

Employees' emotional responses to organizational stigma:

Frontline fear and internalization of stigma

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We investigate how frontline employees manage their emotional experiences of organizational stigma. While the literature on organizational stigma has increased in recent years the main interest has been on the implications of stigma at an organizational level and the managerial attempts to alleviate or remove the stigma (Carberry and King, 2012; Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Hampel and Tracey, 2017; Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009; Pfarrer et al., 2008; Sutton and Callahan, 1987). Little attention has been given to the employees' individual and emotional responses to the stigmatization of their employing organization. We attempt to address this shortcoming by asking the following research question: How do frontline employees emotionally experience organizational stigma and how do they manage their emotions in social interactions?

Our research is based on a case study of E-rail, a state-owned train service provider. While public transportation is not regarded as a tainted industry per se, E-rail and its frontline employees' have for years been consistently stigmatized by the media in the wake of a number of critical events. Our case study comprises conversations with 57 frontline employees, including 41 in-depth interviews and a workshop with 16 employees, as well as non-participant observations of four information meetings and training sessions for mid-level management and key employees, 520 hours of observations on the train, and extensive media material. We analyze this empirical material with a sensitivity towards the 'felt' stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) and the employees emotional responses (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Boudens, 2005; Grandy and Marvin, 2014; Hochschild, 1983; Sandelands and Boudens, 2000).

Our study shows that organizational stigma causes emotional experiences of fear and that this fear is amplified by management's public attempts to manage the stigma. In the case of E-rail, management appears to accept the stigmatization and even, from the point of view of the frontline employees, amplify the stigmatization by systematically shifting the blame on the employees. In response, we find that frontline employees experience fear of persecution, fear of blame, and fear of betrayal. The literature on fear describes fear as a powerful and pervasive negative emotion associated with threat and danger (Frijda, 1986; Coget et al, 2011; Kligyte et al, 2013). While it is often hidden and considered part of our 'private lives' it is also quickly shared among employees of the same group (Haas, 1997; Huy, 2002). One of the main consequences of fear in organizational life is organizational inertia and the incapacity to react to perceived threats. In our study, we find that frontline employees attempt to manage their fear through strategies of self-alertness, avoidance, and suspicion. A dynamic of paranoia emerges. Interestingly, we find that the frontline employees' attempts to manage their fear cause them to internalize the stigma rather than buffer it or reframe it. This is expressed through a sense of powerlessness and naturalization of the organizational stigma.

We contribute to the literature on organizational stigma in three regards. First, by offering a theoretical lens focusing on individual-level emotional responses to organizational stigma. Second, by examining the problematic internal implications of the public, managerial stigma management strategy. And finally, we reveal the rarely studied backstage and dark-side dynamics of organizational stigmatization that leads to organizational inertia.

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