Liminal Stigma and Disaligning Activity: Online Comments about Trump's Family Separation Policy

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In 2018, the Trump administration initiated a "zero-tolerance" border policy wherein they criminally prosecuted all individuals who were apprehended crossing the border without proper authorization. The policy change resulted in numerous migrant children being separated from their parents. Through a qualitative content analysis of 1500 YouTube *comments made in response to* CNN *and* ProPublica *news coverage, we examine each side's aligning activity. Separation challengers claimed border crossers were innocent while condemning their opponents as racist, cruel, and otherwise shameful. Separation advocates bolstered their own claims of innocence by denying that the detainees are victims and condemning separation challengers as hypocrites, dishonest, complicit in illegal immigration, and generally loathsome. These findings show that, enabled by social media, aligning activity in stigma contests can produce a liminal stigma, where identities suffer the ideational aspects of stigma but not necessarily the loss of social status.*
Keywords: aligning activity, Donald Trump, family separation, immigration, stigma

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship has advanced beyond Goffman's (1963) apolitical approach to ask how actors construct certain attributes as stigmatizing. This turn has shown that stigma can be a tool of oppression (Hannem 2012; Tyler and Slater 2018). The public debate that occurred in the summer of 2018 over the morality of Donald Trump's

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family separation policy presents an ideal case for this critical approach to stigma. One would likely find evidence that stigma was used to advance elite interests by demonizing and marginalizing unauthorized immigrants. Such a focus on how stigma allows for the family separation policy and subsequent marginalization would risk eliding certain elements of how stigma operates in this case, however. Namely, cultural conflicts over morality can expose all participants to some, even if not all, elements of stigma. Both separation advocates who support the policy and separation challengers who oppose it face the possibility of being discredited.[1] While their experience of stigma is unlikely to be as severe as those who were targeted by the policy, the stigmatization of Trump supporters is not without consequence, either. Much research shows that a sense of marginalization motivated conservatives to support Trump and his policies (e.g., Hochschild 2016).

We approach this topic with two principle research questions: What can be made of the type of stigma that occurs during a conflict such as the one of over Trump's family separation policy? This conflict involves actors who face both discrediting of but also support for their identities. The existing literature does not have a concept for such situations. At the outset, we offer the term liminal stigma to capture the type of stigmatization that occurs in stigma contests (Schur 1980), where even the relatively advantaged face discrediting stereotypes. Our second question is how is this liminal stigma produced? Through a qualitative content analysis of 1500 comments made in response to six news videos on the *YouTube* pages of *CNN* and *ProPublica*, we find that the "cumulative power" (Shulman 2000) of commenters' aligning activity (Stokes and Hewitt 1976) produces a liminal stigma. This analysis demonstrates the processes of disalignment that arise with commenters' accounts of the family separation policy. The defense of one's position on family separation largely depends on discrediting others. If the policy is not racist, if the migrants are criminals. If immigrants are not criminals, then the policy is a human rights abuse. This finding further extends the literature on aligning activity by showing how disalignment (Dellwing 2012, 2015) can occur through accounts (Silva 2007; Suarez and Bolton 2018; Sykes and Matza 1957) of contested institutional practices.

In what follows, we first review the recent efforts to uncover the processes that lead to specific attributes being stigmatized and argue that this literature needs to account for situations of liminal stigma. We claim that liminal stigma can likely be found in stigma contests such as the one that arose over Trump's family separation policy. Moreover, an ideal way to examine the construction of liminal stigma is to turn to the literature on aligning activity. Following a description of our data and methods of analysis, we outline the types of aligning actions that *YouTube* commenters made to defend themselves and marginalize their adversaries. Finally, we consider the significance of our findings for the literature on stigma and aligning activity.

STIGMA AND POWER

Goffman (1963) defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p. 3) and "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance"

(p. i). Decades of scholarship has uncovered numerous aspects of this complex set of social processes such that the concept requires some disambiguation. Pescosolido and Martin (2015:91) argue that stigma involves four components: "(1) distinguishing and labeling differences, (2) associating human differences with negative attributions or stereotypes, (3) separating 'us' from 'them,' and (4) experiencing status loss and discrimination." Parts 1, 2, and 3 speak to ideational elements of stigma, while 4 incorporates material consequences that result from ideas about what is stigmatizing. Most work on stigma addresses cases where oppressed populations, such as sex workers (Bruckert 2012), ex-prisoners (Keene et al. 2018) and their families (Hannem 2012), the disabled (Latimer 2018), and racial minorities (Loyd and Bonds 2018) deal with both ideational and material dimensions of stigma.

Recently scholars have examined the relationship between stigma and the production of social inequality. Hannem (2012) and colleagues (see Hannem and Brukert 2012) called on scholars to supplement Goffman's micro-focused approach, which emphasizes symbolic stigma, with a Foucauldian orientation that allows us to study the structural stigma that comes from the exercise of power at the macro level. Hannem (2012) distinguishes between symbolic stigma "realized in individual interactions" (p. 10) and structural stigma that "arises out of an awareness of the problematic attributes of a particular group of people and is based on an intent to manage a population that is perceived, on the basis of the stigmatic attribute, to be 'risky' or morally bereft" (p. 24). Likewise, Tyler (2018:748) and colleagues (see Tyler and Slater 2018) draw on "Black Sociology" to reconceptualize "stigma as a government technology of 'racialized capitalism.'" This critical turn offers the promise of pushing scholars to consider how certain attributes come to be defined as deviant in the first place. Both Hannem and Tyler's lines of research implicate stigma as serving the interests of the powerful. For instance, multiple studies have shown how stigma can legitimize neoliberalist policies (Paton 2018; Scrambler 2018; Shildrick 2018; Slater 2018). Although they raise important questions, this critical turn also potentially elides the variability and fluidity of stigma.

By focusing on how the powerful wield stigma and how the powerless resist it, we run the risk of reifying stigma by reducing it to interests and ignoring the interactional process through which people construct stigma. Goffman (1963:125–127) theorizes that stigma exists on a continuum as most individuals possess at least some stigmatizing attributes. Indeed, empirical research shows how well-established stigmas such as anti-Muslim prejudice can vary by context and intensity (Casey 2018; Kusow 2004; Marvasti 2005). For instance, Kusow (2004) demonstrates how Somali immigrants in Toronto were protected from anti-immigrant stigma because they had their own notions of honor, had limited interactions with non-Somalis, rejected Canadian identity and racial discrimination, and imposed their own stigmas on non-Somalis. Likewise, ostensibly mainstream identities such as real estate developers (Lofland 2004) and nonliteralist Christians (Silva 2018) can suffer at least partial discrediting. While Goffman and others address situations where there is widespread agreement that a given attribute is contaminating, the process of defining what counts as a stigma

is politicized, often resulting in stigma contests (Schur 1980). Stigma contests, Schur argues, are a function of cultural diversity and are not reducible to economic or state interests. They involve struggles over the relative status of collective identities. Schur notes that changing statuses are easily identifiable: Smoking and racism have become deviant, while marijuana, premarital sex, and divorce have become less deviant. Within a stigma contest, the stigmatized often defend themselves by undermining those who stigmatize them. Although participants in a stigma contest may or may not come to experience material consequences, they are likely to have their identities symbolically attacked and defended.

What can be made of the situation of those who meet the ideational but not necessarily material components of stigma? Of those who are both attacked and defended by numerous others? We argue that the concept of liminal stigma can help us to account for such situations. We define liminal stigma as the *situation where an identity is subject to a potentially transitory discrediting as this identity is both ideationally devalued and defended by multiple others*. The public disparagement of an identity introduces or reinforces negative evaluations for those who possess it. It provides the message that one is devalued by numerous others, regardless of one's subjective response or even awareness of it. It may or may not rise to the level of decreased life chances or social exclusion, but it can provide the moral justification for such discrimination. We use the term liminal stigma, then, to conceptualize the process wherein an identity is in a state of becoming stigmatized and destigmatized. While ideational stigma refers to the first three components of Pescosolido and Martin's (2015) definition (labeling, stereotyping, othering), liminal stigma refers to competing versions of what constitutes ideational stigma. Liminality exists along a continuum. At one pole would be a relatively uncontested and thus highly stable stigma where there is no substantial disagreement over the ideational components of stigma (e.g., perhaps child murderers). At the other pole would be complete disagreement or anomie regarding the ideational components of stigma. To be clear: while stigmatized people often occupy a liminal status, this study examines how the concept of their identities itself can have a liminal status. Liminal stigma is likely to be found in stigma contests.[2] While the existence of liminal stigma can be inferred from the existing literature, this study seeks to examine the processes that create it. To do so, we look to a case where liminal stigma is likely to be found.

FAMILY SEPARATION AS A STIGMA CONTEST

In a recent review article, Silva (2019a) argues that Trump's political career is bound up with multiple stigma contests where people construct the "moral worth" of racial, gender, religious, and class identities. Accordingly, we hold that conflict over Trump's family separation policy is not only about how to manage migration but also about the moral worth of the selves of the separation advocates who participate in the policy (e.g., customs and border patrol agents) or publicly defend it, and the selves of the separation challengers who are caught up in it (i.e., the migrants who are directly

threatened by the policy) as well as those who publicly criticize it (e.g., those who make online comments about the issue).

Before arguing that separation challengers and separation advocates face threats to their selves, it will be useful to contextualize the policy at the heart of this stigma contest. While activists and scholars have long issued trenchant criticisms of the practice of immigrant detention (Flynn and Flynn 2017), until the summer of 2018, the practice lacked salience in the American public sphere. In contrast to President Obama, Trump's Justice Department reversed the previous administration's policy targeting only immigrants charged with felonies for detention and deportation, issued new executive orders barring immigrants from a number of majority-Muslim countries, and enacted a "zero-tolerance" policy against putative illegal border crossings. With the Justice Department prosecuting every unauthorized person who crossed the US–Mexico border in May 2018 as part of the new crackdown, the number of children separated from their parents increased dramatically — as did media attention on the topic. Responding to overwhelming criticism across the party divide, religious groups, international organizations, and rights activists, President Trump issued an executive order ending the policy on June 20. Up to that point, the agency placed adults in detention while transferring children to the Department of Health and Human Services, the agency responsible for finding shelter or extended family. A few days later, a federal judge ordered the administration to reunite separated families. According to an Inspector General's report in January 2019, three-quarters of the more than 2700 children had been reunited with their parents, but thousands more may have been separated since 2017 before a mid-2018 court order ending the policy (Chen 2019).

The resultant public conflict over the morality of Trump's family separation policy should provide an opportune source of data for examining liminal stigma. Certainly, the detained migrants meet both the ideational and material elements of stigma. Numerous Americans maintain an anti-immigrant ideology (e.g., Chavez 2013; Santa Ana 2002), which has oppressive consequences (e.g., Romero 2006). Symbolic racism is associated with opposition to legal immigration as well as policies that would benefit legal and undocumented immigrants (Berg 2013). While the United States has a tradition of nativism that marginalizes and stigmatizes immigrants (Zinn 1980), the threat of "courtesy stigma" (Goffman 1963) extends toward immigrants' social circles and supporters (Bloch 2016; Schueths 2014). Schueths (2014) found that white women partnered with Latinos also felt the rebound effects of racist nativism (Schueths 2014). Bloch (2016) demonstrates how participants at a nativist website responded to accusations of racism by making their own accusations of racism against pro-immigrant supporters.

Many of Trump's supporters (and presumed supporters of his family separation policy) also feel stigmatized or discredited. Regardless of the degree to which Trump's supporters are discriminated against, the 2016 American Presidential election was plausibly influenced by their perceived stigmatization (Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2018; Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017; Schrock et al. 2017; Simmons

2018). Hochschild (2016:221) has documented the loss of honor experienced by many of Trump's core supporters and the sense of collective effervescence his rallies provided. Similarly, Lamont et al. (2017; see also Lamont 2018) argue that his speeches destigmatized the white working class by attributing their economic struggles to globalization. Polletta and Callahan (2017:393) argue that Trump's supporters "said that liberals treated them as backward, racist rednecks, but they seemed to know very few liberals. And one would have had to spend a lot of time reading liberal media to find references to 'rednecks' or 'white trash.'" It was likely that this message come from conservative media figures such as Bill O'Reilly and was then built upon by Trump. Schrock and colleagues (2018) explain how the candidate's speeches converted shame into anger toward elites and safety at the prospects of a Trump presidency. Moreover, Trump's opponents vilify his supporters as well as the man himself (Silva 2019b). Simmons (2018) identifies the role of "systematic humiliation" in mobilizing white working-class voters to support Trump. He notes, for example, the significance of Hillary Clinton's remarks that stigmatized Trump's supporters as racist "deplorables" (see also Lamont et al. 2017:164). There is evidence, then, that Trump's supporters believe themselves to be stigmatized.

As our analysis will demonstrate, the stigma contest over family separation was a flashpoint in a long-standing struggle between immigrants and their allies and Trump supporters. It is a situation where liminal stigma is produced as both sides defend themselves by undermining their adversaries. Social media further amplifies the potential for liminal stigma by providing a decentralized and deregulated forum. Having identified a situation where liminal stigma is likely to be found, we now turn to a theoretical literature that will provide the sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1969) for examining how it is produced.

DISALIGNMENT AND STIGMA CONTESTS

Stokes and Hewitt (1976) theorize that individuals maintain social order through aligning activity, which allows them to participate in joint action, despite problems that arise. The umbrella concept of aligning activity pulls together some of the most highly cited interactionist works — such as those on motives (Mills 1940), neutralizations (Sykes and Matza 1957), and accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) — to identify the logics that actors use to defend their identities against discrediting (and even stigmatization) when they are caught in problematic situations. While these studies rarely invoke the concept of stigma, many of the people examined in this work will be stigmatized if their efforts fail.

Accordingly, this tradition has produced several concepts useful for examining how people account for their position on the family separation policy. The accused sometimes make an excuse, which "involves partial or total rejection of personal responsibility," or they might account for themselves with a justification that "involves partial or total rejection of negative evaluation" (Hunter 1984:157). Justifications can take several forms. For instance, with a denial of injury, one accepts

responsibility but claims to have not caused any damage (Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957). An assertion of benefit justifies conduct by claiming it was good for society (Silva 2007). Appeals to loyalties are given by those who claim their actions are justified because "it served the interests of another to whom [they owe] an unbreakable allegiance or affection" (Scott and Lyman 1968:51). Denials of victims are deployed by those who claim that one's "victim deserved the injury" (Scott and Lyman 1968:51). Justification by comparison is used to defend oneself by pointing to others who have done worse things (Cromwell and Thurman 2003; Suarez and Bolton 2018). Finally, with a "condemnation of the condemners," one undermines those who have accused one of wrongdoing (Sykes and Matza 1957).

Much work in the aligning activity tradition has focused on how individuals defend themselves against sanctions by explaining their own potentially discrediting conduct, such as shoplifting (Cromwell and Thurman 2003) or failing to recycle (Markle 2014). While there is an array of concepts elucidating how people negotiate potentially stigmatizing definitions of the situation, there is little consideration of what results from stigma contests where people use countervailing strategies. The concept of liminal stigma can contribute to the literature on aligning activity by directing us to the interplay between competing definitions. Both separation advocates and challengers have many allies, and thus, their accounts have a "cumulative power" (Shulman 2000) that is unavailable to those who defend their own conduct. Social media amplify this cumulative power. Forums such as the *YouTube* comment sections, *Twitter*, *Reddit*, and *Weibo* provide concrete evidence that others share their opinions. Correspondingly, these platforms also allow one to encounter adversaries who would otherwise remain hidden. While it is not a given that online discourse will be conflictual (e.g., see Schneider 2016), it does democratize and decentralize the construction of reality. Given the tendency toward homophily (McPherson et al. 2001) and the disinclination of many to engage in face-to-face political disagreement (Eliasoph 1997), it is likely that most people rarely encounter their political adversaries. The comments section might be one of the few places where one confronts those who seek to marginalize them. With the relative anonymity that comes with traditional media, some actors are, potentially, emboldened (Phillips 2015). Likewise, the structure of online communication can promote discord (Lin and Tian 2018; Tian and Menchik 2016). Another more general factor to consider is the intensity of political polarization in the United States (e.g., see Sexton 2017). The conflict over the family separation policy was but one of the myriad political and cultural battles that have been waged in the United States over race and ethnicity in recent years. Many have been centered on Trump himself (see Lopez 2018). For instance, Trump's 2015 announcement of his Presidential campaign began with the vilification of Mexican immigrants and was a topic of conversation before being neutralized within civil society (Silva 2019b). There are currently tens of millions of Americans who vociferously support Trump and his policies. They are set against an equivalent number who fervently oppose the man and his governance.

Dellwing (2015) argues that much of the work on aligning activity has assumed that actors will seek to reduce conflict in problematic situations. However, he demonstrates that actors can also pursue and resist alignment during interpersonal conflicts. Dellwing (2012) explains that in many problematic situations, aligning with one group requires disaligning with another — for example, cases such as the conflict over family separation where there is no normative consensus. Disalignments vary in their openness and stability (Dellwing 2015). We build on Dellwing's insights by examining how disaligning activity occurs not only in interpersonal relationships, but also in the stigma contests waged by multiple people.

DATA AND METHOD

We address our research questions with a qualitative content analysis (Altheide and Schneider 2013) of statements made about the practice of immigrant detention in the American public sphere.[3] The analysis occurred over multiple rounds, as is typical for qualitative scholarship (Charmaz 2014; Lofland et al. 2006). Although the analysis began in spring 2018 with an examination of letters to the editor, newspaper articles, and online comments, this article focuses on conversations that occurred in response to dramatic news footage happening at the border in June 2018.

YouTube, the popular video-sharing website, allows for a vibrant participatory culture. While Schneider (2016) has documented how actors comment on music videos, the platform hosts all manner of content, including the news reports posted by *ProPublica* and *CNN* analyzed later. Not only were the videos collectively viewed hundreds of thousands of times by the time they were collected, they also received thousands of comments (see Table 1). We collected all the comments made in response to six videos posted to *YouTube* — five from *CNN* and one from *ProPublica*.[4] We selected the first 250 comments responding to each video (and replies to those comments) for a total of 1500 comments. This approach allowed us to sample the discussion that surrounded multiple elements of the issue. Two videos include accusations of harm caused by the policy. Three videos focus on efforts to defend the policy. One video covers a specific instance of blowback to it. The comments section provides a forum where actors can support, oppose, and otherwise elaborate on the content of the videos, thus aligning with some and disaligning with others. Further description of these videos is provided in Table 1.

Initially, our coding focused on how the commenters framed the situation. Two contested and potentially stigmatizing "frames" (Goffman 1974) emerged: racism and justice. It seemed that stigma was playing a role in this process. To further examine how stigma was produced and mitigated, we drew on the literature on aligning activity. While many studies of aligning activity do not typically reference stigma, they do provide a wealth of concepts for examining how individuals redefine situations where they face stigmatizing accusations. Accordingly, the next rounds of analysis focused on which identities were being threatened (e.g., the parents of the

TABLE 1. Description of YouTube Videos that Prompted Online Comments

Source, title, length, and date of publication	Title and description	Reason for selection, number of comments, number of views
1. *ProPublica* "Listen to Children Who've Just Been Separated from Their Parents at the Border." 7 minutes, 48 seconds. June 18, 2018.	Audio of children who have been recently separated from their parents and were being held in a detention facility. The video begins with a photograph of a young girl and an adult woman, but for the majority of the video the screen is black with English subtitles. Thompson, of *ProPublica*, relates that "They scream "Mami" and "Papá" over and over again, as if those are the only words they know" (Thompson 2018). At one point a U.S. Customs and Border patrol agent can be heard making light of the situation (or, less charitably, taunting the children).	This video was selected because it was well covered in the news cycle and likely contributed to the political blowback. That is, it had substantive and historical significance. It is also viscerally gripping and presents an opportunity to view how individuals grapple with one of the ostensibly negative aspects of this policy. There were 1108 comments captured by NVivo when it was collected on June 19, 2018 and had been viewed 1,216,406 times.
2. *CNN* "Undocumented Mom: Child Taken while Breastfeeding." 4 minutes, 3 seconds. June 14, 2018.	In the video "An attorney with the Texas Civil Rights Project tells CNN's Ed Lavandera about an undocumented mother whose daughter was taken away while she was breastfeeding in a detention center in Texas."	This video was selected because it provides an instance where a specific, concrete accusation against the Trump administration is discussed. When it was collected on June 19, 2018, it has had 8931 views and 512 comments were captured using NVivo.
3. *CNN* "Trump Supporters React to Family Separations." 3 minutes, 58 seconds. June 20, 2018.	This video clip features on camera interviews about the family separation policy with Trump supporters.	This video was selected because it demonstrates how one might go about defending the policy and it presents an opportunity to observe how Trump's political base is constructed in the public sphere. It shows how stigmatization goes beyond those directly responsible for the policy. At the time it was collected, June 20, 2018, it had been viewed 206,852 times and NVivo captured 1047 comments.

TABLE 1. *Continued*

Source, title, length, and date of publication	Title and description	Reason for selection, number of comments, number of views
4. *CNN* "Sessions Doubles Down on Immigration." 6 minutes, 39 seconds. June 18, 2018.	The clip covers a speech from then Attorney General Jeff Sessions wherein he defends the Trump administration's policy.	This video was selected because it provides an opportunity to see how people directly respond to the administration's defense of the policy. It was collected on June 19, 2018, by which point it had been viewed 3444 times with NVivo capturing 707 comments.
5. *CNN* "Border Patrol Agent: Kids Are Treated Humanely." 10 minutes, 39 seconds. June 6, 2018.	Includes an interview with Chris Cabrera of the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol who defends the actions of his agency.	This video was selected because it allows us another chance to see how people respond to another member of the administration defending the policy. It was collected on June 24, 2018, by which time it had been viewed 858,246 times. NVivo captured 1019 comments.
6. *CNN* "Sarah Sanders: I was Kicked out of Restaurant." 7 minutes, 26 seconds. June 23, 2018.	Coverage of and commentary about an incident where Sarah Sanders, Press Secretary for the White House, was asked to leave the Red Hen restaurant because of her role in the administration.	This clip video was chosen because it provides an opportunity to observe how members of the public sphere stigmatize the Trump administration (and by implication its supporters) and how such efforts are neutralized. It was collected on June 24, 2018. At the time of collection, it had been viewed 13,979 times and the NVivo captured 1001 comments.

children, the liberal media, the Trump administration, Trump's supporters) and how these identities were threatened.

The codes from previous rounds of analysis were analyzed by comparing them against concepts in the aligning activity tradition. For example, comments made defending immigrants or the Trump administration and its supporters were compared to excuses, appeals to higher loyalty, and denials of injury. Comments coded as disparaging immigrants were compared against the concept of denying victims. Comments that were coded as stigmatizing separation challengers or separation advocates were compared against condemnations of the condemners. These comments were recoded according to whether they seemed to be using excuses or denials of injury to claim innocence, undermining those participating in the debate with condemnations of condemners, or stigmatizing immigrants with denials of victims. These codes were also examined for consistency and types of variation. Note that many of these codes were not mutually exclusive as a comment could make use of more than one type of account. A commenter could deny injury and excuse the migrants while also issuing a condemnation of their opponents. The comments that were not initially coded as separation advocates' or separation challengers' accounts were re-examined to see if any of the types of aligning action could be found. These comments are understood as accounting for or against the policy if they offer arguments for or against either the practice or those who comment upon the practice. It is important to note that, following Mills' (1940) distinction between motives and motivation, aligning activity occurs with or without intent. Therefore, these data are not being used to assess the subjective state of the commenters (who, admittedly, may be fervent believers or nihilistic trolls). Regardless of what an actor wants to occur, in a debate over family separation, if one condemns Trump or one of his critics, then that comment contributes to efforts to reduce their authority. The results of this analysis are presented later.

FINDINGS

Of the 1500 comments, 697 were coded as accounts for opposition to family separation, 628 were coded as accounts in favoring family separation, and 175 comments were unclear or off-topic and thus excluded. Although it was possible to discuss the issue without explicitly identifying a guilty party, the bulk of the aligning activity applied not only to the institutional practice, but also discredited the selves of anyone involved with it (e.g., the detained, the administration) and those who are indirectly connected to it (e.g., supporters, opponents). Note that the number in brackets refers to the video number listed in Table 1. Quotations are verbatim, including grammar errors.

Accounting for Opposition to Family Separation

Comments made in opposition to family separation took one of two basic forms: claims of innocence and condemnations of separation advocates. Although it was

possible to criticize the practice of family separation without vilifying supporters, most comments directly or indirectly negatively labeled separation advocates (672 of 697).

Claims of Innocence: Harmless or Blameless

The first account opposing the policy involves excusing the detained as blameless or claiming that they are harmless. These comments serve as accounts for opposition to family separation. These excuses, denials of injury, and appeals to loyalties are categorized together because although they are analytically distinct, they are often used in tandem. These claims of innocence usually (138 of 163) set up the condemnations discussed later. In this subsection, we will provide examples of the 25 claims of innocence that exonerate the detained without reference to the moral character of separation advocates. For example, two responses to the *ProPublica* video depicting the audio of an interaction between recently separated children and their detainers:

> These kids' parents and guardians risked all to try to make it to the US. I've acted out of desperation before. Have you? [1]

> these kids are just hoping fo a better life … [1]

These commenters suggest that that the situation is unacceptable and should change. The first comment excuses (Sykes and Matza 1957) the parents by claiming they are desperate and not culpable for their actions. This commenter also explicitly asks separation advocates to empathize with them. By focusing on the children (and not the adults who sent them), the second comment implies both an excuse (children are not responsible for their actions) and a denial of injury (children are harmless). Although one might read them as veiled accusations (see Dellwing 2015), they are not explicitly vilifying their opponents.

Some comments exist on the border between condemning and not condemning separation advocates:

> People are complaining that they're breaking the law. Yes they are. But is breaking the law to survive and save your children, I REPEAT, YOUR CHILDREN, TURN AROUND AND LOOK AT YOUR CHILD, is breaking the law to survive that wrong? Put yourselves in their shoes and question yourselves. [3]

This commenter offers an appeal-to-loyalties justification on behalf of the parents. The statement accepts that a law has been broken and that the parents chose to do so, but their conduct is justified because it was done to save their children. It does not refer to any of the other problems that separation advocates attribute to immigrants. Although the comment uses capital letters and perhaps suggests that something is wrong with the morality of the author's interlocutors, it also invites the audience to be empathetic.

Some comments in this category do not fully articulate a defense of the detained:

> Hearing this killed me. All those poor kids, those poor families being split apart. It's just sad [1]

No conduct is explicitly excused much less justified. The focus on children and families does suggest harmlessness. The emphasis on "poor kids" also invokes a frame of blamelessness. This comment stops short of explicitly attacking the selves of separation advocates, however. It offers a sympathetic interpretation of *ProPublica's* report that does not undermine anyone by name and suggests that the situation is upsetting but does not identify a causal agent. Elements of these notions, however, are used by others to undermine separation advocates.

Condemnation of Separation Advocates

More frequently (672), commenters shifted the focus from accusations made against the migrants to the misdeeds of separation advocates (Sykes and Matza 1957). These condemnations rejected supporters of family separation as racist, cruel, dishonest, foolish, or otherwise reprobate. In doing so, these commenters deploy the ideational components of stigma (labeling, stereotyping, and othering) to separation advocates.

Racism and xenophobia. Some 180 comments included accusations of racism or xenophobia against supporters of the policy. In one version of this condemnation, separation challengers compare Trump, his administration, and his voters to the Nazis:

> Fuck Trump! Fuck him and his administration so hard! Fucking nazis! [1]

> This will be on Trump voters legacy and will brand them just as the Nazi sympathizers were branded till their deaths and will follow their children's legacy till they are gone [2]

The label, Nazi, implies racism among other stigmatizing attributes. It was also used in response to the *CNN* coverage of the restaurant that refused to serve former Press Secretary Sarah Sanders:

> Sarah Sanders = Joesph Goebbels [6]

> Nobody likes trumps administration Nazi propaganda. What, you hoping for a standing ovation after spreading lies and hate? [6]

Criticism of the policy is subsumed within an attack on the enactors and supporters of family separation.

Other versions of this condemnation used the label racist or white supremacist. For instance, the charge of white supremacy was used to discredit former Attorney General Jeff Session's defense of the policy:

> Oh this white supremacist Jeff won't miss opportunity to harm brown or black people and he'll do anything to keep it going. He is enjoying every moment of it. [4]

Likewise, the following comment, made in response to the video reporting on Sanders, stereotypes Trump and his fellow travelers as racist:

> The Republicans enable Trumps Crimes against America. Trump is openly racist and so are his supporters [6]

Again, the previous comments represent condemnations because they potentially distract from the accusations leveled by their opponents. These condemnations carry a negative label that contributes to an undesirable framing of Trump and his supporters. That the terms white supremacist, Nazi, and racist could be deployed indexically without further explanation suggests that a narrative of Trump and his supporters as racist already exists. For a counter example:

> There are two types of white racists. The superiority complex type, who sincerely believe in the special-ness of their whiteness, so they punch down, incarcerate and even murder. The inferiority complex type, who fear competition from other races, but hide behind meritocracy to resist the inevitable. Trump goons are the former, his base are the latter. [2]

This commenter concentrates on the character of Trump supporters rather than on the policy of family separation itself. This comment is unusual in that it elaborates on the charge of racism, more typically the epithet of racist was used with minimal support. This racist stereotype, in turn, can draw a distinction between impure conservative racists and pure separation challengers.

Cruel and depraved. In addition to racism, separation advocates were condemned as cruel and depraved (363 comments). Although this type of disalignment was often bound up with accusations of racism in practice (e.g., calling one a Nazi suggests racism and cruelty), they are analytically distinct as one could be used without the other. For example, in response to the report on the ill-treated mother and child by CNN one commenter added:

> So sad, Trump Administration is cruel [2]

This comment accuses the administration of cruelty and is an indirect attack on those who would support the administration. Challengers also fashioned this form of condemnation by accusing the Trump administration of cruelty to children:

> Keeping children in this enforced situation constitutes child abuse. [1]

> Wow, how can folks think separating families and caging kids is good? [3]

> Baby Prisons !!! [4]

These comments treat the policy and those who implement it as reprehensible. These condemnations were often specifically directed at Trump, members of his administration, and their presumed supporters:

> Trump is a evil man he doesnt think of the kids trump a dictator he must know how awful these kids feel because they are split up with there family that sick man needs to stop being president [1]

> TeaCup Jeff Sessions is a demon [4]

> I can't wait for these baby boomers to die out … They are scum that is screwing up the rest of the world. [3]

The first comment in response to the *ProPublica* recording centers on Trump. It derides him and the policy as sick. While the first comment also includes a claim of innocence by implying that children are blameless, the second comment dismisses Sessions as a demon without even mentioning the policy. All three of these comments place blame on separation advocates and direct it away from the separation challengers. As with racism, the cruelty label contributes to a distinction between immoral Trump supporters and moral opponents.

Dishonesty and foolishness. A third condemnation found in 176 comments labeled separation advocates as liars or fools. Separation challengers would neutralize claims made by their adversaries by dismissing them as unintelligent. For instance, the following comment disparages those who support the President:

> At the end of the day. Most Trump voters are literally uneducated. Either didn't finish High school, didn't go to college or finish college. [3]

> I hate to shame anyone's looks and in this case brains as well but most of these Trump supporters are fat, ugly, stupid, worthless people. [3]

These comments, in response to a *CNN* report interviewing Trump's supporters, attack their character without calling them racist or cruel and without specifically defending detainees. These ad hominem attacks draw on and reproduce negative cultural depictions of conservatives.

On the dishonesty side of this condemnation, the supposed threat posed by unauthorized immigrants is explained as a lie proffered by charlatans. Likewise, in response to *CNN*'s reporting that Sanders was denied service at a restaurant:

> FUUUUUUUCK YEAH!!!!!! FUCK THAT HYPOCRITE BITCH!!!!! SHE'S A LYING SCUMBAG FOR THE ORANGE FRAUD CONMAN TURD! [6]

Among other insults, this comment defines both Sanders and Trump as dishonest. Consequently, it directs the public conversation away from the accusation made by separation advocates. Another commenter marshaled a separate political controversy:

Your sounding like a Putin sponsored bot [4]

This comment references the ongoing controversy over Russia's attempts to inter-fere with American politics by hiring disruptive online commenters. These accusa-tions of dishonesty are informed by partisan narratives and stereotypes as are the ones in the final type of condemnation.

Both types of condemnation worked together. To be unintelligent is to be easily misled. For instance, in response to *CNN*'s interviews of Trump supporters, a com-menter wrote:

It's because the older people, mostly white, are scared of their own shadows and see danger everywhere. They live in a state of fear because are brainwashed by Fox News and similar ultra conservative media outlets. The data speaks for itself and shows how wrong they are about crime and the illegal immigration numbers. [3]

This comment claims that the interviewed Trump supporters are dupes who have fallen victim to the dishonesty of conservative media. It is a condemnation of con-servative leaders (*Fox News*) for having "brainwashed" their followers. The term brainwashed indicates that elite separation advocates have been either unreasonably biased or purposefully dishonest, which bolsters the claims of innocence.

Ancillary condemnations. The above condemnations form the core of the moral challenge to family separation. There were also ancillary condemnations that directed attention to the problematic character of separation advocates without direct reference to racism, cruelty, or dishonesty and foolishness. Most of the ancil-lary condemnations (143 of 147) drew on partisan stereotypes.[5] Most (101) of the ancillary condemnations were made in response to a *CNN* report about Sanders being asked to leave a Virginia restaurant:

Good. I'd kick her fat ass out too [6]

Good, bitch [6]

These comments suggest that Sanders is a reviled character without explicitly ref-erencing the family separation policy. This report came when the family separation was highly salient in the United States, so these attacks on her character have the effect of contributing to the outrage being leveled against the administration for the policy. These labels, if accepted, would help to reinforce partisan polarization. Notably, these two comments do not follow politically correct or feminist sensibili-ties that are supposed to be typical of Trump's critics. While they are disaligning from Trump supporters, it is not clear they are aligning with liberals or Democrats, either. It could be that some of the more offensive language was an attempt to "troll" oth-ers (Phillips 2015). It could also be that an emotionally charged conflict combined with the anonymity of social media eroded the decorum that might be found in other forums, such as letters to the editor.

In sum, these condemnations of separation advocates include the ideational aspects of stigma identified by Pescosolido and Martin (2015:91). Separation challengers label their adversaries as racist, cruel, dishonest, and otherwise reprehensible. These labels are connected to negative stereotypes and these comments distinguish between good people who oppose Trump and impure ones who support him. The condemnations of the separation advocates also function as self-defense.

Accounts by Advocates of Family Separation

There were 628 comments supporting the family separation policy directly by explaining that it was acceptable or indirectly by assessing the character of the individuals involved in the debate over it. They did so with claims of innocence, denials of immigrants as victims, and condemnations of separation challengers.

Claims of Innocence

There were 222 comments that had the effect of denying that the policy and its supporters were racist, cruel, or otherwise untoward. These accounts often provided a foundation for the denials of victimhood and condemnations given in the next subsections. Only 23 comments claimed innocence without undermining any other identities. In this subsection, we will discuss such cases, before demonstrating how claims of innocence were integrated with denials of victimhood and condemnations of condemners. For example, in response to the *ProPublica* audio of recently separated children crying, one commenter wrote:

> Check out line at a grocery store? [5]

This commenter claims innocence by denying injury: The crying happened but does not amount to evidence of anything sinister, as children readily cry.

Others would simply offer support to relevant parties:

> He's got my vote . . . . 1000 percent [3]

> Sarah is a great women and does a great job [6]

The first quote is supporting Trump and the second supports then Press Secretary Sanders. Neither explicitly denounces adversaries or immigrants in the process. Still, it would be reasonable to take these comments as oblique disalignment from those who blame Trump and Sanders (Dellwing 2015). Given the animosity expressed toward Trump, Sanders, and other supporters of family separation, offering encouragement has the effect of implying that they are not guilty. As with the challengers, separation advocates' claims of innocence were typically paired with attempts to affix ideational stigma to immigrants and their defenders, these types of denials will be considered below.[6]

Denials of Victim

There were 312 comments that defined unauthorized immigrants as rule-breakers at best and an existential threat at worst. Doing so follows the pattern of "denial of the victim" (Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957). These commenters neutralize the potentially stigmatizing condemnations made against separation advocates by asserting that unauthorized immigrants are being treated justly. All denials of victimhood defined immigrants as undesirable, a subset of which placed the focused parental responsibility of the detained children.

Immigrants as undesirable. As with other public discussions of immigration in the US public sphere, immigrants were defined as criminals, intruders, and general threats. In one version, defenders of the policy would refer to the law:

> No sympathy for illegal aliens at all. If you want to come to this great land of ours come here legally. Just like others did before you. [1]

> I know this sounds heartless, but if you come here legally, you won't have this problem. [1]

These commenters deny victimhood by simply claiming that the detained have violated the law. The implication being that rule violators deserve their fate and, thus, the policy is morally acceptable.

Others would go a step further and compare the detainees to dangerous criminals:

> Rapists drug dealers and criminals deserve no empathy [3]

> If someone comes to yr door u open n welcome n if someone comes through the window then wat do u do … [5]

In these comments, the detainees and unauthorized immigrants are labeled as rapists, drug dealers, and burglars. Likewise, some commenters denied victimhood of the detainees by arguing that unauthorized immigrants cause general harm the United States:

> dude illegals are leeches and freeloaders. Deport them. [3]

> Remove your borders and your country will become just another shithole nobody wants to live in. [3]

These comments indicate that the policy is justified by employing stereotypes of threatening immigrants. The above comments only indirectly defend the selves of separation advocates. That is, they focus on the wrongdoing of the detainees and, thus, away from themselves. For a contrasting example, see the following commenter who explains why comparisons of the Trump administration to Nazis are inaccurate:

> Hitler use to take German citizens out of their homes into ghettos and then into Concentration camps to kill them or just kill them on the spot … quit comparing

our President to the atrocities committed by the Nazis, and apologies to the Jewish people. We are protecting our borders as a free nation we have the right to do so. [1]

In this case, the commenter explains how Trump and his supporters are unlike Nazis. They note that Germans were oppressing their own citizens, while the Trump administration is protecting the borders from an invader. This commenter shifts between defending Trump and all Americans ("quit comparing our President" then "We are protecting"). These condemnations transfer the blame from the Trump administration and its supporters to the migrants. Many of the above statements do not acknowledge that children are also being detained.

Parents at fault. Some commenters handle the problem posed by the blamelessness of children by focusing on migrant parents. There were 123 denials of victimhood that specifically mentioned the parents. One commenter explicitly presents themselves as being sympathetic to the children, but not for the parents:

> Blaming The U.S. for enforcing the LAW that these ADULTS KNOWINGLY BROKE … Had Kids while being ILLEGAL in a country then NOT TAKING responsibility for those kids by trying to become a naturalized citizen???? I am sorry I feel sorry for the kids. But I dont blame the US I blame the IGNORANT Parents. [1]

This statement allows the separation advocate to absolve themselves of the accusation of being a person who would support child abuse by claiming that it is the parents who are responsible for the situation. Others accomplish a similar task in a more circumscribed fashion:

> THAT'S THIER, PARENTS FAULT. IF U, SNEAK IN ANY OTHER COUNTRY, YOU GO 2 PRISON. FUCK EM, ALL!!! [1]

> Blame their parents for putting them in this situation. If they had not crossed the border illegally they would still be together. [1]

> Why are these idiot people bringing children across the border? What is wrong with them? [1]

> Parents fault. If your illegaly here. Your gonna get sent back. Awful parents. Truely awful people [5]

While these comments seem to accept that the children are victims, they deny such claims for the parents. Separation advocates neutralize the condemnations of cruelty issued by separation challengers by blaming the parents for the plight of the children.

Alternatively, some would compare the child migrants to the children of incarcerated Americans:

men and women parents that are American citizens that break our laws are separated from their families everyday. So we are supposed to give special rights to non citizens? [1]

white kids are taken from their criminal parents in America everyday. [3]

Bullshit . . . .their parents are criminals . . . .nobody keeps bank robbers from prison because they have kids. Go to prison, lose your kids. Pretty simple. [3]

These comments reinforce the stereotype of the detainees being criminals. As evidenced above, these comments tended to emphasize the agency of the parents without explicitly defining the role played by Trump and other separation advocates. While denials of victim use stereotypes to draw a boundary between citizens and immigrants, the next category of disaligning activity distinguishes between the American left and the American right.

Condemnation of Separation Challengers

In 434 comments, separation advocates condemned their adversaries. These condemnations included the accusation that separation challengers are (1) complicit in illegal immigration and that separation challengers are (2) hypocrites and (3) liars. Finally, separation advocates used (4) ancillary rejections.

Complicity. In 120 comments, separation advocates employ antileftist narratives to condemn their opponents as guilty of facilitating unauthorized immigration:

why the hell would I vote for a Democrat who wants to flood this country with third world migrants? [4]

THIS IS AN INVASION supported by Democrats and global leftists designed to overwhelm and bring down America. [5]

democrats should fight for US citizens as much as they do for illegals [1]

You are either with america or you are with illegal immigrants ... Liberals are traitor to our nation [4]

These comments take the denials of victim described above and use them to undermine those who are allied with immigrants. Immigrants are stereotyped as flooding, invading, and overwhelming the United States in the first two comments. In the third and fourth comments, the label of "illegal" immigrants is used to distinguish them from American citizens. All four of these comments reinforce the conservative stereotype that the left favors immigrants over American citizens. These statements defend the selves of separation advocates against their adversaries' stigmatizing condemnations by redirecting the discussion to the label of separation challengers as unpatriotic.

Hypocrisy. There were 100 comments that accused separation challengers of committing, supporting, or overlooking the same transgressions of previous Presidential administrations:

> This has been going on 24/7, 365 days a year during the Obama administration and none of you fake fucks gave a shit then. But somehow now because Trump is president you conveniently decided to finally stop turning a blind eye? Get the fuck out of here with that bullshit. None of you cared about those kids to begin with. But suddenly you care now? Funny how that works right? Um except this law was written by Dems and signed by Bill Clinton [2]

> ummm dont you know this was set up years ago under obama, you are smart?? right??? [2]

These comments condemn their opponents by claiming first that Democratic Presidents Clinton and Obama also engaged in family separation and second that their interlocutors had refrained from condemning their own party for the practice. The challengers are labeled as equally culpable, if not guilty.

Other separation advocates assert that the left's concern for the detainees is selective and opportunistic:

> please bleeding hearts, let homeless people stay in your house. feed them and let them sleep in your bed. [4]

> Fake liberals. If liberals were concerned they would have complained during the Obama administration when this was happening. They would have complained about Mexico dumping these people in the desert at the border No this is the fake left, they fake concern for people to get votes. It's a simple scramble for raw power. [4]

These commenters claim that challengers are inconsistent at best and cynical at worst. Unlike the association of the left with unauthorized immigrants, these claims of hypocrisy do not defend the policy itself. Instead of claiming that family separation is protecting Americans, they are claiming that the left and the right are both culpable. These accusations of hypocrisy amount to the "condemnations the condemners" identified by (Sykes and Matza 1957) because they distract from accusation against themselves by castigating their opponents. Note that these hypocrisy condemnations are directed at Trump's political opponents. In so doing, a boundary between the left and the right is fortified.

Dishonesty and foolishness. Separation advocates, in 242 comments, condemned their opponents as liars or fools. A common form of this condemnation drew on stereotypes of the media being liberal propaganda. For example, the reaction to a *CNN* segment reporting on the claim that agents separated a nursing mother from her child:

> Relax, CNN is just blowing more smoke up your ass, some lady said a girl told her they took her baby away, CNN is headlining gossip at this point, no verification of the story, no proof, no report to show you just some lady saying she heard some shit? [2]

> Daily dose of fake news and where is the evidence? [2]

> More fabricated lies by the left media. [2]

These condemnations of the media are often bound with claims of innocence. The media is cast as being in league with the separation challengers. If the media is lying, then the accusations are not true. Terms like "fake news" and "left media" connect this particular issue to a larger narrative that stereotypes the mainstream media as biased against conservatives. These negative attributes, if accepted, would disalign the mainstream media from Trump supporters and justify the rejection of its reporting.

The other side of this condemnation is the questioning of separation challengers' understanding of the situation and mental capacities:

> So when Americans commit crimes and go to jail do they take their toddlers to jail too? No when do libtards understand this?? [3]

> How is asking people to come here legally … racist? Only in the liberal mind does that make sense. I think you libtards need to lookup the word racist … I dont think it means what you think it means. [4]

Both commenters deploy the epithet "libtards" to connect to an othering stereotype of the left as being unintelligent. The first use of the term libtard bolsters the denial of victimhood and the second uses it to strengthen a claim that separation advocates are not racists. The logic being that liberals are unintelligent and, thus, their condemnations of cruelty and racism are invalid. While being unintelligent does not carry the same moral implications as being deceitful, these types of labels represent condemnations in that they are asserting that separation challengers do not have a right to comment on the matter. They also reinforce the boundary between conservatives and liberals.

Ancillary condemnations. The previous denials of victimhood and condemnations of the condemners engage with the separation challengers' condemnations of the practice. The hypocrisy condemnation accuses liberals of inconsistency, implying that the policy is either unproblematic or that both parties are equally guilty of the same cruelty. Dishonesty claims suggest that separation challengers are unduly amplifying or manufacturing the problem. The complicity condemnations and denials of victimhood defend the practice by arguing that unauthorized immigration poses a risk to the United States. There were, however, 68 comments that made ancillary condemnations that label challengers by referring to negative sentiments toward the left without engaging with their accusations. For example:

> Democrats are scum [2]

> Democrats need to be voted out [4]

> I hate Dems so fucking much!!!!!! Wish I had the infinity glove!!!!!!! [6]

These condemnations are not specifically paired to a defense of the family separation policy. They define Democrats as generally loathsome. Such expressions would also season some of the other types of condemnations. In 52 cases, however, antipathy toward the left was disconnected from any engagement with accusations made against the family separation policy ancillary condemnations. Ancillary condemnations could also be made in a nonpartisan fashion by claiming that separation challengers are unintelligent or otherwise flawed.

In sum, separation advocates' denials of immigrant victimhood and condemnations of separation advocates produce the ideational aspects of stigma. They label differences (e.g., they are lying), associate those differences with stereotypes (e.g., the media is always lying), and use the stereotypes to imply that there are fundamental differences between themselves and their adversaries (e.g., these liars are not like us).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the *YouTube* comments section, we find reactions to the family separation policy went beyond its consequences and into an evaluation of the selves of anyone directly or indirectly connected to it. Most of the comments generated an open and frontstage disalignment (Dellwing 2015). We conclude by considering how our findings contribute to the literatures on stigma and aligning activity.

Hannem (2012), Tyler (2018), and their colleagues have advanced the literature on stigma by addressing the question of how certain attributes come to be constructed as stigmatizing. They have documented how the powerful use stigma to oppress marginalized communities. This study contributes to this turn by addressing the question of how to conceptualize the situation of those who meet the ideational (i.e., labeling, stereotyping, and othering or boundary-making) but not necessarily material (i.e., discriminatory) elements of stigma.

Our findings confirm and extend Hannem and Tyler's insights. It supports their contention that stigma is involved in producing and maintaining inequality. As noted above, there are many studies that find that stigma can justify unequal treatment by highlighting individual flaws and discounting structural conditions (Paton 2018; Scrambler 2018; Shildrick 2018; Slater 2018). Likewise, in this study, we see the denial of victimhood argument used to justify the oppression of migrants. Taken together, separation advocates' accounts possess a cumulative power that justifies the oppression of unauthorized immigrants. This effect is multiplied by the relative anonymity of online spaces that allow for the expression of stereotypes that would be sanctioned in other situations (Phillips 2015).

This analysis also highlights another way that stigma can enable discrimination; stigma contests, empowered by social media, threaten the selves of the stigmatizers through liminal stigma. Previous work has thus far overlooked the ideational stigma aimed at stigmatizers, which occludes one of the ways that stigma can contribute to inequality. Sessions and Sanders and many of their fellow travelers are not necessarily facing a unified generalized other or experiencing status loss in the way that Goffman, Hannem, or Tyler assume. The stigma contests that follow the implementation of the family separation policy do facilitate their claims to victimhood, however. Much literature suggests that Trump supporters believe they are losing status, and this claimed marginalization gives them a justification for their support for oppressive policies. The data presented here and our conceptualization of liminal stigma lend further support to this account. While much of the literature on the election of 2016 shows how Trump spoke to the stigma experienced by Trump's supporters (Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2018; Lamont et al. 2017; Schrock et al. 2017; Simmons 2018), our study provides evidence that Trump's supporters do indeed face labeling, stereotyping, and othering from a substantial number of people. They are readily and easily called racists in a colorblind society where actors typically hesitate to offer such charges (see Silva et al. 2018) and it is not difficult to find these comments on social media. Even if they may not be materially stigmatized through discrimination or status loss, they actively defend themselves against labeling and stereotypes as they condemn separation advocates and deny victimhood to immigrants. There is a robust and variegated set of justifications commenters give to defend the practice. Because it is not difficult to find instances of Trump supporters defending themselves against liminal stigma, we can have greater confidence that status threats play a role in driving their support.

Our study also extends prior research by further uncovering the social construction of stigma. It does so by drawing on the aligning activity literature to provide a conceptual vocabulary of liminal stigma. Goffman recognizes that stigma is created through social interaction but leaves it to others to take up the question of which attributes become constructed as stigmatizing. Hannem and Tyler address this gap in the literature by demonstrating how the powerful employ stigma to legitimize the status quo. We argued that scholars have often overemphasized the ideational stability of stigma by studying situations where there was comparatively little disagreement over the meaning of the stigmatized category. The problem with this assumption of cultural uniformity was demonstrated by Kusow (2004) who found that the stigmatization of Somali immigrants was neutralized by belonging to a subculture that rejected the negative definitions of nativist Canadians. At the outset, we identified liminal stigma as an undertheorized process. From the existing literature, we posited that liminal stigma occurs when an identity category is both defended and vilified by numerous others. Our analysis allows us to empirically support this definition by identifying the commenters' aligning activity. Separation challengers claim that the unauthorized migrants targeted by the policy are innocent with excuses, denials of injury, and appeals to loyalty. Separation advocates claim that they are innocent

by denying injury. Most of their claims of innocence were accompanied by denials of the victimhood of the detainees as threats to the United States and reckless parents. They also condemned the separation challengers by claiming that they are hypocrites, dishonest, complicit in illegal immigration, and generally loathsome. For their part, separation challengers condemned their adversaries by labeling them as racist, cruel, liars, and otherwise detestable. Each side typically accounted for themselves with statements that accomplished three of the four components of stigma identified by Pescosolido and Martin (2015:91) — what we term the ideational aspects of stigma (1. labeling, 2. stereotyping, and 3. boundary formation). These condemnations and denials of victimhood apply labels that are grounded in and provide reinforcement for stereotypes and narratives (e.g., fake news, racist conservatives) that imply a basic difference between adversaries. The difference between liminal stigma and the more stable stigma that has often been studied is that the ideational components of stigma are widely contested in the former. As is evidenced by the easily found public disputes on social media, liminal stigma lacks the force of a unified collective conscious or generalized other.

The concept of liminal stigma can help to avoid reification. When stigma is studied as a means of oppression, it is possible to reduce stigma to material interests and lose sight of variations in how people actively construct their definitions of right and wrong. This active process is demonstrated by uncovering the varying logics that commenters use to invoke stigma and to protect themselves against it. We can also avoid reification by showing how participants in this stigma contest are both threatened and protected by their actively maintained equilibrium. That there are many instances of each of the reported types of aligning activity shows that the generalized other does not have a unified view of the relevant identities. The myriad examples of these statements show that stigmatizing categories are constantly being issued and neutralized, and, therefore, provide a reminder that the categories should not be ignored, taken for granted, or assumed to be uniform.

Much work on aligning activity demonstrates the specific techniques that actors use to protect their identities and maintain social order. This study contributes to this literature by introducing the concept of liminal stigma and highlighting the role of disalignment. Typically, research in this tradition examines the neutralizations or accounts of a particular category of accused norm violator; this study demonstrates the value of examining how multiple sides construct a problematic situation. Liminal stigma is a dialogic product of adversaries. Dellwing (2012, 2015) offered the important correction that actors sometimes resist alignment. We support and build on his insight to demonstrate that alignment can also be undermined by efforts to support or oppose institutional practices in the public sphere. Not only is disalignment a means of threatening interpersonal relationships, it might also be a mechanism of political polarization. While the literature on aligning activity rarely invokes the concept of stigma, many of the subjects of these studies face stigmatization if their accounts for their conduct are unpersuasive. An unstated implication of this tradition is that aligning activity is a means of maintaining social order by avoiding or mitigating stigma.

That is not what we found in this case, however. It was indeed possible to discuss the issue without discrediting or blaming a named entity. Nonetheless, such aligning activity was exceptional. It was far more common for commenters to create an open, front stage disalignment by combining their position on the policy with a denial of victim or condemnation of condemners. Instead of offering a means to reduce social strain by minimizing stigma, separation challengers and advocates threatened social solidarity by creating a liminal stigma that threatens multiple identities.

This project raises some questions that could not be answered here. First, we were only able to examine what commenters said and we could not probe for what they were thinking and feeling. Another study using open-ended interview questions could provide a fuller picture of the worldviews of separation advocates and challengers. For example, to what extent does it help to see one's opinions validated by others? Second, because we were examining the cumulative power that comes from multiple actors offering the same type of alignment, we did not analyze the dynamics between commenters. Such an analysis would be illuminating. Third, it would be worth studying the extent to which the negative emotion exhibited here was the result of the issue or the forum (Julien 2018; Lin and Tian 2018). Although there are many areas of the public sphere that are structurally similar to the relatively light moderation and anonymity of the *YouTube* comments section, others might be more tightly regulated. This assumption should be tested with further research. How might the debate play out in town hall meetings, letters to the editor, radio call-in shows, or social media such as *Twitter* or *Facebook* that might afford greater moderation and less anonymity? Finally, there is the question of the consequences of stigma contests. Will the liminal stigma uncovered here be a permanent condition or will it transform into cultural marginalization for either side? On the one hand, it seems that the family separation policy is inspiring considerable opprobrium. On the other hand, Trump seemingly thrives on such spectacle (see Kellner 2016). Stigma should be understood as an ongoing process and not a reified social fact. Toward that end, we sought to establish the existence of liminal stigma. Future research should take up the question how to conceptualize degrees of liminality or the point at which a comparatively stable and uncontested stigma becomes liminal stigma.

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NOTES

1. For stylistic simplicity, we are including those who enact the policy (e.g., border patrol) in the category of separation advocates and the detained migrants as separation challengers, alongside commenters on both sides of the issue.
2. Holstein and Miller's (1990) concept of "victim contests" is also relevant here.

3. While the *YouTube* comments sections examined in this article would not likely meet the normative requirements of the Habermasian public sphere (see Adut 2018), it is a place where strangers collectively construct reality.

4. As of December 6, 2019, the videos can be found at (1) https://youtu.be/PoncXfYBAVI?t=78; (2) https://youtu.be/qkPc-efoWaE; (3) https://youtu.be/8WLsNa3YSn8?t=72; (4) https://youtu .be/OuTQbJKY7Cc; (5) https://youtu.be/eGuSdXiFtLk; 6. https://youtu.be/F-syTLa1sWk.

5. Partisan stereotypes were also employed in the other types of condemnations. What is significant is that these stereotypes could be used to dismiss separation advocates without engaging with their criticisms (see also Hunter 1984).

6. There were eight comments that stigmatized a third party without condemning separation challengers or denying victimhood to the immigrants. These few comments took the form of social comparisons to how other nations enforce their borders or accusing Mexico of not assisting the migrants.

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