elaborate on each form of staging in turn, outlining the key *antecedents* that shape the organizational adoption of concealing or normalizing, and then explore their implications for the societal integration of stigmatized groups. Our overall theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Staging the Stigmatized: Concealing and its Antecedents

Many organizations avoid drawing attention to and thus conceal the stigmatized groups they have deliberate ties with. For example, those working with patients in methadone clinics (Broman, Pasman, Brown, Lister, Agius, & Resko, 2023), sex workers in brothels (Benoit, Jansson, Smith, & Flagg, 2018), or homeless individuals in temporary shelters (Okamoto & Peterson, 2022) often operate in unmarked buildings and avoid publicly advertising their services, physically shielding stigmatized groups from view. Others frame their initiatives under broader, less stigmatizing labels to avoid attention – for example, supporting drug users under the umbrella of "community health" rather than explicitly referencing addiction. Some organizations may even go further, not only concealing stigmatized groups but also obscuring any observable actions of stigmatized groups. Some hospitals, for example, design physical spaces or schedule appointments in ways that minimize public visibility and thereby protect patients from public scrutiny (Phelan et al., 2023). Similarly, organizations that offer stigmatized goods or services, such as in the recreational cannabis industry, often create discreet customer experiences to limit exposure for their clients (Lashley & Pollock, 2019). By contrast, concealing fails when stigmatized attributes

are unintentionally revealed or only partially masked by organizations. In such cases, organizational efforts to manage perceptions fall short, groups become visible in unintended ways, and backlash may follow. For example, an organization hiring formerly incarcerated individuals that does not contain these groups to the private sphere may inadvertently expose employees to critique and sanctioning, thereby undermining protection and opportunities for societal integration.

Building on prior research highlighting that stigmas and the extent to which societal audiences are aware of stigmatized groups vary broadly, we argue that concealment is primary shaped by the *salience of a group's stigma* in their broader social context (Craig & Richeson, 2016; Quinn et al., 2014). A group's stigma is salient when the corresponding stigmatizable attribute is noticeable and viewed as meaningful enough to trigger judgment and concern. Because stigma reflects a negative social evaluation, greater salience heightens awareness of a group's (perceived) undesirable traits and increases the likelihood of sanctions (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2015). Thus, when stigma is highly salient, organizations are more likely to conceal. By contrast, when stigma is less salient, audiences within and outside of organizations may be less aware of or attuned to the stigma of groups. In such cases, organizations may still avoid openly promoting their engagement with such groups but will feel less urgency to engage in proactive concealment. In sum, when stigma is salient, organizations' immediate concern is often protective. Concealing serves as a pragmatic way to reduce risk and shield stigmatized groups from the externalities of negative evaluations, thereby enabling integration.

To deepen our theorization of concealing as a form of staging, we conceptualize the factors that make up stigma's salience. Anchoring our rational in Goffman's (1963) work on stigma, which highlights how different societal audiences evaluate the nature of a group's attributes, we identify and theorize three core, group-level characteristics of a stigma that jointly shape the salience of

stigma and thereby influence organizations' likelihood of concealing stigmatized groups: *attribute visibility*, *attribute harmfulness,* and *attribute multiplicity*. These antecedents are grounded in Goffman's foundational concepts and are further informed by subsequent research on disclosure (Follmer, Sabat, & Siuta, 2020), harm (Piazza, Bergemann, & Helms, 2024; Lodge, Augustine, & Radic, 2025), and intersectionality (Turan et al., 2025). They operate additively, with each capturing a distinct dimension of salience that independently heightens the perceived risk of discovery and sanctioning. Accordingly, the greater the presence of these factors, the more salient the stigma is, and the more likely organizations are to conceal to protect groups from sanctions and enable their societal integration. When antecedents are less aligned or absent, concealment becomes more partial or restrained.

Attribute visibility. When organizations have ties to stigmatized groups, we propose that the degree of *visibility* of these groups' stigmatized attributes plays a central role in determining whether organizations stage such groups in a concealing manner. Attribute visibility refers to the extent to which a group's stigma can be readily observed and recognized as a stigmatizing mark by audiences (Jones et al., 2016). Scholars have long shown that stigmas vary in their perceptibility, with some attributes remaining largely invisible unless disclosed and others being immediately recognizable in social interactions (Zhang et al., 2021).

When stigmatized attributes are highly visible – such as those tied to race or physical appearance (Rodhain & Gourmelen, 2018) – groups cannot easily pass unnoticed and stigmatizing audiences are more likely to detect and act on stigma. As a result, these groups face heightened risks of negative judgement and sanctions. This increases the imperative for organizations to conceal in order to shield stigmatized groups from exposure and its associated penalties. Even though concealment may be more difficult under such conditions, the need for it rises.

Organizations may conceal by avoiding publicizing their association with stigmatized groups, excluding them from external campaigns or communications, or structuring roles and interactions to limit contact with potentially stigmatizing audiences (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Tracey & Phillips, 2016). In these ways, concealment functions as a protective buffer, reducing the likelihood of stigmatizing reactions by audiences through controlling exposure.

In contrast, when stigmatized attributes are less visible or even invisible – such as those tied to sexual orientation (Lauriano & Coacci, 2023) or religion (Syakhroza & Lodge, 2024) – the risks of hostile reactions are generally lower because the stigma is not immediately apparent to audiences. At these low levels of visibility, concealment may be easier to manage for organizations, but the imperative to conceal is weaker since stigmatizing audiences are less likely to notice the attribute and respond. The benefits of concealment are therefore less pronounced than in situations of high visibility, where exposure is much more likely and sanctions can be more severe.

In sum, we propose that organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a concealing manner when such groups' stigmatized attributes are highly visible. High visibility increases the likelihood of detection and sanctioning by stigmatizing audiences, strengthening incentives for organizations to manage stigma through concealment, compared to when stigmatized attributes are less visible. It follows that:

> *Proposition 1: Organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a concealing manner when groups' stigmatized attributes are highly visible, compared to when these attributes are less visible.*

Attribute harmfulness. The second antecedent shaping whether organizations will adopt a concealing approach is the perceived *harmfulness* of a group's stigmatized attribute (Ben-Yehuda, 1990). Drawing on theories of moral panic (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), we characterize

harmfulness as the extent to which an attribute is socially judged as dangerous, threatening, or contaminating for or by other members of society. Crucially, such evaluations often reflect subjective perceptions shaped by cultural, political, and historical factors (Ben-Yehuda, 1980).

When stigmatized attributes are perceived as highly harmful, they face greater risks of hostile reactions. Attributes linked to perceived danger or moral deviance – such as HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, or histories of violent crime – are not only markers of difference but also seen as potential threats to others (Davoudpour, Salvador, & Phillips, 2025). This amplifies stigma's salience and the likelihood of sanctions by audiences. Under these conditions, concealment becomes a pragmatic response: by obscuring stigmatized groups from stigmatizing audiences and thus shielding them from exposure, organizations can still provide support while reducing the risk of sanctions. For example, organizations hiring individuals with histories of violent crime may keep this engagement private, concealing it from public view to prevent punitive reactions that could harm the individuals.

In contrast, when stigmatized attributes are perceived as low in harmfulness, organizations face less pressure to conceal to enable the group's societal integration. While groups may still be marked as different, the absence of perceived threat reduces the urgency of concealment. For example, although immigrants are often stigmatized, the perceived harmfulness of this group and its attributes varies dramatically across contexts and subgroups (Valenta, 2009) and, in many settings, is frequently seen as posing little threat, making organizations less likely to actively engage in concealment with such groups (Tracey & Philips, 2016).

In sum, we propose that organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a concealing manner when the stigmatized attributes are perceived as highly harmful, because such harmfulness attracts attention, heightens perceived risks, and increases the likelihood of

sanctioning by audiences. When attributes are perceived as less harmful, concealment becomes less necessary. Taken together, we suggest:

> *Proposition 2: Organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a concealing manner when groups' stigmatized attributes are evaluated as highly harmful, compared to when these attributes are perceived as less harmful.*

Attribute multiplicity. A final antecedent shaping whether organizations adopt a concealing approach is what we refer to as *attribute multiplicity*. Attribute multiplicity refers to the extent to which a stigmatized group is associated with multiple stigmatized attributes (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997). Unlike visibility, which concerns whether a stigma can be observed, or harmfulness, which concerns the perceived severity of an attribute, multiplicity captures how many stigmatized meanings cluster around a single group. For example, refugees may be simultaneously associated with stigmas around religion, race, and criminality (Reinka, Pan-Weisz, Lawner, & Quinn, 2020) and thus may often be characterized as a group high in stigma multiplicity. Similarly, certain racial groups may be likened to stigmas around unemployment and criminal records. Such overlapping associations create a more complex situation that heightens a group's salience.

We argue that when attribute multiplicity is high – i.e., when a group is tied to multiple stigmatized attributes – organizations are more likely to adopt concealment as a staging approach. A multiplicity of attributes amplifies stigma by giving audiences several grounds for discrediting and sanctioning the group (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015), thereby intensifying perceived risks for the organization seeking to integrate it. Stigmatizing audiences may view groups with multiple stigmatized attributes as particularly deviant or threatening (Chaudoir, 2023), making concealment all the more crucial. In such cases, concealment reduces exposure and limits situations in which

stigmatizing attributes are highlighted. Concealment thus minimizes sanctioning risks while still enabling stigmatized groups to participate in organizational and social life.

In contrast, when attribute multiplicity is low – i.e., when groups are characterized by fewer or only a single stigmatized attribute – organizations face fewer layers of stigma to manage and therefore a lower cumulative risk of detection and sanctioning by stigmatizing audiences. Although stigma may still be visible and harmful, its relative simplicity may make extensive concealment less pressing as organizations perceive that stigmatizing audiences have fewer grounds for attack.

In sum, we propose that organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a concealing manner when those groups are associated with multiple stigmatized attributes, rather than a single one. High multiplicity intensifies stigma by layering attributes together, thereby heightening the risks of sanctioning and prompting organizations to protect groups through concealment. This leads us to propose:

> *Proposition 3: Organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a concealing manner when groups' stigmatized attributes are multiple, compared to when they are fewer.*

Taken together, our theorizing thus far suggests that different facets of attribute salience – visibility, harmfulness, and multiplicity – are central drivers that help explain why and when organizations will stage stigmatized groups in concealing ways.

Staging the Stigmatized: Normalizing and its Antecedents

Building on the relational perspective on stigma, we argue that stigmatized groups are not uniformly vilified across contexts but vary in the degree to which their attributes are viewed as acceptable and institutionalized (Helms et al., 2019). That is, while some stigmatized groups have benefited from a long history of advocacy and helpful visibility in public discourse others have

received little recognition and remain marginalized. From this perspective, the greater the degree to which the attributes of stigmatized groups are institutionalized, the more likely it is that both organizations and audiences will be "wise" to the stigma of groups (Goffman, 1963) – that is, more informed, empathetic, equipped, and willing to engage with groups. Importantly, institutionalization does not mean that stigma has disappeared, but rather that organizations can draw on established narratives or behavioral norms to present the attributes of stigmatized groups in ways that resonate more positively with audiences. In such contexts, normalization becomes the more likely staging approach because organizations have both the "tools" and a somewhat heightened audience receptivity to promote broader integration. We therefore suggest that normalization, unlike concealment, is not primarily[2] driven by the salience of the stigma, but by the extent to which attributes of groups are institutionalized in a given context.

From a dramaturgical perspective (Goffman, 1956), we suggest that institutionalization is reflected in the prevalence and diffusion of *social interaction scripts* that guide how such groups are engaged. Broadly, social interaction scripts refer to cognitive schemas that shape how individuals behave, interpret situations, and interact (Ashforth & Fried, 1988; Goffman, 1956). Rooted in cultural beliefs and values, societal norms, and formal rules (Nag & Gioia, 2012; Zohar & Luria, 2003), these scripts provide repertoires of language and behavior that enable actors to navigate interactions and "act appropriately" in social settings (Gioia & Poole, 1984: 45). For example, social scripts may govern how individuals behave during formal events – such as adhering to particular dress codes and modes of speech – or in customer service exchanges, where smiling and politeness are expected.

In the case of stigma, these scripts shape both how organizations can appropriately present stigmatized groups and how audiences interpret them (Korver-Glenn, Arigbabu, Rogers, Valdez,

& Roberto, 2025). Thus, we suggest that normalization depends less on the salience of stigma and more on the presence of social interaction scripts in society that (implicitly or explicitly) are able to promote stigmatized groups. In particular, the more widespread and culturally resonant these scripts are within a particular context, the more viable and effective normalization becomes. This is because such scripts, manifesting in a variety of ways, provide organizations with resources, i.e., language (appropriate labels and stories) and behavioral repertoires (interaction rituals and routines), that enable them to frame stigmatized groups as legitimate and valuable members of society and play a critical role in shaping audience perceptions, encouraging broader interactions with and understanding of stigmatized groups. For example, media portrayals that depict formerly incarcerated individuals as rehabilitated and productive can equip organizations to frame these individuals as redeemed and valuable members of the community (Reddan, Garcia, Golarai, Eberhardt, & Zaki, 2024) and provide interaction scripts that guide how these individuals can be engaged, creating a foundation for more constructive encounters and more positive audience evaluations. As such, we suggest that organizational engagement in normalization largely hinges on the presence of such social interaction scripts related to the attributes of stigmatized groups with which they have ties.

Building on this reasoning, we identify three factors – grounded in Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical accounts of everyday social encounters, professional role expectations, and formalized statuses – that manifest different social interactions scripts in society and thus shape whether organizations will stage stigmatized groups in normalizing ways: *media narratives*, which offer cultural scripts for engaging with stigmatized groups, the *professionalization of interactions,* which provides professional scripts, and *regulatory protection,* which provides legal scripts. These factors again operate additively, as each represents a distinct enabling condition that independently

equips organizations to present stigmatized groups in more positive ways. The more these conditions are given, the greater the likelihood of full normalization. When they are misaligned or absent, normalization becomes more partial or constrained.

Media narratives. One central antecedent shaping normalization is the prominence of *media narratives* concerning stigmatized groups – that is, the extent to which mass communication outlets including books, radio, podcasts, films, or television depict these groups in ways that make them appear as accepted members of society. Such narratives, we suggest, provide and diffuse cultural scripts that shape how audiences perceive, understand, and interact with stigmatized groups (Dotter, 2002), guiding societal norms and influencing attitudes toward these groups over time (Parrott & Eckhart, 2021).

Importantly, our argument is that organizations can draw on and be influenced by these media-generated cultural scripts, providing repertoires of language and behavior that enable them to present stigmatized groups and their attributes in ways that resonate with broader audiences (Campana, Duffy, & Micheli, 2022). Media narratives that authentically portray the lives and experiences of stigmatized groups equip organizations with concrete stories and relatable examples that they can use to foster empathy, reduce resistance, and promote understanding. For example, in North America, the Black community is extensively represented in literature, podcasts, television, and film (Goodwill, Anyiwo, Williams, Johnson, Mattis, & Watkins, 2019), with portrayals that both emphasize lived struggles and provide supportive audiences with insights into how to understand, engage with, and back this community (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Similarly, media narratives can be used to humanize stigmatized groups by offering relatable and empathetic perspectives. For example, television shows like *The Good Doctor* have helped normalize portrayals of people with autism by highlighting both their capabilities and challenges in everyday

situations (Stern & Barnes, 2019). Such widely recognized narratives can encourage organizations to stage groups in normalizing ways and advocate for their acceptance and societal integration.

In contrast, when such media narratives are lacking, audiences are less exposed to sympathetic portrayals and organizations are left with fewer linguistic and behavioral repertoires to draw upon. Without this "material" to frame the attributes of stigmatized groups, organizations are less equipped – and therefore less likely – to stage groups in normalizing ways.

Taken together, we argue that media narratives strongly shape whether organizations stage stigmatized groups in normalizing ways. When such narratives exist, audiences are more informed and organizations have greater access to cultural scripts that enable them to stage groups in ways that enable societal acceptance. When such narratives are absent, normalization becomes riskier and less effective, reducing organizations' inclination to pursue it. Therefore, we propose:

> *Proposition 4: Organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a normalizing manner when media narratives about groups are highly prominent, compared to when they are less prominent.*

Professionalization of interactions. Normalization will further depend on the *professionalization of interactions* with stigmatized groups. Here, we refer to professionalization as the extent to which interactions with stigmatized groups are guided by scripts embedded within professional norms and practices. These can, for example, include HR protocols, training manuals, and professional education programs (Mitchell et al., 2024). We argue that the more prevalent these professionalized scripts are in a given context, the more they shape not only how professionals interact with stigmatized groups but also how organizations gauge the broader cultural receptivity for such groups. Furthermore, when stigmatized groups are surrounded by dedicated professional

scripts, organizations gain the awareness, vocabulary, and practices needed to present groups and their attributes as acceptable to audiences, making normalization more likely.

The extent of professionalization varies considerably across stigmatized groups and contexts. In settings where interactions with stigmatized groups have been widely professionalized – such as in addiction recovery or mental health care (Schulze, 2007) – professional scripts provide structured, widely accepted frameworks for interacting with and talking about these groups. For example, addiction counseling services rely on and offer professional guidelines that structure support for clients, helping to reframe and present addiction as a condition to be managed rather than judged (BACP, 2024). Likewise, occupational therapy and rehabilitation practices in disability advocacy promote inclusion and accessibility, enabling organizations to present disabled individuals as capable and valuable contributors to society (Hein & Ansari, 2022). In these cases, professional scripts guide organizational behavior and educate audiences, making normalization efforts more effective.

In contrast, when contexts lack professionalized scripts for stigmatized groups – whether because they are weakly diffused or entirely absent – organizations have less clarity about how to present such groups in ways that will resonate with audiences. For example, while mental health stigma has been increasingly addressed in many Western societies, significant gaps in professional training remain in regions where mental health is taboo, leaving organizations ill-equipped to enable integration (Krendl & Pescosolido, 2020). Similarly, despite growing visibility, the absence of robust professional scripts and training limits organizations' capacity to address the unique challenges faced by transgender people, often perpetuating stigma rather than reducing it (Skuban-Eiseler, Orzechowski, & Steger, 2024).

In sum, we propose that the availability of professional scripts and the professionalization of interactions with stigmatized groups encourage organizations to stage groups in normalizing ways. In contrast, when such scripts are absent, normalizing is less viable. Thus:

> *Proposition 5: Organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a normalizing manner when interactions with groups are highly professionalized, compared to when they are less professionalized.*

Regulatory protection. Finally, we propose that organizations' staging of stigmatized groups in a normalizing manner is shaped by the presence of *regulatory protection* – formal laws, policies, and guidelines that protect stigmatized groups from discrimination and harassment and defend their rights (Burris, 2006). These safeguards provide legal scripts that not only reduce overt discrimination but also shape societal norms and audience perceptions, making it more feasible for organizations to advocate for the acceptance of stigmatized groups.

The degree of regulatory protection afforded to stigmatized groups varies widely across contexts (Burris, 2002). In some settings, anti-discrimination legislation creates an environment in which organizations are expected not only to avoid discriminatory practices but also to proactively demonstrate support for stigmatized groups. Regulations may, for example, require organizations to post anti-discrimination policies, safeguard stigmatized identities, or actively celebrate diversity. Legal frameworks around drug use can also encourage organizations to stage drug users in normalizing ways as these frameworks establish societal scripts that guide audiences toward more empathetic perceptions of such groups (Bambra & Pope, 2007; Nittrouer, Fa-Kaji, Hebl, Janakiraman, & Rutigliano, 2024; Scher et al., 2023). A salient case is the legal protection of LGBTQIA+ rights in many Western countries, where anti-discrimination laws and equal rights provisions have reduced overt discrimination. These frameworks give organizations a legally

supported foundation, driving them to stage LGBTQIA+ groups in normalizing ways (Earnshaw, Logie, Wickersham, & Kamarulzaman, 2024).

By contrast, when regulatory scripts concerning stigmatized groups are weak, inconsistent, or absent, organizations are less likely to engage in normalization. For example, in countries with minimal protections for LGBTQIA+ rights, the lack of regulatory frameworks can make it difficult for organizations to present stigmatize groups in generative ways as they have less clarity on how to stage groups in ways that will resonate with audiences (Moser, Booth, & Beauregard, 2021). A striking illustration is the recent rollback of equal protection laws in parts of the United States, which has reduced organizational support for LGBTQIA+ initiatives such as Pride celebrations. In such environments, the absence of regulatory pressure reduces organizations' willingness to normalize groups.

In sum, we propose that regulatory protection not only shapes the direct discrimination of stigmatized groups but also equips organizations with important scripts, encouraging staging in normalizing ways. When such regulatory scripts are absent, normalization becomes less viable. Taken together, we propose:

> *Proposition 6: Organizations are more likely to stage stigmatized groups in a normalizing manner when those groups are afforded strong regulatory protections, compared to when such protections are weaker or completely absent.*

The Integrative Implications of Organizational Staging for Stigmatized Groups

The forms of organizational staging outlined above carry important implications for stigmatized groups. We define the outcomes of staging as *integrative*, reflecting how it can mitigate stigma's negative effects and influence how groups are perceived and treated by different

audiences, thereby enabling their broader societal integration. Specifically, we propose that these integrative outcomes unfold along two dimensions.

Sanction reduction as a result of concealment. We argue that when organizations stage stigmatized groups in a concealing manner, the primary effect is a reduction in the negative sanctions these groups face from stigmatizing audiences (though not necessarily an increase in broader acceptance among more supportive audiences). By obscuring the visibility of these groups, concealment creates a buffer that shields groups from exposure to stigmatizing audiences likely to judge and penalize them and thereby from overt social and economic sanctioning (Hudson, 2008; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). This protective mechanism thus minimizes the potential for ostracization, enabling stigmatized groups to participate more fully in societal interactions, thereby offering integrative benefits to the stigmatized. Because concealment operates by reducing immediate exposure, its benefits can materialize quickly, as protection often begins as soon as exposure is lowered. However, these gains remain fragile, as they rely on concealment being continuously maintained.

Empirical research across diverse contexts supports our argument. Studies have shown that when organizations maintain secrecy about stigmatized groups, exclusionary and punitive measures can be reduced or even prevented. This has been documented among formerly incarcerated individuals (Ramakers, 2022; Arora et al., 2025), people struggling with substance abuse (Broman et al., 2023), and LGBTQIA+ workers in heteronormative environments (Stenger & Roulet, 2018). By concealing and limiting exposure, organizations create protective barriers that enable stigmatized groups to participate more fully in society. Specifically, reduced sanctions can enable integration by granting stigmatized groups access to key domains of social life – such as housing, education, or public and private services – without the penalties or exclusions that often

accompany stigma. In shielding groups from the material and relational harms associated with sanctions, concealment preserves opportunities for stigmatized groups to engage in everyday interactions, build stable social ties, and accumulate the resources that support societal integration.

In contrast, when organizations do not conceal stigmatized groups, those groups face heightened risk of exposure to stigmatizing audiences and associated sanctions. Research shows that when stigmatized attributes become visible (whether through intentional disclosure or because they are difficult to hide), they often provoke ostracization or other negative responses from stigmatizing audiences (Jones & King, 2014). Thus:

> *Proposition 7: Organizations are more likely to reduce sanctioning of stigmatized groups – and thereby enable integration – when they stage groups in a concealing manner to stigmatizing audiences, compared to when they are not concealed.*

Acceptance eliciting as a result of normalization. We propose that when organizations stage stigmatized groups in normalizing ways, they primarily influence the extent to which these groups experience broader acceptance, particularly from more sympathetic and supportive audiences (without necessarily reducing the sanctions that such groups may still face by stigmatizing audiences). By publicly presenting, affirming, and endorsing stigmatized groups as legitimate, capable, and valuable, organizations signal that these groups deserve respect, acceptance, and ultimately integration. Normalization thus fosters greater understanding and solidarity among audiences. Because normalization works by gradually deepening support, its integrative benefits tend to emerge more slowly than those of concealment. Yet, once established, these benefits are typically more durable and less dependent on continuous protective measures.

We suggest that normalization efforts work by shaping how more supportive audiences view stigmatized groups, moving them from passive sympathy or quiet acceptance toward more active

understanding, admiration, or even advocacy. Through providing accessible and relatable narratives and positive representations, organizations can consolidate and deepen understanding and support. For example, when organizations highlight the skills or unique contributions of stigmatized groups, they help shape how these groups are evaluated (Ramírez-Vielma, Vaccari, Cova, Saldivia, Vielma-Aguilera, & Grandón, 2023) and can encourage more supportive audiences to voice their advocacy more publicly. In this way, covert supporters are transformed into overt allies, further expanding collective acceptance of the stigmatized and fostering integration (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Rao et al., 2019).

Empirical work suggests that normalizing activities – especially when carried out by trusted, high-profile organizations – can strengthen the societal position of stigmatized groups. For example, corporate endorsements of LGBTQIA+ rights have helped shift public discourse in many countries, crucially not by converting stigmatizing audiences, but by emboldening supportive ones to express and act on their sympathy (Haski-Leventhal & Korschun, 2019). Normalization thus helps integration by broadening the circle of acceptance: it turns latent supporters into active allies and reinforces the idea that stigmatized groups are legitimate and valued members of society. For the stigmatized themselves this can translate into tangible improvements in everyday life, including closer social connections, greater access to jobs and services, and deeper participation in community life – outcomes that are critical for integration.

In contrast, when stigmatized groups are not staged in normalizing ways – for example, when organizational portrayals cast groups as pitiable or burdensome – support and acceptance may inadvertently weaken even among otherwise generally more supportive audiences. Such representation risks eroding confidence, reinforcing ambivalence, and perpetuating implicit biases, ultimately constraining the societal integration of stigmatized groups.

In sum, normalization contributes to societal integration not by reducing sanctions from stigmatizing audiences, but by activating or amplifying acceptance among more supportive ones. This leads us to propose:

> *Proposition 8: Organizations are more likely to elicit acceptance for stigmatized groups – and thereby enable integration – when they stage those groups in a normalizing manner to supportive audiences, compared to when they are not normalized.*

DISCUSSION

Building on the growing prevalence of organizations engaging with stigmatized groups, this paper develops a dramaturgical theory of the societal integration of stigmatized groups through organizational staging. Drawing on the relational view of stigma, we conceptualize how organizations present stigmatized groups to diverse audiences, allowing us to contribute to conversations on the organizational management of stigma in three ways.

Implications for Theory

Conceptualizing the integration of stigmatized groups as an audience-focused process. Our first contribution is the fundamental conceptualization of the integration of stigmatized groups into society. Prior stigma scholarship has often focused either on the behaviors of stigmatized individuals in managing their *attributes* or on the supportive actions of organizations and their attempts to manage group attributes (Corrigan, 2016; Heijnders & van der Meij, 2006; Morgan et al., 2018). These perspectives assume that integration is a consequence of the quality or intensity of these efforts. In other words, integration has largely been viewed as the outcome of what stigmatized groups or supportive organizations do concerning attributes, with the implicit assumption that managing attributes will produce positive integration outcomes.

We challenge this assumption. Building on the relational lens of stigma (Goffman, 1963; Aranda et al., 2023), we conceptualize societal integration as an inherently audience-focused process, arguing that integration depends centrally on the management of *audiences* and on how organizations present stigmatized groups to such different – and often opposing – audiences. This extends existing work on the management of stigma by organizations and reconceptualizes how integrative outcomes are achieved (Goodrick et al., 2022; Jones & King, 2014). Ignoring audiences and their role in enabling integration, as much prior work has done, leads, in our view, to an oversimplified and potentially misleading theoretical account, because it overstates the extent to which managing groups' attributes alone can bring about integration.

Our model identifies two distinct ways through which organizations can enable integration. First, integration can occur when organizations prevent stigmatizing audiences from sanctioning groups – a process we refer to as *concealing*. Concealing enables integration by shielding groups from hostile reactions, allowing them to participate in everyday social and economic life without fear of constant penalties. Second, integration can occur when organizations elicit greater acceptance among more sympathetic and supportive audiences – a process we refer to as *normalizing*. Normalizing enables integration by reframing stigmatized attributes and promoting broader recognition and acceptance. An insight that emerges from this theorizing is that not all forms of staging are equally beneficial for integration and that their integrative impact depends on which audiences are addressed. Thus, structural factors (i.e., the antecedents we propose) may drive organizations to adopt forms of staging that may misalign with the audiences they face, thereby limiting integration opportunities. For example, structural factors may drive organizations to conceal stigmatized groups in cases where audiences are supportive, unnecessarily maintaining invisibility and preventing opportunities for acceptance and integration. Conversely, structural

factors may drive organizations to normalize in cases where some stigmatizing audiences are present, risking responses that could intensify harm for stigmatized groups. These "mismatches" make it possible that staging can unintentionally undermine integration and future research should conceptualize these negative trajectories more systematically.

Extrapolating from this, our work helps explain why organizations, despite good intentions, often struggle to enable the societal integration of stigmatized groups (Hein & Ansari, 2022). We argue that this difficulty stems less from organizational ineffectiveness per se than from the inherent challenge of navigating diverse and conflicting audiences, each requiring different forms of staging to achieve integration. This reflects a significant tension in the management of the stigma of groups and explains why stigma management remains so fraught for organizations.

Taken together, our theorizing suggests that while it remains crucial to understand how organizations manage stigma, whether these efforts ultimately yield integration depends far more on the audiences in their environments and how they are managed than has previously been recognized. Conceptualizing integration as an audience-focused or even audience-dependent process is thus essential for a fuller understanding of how stigmatized groups are integrated into society.

Developing a structural model of integration of stigmatized groups. Our second contribution is to depart from predominant organizational research on stigma that has emphasized how organizations that intentionally engage with stigmatized groups for a variety of reasons (Zhang et al., 2021) manage these ties for their own benefits and in ways that "integrate themselves" into society (Helms & Patterson, 2014) – for example, by gaining legitimacy and securing acceptance for their work (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Tracey & Philips, 2016). In

contrast, we show how organizations can create benefits for stigmatized groups themselves, enabling *their* societal integration (Aranda et al., 2023).

By shifting focus from organizational outcomes to the outcomes for stigmatized groups, we offer a novel lens on the role that organizations can play in managing stigma and supporting integration. This is important because existing studies on stigma often conflate beneficial organizational outcomes with positive integration outcomes for stigmatized groups (Rao et al., 2019). By contrast, we argue for and delineate these as distinct processes: actions that benefit organizations do not necessarily translate into improved integration outcomes for the stigmatized – and may sometimes even disrupt them.

To foreground outcomes for stigmatized groups, we draw on Goffman's (1956, 1963) relational perspective and dramaturgical metaphor to theorize how organizations act as stages on which stigmatized groups are presented – through concealing and normalizing – and that the forms of staging organization adopt are driven by different structural antecedents. Because stigmatized attributes vary in how they are perceived across contexts (Hudson, 2008), the likelihood of concealment or normalization, so we argue, depends on the environment in which organizations operate. Specifically, we assert that concealing is shaped by the salience of stigmatized attributes, while normalizing is shaped by their institutionalization. This perspective, and the theorizing of the different antecedents themselves, offers a new, structural lens – and thereby a structural model of integration – by providing new explanations for why organizations adopt particular approaches: decisions about whether to conceal or normalize are driven more by contextual pressures in organizational environments than prior research has acknowledged, which has often tended to focus on organizational responses and related outcomes as being shaped primarily by managerial preferences and strategic intent. Recognizing these structural influences, and how they shape the

ways organizations present groups to audiences, has remained underexplored in organizational research on stigma, yet we argue that it is crucial for advancing our understanding of how organizations can meaningfully support stigmatized groups and ultimately enable their societal integration.

Conceptualizing the dynamics and tensions of organizational staging. Finally, whereas prior scholarship has often treated concealing and normalizing as opposite ends of a single continuum, we extend this perspective by reconceptualizing them as discrete stigma management approaches that organizations may (or even have to) engage in simultaneously to enable the integration of stigmatized groups. That is, although conceptually distinct, the two are not mutually exclusive in practice and organizations may often employ both to varying degrees depending on contextual factors (i.e., our theorized antecedents). Rather than "balancing" concealment and normalization, we thus suggest that organizations frequently find themselves engaging in both simultaneously, concealing groups from stigmatizing audiences while normalizing them to more supportive ones. This insight – that effective integration involves "speak(ing) out of both sides of the organizational mouth" (Helms & Patterson, 2014: 1470) to both conceal and normalize groups to different audiences – challenges the more dominant binary framing of stigma management (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009; Tracey & Philips, 2016) and highlights that organizations often may need to present the stigmatized in more complex and overlapping ways than previously theorized.

Each form of staging offers unique benefits: concealing buffers stigmatized groups from sanctions, enabling participation in society without constant fear of penalties, while normalizing validates groups by presenting them as valuable and legitimate members of society, deepening acceptance. Table 1 illustrates potential combinations of concealing and normalizing. Although not exhaustive, it highlights how organizations may stage groups in different configurations.

Insert Table 1 about here

While enacting both forms of staging together might appear to offer the "best of both worlds" by simultaneously enabling the shielding and validating of stigmatized groups, this interplay can generate tensions. Such tensions are particularly visible in the bottom-right cell of Table 1, where organizations actively celebrate stigmatized groups to promote normalization and acceptance while also seeking to conceal and protect them. In such cases, visibility can undermine parallel efforts to shield groups from harm. For example, UK retailer Marks & Spencer has long and openly supported Trans Awareness Week in the media while concealing the identities of trans employees in the workplace to foster safety and belonging. However, their public (normalizing) stance has heightened scrutiny: a widely publicized customer complaint about a trans employee in the lingerie section drew intense media attention, compromised broader concealment efforts, and ultimately hindered integration for the group (Hansford, 2025). This example illustrates how normalizing can unintentionally impinge on concealment, ultimately undermining both.

Our theorizing thus further highlights why integration by organizations is so difficult in practice. Concealing provides immediate protection from sanctions but may inadvertently inhibit broader acceptance by perpetuating a group's invisibility. This form of integration is also relatively fragile, as it depends on sustained concealment and does little to alter the root causes of stigma. In contrast, normalizing offers a potentially more durable form of integration by reframing stigmatized attributes and enabling broader, long-term acceptance, but risks exposing groups to scrutiny and sanctioning, thereby undermining integration in the immediate term. These tensions

underscore the challenge of managing stigma: staging groups in one way can inadvertently weaken the benefits of the other, emphasizing the delicate and dynamic nature of the staging of groups.

Directions for Future Research

Our theorizing opens several avenues for future research. First, because we focused on the generative role organizations can play in the societal integration of stigmatized groups, we did not directly theorize the reverse possibility: how organizational actions may (unintentionally) exacerbate sanctions and deepen stigmatization. While we hinted at this "dark side" of staging when forms of staging and audiences are misaligned, future work could investigate exactly how, when, and why organizational staging backfires, reinforcing rather than alleviating the negative experiences of stigmatized groups. This is especially relevant given evidence that well-intended organizational initiatives can inadvertently prime stigma and make life more rather than less difficult for the stigmatized (Quinn et al., 2014), both within organizations and in society at large.

Second, research could examine the relative weight of the antecedents we theorize. While our model treats them as additive, it does not address whether some exert stronger influence than others on forms of staging. For instance, is high attribute harmfulness more consequential for driving concealment than high visibility, or are media scripts more powerful than professional scripts in promoting normalization? Addressing such questions would refine and nuance our understanding of how structural conditions shape organizational staging.

Third, our study focuses on audience evaluations of stigmatized groups and does not explicitly consider how audience evaluations of the organizations engaging with these groups may influence our theorizing. For example, organizations that are themselves stigmatized may face distinct constraints in normalizing stigmatized groups, since they too are cast as deviant. While we believe that our core theorizing still applies in such situations, staging may become more complex,

requiring additional considerations regarding how organizations' own stigma interacts with that of the groups they support or how organizations' own stigma may compound the consequences of staging. Exploring this offers a promising avenue for future research.

Finally, future research could examine how technology shapes staging. Prior work shows that the rise of social media has disrupted processes of stigmatization and destigmatization (Wang & Tracey, 2024) by collapsing previously distinct contexts into more porous ones (Lauriano & Coacci, 2023). Building on this, future studies could investigate how such context collapse – and the technologies that enable it – amplifies or complicates concealing and normalizing activities.

Implications for Practice

Building on our theoretical insights, our work offers several practical implications for both organizations and stigmatized groups. For organizations and managers, our first implication is that societal integration is frequently not achieved – contrary to much recent debate (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010) – by openly "celebrating" or normalizing stigmatized groups in the hope that acceptance will follow. In some situations, managers must recognize that active concealment and the deliberate cloaking of attributes may be the most effective way to achieve societal integration. This is an insight often overlooked in DEI debates, which tend to place a disproportionate emphasis on disclosure and visibility.

Second**,** managers should be aware that the societal integration of stigmatized groups is not determined by their organization's intention or innovation alone but by how different audiences evaluate the groups. This suggests that even well-intended, attribute-focused initiatives may have limited effect if audience dynamics are not considered and supportive. Recognizing this audience-cantered dynamic can help managers better understand why integration efforts sometimes succeed and sometimes fail.

For stigmatized groups, our work, first, provides guidance for understanding how organizations may engage with them – whether as employees, customers, or clients – and what this implies for experiences of stigma, sanctioning, and societal integration. Concealing, for example, through limiting disclosure of personal histories, protecting privacy, or avoiding public attention may shield groups from sanctions but may also signal limits in organizational advocacy for broader acceptance. Normalizing, by contrast, through storytelling or advocacy campaigns, may foster wider societal support but also heighten public visibility and exposure to risk. Recognizing the forms of staging organizations engage in can help stigmatized groups to anticipate trade-offs, weigh potential risks and benefits, and make more informed decisions when selecting employers, service providers, or advocacy partners.

Second, our work suggests that stigmatized groups may benefit from more active collaboration with organizations in shaping how exactly they are staged. While, as we propose, antecedents drive an organization's staging approach, it can be critical to involve stigmatized groups themselves in co-creating the specific ways in which staging is enacted. For example, for some groups that are concealed by organizations, they may prefer that organizations limit external communication altogether, while others may find anonymization of personal details sufficient. Involving stigmatized groups in these decisions allows for more tailored staging approaches that reflect their needs, potentially leading to more effective integration outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we draw on Goffman's (1956, 1963) relational perspective on stigma to develop a dramaturgical theory of how organizations can stage stigmatized groups in ways that enable their societal integration. By conceptualizing distinct forms of staging – concealment and normalization – and theorizing their drivers and their consequences for stigmatized groups, our

study offers new insights into how organizations can engage generatively with some of the most vulnerable members of society. In so doing, we highlight the critical role organizations play in bridging the gap between stigmatized groups and society at large.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Our theorizing applies to all organizations that *intentionally* build ties with stigmatized groups – whether for social, economic, or political reasons – and therefore regard these groups as worthy of inclusion, support, or service. It *excludes* cases in which ties are accidental (e.g., a product becoming popular within a controversial subculture) as well as intentional but adversarial relationships (e.g., law enforcement interactions), because in such situations organization cannot be expected to deliberately pursue the societal integration of stigmatized groups.

[2] We distinguish attribute salience and institutionalization as distinct antecedents because they operate in different ways: salience heightens perceived risk and drives concealment, while institutionalization provides scripts and audience receptivity that enable normalization. The absence of one does not automatically trigger the other: low salience does not imply normalization as contextual conditions may still be unfavorable for such staging. When institutionalization is limited, organizations may experience ambiguity or inaction in positioning stigmatized groups, but this absence alone does not create sufficient threats for groups to trigger concealment, unless, following our theorizing, stigma is also highly salient.

TABLE 1

Dimensions of Organizational Staging: Examples of the Intersection of Concealment and Normalization

		Normalization		
		Low Organizations frame groups as needing support and protection without portraying them as equal, admirable, or exemplary, based on low institutionalization	Medium Organizations position group as having equal rights but without overt celebration, based on moderate institutionalization	High Organizations celebrate groups as admirable or exemplary, based on high institutionalization
Concealment	Low Organizations make no effort to obscure groups, based on low attribute salience	E.g., an international humanitarian NGO showing images of refugees as helpless victims to generate donations, without highlighting their agency.	E.g., a public university publishing a disability non-discrimination policy but no public-facing campaigns or visible leadership from people with disabilities.	E.g., a multinational retailer prominently featuring LGBTQIA+ employees in Pride campaigns and highlighting them in both internal and external leadership communications.
	Medium Organizations avoid drawing attention without strictly suppressing groups, based on moderate attribute salience	E.g., a regional healthcare provider benevolently offering work experience to people with disabilities but advising them not to disclose their condition to clients or colleagues.	E.g., a global technology company donating to racial justice causes internally but avoiding public associations for fear of backlash.	E.g., a fashion brand featuring models with disabilities during specific inclusive campaigns but rarely casting them outside of these contexts.

	High Organizations obscure groups, based on high attribute salience	E.g., a logistics contractor quietly hiring formerly incarcerated individuals through third-party contractors without public acknowledgment.	E.g., a corporate law firm hiring lawyers with severe mental health conditions, ensuring they have the same legal rights and accommodation as others, but concealing their identities from clients and avoiding media attention to protect them from bias.	E.g., an FMCG company's executive team publicly praising a stigmatized group while disguising the identities of employees who are members of that group.

FIGURE 1

A Dramaturgical Model of the Societal Integration of Stigmatized Groups

