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Relational Egalitarianism and Warranted Stigma

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Correspondence: Matilda Carter (m.r.carter@leeds.ac.uk)**Received:** 17 February 2025 | **Revised:** 26 August 2025 | **Accepted:** 21 October 2025**Funding:** This work was supported by the British Academy.**Keywords:** egalitarianism | social hierarchy | stigma**ABSTRACT**

Relational egalitarians oppose social hierarchy. Or, more precisely, they oppose intolerable social hierarchy. Stigma is often included among those unequal forms of relating that relational egalitarians ought to oppose, but there are circumstances in which stigmatizing behaviors or group identities might be strategically important for opposing social inequalities. Working through different responses to this puzzle, in this paper I advance the view that stigma is neutral, such that relational egalitarians should only oppose forms of it that are unwarranted.

1 | Introduction

Relational egalitarians oppose social hierarchy. Or, more precisely, they oppose *intolerable* social hierarchies. That some individuals are highly acclaimed for excellence in certain attributes or pursuits is not obviously objectionable, despite its hierarchical implications.¹ Neither, for that matter, is it necessarily offensive to the ideal of relational equality that there exist relationships of deference between mentees and mentors, patients and doctors, or laypersons and experts. Relational egalitarians will disagree on how to handle cases like these. There is no widespread internal disagreement, however, on how the theory ought to treat relationships of *domination* or *oppression*: they are paradigm examples of inegalitarian relations to which relational egalitarians ought *always* to object [2].

Stigma often appears alongside domination and oppression in relational egalitarian scholarship, as if it, too, is a paradigm case of always-objectionable inegalitarian relating [1, 3–5]. On one hand, this seems commonsensical: many of the injustices that

contemporary egalitarian political movements rail against—the very injustices that early relational egalitarians developed the theory to better take account² of—seem to consist in or at the very least involve stigmatizing behaviors. Think here of the stigma associated with many forms of disability or non-heteronormative romantic relationships. Yet it is less clear, on the other hand, that what is unjust in these cases is the stigma *itself*, as opposed to nearby and associated issues of social inequality. All serious egalitarians oppose ableism and homophobia, so will also oppose behaviors that contribute to or perpetuate these forms of discrimination. In circumstances in which wider relational injustices are not experienced by the stigmatized, by contrast, the motivating force for opposing stigma seems less pressing. For instance, it is not obvious that we should oppose the stigmatizing of sex offenders—especially not those who are unrepentant. The same goes for committed white supremacists or virulent misogynists. Moreover, even where we *can* sensibly talk of oppression or domination experienced by those groups, it is still not clear that the stigma involved in what I will term the *puzzling cases* ought to be met with egalitarian objections.

I presented early versions of these arguments at a Scottish Feminist Philosophy Network workshop in 2024, and subsequently developed versions of them at a Scottish Political Theory Network workshop in 2025. I am grateful to the organizers of both events for inviting me to speak, and to the attendees of each for their helpful comments. I wish, in particular, to thank Eilidh Beaton, Michael Frazer, Nikolas Kirby, and Carl Knight for identifying key areas that were in need of improvement.

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Relational egalitarians, I take it in this paper, have three strategies open to them for addressing the puzzling cases. They could argue that what is going on in these cases is not really stigma at all: that persons who possess these attributes cannot be stigmatized by the fact of having them *by definition*. In Section 1, I argue that this approach is liable to failure on a range of definitions of the phenomenon (including the one I will adopt for the remainder of the paper). As an alternative, they might seek to demonstrate that stigmatizing members of these groups is equivalent to oppression or dominating them, meaning that relational egalitarians should always oppose it. While some bullets can be comfortably bitten, in Section 2 I argue that this is not one of them. Because of the way it developed as a theory, relational egalitarianism is placed under significant pressure wherever it falls out of step with the priorities of contemporary egalitarian movements. Its advocates ought to be cautious, therefore, about positioning themselves against strategies that are widely made use of within egalitarian activism. As I demonstrate, there are sometimes good, egalitarian reasons for engaging in stigmatizing behaviors, including resistance to intolerable social hierarchy and deradicalizing anti-egalitarian extremists, and these make a strategy of blanket opposition untenable. We are left, therefore, with the third strategy: accepting that stigma is not an inherently objectionable way of relating and providing a principled way of distinguishing between *warranted stigma*, which relational egalitarians ought not to oppose, and *unwarranted stigma*, which they ought to. This is the approach I favor, giving supporting arguments for it in the final section of this paper.

2 | Exclusion by Definition

The most straightforward way for the relational egalitarian to deal with the puzzling cases is to deny that they represent instances of stigma at all: to rule them out, that is, *by definition*. If successful, this strategy would honor common intuitions about the morality of our social responses to sex offenders, white supremacists, and virulent misogynists, while protecting the (often only implied) idea that stigma, like oppression and domination, ought always to be met with objections. It is a straightforward strategy, in other words, because it presents no serious challenge to the normative commitments of (most) relational egalitarians.

In another sense, however, this is not a straightforward strategy at all. To be successful, the relational egalitarian must be able to point to an account of stigma upon which being a sex offender, a white supremacist, or a virulent misogynist is *never* the sort of thing for which a person can be stigmatized—even if the way we respond to people who fit these descriptions bears a close resemblance to what the account would label stigma in other cases. And, while they could generate a toy definition that accomplished this, such as one that explicitly ruled them out without an accompanying explanation, a satisfactory response requires a model that is *independently defensible*. The relational egalitarian pursuing this strategy must be able to show, that is, that the definition of stigma they choose is one that we would have good reason to adopt irrespective of our intuitions about the puzzling cases. As I demonstrate in this section, there is no such definition available.

2.1 | Stigma in the Social Sciences

Perhaps surprisingly, given the frequency with which it is referred to, there is little work within relational egalitarian scholarship on the definition of stigma. By comparison, social scientific research on the concept is abundant, with several competing definitions in use. When reviewing candidate models to support the strategy of exclusion by definition, then, the social sciences are the best place to start.

Typically credited as the starting point for contemporary sociological research on stigma, Erving Goffman's definition casts it as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" in a given social setting. He understands this as the result of a discrepancy that arises between "what the individual before us ought to be" and the attributes they actually possess: a discrepancy between what he terms their "virtual" and "actual" social identities. Not all such incongruities in expectations involve stigma, but only those in which the attributes they involve mark the person as different and "of a less desirable kind," reducing them from a whole and normal person to one who is "tainted" [8].

That being a sex offender, a white supremacist, or a virulent misogynist elicits a response of deep discrediting is inarguable. It is difficult to imagine a situation in which any evidence of the first of these traits emerging would not lead to the kind of negatively valenced incongruity in expectations that Goffman describes, save for judicial or therapeutic settings in which the person is already expected to be a sex offender. And while white supremacy and misogyny are not so universally treated as markers of a tainted social identity, this process is present in plenty enough scenarios to make plain that persons possessing these attributes are subject to stigma in the sense that Goffman describes. It is also important to note that in principle *any* attribute can be stigmatizing in at least one social setting on this account, so raising doubts about whether sex offenders, white supremacists, or virulent misogynists actually are discredited in contemporary societies would not be sufficient to diffuse the worry; if stigma is something to which relational egalitarians must always object, then they must be ready to object to it in these cases, whether or not such stigma genuinely exists today.

That Goffman's model is so clear-cut on the puzzling cases is something of an inauspicious start. Worse still, across those prominent alternative models in psychology and sociology that have built on Goffman's research, it is still broadly the case that the puzzling cases straightforwardly count as instances of stigma.

Consider, for instance, Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan's model of stigma as a process that consists of four elements: (1) the social selection of a human difference as salient, (2) the stereotyping of that difference through association with negative characteristics, (3) the use of that label to distinguish "us" from "them," and (4) the experience of status loss and discrimination by those who possess that difference [9]. Nothing about this definition rules out the possibility that a history of sexual offending, a commitment to white supremacy, or adherence to virulent misogyny are the sort of differences that can be stigmatized. In many (or indeed most) settings we do consider these differences salient, we do associate them with negative

characteristics, we do engage in social separation, and those who possess them do experience status loss and discrimination. This is most obvious with sex offenders: we keep registers of them, associate them with danger and a lack of trustworthiness, use terms that mark them out as separate from the rest of society,³ and subject them to discrimination in areas like employment and housing.

Likewise, the same result is produced by applying the four-part model of stigma developed within the field of social psychology by Nicolas Rüsçh, Matthias C. Angermeyer, and Patrick W. Corrigan. On this view, stigma arises when people with relative power internalize *stereotypes* about a group, manifesting in emotional responses of *prejudice* and behavioral responses of *discrimination* [10]. For white supremacy and virulent misogyny, a strong case could be made that many of those with relative power *themselves* possess these attributes, such that it would not be accurate to label them as stigmatizing. For sex offending, however, such a case is more difficult to make. While there are many people with relative power who have been revealed to the public as alleged or convicted sex offenders, that power does not wholly insulate them from the stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination leveled at members of that group. And, in any case, this definition does not in principle rule out the possibility that members of these groups *could* be subject to stigma, so once again disputes over the actual state of affairs in our society do little to dispel the central worry.

2.2 | Stigma or Social Ostracism?

Now, that researchers in the social sciences define stigma in such a way as to include—actually or hypothetically—negative responses to traits like sexual offending, white supremacy, and virulent misogyny does not necessarily mean that the relational egalitarian should agree. Perhaps Goffman and those that have built on his work have simply gotten things *wrong*, and so political philosophy ought to step in and correct their mistakes. If an independently justifiable account of stigma can be developed that *does* rule out the puzzling cases by definition, then it is perfectly within reason for relational egalitarians to adopt it in place of those that are in use in the social sciences. And, indeed, there are good reasons for thinking that a better model could be developed.

For one thing, close examination of Goffman's definition reveals it to be implausibly broad. We might grant that all paradigm cases of stigma do involve a kind of deep social discrediting in response to an attribute, but the obverse notion—that all instances of deeply discrediting attributes are instances of stigma—does not seem to pass the commonsense test. Consider individual character traits such as habitual dishonesty or being quick to anger. Certainly, where such “blemishes of individual character”, in Goffman's language, are *wrongly* inferred from other known facts about a person, such as their sexuality or a history of mental ill health, it makes sense to describe such inferences as a part of the stigma applied to such traits. But, because these traits are nearly always deeply discrediting, the account seems to imply that *they themselves* are stigmatizing—even where people have inferred them from accurate recollections and reasonable evaluations of past behavior [11].

The problem of over-inclusivity also afflicts Link and Phelan's model, at least insofar as individual traits of character can be described as human differences. We can say that we have selected, for example, human differences in honesty as salient, have associated dishonesty with untrustworthiness, use the label “liar” as a way to divide the undesirable “them” from “us,” and relate to known “liars” in a way that causes them to lose status. Certainly, this would be felt as very painful for those on the receiving end of it, and certainly it is an interesting social phenomenon worthy of study, but a definition that is this capacious seems to lose sight of what is characteristic of stigma as a form of social relating. Indeed, under both models, there is a risk that stigma simply collapses into *social ostracism*, with nothing usefully distinct being picked out by the term. There is, then, an independent reason for the relational egalitarian to reject the first and second of the three social scientific accounts I have considered here: that they are diagnostically imprecise.

Were the term “group” to be interpreted as referring to any aggregate of persons, the four-part model of Rüsçh, Angermeyer, and Corrigan could be rejected for exactly the same reason. This, however, would be inconsistent with the narrower sense in which the term is used in relational egalitarian scholarship. Consider, for instance, Iris Marion Young's influential work on the nature of oppression, in which she defines a social group as “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life” [12]. Even on the very widest interpretations of those concepts, it is hard to see how the dishonest or the easily angered would fit this description, meaning relational egalitarians—at least those of a Youngian stripe—would be unlikely to treat them as social group identities in other contexts. And if the charge of diagnostic imprecision relies on an *ad hoc*, uncharitable reading of its underlying components, the case for rejecting the four-part model is substantially weakened.

That Rüsçh, Angermeyer, and Corrigan can withstand this line of criticism, of course, is only a problem for the first strategy if their model would still include the puzzling cases when incorporating a Youngian conception of a social group. And, because we can sensibly redescribe them as cases of aversion to individual character traits, it is not immediately obvious that it would. Yet, to be a committed white supremacist is not just to hold hateful, racist attitudes towards others; it often involves membership in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan or the English Defence League, attached to which are a range of cultural practices and ways of living that are sources of group identity. In fact, it has been suggested that identity transformation and group affiliation with white supremacist groups precede the development of extreme racist attitudes [13]. Likewise, the kind of virulent misogyny espoused by self-described Incels (a portmanteau of “involuntary celibates”) or members of the “Red Pill” movement comes attached with a range of shared practices and a sense of affinity that would meet the criteria for group identity. And while the stricter understanding of the kind of group that can be subject to stigma might serve to rule out at least some people whose historical sexual offenses were solitary and opportunistic, the same cannot be said for those that have taken part in organized sexual abuse nor those who identify with ideological or cultural groups that view their sexually violent acts as permissible. Sexual trafficking rings would seem to meet the criteria for

a social group, as would anti-feminist organizations that downplay the seriousness or even call for the legalization of rape.⁴

The puzzling cases, in short, at the very least *can* involve social group membership. Indeed, it is that subset of cases—those that involve organized commitment to morally abhorrent causes—that place the most pressure on the idea that relational egalitarians should oppose stigma wherever it arises. There is also a case to be made that the bare attributes themselves, because of how we socially respond to them, are sufficient to indicate shared ways of life and, therefore, social group membership. But because so many of the subset of cases are clear-cut, that argument does not need to be made here to show that the strategy of exclusion by default cannot be rescued merely by invoking the Youngian conception of a social group.

2.3 | Stigma and Legitimizing Ideology

That it does not follow them in treating aversion to individual character traits as cases of stigma, however, does not fully absolve Rüschi, Angermeyer, and Corrigan from the charge of diagnostic imprecision that gave the relational egalitarian reasons to reject the first two models. Recall that the problem here is not directly about the inclusion of these cases, but about the way doing so seems to subsume stigma into the broader social phenomenon of social ostracism, such that we lose sight of what characterizes stigma as a distinct form of social relating. The four-part model does manage to carve out *something* that is distinct from social ostracism, but that is not the only nearby concept that a precise definition needs to avoid.

In one of the few definitional claims about stigma made by a relational egalitarian, Elizabeth Anderson describes stigmatized people as being “subject to publicly authoritative stereotypes that represent them as proper objects of dishonor, contempt, disgust, fear, or hatred on the basis of their group identities and hence properly subject to ridicule, shaming, shunning, segregation, discrimination, persecution, and even violence” [15]. At first glance, this looks almost identical to Rüschi, Angermeyer, and Corrigan’s model: it is exclusively a phenomenon that attaches to people as members of social groups, it begins from the internalization of *stereotypes* by people in *power*, and it manifests in *prejudice* and *discrimination*. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference: for Anderson, it is only stigma when the stereotypes in question treat their objects as *properly* subject to what follows. That is to say, if the stigmatizing individuals or groups believe they have good reasons to hold them.

As I have pointed out in previous work: not all cases of wrongful prejudice or discrimination involve this phenomenon: where the holding of stereotypes is backed by a broadly accepted set of ideas about the stigmatized group, constituting what I have termed a *legitimizing ideology*. Accent-based prejudice and discrimination are rife in my home country of the United Kingdom, for instance, but very often this is a result of unconscious bias that, when brought to light, would result in public criticism. This is not true in all cases; widely held stereotypes that associate the use of Scots-language words with low intelligence or even violence can be plausibly traced back to the longstanding cultural domination of England within the Union, which has led to an

ongoing ideology of *Anglocentrism*. Nevertheless, it is very often the case that such prejudice and discrimination cannot be publicly defended, because there are no such beliefs to draw on [16].

To be clear, lacking a legitimating ideology does not make prejudice or discrimination towards regional accents any less wrongful, but describing what is going on in these cases as stigma serves, again, to make that term diagnostically imprecise. We already have terms like bias, prejudice, and discrimination, so for a term like *stigma* to be useful to us, it needs to pick out something distinct. Anderson’s appeal to this idea of a legitimating ideology accomplishes this; it is not just that the group is subject to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, but that there is a broad adherence to a set of beliefs that ensures both a lack of internal conflict among those perpetuating those stereotypes and a lack of widespread public opposition to or disavowal of them.

Amending the four-part model with the aid of Anderson’s ‘proper objects’ condition, provides us with a diagnostically precise definition of stigma that captures best, out of all those considered here, the distinct social phenomenon under discussion. As I have put it in previous work:

Stigma ... can be said to occur when people with relative power propagate, adhere to, and reinforce a socially dominant set of ideas about a group (a legitimating ideology), from which they derive negative views (stereotypes) that are socially approved of, which manifest as negative emotional responses (prejudice) and behavioral responses (discrimination) that are considered, under the prevailing set of social ideas, justifiable [16].

Unfortunately for the relational egalitarian pursuing the strategy of exclusion by definition, however, this model—which I take to be the strongest available (at least in terms of diagnostic precision)—does not rule the puzzling cases out of consideration.

The addition of the legitimating ideology condition certainly does raise the bar for a group to be properly described as stigmatized. That white supremacy and misogyny can properly be described as legitimating ideologies within many of our societies, moreover, would seem to count against the idea that people who possess those traits meet that bar. If we can identify legitimating ideologies that seem to support their behaviors (or at least the beliefs underlying them), then it becomes harder to make the case that our social responses to them are drawn from the same pool of widely held beliefs.

But, of course, the incorporation of a Youngian conception of a social group has already (potentially) ruled out cases of mere adherence to hateful beliefs or historical engagement in solitary, opportunistic sexual violence. Where what is at issue is membership of and participation in social groups like white supremacist societies, the online incel subculture, or sexual abuse rings, the existence of supporting ideologies does not suffice to rule the puzzling cases out. Liberal multiculturalism as actually practiced might not have been successful in fully undermining white supremacist ideology, but it has, at least

in many cases, produced a widely held set of beliefs about the unacceptable nature of active commitment to explicitly racist causes. We can say similar things about extreme misogyny, and we need only look at the propagation of self-described “pedophile hunter” groups to recognize the scale of public opposition to organized sexual abuse.

More to the point, while reasonable people can disagree about how widespread the relevant ideologies are here, nothing in this model makes it *definitionally impossible* for the puzzling cases to count as stigma. In a world more just than our own, in which white supremacy had been successfully dethroned as a legitimating ideology, an even stronger set of opposing beliefs to involvement in racist political organizations might have emerged, which would in turn have led to the kind of publicly authorized prejudice and discrimination that, under this definition, characterizes stigma.

It is not enough, in other words, to point to our contemporary societies and say the puzzling cases do not count as stigma *here*, because we can always imagine hypothetical scenarios in which the relevant conditions can be met. To succeed, the relational egalitarian pursuing this first strategy of exclusion by definition must be able to rule out these cases for consideration *in any possible world*, by restricting the boundaries of the sort of thing that can in principle be stigmatized, such that the puzzling cases never fall within them. As I have demonstrated through my discussion of competing definitions here, this is highly likely to be a fruitless endeavor.

3 | Stigma as Always Objectionable

While work dedicated to defining stigma is scarce within it, relational egalitarian scholarship abounds with references to its wrongfulness. As Rekha Nath points out, it is very often invoked to explain why certain hierarchies of esteem are objectionable where others are not [2]: they produce what T.M. Scanlon calls “stigmatizing differences in status” [17]. For Martin O’Neill, such status differences are objectionable for the way they undermine “individual self-worth and fraternal social relations” [5], while for Fabian Schuppert they are simply “incompatible with social equality” [18]. More broadly, Anderson has objected to the way that stigma inflicts “expressive harms that reach to the core of people’s identities” [19] and described “subjecting others to the humiliations of a stigmatized identity” as one of the many “ill-effects” of social hierarchy [20].

These examples are representative of the way stigma is spoken about in relational egalitarian scholarship, with no distinctions made that would rule out the idea that stigma in the puzzling cases is objectionable. If then, as I have argued, it is not possible for relational egalitarians to defensibly define stigma in such a way that the puzzling cases are excluded from its scope by definition, then they are faced with a dilemma. They can either relinquish (what seems to be) a longstanding position in the literature that stigma is always objectionable, or they bite the bullet and accept that they should object to the stigmatization of (at least some) hatemongers and serious wrongdoers. Of these two options, the latter may well be the more tempting, as it would enable the relational egalitarian to keep the broad structure of

the view intact. For that reason, it is worth exploring its prospects—and that is the aim of this section.

However unintuitive it may seem at first glance, the bullet-biting strategy is not without argumentative force. For the justice-based relational egalitarian, who views relational equality as a (or *the*) central demand of justice, there is precedent for making an argument of this kind. That someone has committed a serious sexual crime or harbors dangerously hateful beliefs is rarely taken to be grounds to eject them from the scope of justice altogether. Each of the groups under discussion would remain entitled to their fair share under most distributive views of justice, even if that share may alter according to the degree of responsibility they bear for their actions. In this sense, the theory of justice that says we ought not to stigmatize in the puzzling cases may seem no less radical than the one that says we ought to ensure our distribution of goods provides them with their fair share.

For the pluralist social egalitarian, who views relational equality as a value separate from and sometimes in conflict with justice, there is an even more straightforward line of argument available.⁵ Consequences for criminal behavior or the harboring of beliefs that are corrosive to social equality are not necessarily to be ruled out, but they will be self-defeating if they take a form that undermines the kind of solidaristic and fraternal relations that are characteristic of a society that realizes the relational egalitarian ideal. If stigma is an impediment to realizing the independent good of social equality, therefore, pluralist social egalitarians have coherent grounds for opposing it in the puzzling cases.

Similar sorts of arguments can be made about domination and oppression in relation to the puzzling cases, yielding much less controversial results. While criminal punishments for serious wrongdoers are not necessarily incompatible with the ideal of relational equality, punishments that go as far as to subject those suffering them to relationships of domination do seem troubling from this perspective. Phillip Pettit, whose conception of domination undergirds (most) relational egalitarian accounts that incorporate the concept, points out that criminal justice systems, while coercive, can be non-dominating as long as they are non-arbitrary: that they represent the fair rule of law, adjudicated in a way that tracks the interests of those who are subject to its punishments [22]. Accordingly, relational egalitarians can oppose criminal justice systems that subject serious wrongdoers, including sexual offenders, to unfair treatment that does not track their interests when handing out punishment, without thereby opposing the punishment of those wrongdoers in and of itself. Indeed, insofar as relational egalitarians tend to support the political project of achieving criminal justice reform, it seems like they should oppose punishments that amount to in themselves or indirectly subject wrongdoers to relationships of domination.

Similarly, relational egalitarians are unlikely to feel discomfort in opposing the oppression of those harboring inegalitarian beliefs. Taking Young’s influential framework, it is not clear that there is anything worrying about opposing the use of any of oppression’s five “faces” when responding to white supremacists, virulent misogynists, or similar extremist groups. Expelling them from useful social participation (marginalization), structurally subordinating them so they must transfer their energies

to a relatively privileged group in order to maintain that privilege (exploitation), subjecting them to inaccurate stereotypes while preventing them from presenting their own understandings of their lives in the public sphere (cultural imperialism), subjecting them to power while stripping them of any power they do possess (powerlessness), or developing social structures in which they are constantly faced with the threat of violence or actual instances of it (violence), all seem like the sorts of things that relational egalitarians *should* oppose—if for no other reason than it is simply not obvious that these strategies will do anything to address the problem of harboring such beliefs [23].

However, neither of these two considerations—that it is compatible with political positions held by many relational egalitarians, or that it is at best unhelpful in pursuing social equality—applies to opposing stigma in the puzzling cases. Insofar as the relational egalitarian project aligns with the political aims of the feminist movement, stigmatizing those who have committed sexual offenses might be thought to be an important political tactic in overcoming oppressive, patriarchal social norms; indeed, we might think that this type of tactic characterized the #metoo movement. Some might think that, for instance, oppression by marginalization could play a similar role, but there is an important distinction between these two responses to difference. Where stigma might involve a degree of restriction on the terms in which a person can participate in social life, that restrictiveness is limited to the circumstances in which it is relevant. A person who has committed a serious sex offense against a child, for instance, may find that parents lodge formal objections to them moving into a housing unit nearby before they have ever met them, treat them with deep suspicion whenever they cross paths, and instruct their children to be especially vigilant around them regardless of any demonstrated evidence of rehabilitation. Oppression by marginalization, by contrast, involves an indiscriminating process of expulsion from useful participation in social life, going beyond that which is relevant to the fact of being a sex offender, and closing off avenues for rehabilitation and growth.⁶ Perhaps there might be an all-things-considered feminist justification for this, but such a justification would involve an admission that it goes beyond what is needed to achieve egalitarian aims.

Likewise, it might be thought that stigmatizing the holding of extreme inegalitarian beliefs is an important political tool in challenging them. There is some evidence that stigma towards minority racial group identity, for instance, plays a causal role in expanding membership of extremist organizations [24], but it is of course not troubling for the relational egalitarian to oppose stigmatization in these cases. What is at issue here is the stigmatization of *extremist group membership*. Where that kind of (specific, targeted) stigma is concerned, there is some promising evidence that it can aid in deradicalization. For instance, the same study that found group identity transformation to be a key contributor in the radicalization of white supremacists also found that the stigma levied at that identity plays a supportive role in deradicalization by making continued engagement less attractive [13].

Of course, it is true that egalitarian political movements have often questioned taboos against violence towards inegalitarian political extremists, so it might be thought that a similar defense

could be made about subjecting these groups to *oppression by violence*. Young's concept of violence as a face of oppression, however, goes far beyond the kind of defensive acts that these movements have in mind. There is a significant difference between punching a far-right agitator engaged in rioting or public demonstrations of white supremacist beliefs, for example, and developing social structures in which they are constantly threatened by violence in all aspects of their social life. As with the previous case, while there may be an all-things-considered justification of this available, such a response would go beyond what is needed to support egalitarian aims. Unlike the deployment of stigma, there are clear and uncontroversial relational egalitarian reasons to oppose oppression or domination in these cases: reasons that are only reinforced by the absence of evidence of their effectiveness.

This is then, a bullet that cannot be comfortably bitten. If stigma is always objectionable to the relational egalitarian, then it is objectionable even in those cases in which it supports egalitarian political aims. Accepting this undermines the compatibility of relational egalitarianism with the priorities and objectives of many aspects of contemporary egalitarian political movements, given that stigma can sometimes be an effective tactic in resisting injustice and bringing about social justice. Of course, these movements are not monolithic and, more to the point, it is not impossible for them to be *wrong* in their priorities, aims, and tactics. That there does seem to be a significant clash, nevertheless, ought to give relational egalitarians pause for thought. Putting contemporary political philosophy back in touch with egalitarian activism was one of the founding motivations of the relational turn, so decisive breaks with these political movements are costly [25]. Appealing to such costs is not sufficient to rule the bullet biting strategy out, but it does make it a lot less attractive—especially given, as I shall demonstrate, a better choice is available.

4 | Warranted and Unwarranted Stigma

In this paper so far, I have posited a clash between common intuitions and an (often only implied) normative commitment of relational egalitarians. In my exploration of the strategy of exclusion by definition, I have demonstrated that it is not possible to preserve both; the relational egalitarian must either reject the idea that stigma ought always to be opposed or adopt a position, counterintuitive to many, that we should object to the stigmatizing of committed white supremacists, virulent misogynists, and serious sex offenders. As I argued in the previous section, the costs of maintaining an opposition to stigma, no matter the target, are compounded by the fact that stigmatizing behaviors can often play an important role in resisting injustice and even, potentially, aiding in the deradicalization of antiegalitarian extremists. These factors are not decisive on the problem posed by the puzzling cases—commonsense morality is not always right—but there is an important sense in which relational egalitarians would be better off if they were able to capture, in a principled manner, the positive political case for deploying stigma. This is not just because failing to do so would place the theory out of step with those egalitarian political movements that favor stigma as a *pragmatic* tactic, but also because it would risk committing its

adherents to conclusions that many of us find unpalatable *for egalitarian reasons*.

The aim in this section, then, is to make a relational egalitarian case against unqualified opposition to stigma. Stigma, I suggest, ought to be viewed as a way of relating that is *neutral* with respect to social equality. Where it is objectionable, it is so because it is *unwarranted*. Where it is *warranted*, on the other hand, it is not only unobjectionable but may often be *required*. Stigma, in this respect, ought to be understood in a similar way to power asymmetry: a feature of social relations that, while often intolerable, is not *inherently* so.

4.1 | What Stigma is for

Through the definitions that I explored in Section 1, including the modified version of Rüschi, Angermeyer, and Corrigan's model I endorsed as the strongest available, there is a picture of what stigma is and what it is for that emerges: one that is compatible with a context-dependent reading of its egalitarian valence. Stigma is, at its core, a social tool. It is used by members of a society to weed out cultural forms, practices, and ways of life that its participants consider undesirable: both directly, through the prejudicial and discriminatory behaviors its deployment involves, and indirectly, through the stoking of a sense of shame among those who possess the attributes in question. In its aggressive posture, it involves both conscious and unconscious social coordination to exploit one of the most powerful urges humans possess: a desire to belong. But it can also be used as a protective social tool: one that highlights certain attributes as threatening and socially signals to the vulnerable that members of groups who are characterized by them are to be avoided.

What matters for determining whether stigma ought to be opposed, I want to suggest, is whether or not the social group in question *genuinely* is characterized by attributes that *genuinely* are undesirable or threatening, such that the kind of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors it involves *genuinely* are apposite—in the terms I used in the model I endorsed, whether or not the legitimating ideology is *right*. For the egalitarian, there is a high bar that must be met. It is cogent to describe HIV as undesirable and threatening to public health, but there is no convincing egalitarian justification for deploying the social tool of stigma against those with an HIV-positive status merely because they possess it. This is a condition that, in the present day, is well controlled by pharmaceuticals and, in any case, could only ever be passed on under specific circumstances. While we might have good reasons to disapprove of individuals who behave irresponsibly, such as by refusing medication while continuing to engage in behaviors likely to transmit the condition without disclosing their status, the mere presence of those who are HIV-positive in everyday social life is neither undesirable nor threatening enough to bypass egalitarian concerns about the intentional stoking of shame and the deployment of prejudice and discrimination. In fact, it is hard to see how it is undesirable or threatening *at all* to anyone other than the (inherently inegalitarian) eugenicist or sexual puritan.

That the bar that must be met is high, however, does not mean it can never be met at all. Relational egalitarianism should not be

mistaken for crude moral or cultural relativism. It is not a pacifistic, endlessly capacious theory that shies away from admonishing behaviors or belief systems. It is, rather, a substantively egalitarian theory of desirable social relations. The relational egalitarian *does* disapprove of the hierarchist, the dominator, and the oppressor; they do consider these attributes to be undesirable. It only stands to reason, then, that attributes like these, which are wholly incompatible with the aim of achieving a society in which persons relate to one another as equals, would genuinely be undesirable and, at least in certain cases, threatening. For a relational egalitarian, this is the bar that must be met for stigma towards a social group to be warranted: it must genuinely be the case that commitment to or membership of the group in question is characterized by possession, affirmation, and/or promotion of attributes that are genuinely and fundamentally incompatible with the aim of securing a society of equals. The incompatibility must be *genuine*, in the sense that there is no obvious way for groups possessing that attribute to exist within a society without subjecting or threatening to subject at least some of its members to unjust inegalitarian relations. And the incompatibility must be *fundamental*, in the sense that the attribute that characterizes that group is at odds with the most basic commitment of any reasonable theory of the just society: a commitment to the moral equality of persons.⁷

In each of the puzzling cases, the threshold for an egalitarian justification of stigma is quite clearly breached. Sex offenders have exerted power through violence to achieve their ends, and a number of them will be unrepentant and involved in organized operations to carry out such attacks. Such acts may (and usually do) reinforce oppressive relations between social groups, such as between men and women or adults and children, where the latter group is regularly subject to such violence from the former, to the extent that its members must live in fear of it [27]. Consider my home country of the United Kingdom, in which prosecution and conviction rates for such offenses are so low that they have been described as being “effectively decriminalized” [28]. In such circumstances, sexual offenses are also an exertion of dominating power, in the sense that they are unconstrained and exerted with impunity. Relational egalitarians, then, have good reasons to consider being a sex offender an undesirable or threatening attribute, which means they have good reasons to deploy prejudice and discrimination against sex offenders—or specific organized groups of sex offenders, if we are unwilling to grant that the category writ large instantiates a social group—with the aim of weeding out these violent behaviors from society. And similar things can be said against white supremacy and virulent misogyny: ideologies whose inherently inegalitarian natures speak for themselves.

4.2 | Justifying Stigma, as an Egalitarian

The emotive case here is not a difficult one to make, but some may still be skeptical of the political case for deflating the objectionability of stigma. The relational egalitarian, I take it, wants to be able to say that stigma is objectionable in standard cases, and depriving them of the claim that stigma is inherently objectionable would seem to make that task more difficult to accomplish. They could lean on reasonably foreseeable *consequences* of stigma, but appealing to these does not helpfully distinguish

between standard and puzzling cases: especially if the consequences in question are simply making objectionable relational inequalities like domination and oppression more likely, given I have already pointed out that these should, at least in principle, be opposed no matter who their targets are. And, in any case, making the objectionable nature of stigma contingent on consequences that, while likely to arise, are not *guaranteed* to would be a suboptimal outcome for a theory intended to rule out stigma in *all* standard cases. What is needed for the deflationary strategy to succeed with relational egalitarian intuitions and commitments intact is a way of objecting to stigma *itself* in standard cases, while leaving it unobjectionable in the puzzling cases.

One course of action would be to adopt a responsibility-sensitive approach: excepting cases of inegalitarian relations from the general opposition to them where they can be meaningfully attributed to exercises of their victim's responsibility [29]. Because being a sex offender, a committed white supremacist, or a virulent misogynist is nearly always a result of a person's responsibility (often in combination with other factors), this may seem promising. Doubts very quickly set in, however, upon consideration of the fact that this can also be true of many paradigm cases of (what I want to call) unwarranted stigma. Though HIV is not always passed on through unprotected sexual intercourse, it often is, and the implication that whether or not it is okay to stigmatize someone who is HIV positive depends on how they acquired the condition ought to be deeply uncomfortable for relational egalitarians. Likewise, a recipient of social welfare may require this support in part through their own negligence: consider a person who requires disability support as a result of a car accident for which they themselves were responsible. If the relational egalitarian wishes to retain their opposition to stigma in such cases, this sort of responsibility-sensitive approach is unavailable to them.

A different sort of responsibility-sensitive approach is offered by Emily McTernan, focusing not on the metaphysical questions surrounding the determination of responsibility, but on the value of our responsibility practices. On this view, the question we must ask when considering the role of responsibility is not whether a person is substantively responsible for their predicament, but whether the practice of holding them responsible promotes the right social relations or delivers other instrumental benefits [30]. Again, this initially looks promising: the crux of the above argument is that relational egalitarians are right to demur from opposing stigma in the puzzling cases because the attributes targeted are incompatible with egalitarian social relations. Unlike the view from metaphysical responsibility, moreover, this view does not imply that stigma is unobjectionable when targeted at people who have contracted HIV through consensual unprotected sexual intercourse or become disabled through their own negligence. The McTernan view is, in this sense, an attractive view of the relationship between relational egalitarianism and responsibility.

Nevertheless, the central question of why stigma is warranted in the puzzling cases where domination and oppression are not remains, and the McTernan view does not resolve it on its own. If the relational egalitarian is to retain their opposition to domination and oppression in *all* cases, then they must conclude that holding sex offenders, committed white supremacists, and

virulent misogynists responsible for domination and oppression does not encourage the right kind of relations or secure valuable instrumental benefits. There is a very simple justification for that: domination and oppression are archetypal inegalitarian relations to which relational egalitarians ought to be opposed. But relying on this justification brings the argument back around full circle: on what grounds ought we to treat stigma differently?

The solution to the conundrum does not lie in the territory of responsibility-sensitivity, but in the concept of *intolerability*. As I stated at the outset of this article, few if any relational egalitarians seek the elimination of all forms of social hierarchy: many make allowances for hierarchies of esteem, hierarchies of knowledge, and hierarchies of authority that are oriented towards beneficial ends (such as those that exist between teachers and students or doctors and patients). In holding that stigma is not always objectionable for a relational egalitarian, one need not also hold that stigma involves no hierarchical relationships; to take such a line would be to try to defend an indefensible position, given the essentially hierarchical nature of ranking attributes as desirable and undesirable. What makes unwarranted stigma objectionable is the fact that it is *intolerable*. Warranted stigma, on the other hand, is always *tolerable*, given the depth of the incompatibility of the attributes that characterize the targeted social group with a society of equals.

Conditions for the tolerability of social hierarchy will vary from scholar to scholar, but a position supportable by many can be grounded in Stephen Darwall's concept of *recognition respect*. This is the sort of respect for a person that involves giving appropriate weight to a feature or attribute of theirs when determining how to act [31]. There are various ways of cashing this out in a way that undergirds claims of all to treatment as social equals, including through recognizing the fact that persons are moral equals, recognizing that they are equal members in a scheme of social co-operation, or recognizing that all are equally important in securing egalitarian relations like solidarity and fraternity. However it is arrived at, the idea that relational equality is an appropriate upshot of recognition respect provides the relational egalitarian with tools for determining which hierarchies are tolerable and which are not: domination and oppression are always intolerable because they violate the demands of recognition respect, but tolerable social hierarchies do not violate those demands.

So, on what grounds might it be argued that stigma does not violate the demands of recognition respect in the puzzling cases? Two points can be made here. The first is to point out that recognition respect is a response to *all* of a person's attributes, not just their fact of being a person worthy of relational equality. The stigmatized attributes in question, being wholly incompatible with a society of equals, are appropriately weighted heavily and negatively, whereas in other cases, such as the stigma faced by HIV recipients, a neutral and lighter weight is appropriate. The second, stronger point to make is that *failing* to stigmatize in the puzzling cases can be understood as a violation of recognition respect towards *others*: namely, survivors of sexual assaults, racial minorities, and women. This is so, because failing to act in such a way as to secure equal relations for those groups is to fail to take their demands seriously. The fact that stigmatized persons in the puzzling cases are persons worthy

of relational equality is an important counterweight: alongside their lack of usefulness in securing a society of equals, it is what rules out oppression and domination as responses. But because the traits it targets are so weighty, and because it is different in degree and character, we would have good reasons for thinking that stigma represents a tolerable, *warranted* social hierarchy in these cases.

It should be noted, nevertheless, that the tolerability of a certain instance of stigma, and therefore the extent to which it is warranted, cannot always be decided by the identity of the group in question alone. For the legitimating ideology to be *right*, it cannot merely be right in identifying the group in question as one who is properly subject to *any* kind of prejudicial attitudes or discriminatory behaviors: it must also be right in identifying them as properly subject to the *specific* attitudes and behaviors it is legitimizing. There may very well be groups, therefore, who can tolerably be subjected to stigma *of some kind*, but who actually experience a manner of stigmatizing that is intolerable, and therefore unwarranted.

This distinction is most clearly demonstrated by looking at *subgroups*. The group “sex offenders,” like most if not all social groups is broad and heterogeneous. It includes persistent, unrepentant, vicious offenders who have committed particularly cruel and disturbing crimes against children. But it also includes repentant people who have committed objectionable, but less monstrous crimes against adults, and who are committed to rehabilitation. It would be surprising if all of the prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors tolerably targeted towards the first subgroup—including, for example, hurling verbal abuse towards them when they are seen in public—would be tolerably targeted towards the latter.⁸ And if the legitimating ideology fails to make that distinction, there are at least two good, egalitarian reasons for thinking relational egalitarians should consider (at least some of) the stigma it supports unwarranted.

First, it would seem to disincentivize rehabilitation and commitment to change, such that it may keep us further away from the society of equals, rather than bringing us closer. For another, if earnestly repentant sex offenders are publicly presented as identical to the most serious, repellent, unrepentant bearers of their group markers, and if they are prevented from *challenging* those representations, then we would have good grounds for thinking that the legitimating ideology is driving the kinds of inegalitarian relations that are *always* objectionable: namely oppression by marginalization and, perhaps, cultural imperialism (under the Youngian definitions discussed in Section 2).

4.3 | Reversing the Arrow of Justification

A skeptic might accept most of what I have said so far, yet still resist the conclusion that relational egalitarians should treat stigma as *neutral* with respect to social equality. They might accept, that is, that stigmatizing in the puzzling cases can be useful for achieving egalitarian ends, that some stigmatized groups really are characterized by objectionable attributes, and that there are often strong reasons to permit stigma. They might, nevertheless, regret that conclusion, and wish to register that regret in their formulation of it.

Instead of letting stigmatizers morally off the hook, a regretful relational egalitarian might instead qualify their conclusion as an *all-things-considered* justification—of the kind I suggested, in Section 2, that might be available in (dire) circumstances in which we might think it permissible to deploy domination and oppression. As I have said, stigma does involve the intentional stoking of shame, alongside the propagation of prejudice and discrimination, so it might reasonably be thought to be far more natural to conclude that, yes, stigma *is* anti-egalitarian—*pro tanto* objectionable—but that circumstances commonly arise in which the pursuit of relational egalitarian ends justifies deploying it regardless.⁹

At first glance, the all-things-considered route might seem more attractive than the more radical case I have made. If it genuinely does preserve the intuition that relational egalitarians should not oppose stigma in the troubling cases, while incorporating less justificatory baggage because it leaves in place the idea that it is an inegalitarian way of relating, then it would be reasonable to ask why we need to go so far as to deflate the objectionability of stigma. There are at least two reasons, however, for doubting that it can genuinely accomplish this.

For one thing, an all-things-considered justification for stigma that can capture common intuitions about the puzzling cases, if understood as an all-things-considered justification for *violating the demands of relational equality*, is much harder to make than an equivalent case for domination or oppression. Common intuitions hold that it is not wrong to be aversive towards serious wrongdoers and hatemongers, even to the point of prejudice and discrimination, but they do not typically extend as far as permitting violent repression or the aggressive exertion of arbitrary power. Stigma, as I have conceived of it here, is a specific and limited way of relating to others, and it does not stretch as far as to oppress or dominate on its own. A relational egalitarian concerned with honoring common intuitions will very rarely need to provide an all-things-considered justification for these latter forms of relation, and the extremity of such scenarios will make doing so relatively simple: think here of the early stages after the overthrow of a violently inegalitarian regime, during which oppression and domination of those activists committed to restoring the former rulers might be justified to stabilize the more egalitarian society and prevent the intolerable hierarchies from returning. The puzzling cases are, by contrast, *ordinary*. An all-things-considered justification that tries to track our common intuitions needs to be able to demonstrate that, even though stigmatizing does violate the demands of relational equality inherently, either the consequences of doing so will bring about a society that is more equal overall,¹⁰ or we *always* have stronger reasons to stigmatize than to refrain. And it is just not clear that a relational egalitarian can offer either.

For the consequentialist route, the key problem is that it is not at all obvious that contributing to the pool of intolerable inegalitarian relations will always lead to the subtraction of more than were added.¹¹ Even under disturbing present-day social currents, we cannot assume that we are holding back more stigma, domination, or oppression than we are causing by stigmatizing white supremacists, virulent misogynists, and sex offenders. Some skeptics may be happy to make the all-things-considered justification contingent on establishing those facts, but this would

represent a deviation from the common intuitions that make the puzzling cases puzzling; the point is not that we tend to think we are permitted to stigmatize in cases where we are preventing more wrongdoing than we are causing, but that we are right to stigmatize in certain cases *full stop*. Suppose, as some do claim, that the stigmatizing of self-described incels, while inspiring some to deradicalize, is counter-productive more often than it is beneficial for the goal of eradicating society of misogyny. The all-things-considered approach seems to suggest it would then be wrongful to stigmatize (at least that kind of) virulent misogyny. Insofar as it does not imply this counterintuitive result, the deflationary strategy is more attractive.

The reasons-based approach might avoid these problems, but at significant cost to both the theory of relational egalitarianism and those engaged in stigmatizing behaviors. It is perhaps commonsensical that in versions of the puzzling cases that involve *actual subjection* of others to inegalitarian relations, our reasons to resist or to aid in resisting that subjection would outweigh our reasons not to stigmatize the perpetrators. But where what is at stake is commitments to belief systems that have not yet manifested in threats, or historical behavior that has not yet been repeated, then the case is harder to make. The regretful relational egalitarian would want to say more, I presume, than that stigma is always objectionable in a *trivial* sense, so a reasons-based all-things-considered justification here needs to explain why it is permissible to behave in a substantively objectionable way towards people who either have not yet or are no longer engaging in fundamentally inegalitarian behaviors. And in any case, even if this explanation could in principle be provided, requiring those engaged in stigmatizing behaviors towards serious wrongdoers or hatemongers to do this sort of calculation before they can feel confident that they are justified represents something of a significant burden: one that we would have good reasons to avoid placing them under, especially if a satisfactory alternative is available.

Moreover, the deflationary approach supplies us with the tools not just to say that stigma is permissible but that it is *required* by the demands of relational equality, and it is just not clear that either kind of all-things-considered approach can be unwavering about this. This is an important distinction, because our common intuitions about the puzzling cases very often do not, it seems to me, present stigma as a regrettable but permissible response to wrongdoing and hatemongering, but a response that is *obligatory*. By contrast, common intuitions about standard cases are not troubled by the idea that what is wrongful about the stigma is that it is *unwarranted*—that the people involved are not the sorts of people who should be stigmatized. In fact, if we think about much of our natural language reasoning about these cases, including phrases like “they don’t deserve that” or “they’re not harming anybody,” it seems to reflect the neutral rather than the always-objectionable view of stigma.

Even though it might at first seem more attractive, then, reversing the arrow of justification leads to a worse result in terms of balancing common intuitions and the commitments of relational egalitarians. That is to say, less is troubled and more tools are provided by presenting stigma as something that is neutral but objectionable when unwarranted (and required when warranted), on the one hand, than by presenting it as something

that is always objectionable but sometimes justified, all things considered.

5 | Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the treatment of stigma within relational egalitarianism with regard to three puzzling cases: sex offenders, white supremacists, and virulent misogynists. I rejected the prospects of dealing with these cases by ruling them out of being labeled stigma by definition, concluding that it is difficult to do so even on the most diagnostically precise account. I cautioned against the idea that relational egalitarians should always object to stigma, pointing out that this would place them out of step with some contemporary egalitarian movements, while requiring them to oppose stigma *even where it can successfully be used towards egalitarian ends*. Instead, I defended the view that stigma is neutral with respect to relational equality: objectionable when it is unwarranted, and unobjectionable when it is warranted. After exploring options for grounding this claim, I settled on a distinction between tolerable and intolerable social hierarchies that is often made in the relevant literature, arguing that stigma in the puzzling cases is tolerable, and may even be required, because the relevant attributes are incompatible with a society of equals, such that their stigmatization is a fitting response to appropriately weighting them in deliberations and demonstrating recognition respect for the claims of others to relational equality.

The cases discussed here are extreme; few would bristle at the idea that stigma towards any of these groups could be warranted. There will of course, however, be a range of much trickier cases that fall somewhere in the middle between intuitively warranted and intuitively unwarranted, including regressively orthodox but peaceful religious conservatives and those who are cruel to animals. It is likely that relational egalitarians who are persuaded by the idea of warranted stigma will nevertheless disagree about how to treat such cases. While there is insufficient space to work through such cases here, however, what I have provided in this paper is the tools that relational egalitarians need to be able to have such arguments without undermining their commitments. In short, what I have shown here is that relational egalitarians *can* accommodate a concept of warranted stigma; it is for future work to determine exactly how wide its bounds are.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ Whether some hierarchies of this kind—hierarchies of esteem—are objectionable is a matter of internal debate [1].

² Chiefly, Elizabeth Anderson [6], but also Iris Marion Young [7].

³ In my home country of the United Kingdom, these terms include “nonce” and “beast” (chiefly in Scotland).

⁴ Consider here the now-defunct anti-feminist group Return of Kings, whose creator—satirically, he claims—wrote a blog post advocating for the legalization of rape on private property [14].

⁵ In distinguishing between these two forms of relational egalitarianism, I am making use of Christian Schemmel’s terms [21].

⁶ I will say more about this in Section 3.

⁷ In Ronald Dworkin’s well-known terms, the idea that persons are morally equal is “a kind of plateau in political argument” [26].

⁸ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this.

⁹ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

¹⁰ My thanks to Eilidh Beaton for pushing me on this distinction.

¹¹ In fact, some argue that stigma needs to have a particularly high degree of severity to avoid being counterproductive in challenging radicalization, which places more pressure on the idea of an all-things-considered justification that incorporates the idea that stigma is always wrongful [32].

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