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Shame, Suspicion, Surveillance, and Blame: The Neoliberal Undergirding of Stigma Experienced and Managed by Latinos/as in the United States

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This study explores how neoliberal ideology shapes the experience and management of stigma among the fastest-growing demographic in the United States—Latinos/as. We adopt a communicative framework of neoliberal stigma to explore how Latinos/as perceived stigma associated with their identity and stigma management communication theory to outline how Latinos/as manage and cope with neoliberal stigma. Through interviews with 17 Latinos/as, we uncovered compounded layers of stigma that intertwine ethnic identity, immigrant stereotypes, and labels of illegality. In response, Latinos/as balanced resistance and self-preservation within a system that leaves little room for challenge. Notably, this study identifies "blame" as an additional mechanism of neoliberal stigma wherein Latinos/as are scapegoated for systemic social and economic difficulties. Furthermore, we highlight the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism by demonstrating how stigma management strategies can paradoxically sustain dominant socio-political ideologies, even when the intent is to resist them.

Keywords: neoliberal stigma, stigma management communication, neoliberalism, immigration, in-depth interview

Stigma is a pervasive communicative process (Smith, 2007) tied to power and privilege (de Souza, 2019) and enacted through dominant ideological systems (Link & Phelan, 2001; Tucker & Hintz, 2024) such as neoliberalism. The current study answers the call to "place stigmatizing experiences in larger structural perspectives, policies, and practices dominated by neoliberalism" (Charmaz, 2020, p. 22) by exploring how Latino/a individuals in the United States encounter, interpret, and respond to stigmatizing discourses in everyday interactions that reflect neoliberal values. To this end, we employ de Souza's (2023) communicative neoliberal stigma framework to examine how neoliberal ideology informs Latinos/as' stigmatizing experiences. Further, to analyze responses to such stigma, we draw on stigma management

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communication (SMC) theory (Meisenbach, 2010), which outlines a range of discursive strategies individuals use to manage stigmatization.

Although initially an economic theory, neoliberalism has evolved into a broader governing logic that seeks to integrate all human activity into the realm of the marketplace (Harvey, 2005). As such, neoliberalism has become a dominant sociopolitical ideology (Igarashi & Ono, 2022) that prioritizes market rationality and imposes social, economic, and moral standards that marginalize those perceived to fall short (de Souza, 2019). Following de Souza (2019, 2023), we define neoliberal stigma as a process through which individuals are discredited based on their perceived failure to meet neoliberal standards of citizenship and human worth, including financial independence, work ethic, and economic productivity. Within this framework, stigma operates as a mechanism of control, commodifying human worth and marginalizing those deemed less valuable to the market (de Souza, 2019).

Within the U.S. sociopolitical context, Latinos/as—those whose heritage can be traced to a Spanish-speaking country in Central or South America—represent a population particularly vulnerable to stigma. While not all Latinos/as are immigrants, and not all immigrants are Latino/a, members of this group are often perceived as immigrants regardless of citizenship or generational status (Chávez, 2008). Immigration has remained a central topic of political discourse and media coverage, with public concern reaching a high point in 2024 (Jackson, 2024). Survey data indicate that approximately one in four Americans (28%) viewed immigration as the most critical issue facing the country, perceiving immigrants as a significant threat and as exacerbating other national problems (Gallup, 2024). Consequently, Latinos/as have been recurrently targeted by dominant narratives associating them with illegality and criminality (Chávez, 2008). Media portrayals have consistently framed Latinos/as through the lens of illegal immigration and economic burden (e.g., Mastro & Sink, 2016), making them a particularly salient group for examining how neoliberal logics shape processes of stigmatization.

Although the current study explores stigma through a neoliberal lens, the stigma experienced by Latinos/as in the United States is not only of economic origin. Stigmatizing narratives surrounding Latino/a identity long predate the neoliberal turn (Harvey, 2005) and are rooted in racialized and nativist constructions of U.S. citizenship (Chávez, 2008; de Genova, 2005; Flores, 2003; Glenn, 2002; Gómez, 2007). Thus, we conceptualize neoliberal stigma as a contemporary communicative logic that reconfigures and rearticulates these older discourses through a market-based ideology. Under neoliberalism, historically racialized and nativist boundaries of citizenship and belonging are reframed through evaluations of self-sufficiency, work ethic, and economic contribution (Joppke, 2021). As a result, stigma toward Latinos/as operates less through overt racial exclusion and more through individualized assessments of worth and deservingness that appear economically rational while repackaging long-standing racialized and nativist discourses. In this way, neoliberal stigma operates in close relation to a logic of earned citizenship (Joppke, 2021), wherein belonging and recognition are framed as conditional outcomes of individual performance.

Whereas de Souza (2019) examined neoliberal stigma in the context of food assistance programs, we extend this framework to the everyday lived experiences of Latinos/as. By moving beyond public assistance settings and focusing on everyday social interactions, we show that neoliberal stigma is not

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confined to institutional contexts but circulates through broader racialized and ethnic social relations. This extension illustrates how neoliberal stigma functions as a mechanism for evaluating earned citizenship (Joppke, 2021), rendering belonging contingent on ongoing performances of productivity and self-sufficiency. In doing so, we respond to Charmaz's (2020) call to explore how neoliberal stigma operates discursively and is structured into everyday practices, and we make two central contributions. First, we extend neoliberal stigma theory by identifying blame as a fourth mechanism that complements de Souza's (2023) framework of shame, suspicion, and surveillance. Blame assigns responsibility for systemic social and economic problems to stigmatized groups, reinforcing their marginalization. Second, our examination of the discursive responses to stigma demonstrates how, paradoxically, neoliberalism not only informs the experiences of stigmatization among Latino/a individuals but also undergirds how they manage and cope with such perceived stigma. Indeed, the strategies Latinos/as employed to manage stigma often aligned with neoliberal values of economic productivity and self-reliance. This dual role of neoliberalism, as both a source of stigma and a framework for its management, highlights the inescapable nature and pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology in shaping contemporary human experience.

Literature Review

The Neoliberal Turn and Neoliberal Stigma

Neoliberalism is based on the principle that human well-being is best served through economic freedom and competition, with strong private property rights, a free market, and free trade (Harvey, 2005). The turn to neoliberalism as an ideology has shaped individuals' worldviews and interpretations of social life, providing a structure for evaluating social relationships and valuing individuals (Charmaz, 2020; de Souza, 2019, 2023). In this context, notions of personal effort, individual responsibility, self-sufficiency, competition, and profit maximization function as pillars of society and markers of good citizenship (de Souza, 2019, 2023). As a dominant discourse, we argue that neoliberal ideology "constructs a standard of behavior that individuals are expected to fulfill and stigmatizes those who do not" (Tucker & Hintz, 2024, p. 403). Thus, neoliberal stigma is a process of othering and social distancing that results from applying "a framework that values hard work, self-help, self-reliance, and personal responsibility as the attributes that determine personal worth, human dignity, and citizenship" (de Souza, 2019, pp. 21–23).

Latino/a Belonging, Neoliberalism, and Earned Citizenship

Latinos/as have historically been positioned as foreign, dependent, culturally incompatible, or unfit for fully belonging within the U.S. national community (Flores, 2003; Glenn, 2002; Gómez, 2007). As Glenn (2002) and Gómez (2007) document, the incorporation of Mexicans into the United States following the Mexican-American War illustrates how racialization directly shaped the meaning of citizenship. Although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo formally granted U.S. citizenship to Mexicans residing in annexed territories, this status was later undermined by racial classifications that cast Mexicans as non-White and therefore unfit for full civic membership (Glenn, 2002). This reveals how U.S. citizenship functioned as an ethnonational institution, formally incorporating Mexicans while

simultaneously denying them belonging by tying civic worth to Whiteness, independence, and self-governance (Gómez, 2007).

Moreover, these racialized and nativist logics of citizenship continue to shape contemporary understandings of belonging (Amaya, 2024; Chávez, 2008; de Genova, 2005). De Genova (2005) argues that nativism in the United States is deeply tied to a White national imaginary, in which Latinos/as are constructed as foreign and deportable. Through the ongoing association of Latinos/as with illegality, citizenship becomes a mechanism for regulating belonging by rendering certain populations permanently suspect. Chávez (2008) coined the notion of a Latino threat narrative to conceptualize this process. In this narrative, Latinos/as are framed as culturally and socially incompatible and resistant to assimilation. In this sense, the stigmatization of Latinos/as is neither new nor reducible to economic discourse alone. It is grounded in racialized and nativist principles of citizenship that function as mechanisms of boundary making (Flores, 2003), producing a separation between "us" and "them."

Thus, neoliberal stigma does not rupture earlier logics of exclusion, but rearticulates them through market-based evaluations. We conceptualize neoliberalism as an ideological layer that reshapes how long-standing racialized and nativist exclusions are articulated, justified, and experienced. Within the neoliberal framework, good citizenship becomes synonymous with economic productivity and the capacity to make proper choices, while those who do not conform to these ideals are frequently framed as lazy or irresponsible (de Souza, 2019). de Souza further argues that these neoliberal values are rooted in older stigmatizing discourses that distinguish between the "deserving" and "undeserving" and continue to legitimize nationalism and self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, as Joppke (2021) explains, nativism and neoliberalism are mutually reinforcing logics within contemporary citizenship regimes. Specifically, nativism establishes the boundaries of the national community by determining who properly belongs, drawing on imaginaries of shared culture, sovereignty, and national identity. Simultaneously, neoliberalism governs how belonging is evaluated within those boundaries by introducing ostensibly universal standards of individual responsibility, productivity, and self-sufficiency (Joppke, 2021). In this configuration, neoliberalism provides a moral-economic vocabulary that allows nativist exclusions to be articulated without explicit reference to race or origin. Rather than excluding individuals based on who they are, exclusion is justified on the basis of what they do (or fail to do), making racialized and ethnonational distinctions legible as assessments of merit, effort, and contribution. This interrelation enables nativist boundary making to persist under liberal democratic conditions, while neoliberalism supplies the seemingly neutral criteria through which inclusion and exclusion are legitimized.

In contexts dominated by neoliberal ideologies, citizenship increasingly operates as something that must be earned. Joppke (2021) describes earned citizenship as a form of membership in which access to and security within citizenship are contingent on continuous demonstrations of deservingness, integration, and economic self-sufficiency. Importantly, earned citizenship is neoliberal insofar as it treats citizenship as a reward for performance rather than a status of equality and nationalist insofar as it frames citizenship as a privilege that affirms the moral value of the national community itself. In this sense, neoliberal stigma

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marks those who have failed to meet citizenship's moral and economic standards, thereby sustaining racialized and nativist exclusions through judgments of responsibility and worth.

Communicating Neoliberal Stigma

de Souza (2023) established that neoliberal stigma is communicatively constituted through three mechanisms: shame, suspicion, and surveillance. These mechanisms work together to construct stigmatizing narratives about marginalized groups, casting them as undeserving and incapable of achieving neoliberal ideals. First, de Souza (2023) reasoned that shame is not merely an individual emotional response but also a sociopolitical construct that emerges from discursive practices within systems of inequality. These practices frame structural issues, such as poverty, as personal failures, thereby aligning with neoliberal values of self-reliance and productivity. Second, suspicion operates by casting doubt on the legitimacy and morality of stigmatized individuals (de Souza, 2023). It arises from neoliberal discourses that portray poverty and need as indicators of personal failure or deceit, fostering an environment in which individuals are presumed to exploit systems of aid. As a political tool, suspicion reinforces exclusion and upholds neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility and self-sufficiency. For example, de Souza (2019) highlighted how poverty and participation in food assistance programs were often linked to a lack of self-discipline or criminality, positioning participants as suspicious and undeserving. Finally, surveillance refers to the hierarchical observation and monitoring practices imposed on stigmatized communities (de Souza, 2023). Surveillance functions by restricting access to resources, linking social programs with criminality, and reinforcing control over marginalized populations.

The current study applies de Souza's neoliberal stigma framework to examine how Latinos/as perceive that neoliberal stigma is applied to them, driven by stereotypes and misconceptions about their perceived inability to meet neoliberal standards. Thus, we propose the first research question:

RQ1: How does neoliberal ideology inform stigma about Latinos/as?

Managing Neoliberal Stigma

Although scholars have begun to articulate the experience of neoliberal stigma (Charmaz, 2020; de Souza, 2023), there has been little consideration of how individuals experiencing neoliberal stigma communicatively respond to and manage that stigma. Understanding how Latino/a individuals manage and cope with neoliberal stigma is essential, as awareness and internalization can have adverse consequences, including depression, avoidant coping, social avoidance, decreased hope and self-esteem, and reduced interest in support (Link & Phelan, 2001). For instance, Latino/a immigrants have reported isolation and a loss of meaningful interactions because of stigma (Ponder et al., 2023), and Latino/a youth have reported feelings of fear, anxiety, and anger (Wray-Lake et al., 2018).

de Souza (2023) noted that not all recipients of neoliberal stigma internalize the shame associated with it. Indeed, people may be acutely aware of negative perceptions associated with the neoliberal stigmatized identity, but not necessarily agree with the underlying logic. In response to stigma, some Latino/a individuals may offer narratives that counteract negative perceptions and even encourage increased

civic engagement (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Further, Romo and Obiol (2021) suggest that acts of advocacy can enable stigmatized individuals to discount stereotypes, modify stigmatizing public understandings, and connect with others who share the stigmatized characteristics.

Ultimately, we draw on SMC theory (Meisenbach, 2010) to explore how Latino/a individuals manage neoliberal stigma. According to SMC, individuals' responses to stigma emerge not only from individual perceptions but also from broader discourses that mark particular identities as inferior. SMC offers a strategy typology that can improve understanding of stigma management, comprising six overarching strategies (i.e., accepting, avoiding, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, denying, and ignoring or displaying) and several substrategies (Meisenbach, 2010).

Furthermore, we draw on critical articulations of SMC that interrogate how stigma management strategies function as discursive practices that reify, resist, and transform dominant ideologies (Tucker & Hintz, 2024) such as neoliberalism. Due to its dominance as a sociopolitical ideology, it is possible that neoliberalism not only informs stigma toward Latino/a individuals but also undergirds the management strategies they use to cope with stigma. Accordingly, the current study examines how individuals resist dominant societal discourses about the Latino/a community while also considering how these discourses inform and shape stigma management. Hence, our second research question is as follows:

RQ2: How do Latinos/as discursively manage neoliberal stigma?

Methods

Recruitment and Participants

After Institutional Review Board approval, we used purposive and network sampling to recruit Latino/a adults (18+). We advertised the study on social media platforms, including Facebook, X, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Although we initially sought to reach a broader audience on public platforms—especially after Latino/a organizations shared our post on X—we removed the post following an influx of scammers and bots targeting the $20 compensation offer. We then relied on more private channels, including personal and professional networks that were shaped by our social positions: a Latino male immigrant, a White woman from the Midwest, and an international graduate student. We were mindful of recruiting participants across multiple states; however, recruitment was challenging, likely because of heightened vulnerability during the 2024 election and the sensitivity of identity-based stigma. Despite these challenges, we recruited 17 participants, all of whom received a $20 gift card.

The sample included nine women and eight men, ranging in age from 24 to 70 (M = 39). Participants were required to reside in the United States and be of Latino/a descent, but were not required to be U.S. citizens. Participants represented seven U.S. states (Florida, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Oregon, and Virginia) and reported countries of birth, including Mexico (n = 6), the United States (n = 4), Colombia (n = 3), Ecuador (n = 2), Honduras (n = 1), and Guatemala (n = 1). Although seven states were represented, participants frequently drew on experiences living in multiple states. Thirteen participants were first-generation immigrants, three were second-generation, and one was third-generation.

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First-generation participants had lived in the United States from one to 49 years (M = 24). Nine participants primarily spoke English at home, seven Spanish, and one both languages; four indicated English as their first language.

Most participants identified as Democrats (n = 10), with six reporting no affiliation and one identifying as independent. Regarding education, eight participants held undergraduate degrees, five held master's degrees, one held a doctoral degree, one had a high school diploma, one had completed some high school, and one had completed elementary school. The overrepresentation of Democrats and relatively high levels of education likely reflect our recruitment strategy and may shape experiences and management of neoliberal stigma, as discussed as a limitation.

Data Collection

Participants completed a brief online questionnaire to gather demographic data and confirm eligibility and were then invited to a one-on-one in-depth interview with the first author, a first-generation Latino who is bilingual in Spanish and English. Therefore, participants could complete the interview in their preferred language of English (n = 10), Spanish (n = 6), or a combination of both (n = 1). A semistructured protocol guided the interviews, which were completed over Zoom (12), phone (two), or in person (three). Participants were primarily asked how they experienced and managed stigma related to their Latino/a identity. Interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes (M = 69). Interviews conducted in Spanish were transcribed using an automated service and translated in their entirety by the first author. English-language interviews were transcribed using an automated service and edited to ensure verbatim accuracy and anonymity. Overall, data collection resulted in 328 pages of single-spaced text.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Tracy's (2024) phronetic iterative approach, which seeks to address a social problem while alternating between emergent readings of the data and existing models, explanations, and theories. After each member of the research team became immersed and familiar with the data, the third author was tasked with primary-cycle coding to assign descriptive words or phrases that capture the essence of each thought. Throughout this process, the research team met to discuss these initial codes and emerging consistencies. Although neoliberal stigma did not serve as a sensitizing concept guiding data collection, we recognized early in the analysis that primary codes such as "undeserving," "freeloader," "taking jobs," and "lazy" reflected neoliberal discourses. Consistent with the iterative process, the research team reviewed relevant scholarship on neoliberal stigma (de Souza, 2019, 2023) and considered how the communicative mechanisms (e.g., shame, suspicion, and surveillance) were present in the data.

As a theoretical expert, the second author collaborated with the third author on secondary-cycle coding, which involves organizing, synthesizing, and categorizing the primary descriptive codes into interpretive codes (Tracy, 2024). This process also included hierarchical coding, in which we grouped codes under umbrella categories or themes, with neoliberal stigma in mind. For example, primary codes such as "underserving," "freeloader," "taking jobs," and "lazy" were all categorized under the "underserving freeloader" theme, which reflected the shaming mechanism (de Souza, 2023). This iterative process

involved creating concept maps and outlining different theme structures to see how the data fit together, as well as revisiting the literature and considering how secondary codes aligned with theory.

Validity and Ethics

Guided by Tracy's (2024) big-tent criteria, we took several steps to ensure research quality. First, we were self-reflective by considering our positionalities, which led the first author to conduct the interviews. The research team also held reflexive conversations about data interpretation, given that the primary coders were not Latino/a. To build analytic credibility, the results section provides thick description through in-depth examples and quotes. Finally, in line with ethical considerations, protecting participants' identities was a primary concern. Participants could complete interviews in person, over Zoom, or by phone, allowing visual anonymity if preferred. Participants were not asked about citizenship status at any point. Each participant was immediately assigned a pseudonym, and other identifiers (e.g., geographic locations) were removed from transcripts.

Results

This section presents the results, which focused on how neoliberal ideology informs stigma about Latinos/as (RQ1) and how Latinos/as manage and cope with neoliberal stigma (RQ2). We show how participants experience compounded layers of stigma that intertwine ethnic identity, immigrant stereotypes, and labels of illegality. In response to these stigmatizing discourses, participants employed a range of communicative strategies to navigate, resist, and reframe the stigma they experienced.

Latino/a Neoliberal Stigma

In response to RQ1, we found that neoliberalism informed stigma about Latino/as through the suspicion and surveillance of criminality (i.e., the dangerous criminal), the shame and suspicion around educational and professional (under)achievement (i.e., the incompetent [under]achiever), the shaming of what was perceived to be freeloading or stealing opportunities and resources from those who were considered more deserving (i.e., the undeserving freeloader), and the attribution of blame for societal issues (i.e., the root of America's problems).

The Dangerous Criminal

The first way neoliberalism informed stigma toward Latinos/as was through the suspicion and surveillance of criminality. According to de Souza (2023), neoliberal stigma casts suspicion on people, questioning their motives and behaviors and invoking criminal associations. In the current study, criminal suspicions included racialized stereotypes about undocumented status and activities involving drugs and theft, which are at odds with responsible citizenship.

First, participants reinforced that those who hold the Latino/a ethnic identity were not only assumed to be immigrants, but undocumented immigrants. For example, Isabel explained:

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> I think people see us as immigrants as soon as they know we're Latino . . . there's this assumption that you don't have papers or maybe you weren't born here [United States]. It's as if saying "Latino" means you're an outsider. It's as if just by being Latino, people assume you don't belong here.

Many participants reinforced the idea that being Latino/a was synonymous with being "illegal," including Omar, who was born in the United States and explained others' assumption that "we're all just thieving migrants that came here illegally." With this logic, all Latinos/as become susceptible to being cast as criminals through the interplay of ethnic identity and immigrant stereotypes, which symbolically withdraws citizenship status (de Souza, 2019) and reinforces an "us" versus "them" dichotomy. Through a neoliberal lens, those marked as Latino/a are positioned as permanently suspect, always needing to prove their legitimacy through productivity and state compliance, positioning citizenship as an ongoing performance of deservingness.

In addition to the stereotype of being an illegal immigrant, participants described stigmatizing associations with forms of criminality, such as "bringing drugs or violence to a new country" (Oscar) and being "quarrelsome" people who "rape women" (Camila). These narratives point to racialized suspicion that render Latino/a migrants as dangerous and morally deficient, rather than law-abiding and nonburdensome to the state. Mario pointed out the notion that "there is danger coming for you and your family," which becomes a "very deliberate language to not only stigmatize people but to create fear." This fear-based framing legitimizes criminal surveillance and social control of Latino/a individuals.

Indeed, participants described overt experiences of suspicion and surveillance because of the dangerous criminal stereotype often attached to Latino/a bodies. Mario has been followed in stores because "people perceive [him] as someone who might steal something," and Diana was accused of stealing while working at a hotel. Fernando recounted an experience in which a cop pulled him over, made him get out of the vehicle, and searched his briefcase, explaining that the cop "assumed that [he] was involved in drugs" because he was Hispanic and had a Mercedes. Such experiences highlight the criminal suspicion directed at non-White individuals perceived as exceeding neoliberal expectations of economic mobility and status.

These examples demonstrate how neoliberal stigma is reinforced through the racialized policing of Latinos/as and how routine activities, such as shopping, working, and driving, become grounds for scrutiny. As de Souza (2023) argues, neoliberalism legitimizes the use of state power to discipline those deemed morally suspect or "bad citizens." In the current study, state surveillance was motivated by markers such as appearance or suspected immigrant status, rather than actual criminal behavior. Ultimately, the dangerous criminal framing positions Latinos/as as fundamentally incompatible with the neoliberal ideals of productivity, legality, and self-sufficiency, thereby justifying their exclusion from full societal participation.

The Incompetent (Under)Achiever

The second way in which neoliberalism informed stigma about Latinos/as was through shame and suspicion around educational and professional (under)achievement. de Souza (2023) explained how shame

serves as a communicative mechanism that perpetuates neoliberal stigma among those who do not meet citizenship standards. In the current study, participants described how Latinos/as are shamed for their perceived incompetence and lack of ability, which was seen as a personal character flaw. When participants met neoliberal standards of achievement, they were cast under suspicion.

First, participants described the stigmatizing stereotype that Latinos/as were uneducated, which led to the assumption that they were only capable of blue-collar jobs "American people don't want to do" (Veronica). Maria reasoned that "when people think of Latinos, they think we all have darker skin and lack education . . . they think we only do service jobs, like in restaurants, landscaping, or cleaning rooms in hotels." Similarly, Paola spoke to "the stigma that Latinos can only work in jobs that involve cleaning bathrooms and working in construction." These stereotypes not only undermine Latinos/as' diverse economic contributions but also reinforce the belief that they fall short of the neoliberal ideals of upward mobility and economic success. Further, because neoliberalism comes to define citizenship as something earned, it shapes perceptions of underperformance in earning citizenship, which is often tied to wealth and Whiteness and assessed through demonstrations of productivity, self-sufficiency, and integration (de Souza, 2023; Joppke, 2021).

Participants experienced surprise and suspicion from others when they demonstrated achievements, such as being educated, holding white-collar positions, speaking "good" English, and dressing well, that contradicted the incompetence stereotype. These reactions reveal how racialized bodies are presumed incompatible with neoliberal markers of merit and professionalism. For example, Camila explained others' suspicion that "someone like her was able to do this," with "someone like her" meaning someone non-White and "this" being a placeholder for any form of achievement. She concluded, "All the achievements are like a surprise." Maria described others' surprise at how "good" her English was and at her holding an executive director position, saying, "It's like they're surprised because it's almost as if I'm an exception." According to some participants, such achievements made them "good" citizens. For instance, Clara explained, "There's like these narratives sometimes of like, well, 'you're a good Latino,' or 'you're a good immigrant' because of what you do for a living, or because you have some level of education." Still, the "good immigrant" label is fragile and must be continuously legitimized, just as they must continue to demonstrate they deserve the privilege of citizenship.

Together, participants' experiences underscore that neoliberal stigma is not only about evaluating achievement but also about who is imagined as a legitimate achiever in the first place. Race shapes how neoliberal achievement is interpreted: White achievement is natural and anticipated, while non-White achievements disrupt dominant assumptions and are anomalous. Indeed, de Souza (2023) outlined how "good citizens" are those who work hard, often thought to be White and middle-class, whereas "bad citizens" are underproductive, lazy, and burdensome—often Black or Brown (p. 17).

The Undeserving Freeloader

The third way in which neoliberalism informed stigma about Latinos/as living in the United States was by shaming them for what is perceived to be freeloading or stealing opportunities and resources from

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those considered more deserving. The perception that Latinos/as are "stealing" also reinforced stigmatizing associations with criminality.

First, Latinos/as were thought to "enter [the United States] illegally . . . to take opportunities away from people who were born [there]" (Camila). In many cases, Latinos/as were thought to be "taking" (Ana, Clara, Elizabeth, Veronica) or "stealing" jobs (Omar, Oscar). Ana shared how "illegals" are thought to "steal childcare" and deplete educational opportunities. In this framing, Latino/a children pose a threat by taking away opportunities from more deserving (i.e., White) children who were born in the United States. In addition to reinforcing the idea that Latinos/as are often assumed to be undocumented immigrants, these examples demonstrate how Latinos/as are stigmatized as a result of stereotypes and misconceptions about their perceived inability to meet neoliberal ideals of hard work and self-reliance and, instead, steal opportunities they have not earned.

Second, participants described the stigmatizing perception that Latinos/as are "freeloaders" of public programs they do not contribute to. For instance, Veronica explained the stigmatizing perception that Latinos/as "take advantage" of America to get free health care. She argued that "people just think when people immigrate here [the United States], they get everything free." Similarly, Maria claimed people believe "we're all taking advantage and getting all the benefits that we're not entitled to." Pablo attributed the "assumption that everybody who is coming to the U.S. just wants to get free stuff" to the perception that "Latinos are lazy."

Here, we start to see the contours of a paradox in which Latinos/as who do work are criticized for stealing jobs from those who are more deserving, whereas those who do not work are criticized for being lazy and stealing resources from those more deserving. The common thread is the perception that Latinos/as are stealing, which reinforces the stigma of criminality, and that they are undeserving of what they gain.

The Root of America's Problems

Finally, our analysis revealed a new communicative mechanism of neoliberal stigma: blame. Although blame has long been recognized as a means of communicating stigma—such as holding individuals responsible for their stigmatized status and its consequences (Smith, 2007)—it has not been formally conceptualized as a communicative mechanism of neoliberal stigma, in which responsibility for large-scale socioeconomic conditions is placed onto marginalized groups. In this case, we define blame as the assignment of fault or the attribution of personal responsibility for adverse societal outcomes. As we elaborate further in the discussion, blame differs from the other mechanisms (i.e., shame, suspicion, and surveillance) in that it attributes societal issues to specific groups, thereby turning them into symbolic scapegoats for structural failures.

In the current study, Latinos/as were blamed, or scapegoated, for America's problems. For instance, Elizabeth reasoned that when people lack clear answers, "they tend to scapegoat," such as blaming Latinos/as for taking jobs. Pablo argued that Americans "throw everything" at Latino/a immigrants, including the lack of housing and the high cost of goods. Similarly, Hernando argued that Americans think Latinos/as "affect their daily lives negatively, whether it's criminally, financially, or something impacting the economy."

These examples illustrate how blame can serve to redirect frustration over structural issues onto marginalized groups rather than address institutional or policy failures.

Finally, discourses of blame were thought to be constructed purposefully by those in power to exacerbate stigma among Latinos/as. Oscar reasoned:

> Stigmas come from a space of fear and of people wanting to maintain power . . . they create power dynamics and demonize [Latinos/as] so that there is something to be angry about. There is *someone* to be angry about. There's a reason why you're not doing well in life—that evil entity is the problem, not you.

By positioning Latinos/as as the cause of social and economic hardship, responsibility is removed from political and economic systems and relocated onto an imagined "evil entity." In this way, blame becomes another technology for political oppression when it is used to shift the attribution for the consequences of structural problems to a specific marginalized group—in this case, an ethnic group. This is another example of how neoliberal stigma operates at the structural level to reinforce relations of power and maintain the social order (de Souza, 2023).

Managing Neoliberal Stigma

In addition to exploring how neoliberalism informs stigma about Latinos/as, we examined how stigma management strategies act as discursive practices that resist stigmatizing perceptions rooted in neoliberalism (RQ2). We found that participants' management strategies (1) leveraged neoliberal ideology to deny stigma, (2) evaded responsibility for neoliberal stigma, and (3) challenged neoliberal stigma through education and advocacy.

Leveraging Neoliberal Ideology to Deny Stigma

Participants logically denied stigma (Meisenbach, 2010) by providing evidence that refutes neoliberal stigma. Specifically, participants denied stigma by arguing that Latinos/as (1) are responsible and law-abiding individuals, (2) are capable and successful people with valuable and lucrative careers, and (3) make significant contributions to the United States and therefore have earned belonging and citizenship. While the strategy of providing evidence worked to deny stigma, it often did so by leveraging and reifying neoliberal logics.

First, participants argued that Latinos/as are responsible, law-abiding people seeking a better life for their families. Ivan is in the United States to "respect the laws," and despite stigmatizing perceptions, he argues "there will always be responsible Latinos/as who come to integrate and follow laws." Diana corroborated that Latinos/as "don't come to harm" and instead "come with the plan of working and behaving well." Ultimately, participants argued that Latinos/as want to "succeed in the U.S. just like everyone else" (Pablo) and "give their families a better life" (Ana).

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Second, participants argued that Latinos/as are competent and make important contributions to the United States, including in blue-collar sectors. Camila claimed Latinos/as working in agriculture are "hard-working," and without their contributions, "society would not function." Ivan noted that Latinos/as are "the leaders in building houses" and are "building the country." While participants acknowledged the value of blue-collar jobs, they also argued Latinos/as are capable of handling white-collar jobs and provided evidence of them working in software engineering (Omar), higher education (Mario), and organizational leadership (Maria).

Finally, participants pushed back against the idea that Latinos/as steal opportunities and resources. By holding positions as nurses and teachers (Ana), they contribute to the very sectors they are thought to be "stealing" from (e.g., health care and education). Moreover, Ana argued that Latino/a immigrants are the "backbone of the economy" and have "purchasing power," noting that reports have "quantified how many hundreds of millions of dollars they pay in State and Federal taxes." Clara also pointed out that Latinos/as contribute billions of dollars in taxes. Indeed, a recent report demonstrated the U.S. Latino/a economy grew to $3.6 trillion in 2022 (Gomez, 2024).

In these examples, participants reified neoliberal ideals as a means to resist stigma directed at Latinos/as as a group. Namely, they provided evidence of their achievement of neoliberal ideals of hard work, self-reliance, and economic contribution, thereby demonstrating their value to the United States, earning citizenship, and proving their right to belong. Understandably, a nondominant group would have a difficult time challenging the dominant ideals within U.S. society, but they can attempt to resist stigmatizing perceptions that their ethnic group does not live up to those ideals.

Evading Responsibility for Neoliberal Stigma

The second way participants managed neoliberal stigma was by evading responsibility, which involves strategies that shift public understanding of the stigma by deflecting agency or control away from the stigmatized individual (Meisenbach, 2010). Participants outlined the systemic conditions in the United States that place Latinos/as at a disadvantage and make it challenging to achieve neoliberal ideals.

First, participants shared examples of discrimination that limited educational and career opportunities. For example, Camila explained Latinos/as find themselves in what might be considered "stigmatized" blue-collar jobs because their education level prevents them from having the same opportunities as others. As a former admissions counselor, she observed that Latino/a high schoolers often lack access to tutors and books that would better prepare them for college entrance exams, yet these students are perceived as uneducated or unmotivated, even though they "would have liked to take advantage" of educational resources and "continue their education." Instead, some end up being "exploited" in blue-collar positions (Camila) and "taking the job that Americans don't want to do" (Ivan).

Camila also shared an experience applying for a job that made her feel discriminated against. Specifically, when applying for a banking job she felt highly qualified for, she was unable to indicate her deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) status on a fillable online application form, which prevented her from continuing the application. Camila sought help from an HR representative, who did not understand

her DACA status and ultimately said, "I can't help you complete the application." This upset Camila because the representative had "no intention to try to connect [her] with someone who knew more."

In addition to sharing stories of educational and professional discrimination, participants also linked these experiences to other structural conditions—such as a lack of access to health insurance (Ana) or a medical interpreter (Diana), as well as the inability to vote—that affect a person's well-being and, therefore, their ability to belong. Ultimately, while blame serves as a mechanism for powerful agents to shift responsibility for structural problems onto marginalized groups, these groups can employ strategies that discursively shift responsibility back to the neoliberal structures that disadvantage them.

Educating and Advocating to Challenge Stigmatizing Perceptions

The third way participants managed neoliberal stigma was through education and advocacy. Participants felt that stigmatizing misconceptions about Latinos/as stemmed from a "lack of education" and "for lack of being exposed to the community" (Ana). Therefore, some participants shared personal stories and educated others. While sharing personal narratives as a means of education is another way to deny stigma, participants described doing so as advocacy. Indeed, denial strategies are proactive and represent social activism and public education techniques (Meisenbach, 2010). Camila described feeling "empowered" to share her DACA story and "advocate" for those going through similar experiences. Although advocacy is not a formal SMC substrategy, Romo and Obiol (2021) argue that it can enable people to discount stereotypes by using their voices to speak up for those experiencing stigma; therefore, it is a valuable strategy for reframing and resisting neoliberal stigma.

Participants also engaged in formal organizing and civic engagement. Ana worked on voter registration during an election and encouraged undocumented parents to register their young adult children, saying, "You might not be able to register to vote . . . but you can still use your voice. Why don't you encourage your kid to register, and you can still use your voice through them?" Ana described the experience as "very powerful." Similarly, stigma motivated Clara to engage in "advocacy" and "civic engagement," arguing that "we need to invest in our communities" and get people involved. Participants emphasized that even without voting rights, undocumented Latinos/as could still resist stigma. Specifically, Ana shared the example of Latinos/as boycotting Goya Foods after the company's president expressed support for Donald Trump. This example echoes Ivan's point that while some "don't have a vote," they still "have a voice" to organize and push back against stigmatization.

Although neoliberalism often discourages disadvantaged people's participation in collective life (Charmaz, 2020), participants' involvement in education and advocacy represents a deliberate pushback against these constraints. Through voter outreach, community organizing, and coordinated boycotts, participants show how Latinos/as leverage alternative forms of participation to assert voice and influence, even without formal political power. In this way, civic engagement becomes both a form of resistance to stigmatization and a means of negotiating the terms of recognition within a neoliberal social order.

Discussion

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The current study explored how neoliberal ideology informs stigma toward Latinos/as (RQ1) and how they discursively manage and navigate such stigma (RQ2), thereby answering the call to examine how neoliberal stigma operates discursively and becomes embedded in everyday practices (Charmaz, 2020). Participants described compounded layers of stigma that intertwine ethnic identity, immigrant stereotypes, and labels of illegality, all of which contribute to pervasive perceptions of their criminal status, incompetence, undeservingness, and blame for socioeconomic problems. In response, participants employed various communicative strategies to navigate, resist, and reframe the neoliberal stigma they experienced.

Although we were primarily interested in neoliberal stigma, our findings underscore that these stigmatizing discourses are rooted in racialized and nativist constructions that precede neoliberalism and continue to shape who is imagined as legitimately belonging. In this context, neoliberal stigma operates in close relation to a logic of earned citizenship (Joppke, 2021), in which recognition is framed as conditional on ongoing demonstrations of productivity, self-sufficiency, and state compliance, thereby allowing older exclusions to be articulated as seemingly neutral judgments of deservingness. By extending de Souza's (2019, 2023) framework beyond food assistance contexts, we show how neoliberal stigma circulates through everyday interactions precisely because it attaches to long-standing, racialized citizenship regimes rather than operating as a purely economic logic.

Theoretical Implications for Experiencing and Managing Neoliberal Stigma

First, in line with RQ1, we contribute to communication scholarship by adding texture to the understanding of how the communicative mechanisms of shame, suspicion, and surveillance (de Souza, 2023) drive neoliberal stigma in a new context—Latinos/as living in the United States. We found that these mechanisms marginalize Latinos/as by positioning them as threats or burdens to the social order, thereby maintaining existing power structures. Neoliberal stigma was intricately connected to ethnicity, with markers of Latino/a identity (e.g., skin tone, accent) triggering suspicion and surveillance. These findings reinforce that neoliberal stigma creates a distinction between "good" citizens, often associated with Whiteness, and Black and Brown individuals, who are seen as unworthy (de Souza, 2019). That said, Latinos/as were often considered the "exception" when they met neoliberal standards, which included conforming to White cultural norms (e.g., speaking "good" English). Taken together, these dynamics reflect how neoliberal stigma functions as a mechanism for evaluating citizenship through performance, reinforcing a regime in which belonging is conditional rather than guaranteed.

Our findings also highlighted contradictions in stigmatizing perceptions of Latino/a identity, particularly about work. Specifically, Latinos/as who held jobs were criticized for stealing them from those deemed more deserving. In contrast, those perceived as not working were criticized for being lazy and for stealing unearned resources (e.g., public funding). As previously noted, the common thread is the perception that Latinos/as are stealing and that they are undeserving of what they gain. This dynamic illustrates the paradox of the "American dream," which promises opportunity yet often excludes Black and Brown immigrants.

Finally, we uncovered a new mechanism of neoliberal stigma—blame, defined as the assignment of fault or attribution of responsibility for large-scale societal problems. In the current study, blame attributed socioeconomic issues such as job scarcity or rising housing costs to the presence or actions of Latinos/as rather than to neoliberal policies or institutional failures. The blame mechanism is embedded in neoliberal ideology, offering a market-based framing of social issues. This was evident in descriptions of Latinos/as as unwelcome or illegitimate market agents, perceived as depleting public resources or inflating the cost of goods, among other effects, thereby affecting resource access for deserving and legitimate neoliberal citizens. This characterization emphasizes principles of individual competition, a deregulated market, and a state that is uninvolved in the free market. Within this mechanism, the construction of an "us versus them" dichotomy not only legitimizes the exclusion of stigmatized groups but also intensifies individual competition within the marketplace, further embedding and solidifying a neoliberal social life.

Blame differs from the other mechanisms because it attributes societal issues to specific groups, casting them as symbolic scapegoats for structural failures. Unlike shame, which frames individuals' inability to meet neoliberal ideals of hard work, self-reliance, or productivity as personal flaws, blame holds stigmatized groups responsible for societal struggles. Similarly, surveillance functions as a form of control, ensuring compliance with neoliberal ideals of productivity, but it does not assign responsibility for systemic issues to members of the stigmatized group. Additionally, suspicion questions the legitimacy and moral integrity of stigmatized individuals, presuming them deceitful, criminal, or taking advantage of the system. Blame extends this presumption by linking these individual characteristics to broader societal issues. We encourage scholars to continue examining how blame, along with other mechanisms, drives neoliberal stigma in different contexts.

Although blame has been identified as a form of stigma communication (Smith, 2007), it has not been theorized as a mechanism of neoliberal stigma. Stigma research shows that blame intensifies when a stigmatized condition is framed as controllable, chosen, or the result of poor individual decisions (Smith, 2007). For example, people with obesity or living with mental illness are often held responsible for their condition, reducing their lived experience to personal failure while ignoring structural, biological, or social determinants (Brewis & Wutich, 2019). In these cases, stigma operates primarily at the level of individual attribution, with the person blamed for their circumstances. Through a neoliberal stigma lens, however, blame assigns responsibility for broader social and economic problems to marginalized groups, casting them as having failed to earn legitimate membership within the national community. Unemployment, housing scarcity, fiscal strain, and social instability are thus framed as consequences of a group's presumed irresponsibility, dependency, or lack of productivity. In other words, the consequences of not earning citizenship are not only personally adverse but also collectively adverse. Again, this move stigmatizes marginalized communities and legitimizes exclusionary policies and public resentment by framing inequality as the outcome of others' inadequacy rather than institutional and economic arrangements.

Second, in line with RQ2, we expand our understanding of how stigma management strategies (Meisenbach, 2010) can be employed to reify, resist, and transform dominant sociopolitical ideologies (Tucker & Hintz, 2024), specifically neoliberalism. Critical theorizing suggests that individuals use stigma management strategies to resist dominant ideologies (Tucker & Hintz, 2024). However, in this unique case, we see Latinos/as reifying the dominant U.S. ideology of neoliberalism as a means to resist stigma for their

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ethnic group. In other words, they provided evidence of how Latinos/as fulfill the neoliberal standard of "good citizenship." This response to stigma may speak to the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism, wherein it may be less feasible for some marginalized and stigmatized groups to resist or transform a dominant societal discourse. To be clear, we do not seek to blame individuals for reinforcing stigma about their ethnic group through their avoidant responses; instead, we aim to demonstrate that various power structures position them in ways that make challenging stigma difficult. Indeed, various contextual factors must be considered when understanding why marginalized groups adopt specific strategies.

While sociopolitical conditions can shape a marginalized group's response to stigma, these conditions do not render them powerless, as participants used strategies that resist and transform stigma (Tucker & Hintz, 2024). For example, a group can exercise power by boycotting institutions (e.g., Goya Foods), and parents who were unable to vote could encourage their children to do so. Participants also engaged in education and advocacy to transform understandings of Latinos/as, consistent with previous research showing that Latinos/as offered pro-immigrant narratives to counter stereotypes and encourage civic engagement (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Although not formally recognized in the SMC typology, the current study supports the claim that advocacy can enable stigmatized individuals to discount stereotypes, shift public perceptions, and connect with others who share the stigmatized characteristics (Romo & Obiol, 2021).

Practical Implications for Navigating Neoliberal Stigma

While changing deeply ingrained ideologies is challenging, a range of anti-stigma strategies and interventions can minimize negative perceptions or discrimination and support Latinos/as. Sharing personal stories and bonding within the stigmatized group are effective coping strategies (Meisenbach, 2010). Participants felt empowered by sharing their stories to educate others and advocate for those with similar ethnic identity challenges. These narratives foster understanding and empathy among outgroup members, minimizing stigma and promoting social acceptance. Narratives also shift responsibility from individuals to broader structures that stigmatize and oppress marginalized communities (Roscoe & Meisenbach, 2025). In response to being blamed for societal problems, participants in the study discursively shifted responsibility from their group to structural conditions that perpetuate inequities.

Although individual-level responses can be helpful, they are often reactive rather than addressing the conditions that produce stigma. Accordingly, interventions must also occur at the structural and institutional levels, where neoliberal ideologies and norms are entrenched. This includes recently proposed policies that eliminate DACA and birthright citizenship, limit immigrants' access to public programs and services, and expand interior enforcement (Pillai & Artiga, 2024), all of which disproportionately oppress immigrant populations and Latinos/as while upholding the current social order under neoliberal logics.

Further, the media can play a crucial role in correcting stigmatizing misconceptions by moving beyond narratives of criminality, dependency, and illegality. News reporting on immigration and political elites' positions may perpetuate stereotypes that fuel societal misconceptions, discrimination, and acceptance of harmful policies, such as equating migration with criminality. Including diverse voices and content that highlight Latinos/as' positive contributions could mitigate the adverse effects of stigmatizing

messages. Moreover, further research should examine content patterns and the prevalence of neoliberal stigma narratives across legacy and social media. Although media messages have historically contributed to negative perceptions of marginalized groups, media and political elite messaging can also reduce stigma and enhance societal understanding.

Limitations

Although participants represented diverse demographics, most were college-educated and identified as Democrats, which likely shaped their understandings of and responses to stigma. Furthermore, we acknowledge that immigration and legal status will significantly impact participants' experiences in the United States, including their responses to interpersonal and structural stigma. Undocumented immigrants may be more likely to avoid stigmatizing situations and passively accept stigma in interpersonal interactions as a means to avoid conflict and potential deportation. Future research might narrow its focus on these groups to better address their individual experiences versus those of Latinos/as a whole.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates how neoliberalism undergirds the stigma experienced and managed by Latinos/as. Together, the discursive mechanisms of shame, suspicion, surveillance (de Souza, 2023) and blame function as a powerful force in shaping notions of citizenship, disproportionately impacting Latinos/as by framing them as social and economic threats. In response to stigma, Latinos/as engage in a range of strategies, balancing resistance and self-preservation within a system that leaves little room for challenge. These findings are critical for fostering a more inclusive and just society that recognizes the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their ethnic or immigration background.

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