

Queers, Bis, and Straight Lies: An Intersectional Examination of LGBTQ Stigma

by **Meredith G. F. Worthen** Routledge, 2020
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For many decades, stigma has been a key concept in understanding the experiences of members of marginalised groups, including LGBTQ individuals (Frost, 2011). sociologist Erving Goffman put forth a conceptualisation of stigma as a 'deeply discrediting' attribute, describing how society sees stigmatised groups as having an 'undesired differentness' that sets their members apart from 'normals' (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). Since this articulation by Goffman, various scholars have expanded on our understanding of the social processes involved in stigma (e.g. Link & Phelan, 2001) and the ways in which specific groups are stigmatised in relation to various experiences and identities (e.g. Herek, 2011; Liamputtong, 2013).

Queers, Bis, and Straight Lies: An Intersectional Examination of LGBTQ Stigma (Worthen, 2020) builds on the many contributions of stigma research from various scholars and disciplines by proposing an innovative theory of LGBTQ stigma called Norm-Centered Stigma Theory (NCST). Pointing out the relative lack of theorising in stigma research despite the large body of literature in this area, Worthen delineates an ambitious theory that highlights the role of norms and social power in processes that organise and maintain the privileging of some beliefs, behaviors, and identities, and the oppression of others - particularly of LGBTQ individuals. Informed by an intersectional perspective, *Queers, Bis, and Straight Lies* acknowledges multiple axes of social power including gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class as it investigates the stigmatisation of different LGBTQ people located at varying intersections of these axes of social power.

In the first six chapters, Worthen lays down the conceptual and theoretical framework of norm-centered stigma theory starting with its three main tenets: (1) the centrality of norms in stigma processes ('without norms and norm violators, there is no stigma', p.10); (2) the role of social power in organising the relationship between norms and stigma, as well as constituting the lens from which this relationship is examined; and (3) the function of social power dynamics in justifying negativity towards norm violations and norm violators. A key concept in Worthen's discussion of these tenets is that of hetero-cis-normativity - the system of norms, privilege, and oppression within which it is 'normal to be both heterosexual and cisgender and 'not normal' to be non-heterosexual and non-cisgender - as the overarching set of norms that, interfacing with gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and other axes of social stratification, contribute to anti-LGBTQ stigma. The first half of the book also discusses LGBTQ Stigma Scales which Worthen developed as an intersectional measure of anti-LGBTQ stigma based on NCST.

The second half of the text unpacks a vast array of findings that Worthen obtained from over 3000 participants using these scales. It is a thorough discussion with separate chapters focusing on the respective experiences and perspectives of lesbian women, gay men, bisexual women, bisexual men, trans women, trans men, non-binary/genderqueer people, queer women, and queer men. The chapters provide compelling support for Worthen's argument that in general, LGBTQ individuals experience stigma as violators of the norms of hetero-cis-normativity; and that at the same time, the intersections of gender and sexuality with each other and with race/ ethnicity, social class, and other dimensions of social power give rise to variations in experiences of discrimination, harassment, and violence across these nine groups. For example, Worthen's data show that out of the nine groups represented in the sample, non-binary/genderqueer individuals are the most stigmatised by both cisgender, heterosexual individuals and LGBTQ individuals, with beliefs that they should adhere more consistently to either femininity or masculinity contributing strongly to this stigma. Meanwhile, both trans women and trans men experience high levels of discrimination, harassment, and violence, with trans women of colour being particularly vulnerable to such experiences. The book ends with a discussion of implications and recommendations for policy and research, including a call for further research on stigma against sexual and gender minority identities such as pansexual individuals and asexual individuals that do not fit within the nine subgroups that Worthen's research focused on.

For scholars and activists interested in LGBTQ experiences and/or stigma in general, some of Worthen's findings may not be entirely new. For instance, microaggression researchers have previously documented distinct forms of stigma experienced by specific subgroups within the LGBTQ umbrella such as denial of bodily privacy towards transgender individuals (Nadal et al., 2016), and intersectionality scholars have examined forms of minority stress experienced by LGBTQ people with multiple marginalised identities such as Black lesbians (Bowleg, 2008). However, Worthen's work is a welcome contribution to this area of research as it provides evidence from a diverse, nationally-representative sample which includes data from both heterosexual, cisgender individuals (i.e. the 'stigmatisers') and LGBTQ individuals (i.e. the 'stigmatised'). The data also allow for an examination of the specific beliefs that contribute to stigma against each of the nine subgroups, thus supporting the argument that there is a need for separate but interconnected discussions about the experiences of lesbian women, gay men, bisexual women, bisexual men, trans women, trans men, non-binary/genderqueer people, queer women, and queer men.

Comprehensive as it is, the book may fall short for readers who seek rich, in-depth narratives that illuminate the intersectional quality of lived experiences of stigma. Indeed, among the growing numbers of researchers taking an intersectional approach to the study of stigma and prejudice, some have characterised intersectionality as more compatible with qualitative methods than quantitative methods (i.e. Bowleg, 2008). Yet as feminist psychologists and other scholars have argued, quantitative research grounded in an awareness of the social context of power and inequality can be a powerful tool for social scientists seeking to use an intersectional lens to understand oppression and privilege (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). *Queers, Bis, and Straight Lies* is an exemplar of this kind of work, with Worthen's discussion of norm-centered stigma theory and analysis of survey data always situated within the broader sociocultural and political context.

Because the findings discussed in this book are based on data from a US-based sample, they may not necessarily be generalisable to populations outside of the US - a limitation which Worthen acknowledges clearly. Nonetheless, the text has much to offer to scholars and activists interested in LGBTQ stigma, both within and outside the US. With its thorough discussion of a new, evidence-based, intersectional theory of stigma and important implications of this theory for stigma research and social change efforts, *Queers, Bis, and Straight Lies* sheds new light on anti-LGBTQ stigma and the many possibilities for challenging it.

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