
Cancelled by Association: How Stigma Spreads in Different Cultures



By Tianyu He , INSEAD PhD

The tendency to stigmatise others for misdeeds committed by family members appears to extend to even acquaintances and is stronger in close-knit cultures.

In *The Good Wife*, an acclaimed American TV drama, the titular character returns to paid work after her state attorney husband was convicted of corruption linked to his extramarital affairs. Despite her impeccable qualifications, she initially struggles to be taken seriously as a lawyer by colleagues and judges simply for being married to a disgraced public servant.

The travails of Alicia, as the character is called, sounds rather unfair. After all, she is the one who's been cheated on *and* left to fend for herself and her children. But stigmatisation by association is all too human. In fact, cultures that are more interdependent, i.e. emphasise the strength of interpersonal connections, appear to be more fallible to the stigma effect.

A new [paper](#) I co-authored with [Melissa Williams](#) shows that, compared to Americans, Chinese participants expect a wrongdoer's family members to suffer worse negative social consequences. They are also more likely to shun those family members themselves. Such stigma spread is not confined to loved ones but extends even to neutral third parties like roommates. Our findings may offer sobering takeaways for professionals who find their CVs tainted by association with disgraced companies.

The ties that bind

The spread of stigma in a wide variety of contexts has been shown by a large body of research. People with a family member who has Alzheimer's disease, is overweight or mentally ill have been shown to be socially penalised. Even men who support feminists are not spared. However, no previous study has compared the phenomenon across cultural contexts.

My co-author and I sought to do so through three studies. In the first, we recruited about 200 Chinese participants and 200 American ones and had them read two scenarios, one in which a 22-year-old wrongdoer steals a laptop and another in which a separate wrongdoer starts a fight. The wrongdoer (Alex) is described as an only child and living independently.

We developed a set of 10 statements to measure stigma spread, or how much participants expected that the wrongdoer's stigma would spread to parents and grandparents. For example, one statement was: "People in Alex's parents' neighbourhood or at their workplace would have less respect for his parents after this incident."

We also asked participants to attribute responsibility for the misconduct to the wrongdoer himself, his company or his parents. All statements were ranked on a scale of 1-7.

Across both scenarios, the Chinese participants anticipated greater stigma spread to relatives of a wrongdoer compared to the Americans, with an average score of 4.43 vs. 3.30. The Chinese also attributed more blame to the wrongdoer's parents by a similar margin, although based on our analysis this would not have affected the stigma spread either way.

Even roommates are not spared

In our second study, we asked whether participants *themselves* would shun or have less respect for the parent of a wrongdoer (theft as per scenario in

the first study), who was described as “a second cousin of yours”. We compared Asian Americans with European Americans (about 160 participants per group).

While the two groups did not differ on perceptions of parents’ influence over adult children’s behaviours or of the severity of the misdeed, the Asian Americans were significantly more likely to stigmatise the parent (3.22 vs 2.36). Further analysis indicated that Asian Americans’ self-perception as more interdependent than European Americans partially accounted for the effect of culture on stigma by association.

Study 3 tested the stigma effect in a novel context: roommates. We recruited about 90 Chinese and 90 American participants and had them read the theft scenario described earlier, except that here the wrongdoer was described as a neighbour and had a roommate.

Compared to the American participants, the Chinese anticipated the roommate would suffer greater stigma and were also more likely to ostracise the roommate themselves. This finding shows that we could helplessly suffer the consequences of the actions of those with whom we are linked, even if it’s just a person with whom we happen to share an apartment.

Stigma at work

At the root of this phenomenon is the tendency of people from interdependent cultural contexts to perceive more similarity or connection between themselves and others. Our study indicates that they unconsciously assume *other-other* similarity, particularly when family ties are involved.

In the world of work, stigmatisation’s pervasiveness could mean taking a hit to your personal reputation and employability if a colleague or if your company becomes embroiled in scandal, especially in Eastern and other more interdependent cultures. It doesn’t help that self-identity is now so embedded in the work we do.

To mitigate the effect of such stigma, in future job interviews, employees of the likes of **Luckin Coffee** and **Wirecard** could highlight the specific reasons that drew them to work for the disgraced companies. Ponder what is valuable in the job scope in terms of personal development and career progression. It would also help to highlight learning and the experience gained. As Alicia of *The Good Wife* shows, the best response to stigma is to

meet it head on.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/cancelled-association-how-stigma-spreads-different-cultures>

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Tianyu He graduated with a PhD in Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD in 2022.

About the research

"Interdependence and reflected failure: Cultural differences in stigma by association" in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.