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Immigrants and Processes of Destigmatization

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Abstract

Immigration-related diversity in the contemporary era poses a challenge for democratic societies, as immigrants continue to face stigmatization, which includes processes such as stereotyping, devaluation, exclusion, and discrimination. This chapter reviews the social conditions that contribute to processes of destigmatization among immigrants in the United States and Europe. Throughout the chapter, reference is made to "immigrants"—a complex term that includes, but is not limited to, economic migrants, refugees, citizens, legal permanent residents, and the undocumented who vary by national origin, language, religion, ethnicity, and race. Destigmatization processes are analyzed within European and U.S. contexts at three levels: structural (in terms of policies), institutional (the role of political elites, media, and social movements), and individual (as it relates to intergroup contact). The chapter concludes with a discussion of open areas for future research.

Defining Destigmatization

Immigrants, along with racial minorities and the poor, experience exclusion and discrimination; these groups also are not often associated with social worth nor do they experience full cultural membership. Lamont (2018) refers to these disparities as recognition gaps. Some groups are viewed as more deserving than others, and the unequal devaluation of groups has broad implications for the distribution of social and material resources. Destigmatization, defined as the social process by which low-status groups gain recognition and worth (Lamont 2018), provides an approach to address such inequalities. This process can also shape public understandings of stigmatized groups and expand policies and practices that may currently underserve or exclude such populations.

Scholars suggest that destigmatization involves *changing cultural constructions of groups*, or the content and value associated with a group (e.g., Clair et al. 2016). Once a group has been established as undeserving and low

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status, it is often difficult to change this view in the larger society, as there are also material foundations and histories associated with this status. Scholars have found that changing cultural constructions of groups is a complex process that involves a number of different social actors such as experts, social movement activists, media, and policymakers, who can draw on existing ideologies and historical contexts to establish new narratives and understandings about disparaged groups (Lamont 2018). Such efforts aim to change beliefs and attitudes among majority populations, often by dismantling stereotypes, disrupting negative associations, and drawing similarities between the in-group and out-group (Link and Phelan 2001). As an example, Clair et al. (2016) detailed the ways in which scientific experts, activists, advocacy organizations, and lawyers were able to shift the cultural construction of people living with HIV/AIDS, from that of immorality and fear to "people just like us."

Beyond stigma associated with medical conditions or disease, research has also focused on changing cultural constructions of ethno-racial minorities and the working class. This research has explored how advocates, social movements, and experts have drawn upon cultural repertories related to boundaries of national citizenship and created new narratives to shift the cultural notions, images, and ideas about who immigrants are and what their value is in the larger society. We detail some of this work, but first address a large and extensive literature on assimilation that documents *the shifting* and *transformation of group boundaries*, which can potentially contribute to destigmatization processes.

Assimilation, Integration, and Immigrants in Host Societies

Research on immigrants in the United States and Europe has documented how ethnic, racial, and religious differences remain salient, such that "bright" boundaries—which are unambiguous about who belongs within and outside of them—operate to distinguish immigrants from host-society members. Alba (2005) explains that the immigrant–nonimmigrant boundary is largely constructed by the majority group within the host society and shaped by the different histories of immigrant and majority groups, as well as how certain domains such as language, citizenship, and race are institutionalized in host societies. Thus, when group boundaries are "bright" and clearly distinguish immigrants from majority groups on the basis of access to citizenship, for example, this affects equal access to opportunities and life chances for immigrants and their children. It is when the distinctions between immigrants and the majority group in host-society populations decline (i.e., when group boundaries become "blurry") that immigrants become more integrated or assimilated into the host society (Alba and Nee 2003; Drouhot and Nee 2019).

Numerous studies in the United States and Europe have examined the ways in which immigrants have become more similar to host-society populations by measuring economic, political, and social outcomes such as educational and

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linguistic attainment, occupational status, voting, and intermarriage. Scholars in the United States, mostly sociologists and economists, have developed full panel data sets that link immigrant parents to their children by leveraging historical U.S. census data. These data allow scholars to track generations over time and investigate processes of economic assimilation (see Abramitzky et al. 2012; Catron 2019). Other studies use contemporary census data to analyze patterns of social and residential assimilation over time (see Qian and Lichter 2007). In Europe, scholars often use country specific register data from Norway or Denmark (Hermansen 2016) or cross-national survey data from Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, and England (e.g., the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study in Four European Countries, CILS4EU) to examine adaptation processes of first- and second-generation immigrants across various social domains (see Kalter et al. 2019).

Fewer studies focus on the extent to which immigrants gain status and value outside of these social and economic measures. Yet studies that compare gaps in measures of educational attainment, for instance, over time between immigrants and host-society members can provide insights into the destigmatization process. Such studies answer the question of how group boundaries have shifted, such that immigrants are no longer outsiders on particular social and economic dimensions, which provides the foundation for destigmatization. More generally, research in the United States and Europe suggest that immigrants are assimilating over generations in terms of socioeconomic outcomes (see Drouhot and Nee 2019). Some scholars, however, challenge these results, finding evidence of downward assimilation, delayed incorporation, or blocked acculturation of the second generation (Wimmer and Soehl 2014). Still others find mixed results depending on the immigrant group and national context (see Drouhot 2021 on Muslim immigrants in France; for a review, see Heath et al. 2008). Other studies further suggest that if immigrants do too well, they are considered a threat and group boundaries are redrawn once again (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013).

Domains of Destigmatization

Research has traditionally focused on the broader "contexts of reception" that immigrants face in a host society: governmental policies, labor markets, and other key social institutions that affect how immigrants become incorporated into society (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). We argue that destigmatization depends on these contexts of reception inasmuch as they relate to immigrant integration. We note, however, that a host of institutional domains aid or inhibit whether and to what extent immigrants are viewed as deserving and valued citizens. Such domains include, but are not limited to, laws and policies; politics and media; social movements and advocacy organizations; and individual interactions.

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Laws and Policies

Laws and policies related to antidiscrimination, citizenship, and immigration, as well as access to key institutions such as the welfare state are important because they designate who is protected and worthy, and who is included in the polity. Such policies extend symbolic and material access, and establish norms about inclusion or exclusion, which can, in turn, shape immigrant integration as well as host populations' views of immigrants. In this way, laws and policies can directly and indirectly affect the destigmatization process.

A key line of research examines the effects of integration and multiculturalism policies on host-society attitudes toward immigrants in Europe. Integration policies aim to ensure that immigrants receive the same rights and access to institutions (e.g., education, labor market, health care) as host society members, while multiculturalism policies recognize immigrants' cultural identities within public schools and create programs to provide various benefits and support for immigrants (Banting and Kymlicka 2013). Studies have found that more tolerant multicultural and integration policies are related to positive attitudes and less threat toward immigrants, as well as greater levels of trust among the broader population (Tatarko and Jurcik 2021; Wright and Bloemraad 2012). Studies have linked the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) to survey data, such as the European Social Survey (ESS), using cross-national comparison designs, while others have used longitudinal data to analyze within-country variations (Hooghe and de Vroome 2015; Schlueter et al. 2020; Wright et al. 2017). It is plausible that majority groups who already hold positive attitudes toward immigrants are more likely to support integration and multicultural policies in the first place, but longitudinal data help to address the issue of reverse causality. The positive effects of multicultural and integration policies are not, however, uniform across all studies. Furthermore, some scholars argue that multiculturalism has actually discouraged the integration of immigrants, creating separate and parallel societies, and recent studies question some of the established findings linking, for example, multicultural or integration policies to a decrease in anti-immigration attitudes (see Bartram and Jarochova 2022). It is unclear whether the mixed results are due to variations in measurement of policies, analytical approach, or research design.

In the United States, research has focused on understanding how state policies related to racial classification and citizenship shape the integration processes of immigrants. From a historical view, scholars argue that because European immigrants who arrived in the United States in the early 1900s were classified as White by the state, they were able to integrate smoothly into U.S. society, especially compared to Black Americans as well as Mexican and Asian immigrants— groups that experienced race-based exclusion within institutions as well as racial barriers to citizenship and intermarriage (Fox and Guglielmo 2012; see also López 1996; Zolberg 2006). Other scholars have pointed out the limits of whiteness and white designation by law. Catron (2019) challenges the

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notion that European immigrants in the early 1900s were treated as "de facto citizens" because they were classified White and finds that citizenship acquisition—not simply whiteness—was associated with greater economic benefits.

Focusing on the contemporary era, U.S. scholars have examined how anti-immigrant laws and policies shape the integration of undocumented immigrants, given that the debate about "illegality" remains one of the most salient immigration issues to date. Using case studies, surveys, and administrative data, research has examined how legal status operates as a key dimension of inequality in the United States, excluding undocumented immigrants from key institutions such as labor markets, education, and health care, and how restrictive immigration laws shape the everyday lives of immigrants (see Asad 2020; García 2019; Gonzales 2011; Menjívar 2006). Case in point, Flores (2014) found that the proposal of a local restrictive ordinance directed at undocumented immigrants in Hazelton, Pennsylvania, increased the stigmatization of the local Hispanic population. The political rhetoric surrounding the proposal not only led to a heightened sense of threat and fear among long-time residents and increased anti-immigrant activism, but it also associated Latinos with illegality and crime, complicating a smooth integration process.

Few studies in the U.S. context have examined how inclusionary policies impact the cultural constructions of immigrants, but research has documented the effects of such policies on immigrant outcomes. Gonzales (2011), for instance, finds that the introduction of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012—an executive action that provides renewable work permits and temporary relief from deportation—continues to have a significant and positive impact on educational and economic outcomes as well as overall well-being for undocumented youth in the United States Other studies find some evidence that dropout rates for undocumented students attending four-year colleges were higher after DACA, suggesting that some youth may be leaving school for full-time work (Hsin and Ortega 2018). This highlights the complexities in how inclusionary policies may not necessarily have uniform effects across groups, which has implications for destigmatization.

Political and Media Narratives

Political elites construct narratives around immigrant belonging, citizenship, and communities that can reinforce or bridge differences between immigrants and host-society populations. Studies have examined how political officials use overt and symbolic language that blames vulnerable groups for societal problems, and how this language shapes public views toward those groups (Bohman 2011). Using evidence from a survey experiment, Flores (2018), for instance, finds that Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election campaign—in which he referred to Mexican immigrants as "rapists" and "criminals"—negatively influenced public opinion toward immigrants, particularly among Republicans and individuals without college degrees. Using a cross-national

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dataset, Czymara (2020b) demonstrated that native Europeans' attitudes toward Muslim immigrants are more negative in countries in which political elites employ more exclusionary language, and more welcoming when elite discourse is more inclusionary. Thus, the framing and language employed by political elites can shape majority groups' attitudes and behaviors toward immigrant groups, which in turn can influence how majority groups apply value and worth to immigrants (but see Hjerm and Schnabel 2010).

The media also plays a key role in generating narratives about immigrants. Extensive research has demonstrated that media coverage of immigration increases the salience of immigration as a central issue in society and can play a vital role in shaping and reproducing anti-immigration attitudes, both in the United States and Europe (Eberl et al. 2018; Hopkins 2010). Focusing on German news coverage between 1993 to 2005, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009) found that the frequency and tone of media coverage influenced patterns of anti-immigrant prejudice. Similarly, other scholars find that a negative media environment influences immigrant stereotyping, ethnic competition, and support for anti-immigrant political parties (Damstra et al. 2021; Farris and Silber Mohamed 2018).

If news media can foster or support anti-immigrant attitudes, can it also play a role in destigmization processes? A growing body of scholarship is exploring this very question. In Switzerland, Schemer (2012) reports that frequent exposure to positive news helped to reduce the activation of negative out-group attitudes among people with low to moderate knowledge about immigrants. Van Klingeren et al. (2015) suggest that in the Netherlands, media tone affects public discourse: a positive tone in news reports reduces anti-immigration attitudes. In the United States, some studies find that visual media that include positive images of immigrants tend to have a positive effect on peoples' attitudes while negative images (e.g., emphasizing criminality or illegality) increase support of restrictive policies (Haynes et al. 2016).

Social Movements and New Narratives

Social movements remain important in the destigmatization process for immigrants because they can bring attention to issues of discrimination and exclusion, and change cultural constructions, which in turn can shift public attitudes and policies toward immigrants (for further discussion, see Misra et al., this volume). In the United States, scholars have studied the ways in which activists and advocates have historically created pan-ethnic narratives and ethno-racial categories to raise the visibility, profile, and representation of immigrant groups (Okamoto 2014; Okamoto and Mora 2014). For example, and Okamoto (2020b) demonstrate how, in the 1970s, Hispanic leaders, advocates, and community members created a new narrative, which highlighted the contributions of Hispanic soldiers in the military and to past American wars, in

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their attempts to change the views of Hispanics as a domestic minority rather than a foreign group in the American imagination.

In the contemporary era, advocacy organizations and immigrant rights activists in Europe and the United States have focused on improving conditions for migrants and refugees. This has been particularly the case since the European migrant crisis in 2015: native-born citizens and migrants across Europe continue to protest against deportation and advocate for social inclusion (Ataç et al. 2016). Similarly, in the United States, a key objective for immigrant rights organizations and movements has been to destigmatize attitudes toward undocumented and noncitizen immigrants in an effort to expand their membership, both legally and socially. Thus, activists and organizations have been working to reframe the deservingness of immigrants to be recognized as citizens and to gain access to state resources. Immigrant rights activists, for example, have reframed welfare debates by underscoring the government's moral obligation to protect the elderly, disabled, and veterans, regardless of citizenship status (Fujiwara 2005). Local nonprofit organizations have successfully advocated for benefits like municipal ID cards for all by highlighting how immigrants contribute to civic life, just like other residents (De Graauw 2016; Gast et al. 2021). At the national level, organizations have defined undocumented youth brought to the United States at a young age as "citizens but for papers," who have long-standing civic and educational ties to U.S. communities (Patler 2018a), with the aim of altering current immigration discourse and policy (also see Nicholls 2019). While scholars disagree regarding the extent to which social movements and advocacy can shape policies and public opinion, there is some evidence to suggest that they do matter.

Intergroup Contact

While policies and social movements can contribute to destigmatization processes, individual interactions also play a key role (see García et al., this volume). Drawing primarily from contact theory, an extensive body of research examines how intergroup contact can help to reduce prejudice, increase intergroup trust and cooperation, and hamper feelings of threat (Brown and Hewstone 2005; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Existing studies generally find that positive intergroup contact is associated with more positive attitudes toward immigrants, less opposition toward inclusive immigration policies, and more participation in protests promoting the interests of immigrant outgroups (Kotzur et al. 2019; McLaren 2003). For example, drawing upon survey data, Tropp et al. (2018) find that when U.S.-born groups have greater levels of contact with Mexican and Indian immigrants, the more welcoming they are toward immigrant groups, even when controlling for respondents' demographic characteristics and indicators of intergroup exposure. Cross-sectional survey data are limited in addressing the issue of causality, but experimental and longitudinal studies have demonstrated that contact effects still seem to matter. Studies,

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however, have also shown that preexisting intergroup attitudes contribute to perceptions of interactions with immigrants (as positive or negative), such that more prejudiced people report engaging less frequently in intergroup contact and having less positive interactions with immigrants than less prejudiced people, which has implications for contact effects (Kotzur and Wagner 2021).

As we have already noted, institutions and policies can encourage positive views of immigrants. They also can create structures of opportunity where immigrants and the native-born come together and interact, possibly leading to greater intergroup understanding and reduction of prejudice. Local residents may begin to view immigrants as part of their communities because of what newcomers bring to withering local economies or because local political parties need new members to consolidate power (Okamoto and Ebert 2016). No matter what the mechanisms are, research has shown that institutions and policies can encourage intergroup contact. Green et al. (2020) found that tolerant migrant integration policies at the country level were associated with higher levels of everyday contact and lower perceptions of symbolic threat across twenty European countries, and that higher levels of everyday contact were related to lower perceptions of migrants as threats. Indeed, institutional support can facilitate contact and its effects. Yet, the positive effect of intergroup contact on immigration attitudes, whether encouraged by institutional support or not, might not be generalizable to all groups nor across contexts. Analyzing ESS data, Ponce (2020) examined how the European public distinguishes between desirable and undesirable migrants along a racial-ethnic hierarchy. Specifically, he found that contact with immigrants—a key mechanism that can reduce xenophobia and prejudice—tempers anti-immigrant attitudes most effectively with same-race migrants and least effectively with Muslim migrants. This suggests that race and religion constitute strong social boundaries.

A growing body of research (mostly in Europe) has started to explore the *dark* side of intergroup contact, also referred to as the integration paradox; that is, how increased contact with native groups may not always be beneficial for immigrants or, at the very least, does not always produce the intended effect (Verkuyten 2016). Challenging classical integration and assimilation theories, studies find that immigrants who are more structurally integrated report higher levels of perceived discrimination, stronger ethnic identification, and lower levels of perceived acceptance (de Vroome et al. 2014; Schaeffer 2019; Tolsma et al. 2012). It remains to be seen if (and how) the integration paradox will complicate destigmatization processes for immigrant groups in Europe.

Remaining Questions and Future Directions

Our review of the literature suggests that destigmatization processes for immigrant groups occur at various levels and in different domains. Lamont (2018) suggests three important steps to improve public attitudes toward stigmatized

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groups: (a) provide support for laws and policies that incorporate groups, (b) provide positive constructions of groups and behaviors, and (c) improve beliefs and attitudes through institutions and informal interactions. Although these are useful and important suggestions based on extensive research, several questions remain:

Which destigmatization strategies work for the most disparaged groups? Research has shown that nation-states can implement policies directed at immigrant socioeconomic integration, and advocacy organizations and activists can generate campaigns to shift the ways in which immigrants are viewed and understood by the larger public. Often, though, destigmatization processes involve a historical component and are context specific and thus might not work in the same ways in different contexts or even in the same way for all immigrant groups. Furthermore, Muslims in Europe and undocumented immigrants in the United States continue to face significant challenges posed by discrimination and exclusion. It will be important to determine which destigmatization strategies work best for the most disparaged groups as well as for immigrant groups in general.

What type of policies matter the most? One fruitful direction of research would be to examine why some policies work to encourage cultural membership for some groups but not others, and which types of policies are most effective. Scholars have suggested that abstract or universal policies, which include all groups, improve majority-group attitudes toward immigrants because they emphasize normative messages, while policies that provide immigrants with special provisions may have the opposite effect because their implementation may threaten majority groups' access to resources. Future studies should explore how different types of policies across various national contexts can shape immigration attitudes among host-society populations, a sense of belonging among immigrants, and how this can complicate (or encourage) destigmatization processes.

What key institutions can help to destigmatize immigrants? We discussed the role of the state as well as the media and advocacy organizations in contributing to the destigmatization of immigrants. Other institutions such as schools, public services, and health-care systems can also operate to include immigrants as full members of society that are treated with dignity and care. How do these institutions, in combination with others, work to increase the status of immigrants?

How does integration relate to destigmatization? Another unresolved issue concerns the role of integration in expanding cultural membership. Bloemraad et al. (2019) observe that Western societies have witnessed an expansion of formal membership via access to citizenship. Interestingly, this trend has been accompanied by a retraction in social rights, such that over the past fifty years,

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immigrants and other minorities have been seen as less deserving members of the polity even as their citizenship rights are expanding. Relatedly, studies in the United States and Europe show that even when immigrants are structurally and economically integrated and have access to formal citizenship, cultural membership does not necessarily follow, particularly for non-White immigrant groups (Beaman 2017; Schachter 2016; see also Blasco et al., this volume). Are certain forms of integration more effective in generating cultural membership? For which immigrant groups is the integration-cultural membership link tighter or weaker? What role does race, legal status, or citizenship play?

What role can fact-based treatments play in destigmatization? Given the growing prominence of misinformation, another fruitful direction for research would be to examine the consequences and benefits of correcting people's beliefs about immigrants: their impacts, proportions, and characteristics. Abascal et al. (2021) examine beliefs about how immigrants impact four social domains (cultural, labor, crime, fiscal burden) and find that providing Americans with factual information about immigrants' impacts increases support for immigration, at least in the short run. Focusing on immigrants' characteristics, Grigorieff et al. (2020) find that people develop more positive attitudes toward immigrants when additional information confirms that immigrants living in the country are similar to the "deserving" immigrant they have formed in their minds. Other scholars find limited evidence of fact-based treatments pertaining to the correction of misperceptions about the size of immigrant groups (Hopkins et al. 2019). What other types of fact-based treatments are effective, and how can we extend the length of their effects? Such treatments could be an important future step to increase the perceived status and value of immigrants in the United States and Europe.

Which frames are the most effective in shifting attitudes? Scholars are beginning to unpack specific frames regarding immigrants and immigration that resonate best with the public. Using a survey experiment design, Bloemraad et al. (2016) found that a "family unity" framing moves political conservatives toward greater acceptance of legalization for undocumented immigrants and that frames related to human rights appeals resonate the least with political moderates. Additionally, European scholars find that when the framing of grievances is not aligned between nonimmigrant activists and immigrants, it is more difficult to achieve measurable changes in immigration laws and policies (Fadaee 2015). Further exploring the types of frames that resonate with the majority group will be essential to support destigmatization processes. Relatedly, as there has been a surge of more visible social movements and protests held by immigrants and ethno-racial minorities both in the United States and Europe, a critical future direction for the field is to examine the strategies that immigrants themselves are employing to respond to stigma and exclusion while attempting to promote destigmatization processes for their own group

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and others (for an extensive comparative study on the responses to stigma and discrimination, see Lamont et al. 2016).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we reviewed the state of the literature regarding processes of destigmatization as they relate to immigrants and racial minorities. Integrating literature from various social science fields, we examined how these processes have occurred at the structural, meso, and individual levels. Clearly, more work must be done at all levels to raise the worth and deservingness of immigrant groups, so that they will have equal access to life chances and opportunities afforded to majority groups. While there is evidence to suggest that the boundaries between immigrants and host-society populations are shifting, future work should address how the different domains link to one another and the processes through which social change can occur. Here, we discussed each domain as if they were independent of one another, but undoubtedly, they interact and, at times, can reinforce one another to create opportunities to further stigmatize or destigmatize immigrants. Economic and political elites can drive and enact laws, policies, and practices, which can set norms and reinforce social and symbolic boundaries related to immigrants. Media and political narratives can reinforce one another, and it is still unclear which narratives get picked up and why. We also know that interactions on the ground and social movements can shape agendas and push policymakers to bend to public opinion. Clearly, multiple actors play a role in the destigmatization process for immigrants, yet it remains to be seen which strategies of destigmatization work most effectively across and within national contexts, for which immigrant and refugee groups, and at what level and in which domains these interventions will fare best. A systematic focus on past case studies and generating new research from and especially beyond the United States and Europe will be a fruitful and critical way forward.

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