

The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Power and Self-Labeling

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Abstract

We present a theoretical model of *reappropriation*—taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce another group's lesser status. Ten experiments tested this model and established a reciprocal relationship between power and self-labeling with a derogatory group term. We first investigated precursors to self-labeling: Group, but not individual, power increased participants' willingness to label themselves with a derogatory term for their group. We then examined the consequences of such self-labeling for both the self and observers. Self-labelers felt more powerful after self-labeling, and observers perceived them and their group as more powerful. Finally, these labels were evaluated less negatively after self-labeling, and this attenuation of stigma was mediated by perceived power. These effects occurred only for derogatory terms (e.g., *queer*, *bitch*), and not for descriptive (e.g., *woman*) or majority-group (e.g., *straight*) labels. These results suggest that self-labeling with a derogatory label can weaken the label's stigmatizing force.

Keywords

reappropriation, self-labeling, stigma, slurs, power, status, hierarchy, language, social perception

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Derogatory labels express contempt and derision, and, as carriers of stigma, they represent mechanisms of social control that reinforce a group's disempowered state (Mullen & Johnson, 1993). Despite the suffocating nature of these derisive descriptors, some individuals and groups intentionally use them self-referentially. Such *self-labeling* is controversial; many people fear that it reinforces existing stigma. Others have demanded that the use of slurs be declared illegal. Yet Anten (2006), in a legal review of trademarks that contain slurs, argued for allowing their use—but only when a term is self-referential (e.g., Dykes on Bikes).

We propose that self-labeling with a derogatory group label may ironically weaken its stigmatizing force and even revalue it, transforming the very words designed to demean into expressions of self-respect. In essence,

self-labeling with a stigmatizing group label may facilitate *reappropriation*, the process of taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce a stigmatized group's lesser status (Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom, & Bodenhausen, 2003). Given the increasing prevalence of self-labeling with stigmatizing descriptors, it is surprising that no empirical research has investigated its effects. The current research begins to fill this empirical void.

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A Theoretical Model of Reappropriation

Self-labeling involves agency, and research shows that any action taker is seen as possessing power (Magee, 2009). But self-labeling with a derogatory term is more than a simple expression of action. Rather, it is defiant action against a stigmatizing constraint. Given that power is defined as control over valuable resources (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), self-labeling is a form of power because it contests who can use the term. Essentially, self-labelers attempt to “capture” the label for themselves and deny others the use of it.

Furthermore, self-labeling with a derogatory group term has implications that go beyond the self-labeler. When a slur embodies a social identity, self-labelers are likely seen as acting as a representative of their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Because self-labeling with a stigmatizing group label is more than an individual act of defiance, it may influence impressions of group power. We propose that self-labeling with a derogatory group term will lead other individuals to see the group as having greater power.

We present a model of reappropriation that highlights the causes and consequences of self-labeling with a stigmatizing group term. Our model focuses on the role of power because the use of labels, by both the labeled and the labeling person, sheds light on the construction, maintenance, and revision of social hierarchies.

Because self-labeling challenges the negative implications of the stigmatizing label, it may help attenuate the stigma attached to it. Inferences of group power may also

help destigmatize the label, potentially converting a despised descriptor into an appreciated appellation. This latter idea is supported by evidence that power often produces status, whose currency is respect and admiration (Kilduff & Galinsky, *in press*; Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

Central to our reappropriation model is the individual act of self-labeling with a derogatory group term (see Fig. 1). This action will lead to inferences that the individual self-labeler has power (Path 2). Furthermore, because self-labeling with a derogatory group label is tightly connected to social identity, the inferences of individual power after self-labeling will be extended to the stigmatized group, which will also be seen as more powerful (Paths 3 and 4). Given that self-labeling challenges the negative implications of the derogatory term, and because of power's causal link to perceptions of respect (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), we propose that these inferences of individual and group power will lessen the negativity and stigmatizing force of the label. Thus, we propose that self-labeling will attenuate stigma (Path 5) and that perceived power will mediate this effect (Paths 6 and 7). The self-labeler will feel powerful and therefore see his or her group label as less stigmatizing. Observers will infer that the group has power and will therefore see the label as less saturated in negativity.

We have hypothesized that self-labeling leads to inferences of individual and group power. We further propose that power and self-labeling are reciprocally and iteratively related. Indeed, research shows that action and power are reciprocally related: Action leads to inferences

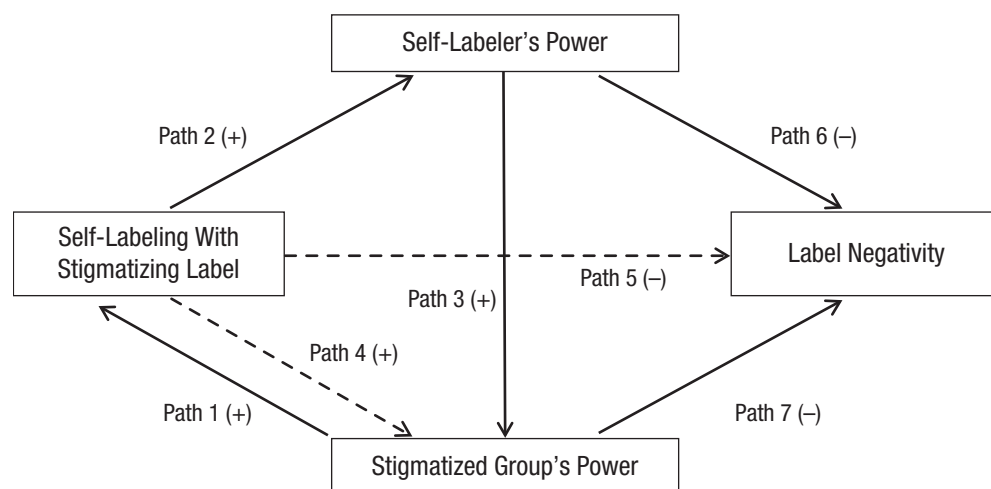


Fig. 1. A theoretical model of reappropriation. Dashed lines indicate direct paths that are mediated through another path in the model. Experiments 1 and 2 tested Path 1; Experiments 3, 4, 6, and 7 tested Path 2; Experiment 6 tested Path 3; Experiments 5, 6, and 8 tested Path 4; Experiments 7 through 10 tested Path 5; Experiment 7 tested Path 6; and Experiment 8 tested Path 7. A plus sign represents a positive relationship between variables, and a minus sign represents a negative relationship.

of power (Magee, 2009), and power leads to action (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). Thus, we propose that individuals will feel most comfortable labeling themselves with their group's stigmatizing term when they feel that their group has sufficient power (Path 1).

Our prediction that group power will lead to self-labeling with the group's stigmatizing term is further grounded in historical examples of self-labeling with the terms *nigger* and *queer*. In 1964, the passage of the Civil Rights Act formally gave African Americans more power. That same year, one of the first high-profile self-referential uses of the word *nigger* occurred in print: Dick Gregory (1964) titled his autobiography *Nigger*, and wrote to his mother on the book's cover, "if ever you hear the word 'nigger' again, remember they are advertising my book"). A similar trajectory occurred within the gay community: As state sodomy laws began to be repealed in the 1980s, the activist group Queer Nation formed and encouraged gays to refer to themselves with the word *queer* as "a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him" (Anonymous, 1990). We propose that the self-referential use of these derogatory labels following these legislative events was not coincidental—it suggests that the groups felt more powerful, which facilitated self-labeling with the derogatory group terms.

The experiments reported here tested our reappropriation model. Experiments 1 and 2 investigated whether feelings of group power encourage self-labeling (Path 1). Experiment 3 tested whether self-labeling leads the self-labeler to feel more powerful (Path 2). Experiments 4 through 6 explored observers' inferences of group and individual power after witnessing self-labeling (Paths 2–4). Experiments 7 and 8 examined the link between self-labeling and the attenuation of stigma as mediated through power (Paths 2 and 4–7). Experiments 9 and 10 investigated whether the improvement in label value following self-labeling is limited to stigmatizing labels (Path 5).

Experiment 1: From Group Power to Self-Labeling

Our first experiment tested whether feelings of group power increase willingness to label oneself with a stigmatizing term.

Method

Fifty-three participants (34 females, 19 males; mean age = 41.64 years, $SD = 16.17$) were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Thirty-nine participants were Caucasian, 6 were Asian, 3 were African American, 2 were Hispanic, and 3 were other ethnicities.

Participants were instructed to "think of a social group or category that you belong to, identify with, and that people have described using a negative label" and were given some examples: *nerd* and *kike*. Participants then were asked to indicate a stigmatizing label used to describe their group.¹ (For example, their responses included "honky" and "white trash," derogatory labels for Caucasians, and "gook" and "chink," derogatory labels for Asians.) After reporting a label, participants in the *high-power condition* recalled a time when their group had power or felt powerful; those in the *low-power condition* recalled a time when their group lacked power or felt powerless (adapted from Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003). Finally, participants rated how likely they were to refer to themselves using the stigmatizing label (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*).

Results

Participants in the high-power condition ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 2.16$) were more likely to label themselves with the derogatory term than were participants in the low-power condition ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(51) = 2.71$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.77$.

Experiment 2: Group but Not Individual Power Increases Self-Labeling

Experiment 2 tested whether power that was group based would have a greater effect on willingness to self-label with a stigmatizing group term than would power that was individually based. This study focused on derogatory labels (e.g., *bitch*, *slut*) for a single group: women.

Method

Sixty-one Caucasian women (mean age = 32.97 years, $SD = 12.23$) were recruited via MTurk. They first listed slurs that were relevant to their identity as women and selected the most negative slur they had generated. The most common labels that were selected included *bitch* (34.4%), *cunt* (14.8%), *whore* (6.6%), and *slut* (6.6%). The other 37.6% were other female-related labels. They then recalled a time when either their group or they individually possessed power. Finally, they rated the likelihood that they would label themselves with the slur they had identified as most negative (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*).

Results

Participants in the group-power condition were more willing to label themselves with a derogatory group label

($M = 2.70$, $SD = 2.04$) compared with participants in the individual-power condition ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(59) = 2.12$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.53$. This experiment provides key evidence of discriminant validity: Group power, but not individual power, increased the propensity to self-label with a derisive group term.

One ambiguity in the results of Experiment 1 was that it was unclear whether high group power increased or low group power decreased participants' willingness to label themselves with the derogatory terms. To clear up this ambiguity, we sorted the data from Experiments 1 and 2 into three conditions: high group power (high-power condition in Experiment 1, group-power condition in Experiment 2), low group power (low-power condition in Experiment 1), and high individual power (individual-power condition in Experiment 2). Compared with the high-group-power condition, the low-group-power condition held constant the group level, and the high-individual-power condition held constant high power. Participants in the high-group-power condition ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 2.11$) were more willing to self-label with the derogatory group term than were participants in both the low-group-power condition ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.38$), $t(111) = 2.49$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.47$, and the high-individual-power condition ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(111) = 3.30$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.62$. Willingness to self-label with the derogatory term did not differ between the latter two conditions, $t(111) = 0.38$, $p = .71$, $d = 0.07$. The results suggest that group power increases the willingness to self-label with a derogatory term.

Experiment 3: From Self-Labeling to Feelings of Power

Experiment 3 investigated whether self-labeling with a stigmatizing group label increases an individual's own sense of power.

Method

Seventy-three undergraduates (31 females, 42 males; mean age = 20.97 years, $SD = 1.08$) were recruited from an undergraduate research pool. Forty-three were Caucasians, 14 were Hispanic, 7 were African American, 7 were Asian, and 2 were other ethnicities.

Participants first listed a social group they were a part of and then listed a stigmatizing label used against their group. The procedure for recalling a group label was the same as in Experiment 1.

Participants then recalled a time when they referred to themselves using this stigmatizing group label (*self-label condition*) or the label was used against them (*other-label condition*). Finally, they rated how powerful they

felt during the labeling situation by responding to the following three questions: "How powerful did you feel in the situation?" "How in control did you feel in the situation?" and "How much influence did you feel you had in the situation?" Responses were made on 7-point scales from 1, *not at all*, to 7, *extremely* ($\alpha = .85$; Anderson & Galinsky, 2006).

Results

Participants in the self-label condition recalled feeling more powerful ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.29$) than did those in the other-label condition ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.60$), $t(71) = 2.78$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.65$.

Experiment 4: Conferring Individual Power on Self-Labelers

The next experiment explored whether observers confer power on individuals who label themselves with a stigmatizing group term. In Experiment 4, we wanted to test whether self-labeling is uniquely connected to perceptions of power. We therefore measured warmth because warmth is one of the two primary bases of social perception along with competence-power (Fiske, Thomas, & Vescio, 2007).

Method

Thirty-three undergraduates were each paid \$5 for participating and read a scenario about two high-school students, Tom and Bill. The scenario mentioned that "new knowledge about a number of students (including Bill) was circulating." They read that Tom and Bill passed each other in the hall. In the *other-label condition*, Tom pronounced to Bill, "You're queer!" In the *self-label condition*, Bill pronounced, "I'm queer!"² Participants evaluated Bill's power (four items: dependent-independent, weak-strong, insecure-secure, passive-active; $\alpha = .82$) and warmth (four items: cruel-kind, cold-warm, unpleasant-pleasant, stingy-generous; $\alpha = .94$) on 7-point scales (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

Results

A significant interaction emerged in a 2 (condition: self-label, other-label) $\times$ 2 (rating: power, warmth) mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA), $F(1, 31) = 20.71$, $p < .001$. Bill was rated as more powerful when he labeled himself *queer* ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.68$) than when Tom labeled him *queer* ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.32$), $t(31) = 3.33$, $p = .002$, $d = 1.16$. In contrast, Bill's warmth did not differ between the self-label ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.81$) and

other-label ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.31$) conditions, $t(31) = 1.58$, $p = .12$, $d = 0.55$. Self-labeling led observers to view the labeled person as more powerful, but did not affect ratings of his warmth.

Experiment 5: Conferring Group Power on Self-Labelers

The next experiment tested whether self-labeling would affect observers' perceptions of the power of the group referred to by the label.

Method

One hundred forty-four undergraduates (84 females, 60 males; mean age = 20.90 years, $SD = 1.59$) were recruited from an undergraduate research pool. Seventy-six were Caucasian, 41 were Asian, 18 were Hispanic, 4 were African American, and 5 were other ethnicities. The study involved a fictitious label, "dokker," ostensibly used as an ethnic slur to refer to Crimean Rutuls (a real ethnic minority representing 10% of Ukraine's population). Participants read a newspaper article about a town-hall meeting in which a Rutul individual shouted, "I'm a dokker" (*self-label condition*) or in which a majority Ukrainian shouted, "You're a dokker" at him (*other-label condition*). Participants then rated how much power Crimean Rutuls possessed, using a scale from 1 to 7 (three items: power, control, influence; $\alpha = .81$).

Results

The Rutul community, a stigmatized minority, was seen as more powerful in the self-label condition ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.19$) than in the other-label condition ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(142) = 2.04$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.34$.

Experiment 6: Self-Labeling Is More Than Mere Action

In Experiment 6, we tested whether perceptions of individual power would mediate the effect of self-labeling on perceptions of group power. We also wanted to explore whether self-labeling is distinct from merely taking another form of action. Magee (2009) found that individuals taking any action (e.g., moving an annoying fan) are seen as more powerful than those who passively do nothing. We expected that action taking, regardless of whether the action involved self-labeling, would increase inferences of individual power. However, we predicted that only self-labeling, but not another form of action taking, would increase evaluations of the stigmatized group's power.

Method

Eighty-three undergraduates (59 females, 24 males; mean age = 20.88 years, $SD = 1.43$) were recruited from an undergraduate research pool. Thirty-four were Caucasian, 31 were Asian, 11 were Hispanic, 1 was African American, and 6 were other ethnicities. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (actor: self, other) $\times$ 2 (behavior: labeling, labeling-unrelated action) between-participants design. Participants read one of four scenarios. In every condition, participants learned that "Bill and his boyfriend had once waved to Tom from across the dining hall," which clearly revealed that Bill was gay. In the *labeling conditions*, we used Experiment 4's scenario in which Bill labels himself as queer or another student, Tom, labels him as queer. In the *labeling-unrelated conditions* (adapted from Magee, 2009), the last sentence of the scenario read that the air conditioning was "annoyingly cold" and that either Bill or Tom "moved first, and turned it off."

Participants rated Bill's power ($\alpha = .77$; three questions: "How powerful is Bill?" "How much control does Bill have?" and "How much influence does Bill have?") and the gay community's power ($\alpha = .83$; three questions: "In general, how much power do you think the gay community has?" "In general, how much control do you think the gay community possesses?" and "In general, how much influence do you think the gay community possesses?"). Responses were made on 7-point scales.

Results

Bill was seen as more powerful when he took action (either labeling himself or turning off the fan; $M = 4.60$, $SD = 0.78$) than when Tom did ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.90$), $F(1, 79) = 12.04$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.78$. The Actor $\times$ Behavior interaction was not significant, $p = .92$. Bill was seen as more powerful whenever he took action, regardless of whether the action was labeling himself or turning off the fan.

For the gay community's power, the predicted Actor $\times$ Behavior interaction emerged, $F(1, 79) = 4.64$, $p = .03$ (see Fig. 2). The gay community was seen as more powerful when Bill labeled himself than when he was labeled by Tom, $t(79) = 2.55$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.94$. In contrast, perceptions of the gay community's power did not differ depending on whether Bill or Tom turned off the fan, $t(79) = 0.47$, $p = .64$, $d = 0.12$. Furthermore, ratings of the gay community's power were higher in the self-labeling condition compared with the other three conditions, $t(79) = 3.66$, $p < .001$. Action of any kind (related or unrelated to self-labeling) increased perceptions that Bill had power, but only self-labeling increased perceptions of the stigmatized group's power.

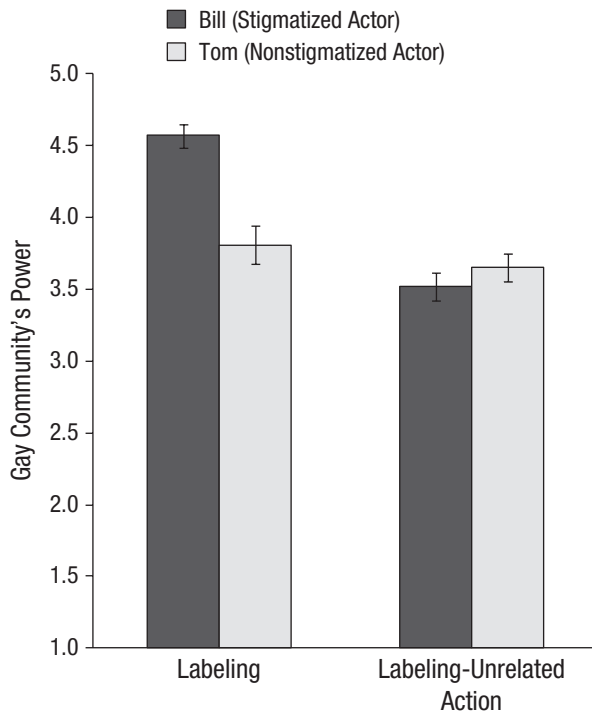


Fig. 2. Results from Experiment 6: perceptions of the gay community's power as a function of actor (Bill, who was identified as gay in all conditions, or Tom) and behavior (labeling Bill as *queer* or turning off an annoying fan). Error bars indicate ± 1 SEM.

Using the moderated-mediation macro developed by Hayes (in press), we conducted a series of linear regressions that simultaneously tested the conditional indirect effects within both the labeling conditions and the labeling-unrelated-action conditions using a constrained non-linear regression, which estimates coefficients from a series of bootstrap samples (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). This allowed us to test whether perceptions of Bill's power mediated the link between labeling, but not labeling-unrelated action, and perceptions of the gay community's power. Within the labeling conditions, the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect (derived from 5,000 bootstrap samples) did not contain zero, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.39]. Self-labeling increased participants' perception of the self-labeler's power, which then increased their perception of the stigmatized group's power. The indirect effect was not significant within the labeling-unrelated-action conditions, 95% CI = [-0.27, 0.27]. Thus, the mediation was unique to the labeling conditions.

Experiment 7: Stigma Attenuation Through Individual Power

Experiments 4 through 6 demonstrated that observers perceive stigmatized individuals and their group as

having more power after stigmatized individuals label themselves with a derogatory group term. The next set of experiments examined whether the act of self-labeling weakens a slur's negativity. According to our model, perceptions that self-labelers and their group are more powerful will change the connotative meaning of the label, attenuating its stigmatizing force in the eyes of both the self-labelers and observers. Experiment 7 tested whether self-labelers see the stigmatizing label as less negative because they feel more powerful.

Method

Seventy-four individuals (63 females, 11 males; mean age = 30.72 years, $SD = 10.68$) belonging to groups that have historically been the target of stigma (women, minority races, gay and lesbian individuals) were recruited via MTurk. Fifty-seven were Caucasian, 8 were Asian, 5 were African American, 2 were Hispanic, and 2 were other ethnicities.

Participants listed slurs associated with their group or groups; 75.7% of participants recalled a label associated with their gender, 20.3% recalled a label referring to their race or ethnicity, and 4.0% recalled a label about their sexual orientation. In the *self-label condition*, participants were asked to describe "a time when you referred to yourself using one of these labels." In the *other-label condition*, they described a time when a member of the majority out-group (defined as the group that imposed these labels on the stigmatized group) used one of these labels against them. Next, participants reported how powerful they felt and how powerful they thought the out-group member felt (scales from 1 through 7). Finally, they rated how negative they felt the label was (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Results

A 2 (label: self-label, other-label) $\times$ 2 (rating: self-power, out-group-member power) mixed-model ANOVA revealed a significant interaction, $F(1, 72) = 12.56, p = .001$. Participants felt more powerful when they labeled themselves ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.83$) than when they were labeled by the out-group member ($M = 2.79, SD = 1.86$), $t(72) = 2.24, p = .03, d = 0.52$. In contrast, participants believed the out-group member felt less powerful when participants labeled themselves ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.70$) than when they were labeled by the out-group member ($M = 5.55, SD = 1.72$), $t(72) = 3.49, p = .001, d = 0.81$. Other-labeled participants felt less powerful than they thought the out-group member felt, $t(37) = 5.49, p < .001, d = 1.54$, but self-labeled participants viewed their own power as equivalent to the out-group member's power, $t(35) = 0.98, p = .33, d = 0.24$. Self-labeling equalized the

perceived power difference between the stigmatized self-labelers and the out-group individuals in the minds of the self-labelers.

Self-labeled participants also viewed their label as less negative ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.83$) than other-labeled participants did ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(72) = 2.55$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.59$. To test whether power mediated the effect of self-labeling on label evaluation, we averaged the self-ratings of power with perceptions of the out-group member's power (reverse-coded). A bootstrapping analysis revealed significant mediation, 95% bias-corrected CI = $[-1.05, -0.001]$. Self-labeling increased the self-labeler's sense of relative power, which then decreased the negativity the self-labeler associated with the stigmatizing label.

Experiment 8: Stigma Attenuation Through Group Power

In Experiment 8, we investigated whether the relationship between self-labeling and stigma attenuation is also mediated through group power. We explored whether witnessing someone label him- or herself with a stigmatizing group term would increase observers' perceptions of the stigmatized group's power over the label and therefore reduce the negativity they associated with the label.

Method

Two hundred thirty-five undergraduates (136 females, 99 males; mean age = 20.94 years, $SD = 1.75$) were recruited from an undergraduate research pool. One hundred twelve were Caucasian, 71 were Asian, 39 were Hispanic, and 13 were African Americans.

Participants first listed their own demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age). We then provided participants with a list of minority groups that they were not part of (e.g., Caucasian women were presented with a list of other races, Hispanic men were presented with a list that included only other non-Caucasian races and women) and had them select the group (or groups) from which they had witnessed a member either label him- or herself with a derogatory slur (*self-label condition*) or be labeled with a derogatory slur by a member of a majority out-group (*other-label condition*). Participants then selected an example relating to one particular stigmatized group.

Participants rated how much power, control, and ownership they felt the stigmatized group had over the use of the stigmatized term, using 7-point scales ($\alpha = .91$). Finally, they rated how negative and positive they felt the label was, also using 7-point scales ($\alpha = .67$; ratings were averaged such that higher ratings on the combined scale reflect greater negativity).

Results

The stigmatized out-group was seen as possessing greater power over the label in the self-label condition ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.52$) than in the other-label condition ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(233) = 8.04$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.05$.

The label was also seen as less negative in the self-label condition ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.37$) than in the other-label condition ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(233) = 2.46$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.33$. We tested whether perceptions of the stigmatized group's power mediated the link between self-labeling and stigma attenuation. The bootstrap analysis was significant, 95% bias-corrected CI = $[-0.41, -0.01]$. Self-labeling increased perceptions of the stigmatized group's power over the label, which attenuated the negativity of the label.

Experiment 9: Revaluing a Term Through Self-Labeling Is Limited to Stigmatizing Labels (*Queer*)

Our final two experiments tested whether the observed effects of self-labeling on stigma attenuation are unique to stigmatizing labels or occur for any label. In Experiment 9, we compared the effects of self-labeling on the perceived negativity of the stigmatizing label *queer* and on the perceived negativity of a nonstigmatizing equivalent label, *LGBT* (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), and a nonstigmatizing, majority-group label, *straight*.

Method

Two hundred five undergraduates (121 females, 84 males; mean age = 21.02 years, $SD = 2.50$) were recruited from an undergraduate research pool. Ninety were Caucasian, 68 were Asian, 31 were Hispanic, 8 were African Americans, and 8 were other ethnicities.

Participants read one of six versions of a newspaper article in a 2 (condition: self-label, other-label) $\times$ 3 (label: *queer*, *LGBT*, *straight*) design. In the three self-labeling versions, a person said, "I'm queer," "I'm LGBT," or "I'm straight." In the three other-labeling versions, someone said to that person, "You're queer," "You're LGBT," or "You're straight." Next, participants rated how negative the label in their respective condition was (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Results

An ANOVA on ratings of the label revealed a Condition $\times$ Label interaction, $F(1, 199) = 4.68$, $p = .01$ (see Fig. 3). Participants in the self-label/*queer* condition viewed the label *queer* as less negative than did those in the other-label/*queer* condition, $t(199) = 3.85$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.88$. In

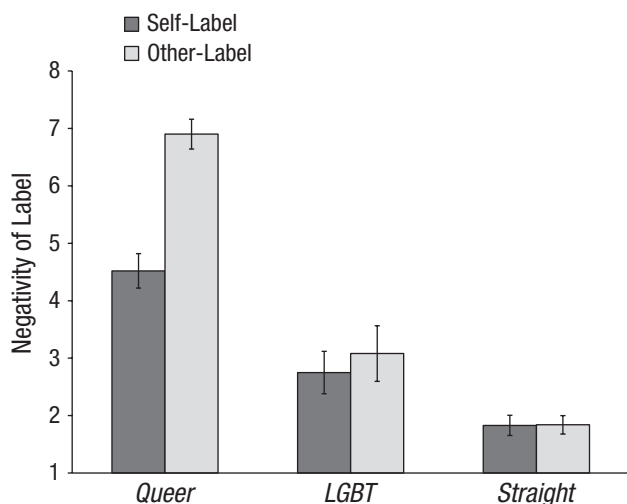


Fig. 3. Results from Experiment 9: rated negativity of a stigmatizing label (*queer*), a descriptive term for the same stigmatized group (*LGBT*—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), and a majority-group label (*straight*) in the self-label and other-label conditions. Error bars indicate ± 1 SEM.

contrast, self- versus other-labeling did not have an effect on evaluation of the labels *LGBT*, $t(199) = 0.64$, $p = .52$, $d = 0.20$, or *straight*, $t(199) = 0.04$, $p = .97$, $d = 0.01$. Self-labeling improved the evaluation of a derogatory label relative to other-labeling. However, self-labeling and other-labeling did not differentially affect the evaluations of the nonstigmatizing, descriptive label for the stigmatized group or the majority-group label.

Experiment 10: Revaluing a Term Through Self-Labeling Is Limited to Stigmatizing Labels (*Bitch*)

In Experiment 10, we compared the effects of self-labeling on the perceived negativity of different group labels in a naturalistic context by varying a Facebook page. For this experiment, we also used a different derogatory label, *bitch*. Feminists have attempted to reappropriate this label to mean a strong, assertive woman, popularized in the Grammy-nominated song “I’m a Bitch.” We used the term *woman* as a nonstigmatizing equivalent for *bitch*. This study also tested whether self-labeling would increase support for the empowerment of women.

Method

One hundred nine undergraduates (59 females, 49 males, 1 participant whose gender was unreported; mean age = 20.93 years, $SD = 2.26$) were recruited from an undergraduate research pool. Forty-eight were Caucasian, 29 were Asian, 23 were Hispanic, 4 were African American,

and 5 were other ethnicities. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (condition: self-label, other-label) $\times$ 2 (label: *bitch*, *woman*) design and to a floating no-label condition.

Participants saw a Facebook page (created by the experimenters) of a student named Jessica. In the *self-label* conditions, Jessica wrote on her own wall either “My name is bitch!”³ or “My name is woman!” In the *other-label* conditions, another student, David, wrote on Jessica’s wall, “Your name is bitch!” or “Your name is woman!” In the *no-label* condition, all posts on the page were the same except that there was no post containing a label.

Participants completed a measure of female empowerment (five reverse-scored items, e.g., “the wife should not work outside the home unless it is an absolute financial necessity”; Fournier, Olson, & Druckman, 1983; $\alpha = .82$). Next, participants in the *bitch* and no-label conditions rated how negative they felt the label *bitch* was; those in the *woman* conditions rated the label *woman* (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Results

A 2 (condition: self-label, other-label) $\times$ 2 (label: *bitch*, *woman*) $\times$ 2 (participant’s gender: male, female) ANOVA on the female-empowerment measure revealed a Condition $\times$ Label interaction, $F(1, 86) = 4.82$, $p = .03$ (see Table 1). In the *bitch* conditions, self-labeling led to greater support of female empowerment than did other-labeling, $t(104) = 2.60$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.89$. In the *woman* conditions, self-labeling and other-labeling did not differentially affect support of female empowerment, $t(104) = 0.16$, $p = .87$, $d = 0.05$.

For ratings of the label, a Condition $\times$ Label interaction emerged, $F(1, 86) = 6.06$, $p = .02$ (see Table 1). We performed planned contrasts to understand the differences between the labeling conditions and the floating no-label condition. Self-labeling led participants to view the label *bitch* as less negative than other-labeling, $t(104) = 3.35$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.00$. Ratings of this label were also less negative in the self-label condition than in the no-label condition, $t(104) = 3.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.37$; ratings did not differ between the other-label and no-label conditions, $t(104) = 0.85$, $p = .40$, $d = 0.31$. In contrast, *woman* was not rated differently in the self-label and other-label conditions, $t(104) = 0.41$, $p = .68$, $d = 0.06$.

Participant’s sex did not moderate the effects, $ps > .67$. Both men and women saw the stigmatizing label *bitch* as less negative and supported female empowerment more after witnessing a woman label herself with this term than after witnessing another person label her with it (or after no labeling).

Table 1. Results From Experiment 10: Means for Support of Female Empowerment and Label Negativity

Label evaluated and condition	Dependent variable	
	Support of female empowerment	Label negativity
<i>Bitch</i>		
Self-label	4.09 (0.70) ^a	4.71 (1.27) ^a
Other label	3.33 (0.99) ^b	5.90 (1.11) ^b
No label	3.43 (0.92) ^b	6.21 (0.89) ^b
<i>Woman</i>		
Self-label	3.82 (0.85) ^{a,b}	2.54 (1.45) ^c
Other label	3.86 (0.79) ^{a,b}	2.45 (1.52) ^c

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses. Within each column, means with different subscripts differ significantly from each other, $p < .05$.

The effect of self-labeling on both stigma attenuation and support of female empowerment was specific to the derogatory label: There were no effects of self-labeling with the nonstigmatizing term *woman*. Although not a focus of this experiment, increased female empowerment could be a catalyst for self-labeling and reappropriation, as demonstrated in Experiments 1 and 2.

General Discussion

Ten experiments tested the core components of a new reappropriation model. Empirically, we explored the causes and consequences of self-labeling with a derogatory group label. We found that power was reciprocally tied to self-labeling. Group, but not individual, power increased participants' willingness to label themselves with a derogatory term. Self-labeling increased self-labelers' perceptions of their own power and increased observers' perceptions of the self-labelers' and the stigmatized group's power. Perceived power was then a critical ingredient in attenuating the stigma attached to the label after self-labeling.

These studies demonstrate an iterative relationship between self-labeling with a derogatory group label and power: A group's power helps determine the likelihood of self-labeling, and once a group begins self-labeling, group power is perceived as increasing. Increased perceptions of power then attenuate the stigma attached to the derogatory group label.

Discriminant validity

Our experiments were designed to begin exploring the precise relationships that should be included in a parsimonious theoretical model of self-labeling and reappropriation. Our finding that a sense of group, but not individual, power increased the propensity to self-label is

critical because it is the first demonstration that group power can produce different effects than individual power. Furthermore, we found that the act of self-labeling is not reducible to a mere act of power: Action divorced from self-labeling altered perceptions of individual, but not group, power. We also demonstrated that self-labeling does not affect all judgments (e.g., of warmth), but is specific to judgments related to power. Finally, we established that these effects are limited to stigmatizing labels: Self-labeling with nonstigmatizing terms had no effects. In summary, self-labeling (a) was driven by group, but not individual, power; (b) primarily affected judgments related to power; and (c) emerged only when the group label was originally stigmatizing.

Future directions

Future research should explore the reaction that stigmatized-group members have when out-group members use a derogatory label against their group *after* they have begun self-labeling. Derogatory labels used by majority groups against a stigmatized group may initially cause that group shame, but after reappropriation may produce indignant anger.

Future research should also explore the limits of self-labeling. Self-labeling may not have positive effects on perceived power or stigma attenuation when the label is soaked in legitimate contempt or when the group has too little power. Groups below a certain threshold of respect (e.g., Nazis, pedophiles) or power may not be able to reap the benefits of self-labeling. Similarly, future studies could investigate when self-labeling fails to capture and revalue the label, but simply validates its negativity or condones its use by majority groups. Finally, research can explore when reappropriation leads to backlash effects because the self-labelers don't "know their place" (Rudman, 1998).

Conclusion

There is pain in being a member of a stigmatized group. But our research demonstrates that stigma can be challenged and slurs reappropriated. As the world embraces multiculturalism, self-labeling with derogatory terms could become more common, with stigmatized groups reappropriating their derogatory labels with pride.

Author Contributions

All authors developed the study concept. A. D. Galinsky, C. S. Wang, J. A. Whitson, E. M. Anicich, and K. Hugenberg designed the studies. A. D. Galinsky, C. S. Wang, J. A. Whitson, and E. M. Anicich were involved in testing and data collection, performing data analysis and interpretation, and drafting the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Notes

1. In the recall tasks (Experiments 1–3, 7, and 8), 9.8% of participants could not recall a group with a stigmatizing label or an experience with the label. These participants were excluded from the analyses and from the numbers of participants reported in this article.
2. To test whether the term *queer* has already been fully revalued, we asked 43 participants to evaluate this label (1 = *absolutely negative*, 6 = *absolutely positive*). Ratings for *queer* ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.3$) were significantly below the scale midpoint, $p < .001$. These results suggest that the term *queer* remains a derogatory term.
3. To test whether the term *bitch* has already been fully revalued, we asked 43 participants (same participants and method as in note 2) to evaluate this label. Ratings for *bitch* ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.1$) were significantly below the scale midpoint, $p < .001$. These results suggest that the term *bitch* remains a derogatory term.

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