Stigma and Foster Care: An Empirical Investigation
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INTRODUCTION
Stigma is known to be a very powerful social phenomenon, with insidious implications for the targets of it (Blythe, Jackson, Halcomb, & Wilkes, 2012). Prior research has established that both adults who provide foster care and children who are in it believe that profound stigma is associated with foster care status. However, no study to date has directly demonstrated that this believed stigma exists or has examined its nature. The present study was designed to determine whether merely attaching foster care status to a child would result in that child’s being perceived more negatively and, if so, in what ways.

METHOD
One hundred twenty volunteers, randomly assigned to one of two conditions, were asked to report their perceptions of a child and their expectations for that child’s adolescent and adult life. Participants read a brief vignette presenting a neutral description of a ten year old child that was identical for all participants except for the experimental manipulation: in one condition the child was described as living with his parents, and in the other the child was described as living with his foster parents (see vignettes given to the right). Participants reported their perceptions of the child and their expectations about his future using six point, modified semantic differential scales (see examples given to the right).

RESULTS
Statistical analyses indicated that foster care status resulted in the assignment of multiple significantly different and uniformly negative perceptions.

DURING CHILDHOOD:
More anxious and fearful: t = 4.76, p < .000
More angry and better: t = 4.32, p < .000
More emotionally fragile: t = 5.16, p < .000
Less optimistic: t = 2.05, p = .042
Less energetic: t = 2.97, p = .004
Less self-assured: t = 4.20, p < .000

DURING ADOLESCENCE:
Less likely to have a steady girlfriend: t = 2.36, p < .000
More likely to engage in petty thievery: t = 2.80, p < .000
More likely to engage in underage drinking: t = 2.05, p = .042
Less likely to have a successful marriage: t = 2.79, p < .000
Less likely to have job security: t = 2.06, p < .000
More likely to live in poverty: t = 2.60, p < .000
More likely to be in jail: t = 2.97, p = .000
More likely to have a mental illness: t = 3.07, p < .000
More likely to abuse drugs or alcohol: t = 1.71, p = .089

DURING ADULTHOOD:
Less likely to have a successful marriage: t = 2.79, p < .000
Less likely to have job security: t = 2.06, p < .000
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DISCUSSION
In sum, the mere assignment of foster care status to a brief, neutral description of a child produced a host of significant differences in how that child was perceived in the present, as well as how that child was expected to develop through adolescence and into adulthood. The robustness of the findings lends convergent validity to the many published accounts of felt stigma reported by both children in foster care and those providing services to them. Together these findings call for immediate work directed toward ameliorating both the stigma attached to foster care and the negative effects that may surely be expected to result from it.

REFERENCES