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Outline of a theory of stigmatization in social work practice

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Stigma is a theoretical concept widely used in different disciplines. Yet, previous theoretical outlooks on stigma have been fairly general. This means that existing stigma theory can be used in different settings, but it does not always provide sufficiently specific explanations. We argue that it is possible to develop a more specific theory of stigma.

Our paper will outline a theory that describes and explains stigmatization processes in social work practice. This effort emanates from previous research experiences when we conducted an empirical study of stigmatization processes in social work in Sweden and the United States. The paper will focus on two questions:

- Which theoretical propositions must be included in a theory able to describe and explain stigmatization processes in social work practice?
- How should these theoretical propositions be transformed into a graphic model in order to illustrate the dynamics of stigmatization processes in social work practice?

We will present a stepwise description of our work to outline a theory of stigmatization processes in social work practice. The building blocks of this theory originate from existing theories and previous empirical research, including our own study of stigmatization processes among social workers. The paper will therefore include parts of our empirical study of social workers in Sweden and the USA (Carpholt, Blom & Krull, 2021). The outline is presented as theoretical propositions and as a graphic model. Finally, we discuss contributions to existing theory and potential implications for policy and practice, especially in relation to social work in the social services.