

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).

Vignette and Sample Rating Scales

CONTROL VIGNETTE

Michael (age 10) lives **with his parents and his sister Samantha (age 13)**. He attends the public school in their town, where he is doing well. His teachers describe him as somewhat withdrawn but as well behaved. He has a friend with whom he regularly has play dates on weekends. He plays on the Rec. Department's Soccer Team. When alone, he enjoys watching TV and playing computer games. He tells everyone he wants to be a Policeman when he grows up.

EXPERIMENTAL VIGNETTE

Michael (age 10) lives **with his foster parents and their biological daughter Samantha (age 13)**. **Michael was removed from his biological mother's care when he was 8 years old. The primary reason for his removal was neglect: when left in his care, Michael's step – father left him unattended overnight and without food on multiple occasions. Michael has lived with his foster family for a year and a half.** He attends the public school in their town, where he is doing well. His teachers describe him as somewhat withdrawn but as well behaved. He has a friend with whom he regularly has play dates on weekends. He plays on the Rec. Department's Soccer Team. When alone, he enjoys watching TV and playing computer games. He tells everyone he wants to be a Policeman when he grows up.

SAMPLE RATING SCALES

Michael is feeling . . .	Extremely Anxious/Fearful	Moderately Anxious/Fearful	Slightly Anxious/Fearful	Slightly Relaxed/Calm	Moderately Relaxed/Calm	Extremely Relaxed/Calm
As a teenager . . .	How likely is Michael to . . .	Extremely Likely	Moderately Likely	Slightly Likely	He will not do this	
	. . . engage in petty theft					
As an adult . . .	How likely is Michael to experience each of the following at some point during his lifetime. . .	Extremely Likely	Moderately Likely	Slightly Likely	He will not do this	
	. . . a successful marriage					

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

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Results

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

During Childhood:		During Adolescence:		During Adulthood:	
More anxious and fearful	t = 4.76 p = .000	Less likely to have a steady girlfriend	t = - 2.36 p = .020	Less likely to have a successful marriage	t = - 2.79 p = .000
More angry and bitter	t = 4.32 p = .000	More likely to engage in petty theft	t = 2.80 p = .007	Less likely to have job security	t = - 2.08 p = .0006
More emotionally fragile	t = 6.16 p = .000	More likely to engage in underage drinking	t = - 2.05 p = .042	More likely to live in poverty	t = 2.06 p = .042
Less optimistic	t = - 2.08 p = .042	More likely to engage in illicit drug use	t = 1.71 p = .089	More likely to be in jail	t = - 2.75 p = .008
Less energetic	t = - 2.97 p = .004			More likely to have a mental illness	t = 3.07 p = .003
Less self-assured	t = -4.20 p = .000			More likely to abuse drugs or alcohol	t = 4.04 p = .000