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The effects of personalization on homelessness stigma

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THE EFFECTS OF PERSONALIZATION ON HOMELESSNESS STIGMA

by

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Abstract

Previous research has suggested those in stigmatized groups experience status loss, social rejection, and dehumanization. The homeless population, in particular, has also been perceived as the ones to blame for their current situation. Using the homeless population as the stigmatized group, the current study investigated whether personalizing people in stigmatized groups leads to differences in attitudes of them. Participants consisted of 148 undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses from the University of North Florida. Via Qualtrics, participants were randomly assigned to a vignette that either included general information about a homeless man or one with more personal details such as his name and family and employment history. Attitudes were assessed through social distance, perceived dangerousness, willingness to provide economic aid, and the extent to which the people in the vignettes were to blame for their situation. Results from independent samples t-tests indicated those in the personalized condition, compared to those in the general condition, were significantly more willing to socially engage with the man in the vignette ($p = .005$), perceived him as less dangerous ($p = .002$), and believed he was less to blame for his situation ($p < .001$). Economic aid was not different between the groups. The results suggest the attitudes towards stigmatized individuals depend on how much personal information is provided, rather than just the stigma itself.

Keywords: stigma, homelessness, personalization, empathy, social distance, dangerousness, blame, economic aid

The Effects of Personalization on Homelessness Stigma

Stigma has been defined as the application of undesirable traits to groups based on stereotypes, leading to discrimination, status loss, social rejection, and devaluation (Link & Phelan, 2001). This involves cognitive separation, creating an "us" versus "them" mentality, which attributes negative traits to the outgroup and leads to social distancing (Link & Phelan, 2001; Lucas & Phelan, 2012; Phelan et al., 1997). The social consequences of stigma may also be a result of dehumanization because it allows one to treat these individuals with disrespect and rejection (Boysen et al., 2020). One study found people had more discomfort with physical contact with obese individuals when looking at headless photos of them, suggesting they had more negative attitudes towards stigmatized groups when they were de-identified (Jeon et al., 2019). Another study found people dehumanized those with mental illness by indicating they were less evolved and human-like compared to other groups (Boysen et al., 2020). The literature suggests it may be that lack of human properties assigned with the stigma, rather than the stigma itself, which underlies negative attitudes and behaviors. The purpose of the current study is to determine whether personalizing people in stigmatized groups influences one's perception of them. The study also investigated whether personality characteristics and general views about a stigmatized group are associated with perceptions of an individual from the stigmatized group.

To fully understand the roots of the stigma, one must consider the stereotypes associated with a group. Stereotypes are socially constructed, rather than true qualities of the individual which leads to oversimplification and the attribution of these traits, creating stigma when stereotypes are negative (Weng & Clark, 2018). The stereotypes also justify negative behaviors such as avoidance, rejection, and discrimination, which also relates to negative emotions such as fear, suspicion, and distrust (Vázquez et al., 2016). The homeless population in particular is a

highly stigmatized group with numerous negative stereotypes. People are more likely to attribute homelessness intrinsically, which may relate to the neoliberal culture which emphasizes individual control towards productivity and success, making one believe they are responsible for their own homelessness (Phelan et al., 1997; Weng & Clark, 2018). Neoliberal policies contribute to the labeling of homeless people as "useless" and "non-functional" members of society because they are not significantly contributing to capitalism (Belcher & Deforge, 2012). In addition, the homeless are stereotyped to have mental health issues, addiction, social deviance, immorality, troubled families, and disabilities (Weng & Clark, 2018). Consequently, this reduces trust and increases perceived dangerousness of this population (Weng & Clark, 2018). These stereotypes and attitudes are misperceptions as there are many reasons for homelessness such as chronic poverty with recent eviction (Weng & Clark, 2018). Additionally, the larger socio-economic culture may contribute to the status of homeless people such as unemployment or lack of affordable housing (Belcher & Deforge, 2012). Thus, stereotypes overgeneralize the possible causes for homelessness that justify the misattribution of cognitions and emotions.

Compassion and empathy may buffer the effects of stigma as they promote prosocial behavior. Empathy can broadly be defined as the ability to understand and experience other's thoughts and feelings, whereas compassion incorporates these feelings with the need to help (Stevens & Taber, 2021). Having the capability to see from another person's point of view may influence how people treat them because it may break down the "us" versus "them" mentality associated with stigma. Previous studies have demonstrated this relationship between empathy and stigmatized groups, including the homeless, as those who are more empathetic reflect more positive attitudes such as compassion, understanding, and less blame (Batson et al., 1997; Banja, 2011). Furthermore, inducing empathy for one group may also be generalized to other

stigmatized groups (Tarrant & Hadert, 2010). This elicits a question of whether people display empathy due to their disposition or if empathy is shown because of a specific situation. Additionally, dispositional characteristics such as the Big Five personality traits have been associated with stigma. Agreeableness, which encompasses one's empathy and compassion towards others, was related to more social comfort with those with severe mental illnesses and lower negative emotions towards them regardless of previous contact (Brown, 2012). In addition, openness which involves questioning societal norms, was associated with more social comfort, less negative emotions, and less perceived dangerousness of those with severe mental illness (Brown, 2012).

The current study examined whether personalizing people who are homeless leads to attitudinal differences. We investigated whether personalization would mitigate the stigma and compared it to the same stigmatized group with less personal information provided. Moreover, we examined whether personality factors such as the Big-5 (extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism) and dispositional empathy influenced one's responses to the situation. Lastly, we explored whether general attitudes towards the homeless are related to attitudes towards the situation. We hypothesized participants who are exposed to more personal information towards the homeless man would favor more positive attitudes towards him with regards to social distance and support for economic aid with less perceived danger and blame from the man. With regards to personality factors, we hypothesized agreeableness and openness would be associated with favorable attitudes towards the man as would empathy and more positive general attitudes towards the homeless.

Method

Participants

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Participants consisted of 148 undergraduate students from the University of North Florida enrolled in psychology classes with 83.1% identifying as female, 12.8% as male, and 3.4% as non-binary/third gender, and .7% as other. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 years to 35 years with a mean of 20.5. With regards to race, 64.2% were white, 15.5% were black, 8.8% were Asian, .7% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 6.8% were Hispanic. In addition, participants indicated which political party they most identify with and 35.8% identified as Democrat, 22.3% as Republican, 29.1% as Independent, 12.2 identified as other. The students participated in the study via the SONA system which granted them credit for their psychology courses. The study underwent IRB approval and had no risk or ethical concerns.

Measures and Materials

Interpersonal Reactivity Index. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980, 1983) assessed dispositional empathy. Participants were given a variety of situations and rated how well it describes them with responses ranging from *Does Not Describe Me Well* (1) to *Describes Me Very Well* (5). The index consists of 28 questions with subscales including: perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. The current study averaged all the scores to calculate a total empathy score (α = .81, *M* = 2.73, *SD* = 0.49).

Big Five Inventory-2. The Big Five Inventory-2 (Soto & John, 2017) measured participant's personality traits. The measure consists of 60 questions with the main scales tapping into the Big Five personality traits of Extraversion (α = .84, *M* = 3.20, *SD* = 0.73), Agreeableness (α = .82, *M* = 3.70, *SD* = 0.64), Conscientiousness (α = .86, *M* = 3.52, *SD* = 0.71), Negative Emotionality (α = .91, *M* = 3.36, *SD* = 0.88), and Openness (α = .71, *M* = 3.78, *SD* = 0.59). The inventory also has facet scales including sociability, assertiveness, energy level, compassion, respectfulness, trust, organization, productiveness, responsibility, anxiety, depression, emotional

volatility, intellectual curiosity, and aesthetic sensitivity. The current study only included the

facet scales of compassion ($\alpha = .55$, $M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.74$) and trust ($\alpha = .70$ $M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.82$)

for analysis. For each question, participants were asked to rate how much each trait applies to

them on a 5-point scale from *Strongly Disagree* (1), *Disagree a Little* (2), *Neutral/No Opinion*

(3), *Agree a Little* (4), and *Strongly Agree* (5). Scores were averaged for each of the main scales

and the facet scales of compassion and trust.

Vignettes. Two vignettes were retrieved from Phelan et al (1997) and modified to fit the

current study. The personalized vignette stated:

> Jim Smith is a 30 year old single man. He is currently homeless and lives in shelters. Jim
>
> has always been poor, having come from a large family that had to get along with a very
>
> small income. He quit school before finishing high school in order to get a job at a fast
>
> food restaurant. Since then he has held a number of low paying jobs but has been
>
> unemployed for over a year. Although he feels unhappy about his current life
>
> circumstances, he is eager to get a job and has a realistic sense of the kind of work he can
>
> do.

The generalized vignette stated:

> A homeless man is currently living in shelters. Having quit school before finishing high
>
> school, he has held a number of low paying jobs but has been unemployed for over a
>
> year. He is currently looking for a job.

After participants read their assigned vignette, they were asked questions retrieved from

Phelan et al. (1997) about their willingness to be in social proximity to the man ($\alpha = .74$, $M =$

3.06, $SD = 0.55$) using a scale of *Definitely Unwilling*, *Probably Unwilling*, *Probably Willing*,

and *Definitely Willing*. Participants also rated their perceptions of dangerousness ($\alpha = .59$, $M =$

1.81, *SD* = 0.54), blame of the character (*M* = 2.14, *SD* = 0.83), and support for economic aid (α = .74, *M* = 3.44 , *SD* = 0.63) for the person all on a scale of *Definitely No*, *Probably No*, *Probably Yes*, and *Definitely Yes*. Questions surrounding the man were adapted to the given condition to keep the labels consistent and to strengthen the manipulation of the personalization. The participants in the personalized condition were asked about "Jim" and the participants in the generalized condition were asked about the "homeless man."

  Homelessness Beliefs and Attitudes Questionnaire. The Homelessness Beliefs and Attitudes Questionnaire (Tsai et al., 2021) was used to assess participant's general beliefs about the homeless with the following subscales: structural (α = .60, *M* = 2.03, *SD* = 0.55) and intrinsic causes (*a* = .75, *M* = 1.43, *SD* = 0.77) of homelessness, dangerousness (α = .72, *M* = 1.98, *SD* = 0.46), the negative effect of homelessness on communities (α = .81, *M* = 2.39, *SD* = 0.66), the capabilities of homeless people (i.e. job skills and the extent to which they would take care of a home; α = .68, *M* = 2.93, *SD* = 0.68), and compassion for them (α = .68, *M* = 3.07, *SD* = 0.60). For the subscale tapping into causes of homelessness, participants rated how much they believe each cause contributes to homelessness from *Not At All* (1) to *A Great Deal* (4). For the rest of the subscales, participants rated how much they agree with each statement using a scale of *Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree,* and *Strongly Agree*.

Procedure

  Participants enrolled in the study via SONA where they were provided the Qualtrics link to the survey. Participants were able to sign up and complete it at any time. After signing the consent form, participants were asked to complete the Big Five Inventory-2. Then participants were randomly assigned to one of the vignette conditions (personalized versus general) via Qualtrics randomizer. After reading the vignettes, participants were asked about their attitudes

towards the vignette, then rated themselves on dispositional empathy, and lastly indicated their general beliefs about the homeless. The survey was conducted in this order to ensure the participants were not primed beforehand to think about the homeless and their compassion towards them.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Effects of Personalized Information on Social Attitudes and Impressions

Independent samples t-tests were run to determine if there were differences between the personalized and generalized conditions of the vignette with regards to attitudes of social distance, dangerousness, economic aid, and blame. The results indicated those in the personalized condition were significantly more willing to socially engage with Jim than those in the generalized condition ($t(146) = 2.63$, $p = .009$). They perceived him as less dangerous in contrast to the generalized condition who viewed him as more dangerous ($t(146) = -3.19$, $p < .001$). In addition, those in the personalized condition attributed less blame to Jim than those in the generalized condition who tended to blame the homeless man for his situation ($t(145) = -3.70$, $p < .001$). With regards to economic aid, there was no significant difference between the personalized and generalized conditions ($t(146) = -.84$ $p = .401$). These results are displayed in Figure 1.

Associations of Personality with Social Attitudes and Impressions

Correlational analyses (see Table 1) were run to examine associations between personality factors such as the Big-5 and Total Empathy with participants' social attitudes and impressions towards the homeless man in the experimental conditions. Total empathy was positively related to social distance and support for economic aid. Those who scored higher on

the dispositional empathy scale also perceived the man as less dangerous and less to blame for his situation.

Among the Big-5 personality traits, only agreeableness and openness were significantly associated with social distance with more agreeable and open people endorsing more willingness to socially engage. The facet scales compassion and trust were calculated for further analyses into personality. Dispositional compassion was positively related to social distance, however dispositional trust was not. Looking at associations between the Big-5 personality traits and dangerousness, only agreeableness was significantly related, suggesting less agreeable people are more likely to perceive him as dangerous. In addition, compassion and trust were not related to how dangerous they believed the man was. The support for economic aid was also positively associated with agreeableness and openness, but was not related to extraversion, conscientiousness, or neuroticism. Dispositional compassion and trust were also not related to the support for economic aid. Interestingly, the attribution of blame was not related to any of the Big-5 scales of personality nor dispositional compassion and trust.

Associations of Homelessness Beliefs with Social Attitudes and Impressions

Correlational analyses were also run to determine relationships between impressions and general beliefs about the homeless such as compassion for them, whether homelessness is due to intrinsic versus structural causes, negative effect on communities, capability to be responsible, and general dangerousness (see Table 1). Generally, homelessness beliefs correlated more strongly with participants' attitudes and impressions compared to personality. The results suggest those who were more compassionate towards the homeless were more likely to socially engage with them and endorse more economic aid. They also perceived the man as less dangerous and less to blame for his situation. Consistent with this, those who believed homeless people are

capable of being responsible were more likely to socially engage, support economic aid, and view him as less dangerous and less to blame for his situation.

Those who believed homeless people were generally more dangerous were less likely to socially engage and support economic aid and more likely to view him as dangerous and blame him for his situation. This association was also applicable to those who believed homeless people were dangerous to the community as they were also less likely to socially engage and support economic aid and more likely to view him as dangerous and blame him for his situation.

With regards to causes of homelessness, those who believed it was due to structural causes were significantly more likely to socially engage and support economic aid. Not surprisingly, they believed the character was significantly less to blame for their situation. However, the belief that structural factors are causes of homelessness was not related to how dangerous they perceived the man. Conversely, those who endorsed homelessness to be attributed to intrinsic causes were less likely to socially engage and support economic aid. They also were more likely to believe he was to blame for his situation, but there was no relationship with perceived dangerousness.

Discussion

The current study examined whether personalizing people in stigmatized groups leads to more favorable attitudinal beliefs towards them and how these beliefs were related to personality factors and general beliefs about the stigmatized group. We hypothesized that those in the personalized condition would report more favorable attitudes with respect to social distance, support for economic aid, and less dangerousness and blame. This hypothesis was partially supported as the groups significantly differed on all attitudes except economic aid. The results suggest one's attitudes towards the homeless are more impacted by the amount of personal

information provided, rather than just the stigmatized category itself. The support for economic aid may not have differed because it may be more closely associated with general beliefs about causes of homelessness. It may be that support for economic aid reflects more on general socio-economic beliefs (structural versus intrinsic causes) about the homeless rather than the stigma surrounding homelessness. Results are congruent with previous studies that suggest stigma is more prominent with a lack of personal information which may be a result of dehumanization that creates an "us" versus "them" mentality (Boysen et al.,2020; Jeon et al., 2019; Link & Phelan, 2001; Lucas & Phelan, 2012; Phelan et al., 1997).

The current study was also interested in personality factors, empathy, and general beliefs about the homeless. We found the main personality factors that favorably influenced attitudes were agreeableness and openness for most of the attitudes and total empathy was significantly associated with more favorable beliefs. With regards to homelessness beliefs, more positive general beliefs (compassion and capability) were associated with more favorable attitudes, whereas negative beliefs (dangerousness and negative effect on communities) were associated with less favorable attitudes. Those who believed homelessness was largely due to structural causes displayed more social engagement and economic aid and less perceived dangerousness and blame. The opposite was true for beliefs in intrinsic causes. These beliefs were important to study as they are stereotypes about homeless people which strengthen the stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001; Weng & Clark, 2018). The preconceived notions may have predisposed them to generally respond in particular ways.

Similar to the study done by Szeto and colleagues (2015), our results suggest that general beliefs about the stigmatized group and empathy are more related to one's attitudes towards the group than general personality traits. Our results are also congruent with Szeto and colleagues

(2015) because we found personality factors such as agreeableness and openness influence the way people perceive stigmatized groups. The study builds on prior research by manipulating the personalization of the stigmatized group. The results suggests that rather than trying to get rid of the negative associations with stigma, perhaps it would be more beneficial to highlight the personal characteristics of the stigmatized individual. In a sense, people get to know them through the disclosure of details thus becoming more comfortable with them. This could be applied to fundraisers for the homeless to encourage them to tell their stories. It could also be a way for homeless individuals to reintroduce themselves as a well-rounded person, not as a stigmatized person who succumbs to stereotypes. In addition, Szeto and colleagues (2015) suggests interventions for reducing stigma by encouraging agreeableness, openness, and empathy when people are young because their personalities are more malleable. These may be ways to help homeless people be less ostracized and dehumanized by society.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of the study is the data consisted of self-report measures collected through Qualtrics. There is a possibility of social desirability bias and the need to avoid being perceived as prejudiced and unempathetic. Also, with the data being collected online, we had less experimental control compared to a lab. People may react differently when experiencing this situation in person compared to how they feel they would act. Additionally, the sample was fairly small, majority of which were female, white, and relatively close in age. Thus, the results cannot be generalized out to the general population.

Future studies could examine attitudes in a lab so the person can experience the situation rather than thinking about it in a hypothetical sense. The study could also be altered to see if there are differences in attitudes if the homeless man was changed to a woman or a different

race. It may be that people are more empathetic to a stigmatized group when taking into account other demographic factors. Additionally, it would be interesting to see if personalization would be stronger manipulated if the participants were shown a picture of the homeless person.

Conclusion

The current study found differences in attitudes towards homeless individuals based on personalized information as well as personality, empathy, and general beliefs about the stigmatized group. Personalization was not related to the support for economic aid. However, people who were exposed to more personal characteristics of a homeless man were more willing to socially engage and perceived him as less dangerous and less to blame for his homelessness. In addition, empathy, agreeableness, and openness were associated with more favorable attitudes towards the homeless individual.

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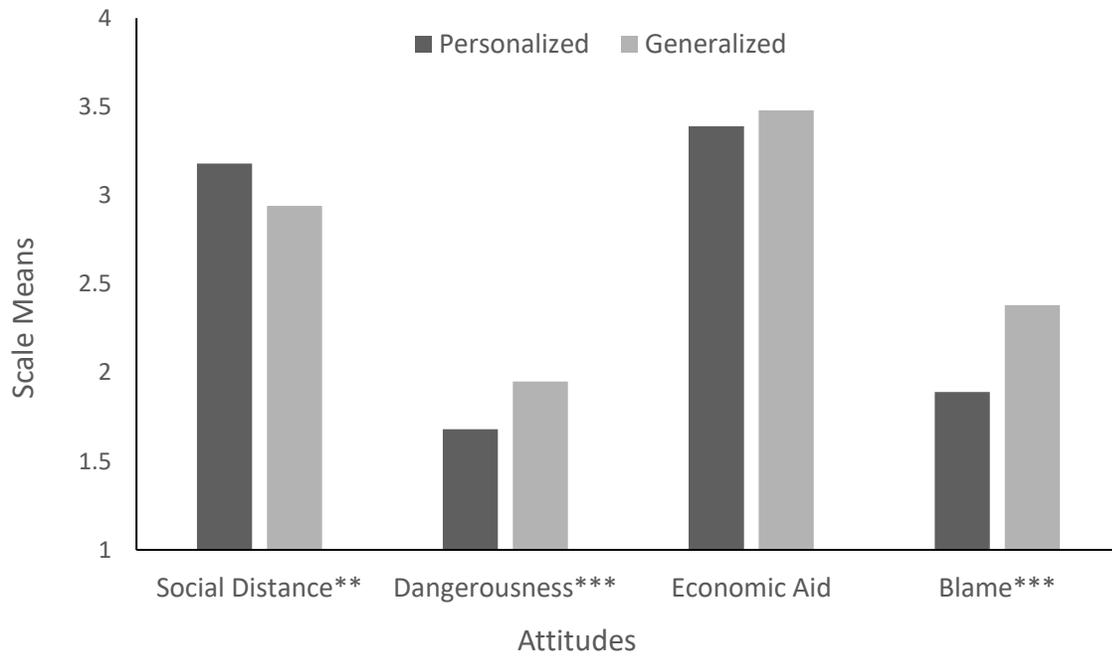
Table 1

Correlations of Study Specific Attitudes with Personality and General Homelessness Beliefs

Personality Traits	Study Specific Attitudes			
	Social Distance	Dangerousness	Economic Aid	Blame
Agreeableness	.23**	-.17*	.17*	-.05
Openness	.28***	-.10	.30***	-.16
Extraversion	.08	.03	-.07	.06
Conscientiousness	-.06	-.16	-.07	.05
Neuroticism	.01	.11	.07	-.06
Trust	.10	-.13	.10	-.07
Compassion	.22**	-.14	.10	.01
Total Empathy	.39***	-.22**	.42***	-.31***
Homelessness Beliefs				
Homelessness Compassion	.53***	-.27***	.52***	-.35***
Intrinsic Causes	-.31***	.14	-.38***	.45***
Structural Causes	.35***	-.09	.47***	-.26***
Effect on Community	-.48***	.43***	-.35***	.41***
Responsibility	.34***	-.17*	.47***	-.38***
Dangerousness	-.45***	.43***	-.34***	.32***

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Figure 1

Means of Attitudes in Personalized and Generalized Conditions

Note. **p < .01, ***p < .001