‘If I Overachieve’

Stigma and its Management by Female Beneficiaries of Caste based Affirmative Action in the Higher Professional Education in India

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Abstract – The paper as a part of thesis dissertation of the author seeks to investigate the effect of caste based affirmative action in higher professional education in India on the beneficiaries of the affirmative action. This paper particularly looks at the female beneficiaries to highlight their perspective as different from the male beneficiaries. Stigmatization by self or others is one of the consequences of affirmative action on the beneficiaries. They employ stigma management strategies to deal with it. The stigma itself has consequences on the mental and physical health of the beneficiaries and its management might also shape their personalities and how they deal with situations. This may affect their personal as well professional lives.

Keywords- affirmative action, anti-discrimination, equal opportunities, diversity, identity, young people.

STIGMA

The Greeks used stigma to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. These signs were cut or burnt into the body and the bearers advertised as a blemished person or ritually polluted and to be avoided especially in public spaces (Goffman, 1963). In today’s world stigma is used more in terms of the disgrace attached to the person than to bodily signs of it. But the philosophy behind it remains the same- a stigmatized person is marked differentiated and discriminated against.

Stigma as defined by Goffman (1963) is “an attribute that makes a person different from others in the category of persons available to him to be” and the person is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one”. In their review paper on stigma Link & Phelan (2001) discover various definitions of stigma for e.g. stigma is a ‘characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit, where a norm is defined as a shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time’; or that the ‘stigmatized individuals possess some attribute, or believed to possess, or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context’. Stigma is also seen as a ‘mark or attribute that links a person to undesirable characteristics or stereotypes’ (Sutton & Callahan, 1987).
According to Goffman (1963) stigma’s discrediting effect is extensive and is sometimes called a handicap, failing, or shortcoming. Not all undesirable attributes are an issue but only those that are incongruous with the stereotype of what a given type of individual should be, and so it’s really a special kind of relationship between an attribute and stereotype. Goffman (1963) describes three different kinds of stigma first that of abominations of the body or physical defects; second that of blemishes of the character or personal weaknesses and third tribal stigma or that which can transmitted through lineages and equally contaminates all members like race, religion, nation (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000; Slattery, 2003) or caste as is the case in India.

Stereotypes are mainly relevant to collective stigmas or tribal stigma of Goffman and have traditionally referred to the content of an assumed set of characteristics associated with a particular social group or type of person (Biernat & Dovidio, 2000). The authors further say that stereotypes are involved in stigmatization to the extent that the response of perceivers is not simply a negative one but go further of assuming a specific set of characteristics to exist among people sharing the same stigma evoking a social identity. Extending Goffman’s observation of stigma as a relationship between ‘an attribute and a stereotype’ Link & Phelan (2001) say that stigma exists when people distinguish and label human differences; then labeled persons are linked to negative stereotypes; thirdly labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation between them and us; fourthly labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes and all this are contingent on access to social, economic and political power by the ones doing the stigmatizing act. Thus stigma most certainly leads to stereotypes and more so in case of group stereotypes. Caste being hierarchical endogamous groups with rigid rituals and customs gave rise to exploitative and discriminatory practices which needed to be corrected by taking recourse to affirmative action.

**AFFIRMATIVE ACTION**

Affirmative Action (AA) as defined by the United States Civil Rights Commission 1977 is “any measure beyond simple termination of a discriminatory practice, adopted to correct or compensate for past or present discrimination or to prevent discrimination from recurring in the future” (Kravitz,
2008). It is differentiated from any other form of antidiscrimination measures by requiring pro-active steps to erase differences between women and men, minorities and non-minorities in contrast to laws that only prevent employers from taking steps that disadvantage minorities in the labour market such as refusing to hire them (Holzer & Neumark, 2000a). It exists under different names in various other countries like in U.K. and India as positive discrimination, as standardization in Sri Lanka, reflecting the federal character of the country in Nigeria, and “son of the soil” preferences in Malaysia, Indonesia as well as some states in India (Sowell, 2004). Affirmative Action is used to refer to policies in different areas of the socio-economic and politico life of the nation like employment, education and government contracting in the USA (Holzer & Neumark, 2000a) and in India reservations in legislative and local government bodies. Affirmative Action works at different levels at the central, state and local levels, voluntary and involuntary levels; and covers many different activities including recruitment, training, hiring, promotion and special outreach to employees (Holzer & Neumark, 2000, 2000a).

There is always the doubt as to whether the benefit of Affirmative Action is reaching the actual targeted beneficiaries and whether it is really achieving its objective of establishing equality of opportunity. Empirical research shows particularly in the U.S.A that affirmative action has benefited blacks both male and female and white women (Leonard, 1984; 1985; 1986) though what has been the mechanism through which it has taken place is not very clear. Neither are the consequences in terms of economic or performance outcomes for organisations conforming to Affirmative Action very evident (Holzer & Neumark, 2000).

**Affirmative Action in India**

The attempt to remove the stigma and make life easier for the members of the socially disadvantaged castes was done after Indian independence through various measures including affirmative action in the form of Reservation Policy. India follows the policy of reservations or positive discrimination which is mandated by the Constitution. Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are given reservations in the government jobs, in government run and government aided educational institutions, and monetary assistance in terms of fees and other benefits. The usual pattern of
reservations like that in the services are applied in education also. The SCs get 15%, STs 7.5% and Other Backward Castes 27%. The SCs and STs also get waivers in fees, admission application fees and other monetary benefits, as well as lower cut off marks in entrance examinations and prior academic achievements as reflected in marks obtained.

STIGMA OF INCOMPETENCE AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BENEFICIARIES

Like any other policy adopted and implemented for creating a better situation than before, Affirmative Action has its side effects. The question - is Affirmative Action helping to its best of ability as well as keeping to its mandate of ameliorating the stigmatized groups’ situation?, has always been on the mind of social sciences researchers. Several studies show that beneficiaries of Affirmative Action are discriminated in ways different from the ways that they were discriminated for being part of the stigmatized group. This form of stigma now attaches itself to the organisational setting be it workplace or academic institutions which brings the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries together and manifests itself in the perceptions of non-beneficiaries about the ability, competency and performance expectations of the beneficiaries. This stigma has two dimensions one which the beneficiaries face and one which they inflict on themselves.

By Self

Selection procedures tell the individuals about their job competence. Preferential selection conveys that work-irrelevant criteria were more important, than in the case of merit based selection where merit and skill were the main deciding points (Heilman, Simon & Repper, 1987). This leads to ambiguous information about qualifications and leads the beneficiaries to question their competence (Major, Feinstein & Crocker, 1994) which may lead to self-doubt emanating from self –threatening implication of receiving help (Turner & Pratkanis, 1994); low performance expectations and effectiveness and maybe more harmful if the individual already has low confidence (Heilman, Rivero & Brett, 1991) or other psychological factors like not thinking well of oneself (Dunning, Heath & Suls, 2005). Therefore this uncomfortable situation may lead to the individual not accepting the position and not excelling due to lack of motivation (Kravitz, 2008). Research has also pointed out
that the beneficiaries may also stigmatize other beneficiaries and think of them as less competent (Heilman et. al, 1993). This is the self-stigmatization of the beneficiaries which literature has talked about. It is one of the indirect consequences of affirmative action where not only does the beneficiary self-stigmatize oneself because of reasons within oneself but also because of what she thinks others think about her. Heilman & Alcott (2001) reported that when beneficiaries believed others were cognizant that they were preferentially selected, they inferred others held negative expectations about their competence, produced timid, performance limiting task decisions and negative self-regard when they were uncertain about their task ability level.

By Others

The policy of Affirmative Action (AA) is sometimes opposed by members of the target groups who have supposedly have gained much out of it. They feel that the Affirmative Action policies ‘stigmatize the intended beneficiaries causing inferences of substandard competence’ (Heilman, Block & Lucas, 1992). Many studies have reported that the stigma of incompetence is invariably attached to the beneficiaries of Affirmative Action. The studies by Garcia et al.(1981), Major, Feinstein & Crocker (1994), Heilman, McCullough & Gilbert (1996), Heilman, Block & Statathos (1997), Heilman et al. (1998), Heilman & Blader (2001) and Evans (2003) all confirm the fact that non-beneficiaries see the beneficiaries of Affirmative Action as less competent, less able to handle tasks and have negative evaluations about future performance and career success.

The reason why this takes places can be explained with the help of attribution theory and the works of Kelley (Heilman, Block & Lucas, 1992), Kelley (1973) and Kelley & Michela (1980). They suggest that when the attributor or perceiver has information that someone has been hired on the basis of Affirmative Action policy then it provides them with the explanation of the selection decision independent of the person’s qualifications (Kelly, 1973). This leads to discounting the qualifications of the concerned person and attributing his or her selection solely on the basis of their beneficiary status. But the qualifications of the person are so central to selection decisions and this leads to another assumption, that the Affirmative Action hires are incompetent. The perceived suspension of ordinary and expected selection criteria provides more fuel to the inference of incompetence
(Heilman, Block & Lucas, 1992; Nacoste 1990). The tenacity of the stigma of incompetence remains intact even in the face of information about the performance and the responsibility of which was given to the beneficiary (Heilman, Block & Stathatos, 1997).

**In Higher Education**

The general perception along with some empirical support show that performance of beneficiaries of Affirmative Action in higher education to be poor which leads to the conclusion that they are being admitted into courses that are difficult for them, prompting the critics of the policy to point out that it promotes self-stigmatization and others stigmatization leading to lower performance (Brown et.al., 2000). The study by authors led by Brown et.al., (2000) showed that the notion of being preferentially selected leads to lower academic performance and also that there is a gap in the overall academic performance of stigmatized versus non-stigmatized groups. Some studies as done by Detterman (2000) go to the extent of saying that Affirmative Action should be stopped in education due to the fact that the targeted groups are not performing up to standards academically.

The discounting of the ability of target group students by others when they were perceived as beneficiaries of Affirmative Action was found in the study by Garcia et.al, (1981). Few studies show the real situation of the minority students in institutions predominantly populated by majority group students and give only the graduation rates or grade point averages. Few studies like the one by Feagin & Sikes (1995) show the real picture of minority students as they self-segregate themselves in order to insulate themselves from the harsh realities of everyday stigma they face in mainstream institutions.

**Effect of Stigmatization on Beneficiaries**

For the stigmatized it may result in strained uncomfortable social interactions with those who stigmatize (Farina et al. 1968); social adaptation after illness (Perlick et al., 2001).status loss- a downward placement in the status hierarchy, compromised quality of life, low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, unemployment and income loss (Link & Phelan, 2001). The stereotype can also affect performance as in academic performance in college students. Steele & Aronson (1995) in their study
of Black students taking standardized tests showed that in case of stereotype threat i.e. in the situations where the negative stereotype applicable to their group is likely to be active, the target group conforms to it as a form of self-characterization and where the stereotype demeans something as important as intellectual ability it can have major implications even leading to impairment of performance. All these outcomes require some way of managing and coping for the stigmatized people to live normally.

**DEALING WITH STIGMA**

Faced with the stigma and stigmatizing situation it is very natural that the stigmatized will try to deal with the situation. This might be called coping or managing stigma or stigma management strategies. According to Leary & Kowalski (1990) people have ongoing interest in how others perceive and evaluate them. Impression management or self-presentation is the process by which individuals attempt to control the impression others form of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The case when the person is stigmatized calls for more efforts on their part to present a confirmatory or real picture of them. Goffman (1963) discusses the importance of self-presentation for defining the individual's place in the social order, for setting the tone and direction of an interaction, and for facilitating the performance of role-governed behaviour. He discusses various types of coping techniques a) *passing* which involves pretending to someone else from what one really is; b) *covering* involves people who are ready to accept stigma nonetheless making an effort to keep it from looming large by reducing tension and diverting covert attention from the stigma towards the real interaction; c) *in-group alignments* involves seeking help and succor with fellow stigmatized people; d) *out group alignments* involves disconfirming of stereotypes attached to his status. Berk (1977) builds on Goffman’s work of face-saving i.e. attempts at preventing stigma or lack full social acceptance and suggests eleven strategies :-

i. Denial - Systematic non-attention to the stigmatic aspects of situations.

ii. Re-definition - Converting stigma to social acceptance by redefining the situation to eliminate or minimize the stigma.
iii. Enhancing presentations – Presentation of information as to the worthy aspects of the individual, "up-grading" the self and playing down negative qualities.

iv. Limiting involvement - Creating displays of detachment from the event or others, over-involvement in side activities, and generally withholding one's participation in such a way as to convey one's participatory and attitudinal disassociation from the event.

v. One-downing others- Being aloof, inaccessible, dis-crediting others, rejecting others and demonstrating of superiority and disdain as well as maintaining social distance, actively discriminating or even scapegoating or ridiculing others can project a position of superiority.

vi. Controlling visibility- Reduced visibility or insulation from observability of stigmatic attributes reduces the population of potential rejectors, thereby decreasing the risks of labeling.

vii. Withdrawal- Withdrawal takes individuals completely out of the situation where they may be discredited and can include psychological withdrawal.

viii. Avoidance- Avoiding the situation entirely or its stigmatic characteristics can help escape negative labeling and rejection.

ix. Internalization- Incorporating the stigma or rejection assumed social identities and self-concepts. Thus shame, guilt, low self-esteem, or self-hatred can result as the self is brought into alignment with public definitions.

x. Repair damaged self-esteem- Friendship could serve to offer solace or reinterpret failure easing the burden of the individual. This may entail a redefinition of the experience with respect to its implication for the self.

xi. Change the self- Changing or improving the self by developing skills, and acting beyond reproach.

Similarly Sutton & Callahan (1987) describe five coping strategies -: concealing- hiding the stigma, defining - by disconfirmation of stereotypes, accepting - the stigma and being comfortable with it, denying- the stigma and blaming others for it, and withdrawing – from all situations which are
stigmatizing. Major & O’Brien (2005) list three coping mechanisms:- a) Attributing negative events to discrimination (versus to the self), (b) disengaging self-esteem and effort from identity-threatening domains (versus engaging and striving in these domains), and (c) increasing identification with one’s stigmatized group (versus distancing oneself from the group). Von Hippel et al. (2005) say that people who face stereotype threat deny the accuracy of the stereotype as applicable generally or to self- this mechanism is denial. But they say that generally denial means that the negative outcomes are not as a result of discrimination or that the self faces less discrimination than compared to the group. Thus we see many coping mechanisms or strategies that are similar mainly denying the existing of stigma, withdrawing from the situation, concealing or passing or covering stigma, internalization or accepting it and defining or disconfirming stigma induced stereotypes. These might occur individually or in some combination and research is required to see how, when and in what degrees do AA beneficiaries use them.

**METHODOLOGY**

Eight female students of a reputed institute of management of Western India who were beneficiaries of the reservation policy were interviewed. The subjects were approached through snowballing. Out of eight beneficiaries two students were from the OBC category, one from the ST category and the rest from the SC category. The number may seem very small but to give an idea of the percentage of female beneficiaries in whole system- there were a total of forty eight beneficiaries in the 2010 batch of three hundred and twenty students of which only three were female beneficiaries. One of three refused to give the interview, one could not be tracked by the researcher and the last one was interviewed. The rest seven subjects are from the batch of 2011. The interviews were conducted between January 2010 and March 2010. Before this few unstructured interviews were done to get the feel of the situation and also in focusing on the major issues. Based on this semi-structured interviews were conducted with these eight subjects.

The analysis included rich textual representation of the interview data in form of transcripts. This text formed the basis of analysis of data. In-depth within case and cross case analysis and comparisons of the narratives of the subjects was done. Themes from these were identified to have better interpretation of the data. In this paper though only the stigma management strategies that too with the
labels picked up from literature are discussed. Full qualitative analysis throws up many more themes and issues.

**FEMALE BENEFICIARY PERSPECTIVE**

All the beneficiaries are aware of the stigma attached to their caste and their status of being from the reserved category. They all have suffered discrimination at the hands people who attached stigma to lower castes. “You belong to lower caste and you should stay there and don’t mix with us.” Statements like these were made. They became aware of their status in or after high school when they had to fill the forms for college and were not aware of the ramifications of the situation. Mostly incidents involving friends or friends’ parents asking questions about their caste have occurred and on finding out most of the time the friendship has ended. When going back to their native places, mostly villages, they feel discriminated more than in the cities. “When we go to our village we have to go around other villages that will not let us pass through, the stigma is there. In Delhi I feel that an economic criterion is needed in the reservation policy but when I go to my village I am still differentiated against and feel that lot has to be achieved yet.”

**Stigma Management Strategies**

1. **Concealing or Passing** – The presence of stigma leads to the beneficiaries using some devices to manage it and keep it under control. One student lied outright and said she was of the same caste as her friend, when one of her friends’ commented on how similar they were and must be of the same caste.

2. **Defining or Disconfirmation of Stereotypes** - This is very profound in the female subjects. The drive to achieve or over achieve to justify their existence in the elite institutions and also disconfirm stereotypes regarding their competence levels. This is also driven by the fact that if the beneficiaries have experienced discrimination earlier in life they want to prove themselves. One student is going to get married to a person of a higher caste and she says she has to “work hard to prove to his family that I am capable and pass the social test i.e. be presentable, educated, doing well in life to discount my caste factor.”
Every time we have to justify why we are here? My boyfriend says that if I overachieve then there will be no problem.” Another student said “If you can outperform them and prove your credentials then we can change the attitude of the non-beneficiaries.”

3. **Denial** - As von Hippel et al. (2005) says that people who face stereotype threat deny the accuracy of the stereotype as applicable generally or to self. But they say that generally denial means that the negative outcomes are not as a result of discrimination or that the self faces less discrimination than compared to the group. One of the subjects’ said that the culture of the topmost engineering institute of the country from where she did her graduation was such that she did not feel discriminated even though she attended the one year preparatory program at the institute. Earlier accounts of same institute tell us that the institute has a very strong SC/ST student body with separate functions and events, unlike the management institute under study and chances of discrimination increase with such visibility. This might be an example of denial.

4. **Accepting** – One of the female students said she took reservations as she wanted to be comfortable with her identity. But mostly the subjects do not like to disclose their identity as they feel that being a woman as well a beneficiary of reservations sometimes subjects them to double discrimination.

5. **Withdrawing** - Most of the beneficiaries do not take part in any discussions on reservations with a wider audience like a class discussion or groups except with friends. They keep quiet on the issue even though they know what it’s like to be stigmatized. Though it is not passing in the sense of Goffman (1963) called pretending to be someone else other than that what one really is; but keeping mum can also be a form of withdrawing.

Some other methods of dealing with as observed from the analysis of the transcripts by the researcher which do not exactly fit into the labels given by literature are – anger which drives them on or sometimes distracts them; defiance- the opposition to prove themselves and establishing equality on their own of themselves with others even if the others do not care; and fencing which is different from
withdrawing or denial as the subject makes barriers around herself and does not let anyone enter that space and distracts herself with work and study. Thus we see that the stigma of belonging to a particular caste as well the stigma of incompetence attached to the beneficiaries of affirmative action makes them employ various stigma management strategies.

CONCLUSION

The butterfly effect expounds that the wings of a butterfly can cause a tsunami half way across the world which means that any action however small can have huge, far reaching repercussions. The thesis dissertation of which this paper is a part aims to capture the same by studying consequences of the affirmative action through reservation policy in India on the beneficiaries as well as the non-beneficiaries. This paper in particular looks at the female beneficiaries and how they deal with the stigma of belonging to a particular caste as well as of being a beneficiary of affirmative action. The constant drive to prove them and disprove stereotypes about their categories can have both positive as well as negative effects on their mental, physical as well as spiritual well-being. How these young people who are the future of a growing and developing nation are going to perform in their lives not only in their work organizations but also in their personal lives?, can be area of further study. What we are trying to do is recognizing the problem in all its dimensions and repercussions. This will help in dealing with not only the problem itself but also give directions for future policy making. The work organisations can also take cues from the direct and indirect consequences any human and personnel policy can have and how to tackle it. Finally the students who are affected by it can become more aware of what they and other like them are facing.
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