



Stigma Acknowledgment: Why And When Is It An Effective Social Strategy?

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Introduction

In the course of an interpersonal exchange, acknowledging a visible (and uncontrollable) stigma can facilitate smoother, more comfortable interactions (Hastorf, Wildfogel, & Cassman, 1979), and has been shown to foster more positive interpersonal and employment qualification feedback for the stigmatized individual (Hebl & Kleck, 2002). These benefits may stem from the role that acknowledging a visible stigma has on perceptions of a stigmatized person's psychological health (Hebl & Skorinko, 2005).

The benefits of acknowledging invisible stigmas are less obvious. Does acknowledging a stigma that is not outwardly apparent put others at ease, or might it do more harm than good? Findings from the psychological literature on revealing personal (non-stigmatizing) information suggest that those who reveal negative or sensitive information may foster doubts about their mental and emotional stability.

We conducted a study to assess the potential for acknowledgment to lead to divergent outcomes for those with visible, compared to invisible, stigmas. Specifically, we predicted that acknowledgment of a visible stigma would lead to positive impressions, whereas acknowledgment of an invisible stigma would lead to negative impressions of an experimental confederate.

Methods

Participants

- $N = 55$ undergraduate students (55% women)

Procedure

1. Participant arrived to the lab for a study on forming first impressions

2. Information exchange between participant and confederate

- Participant received a photo of a male confederate with no facial scars (*invisible condition*) or facial scars rendered with Photoshop (*visible condition*), and information regarding the confederate's supposed major, hometown, and experiences adjusting to college life.

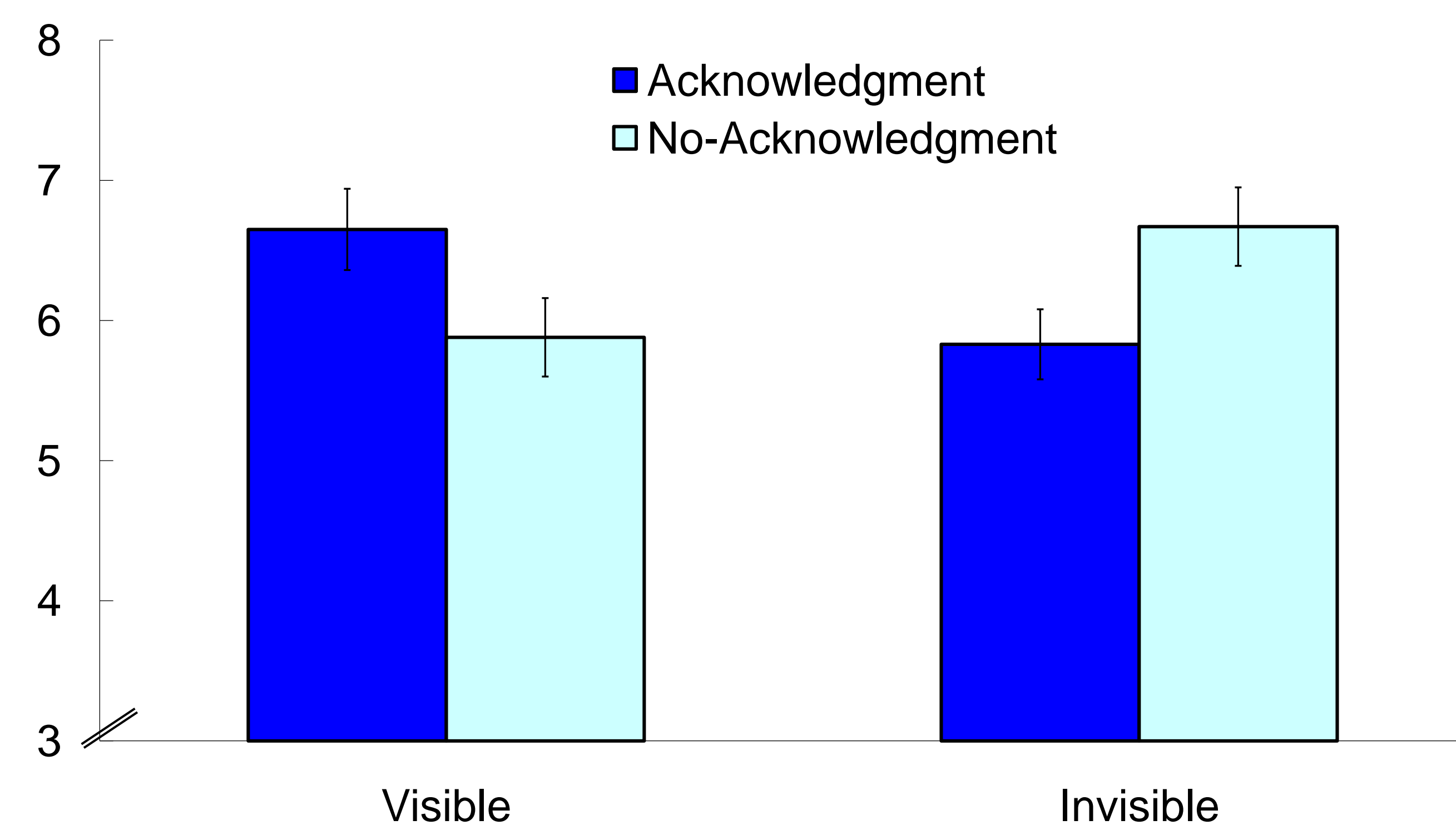
3. Acknowledgment manipulation

- **Acknowledgment:** "... I was born with a skin disease that causes unattractive scars. I used to worry about what people thought when they noticed the scars. I've learned to live with it, and I'm comfortable talking about it now."
- **No-Acknowledgment:** "... I started college with a scholarship but I'm in danger of losing my scholarship. I was worried about what other people would think, but I'm comfortable talking about it now."

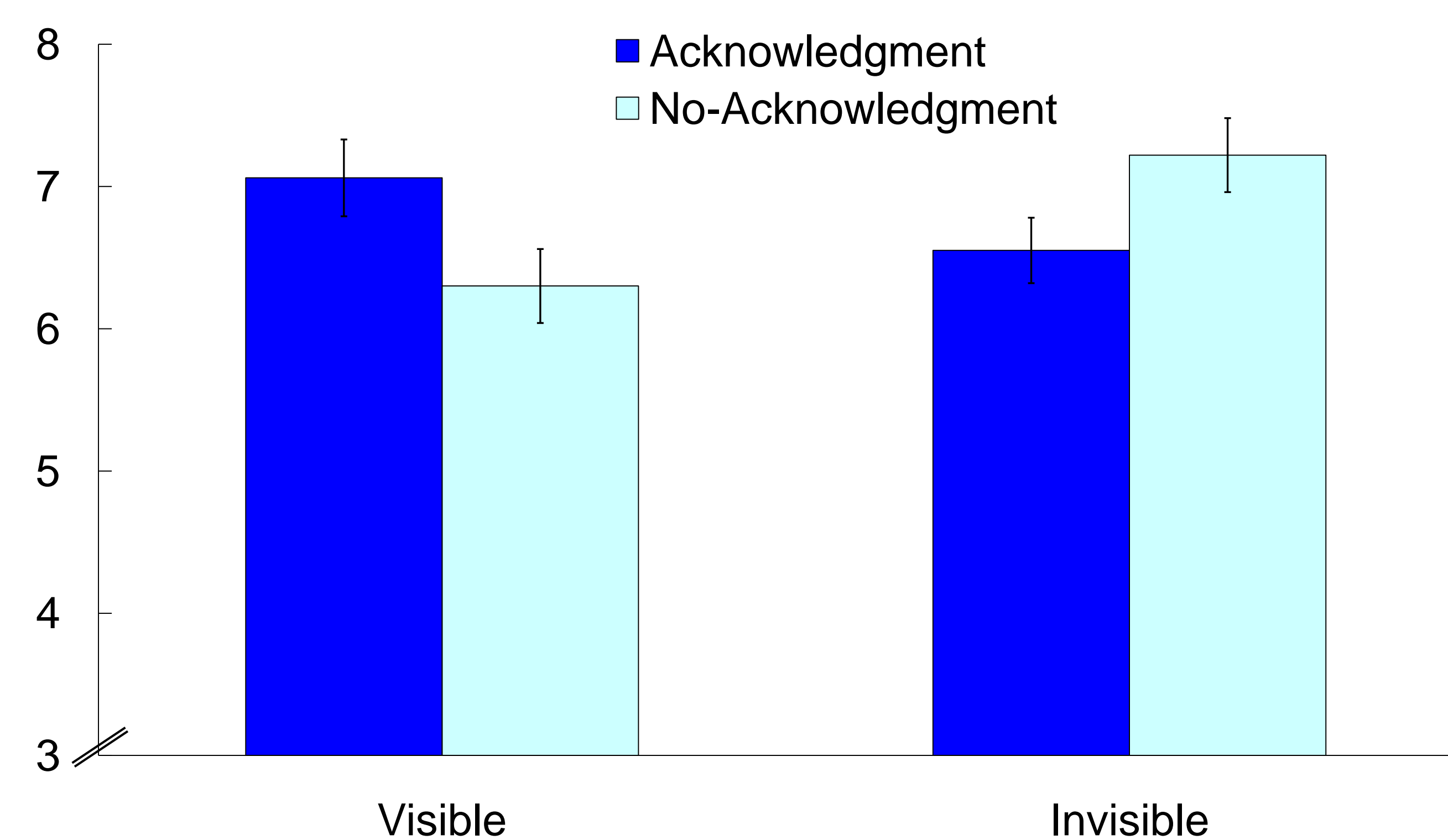
Dependent Measures

- Evaluations of confederate (e.g., how happy, likeable, competent does the other participant seem)
- Impression of confederate's psychological health (e.g., how psychologically balanced, emotionally needy, maladjusted does the other participant seem)

Evaluations of Confederate



Confederate's Psychological Health



Results

Evaluations of confederate

- The confederate in the visible/acknowledgment (V/A) condition was evaluated more positively than in the visible/no-acknowledgment (V/NA) condition, $F(1,46) = 4.14$, $p < .05$.

- Conversely, the confederate in the invisible/acknowledgment (I/A) condition was evaluated less positively than in the invisible/no-acknowledgment (I/NA) condition, $F(1,46) = 4.29$, $p < .04$.

Impressions of confederate's psychological health

- The confederate was believed to be psychologically healthier in the V/A condition than in the V/NA condition, $F(1,46) = 4.52$, $p < .04$.

- Conversely, the confederate was believed to be marginally less psychologically healthy in the I/A condition than in the I/NA condition, $F(1,46) = 3.28$, $p < .08$.

Mediational analyses

- Additional analyses indicated that impressions of the confederate's psychological health mediated the effect of the Visibility \times Acknowledgment interaction on evaluations of the confederate.

Discussion

Acknowledgment of a visible stigma resulted in more favorable impressions of the stigmatized individual. Conversely, disclosure of an invisible stigma led to less favorable impressions. Our findings suggest that while acknowledgment of a visible stigma can be an effective social strategy, the disclosure of an invisible stigma entails costs.

Furthermore, these effects appear to be due to changes in how psychologically healthy a stigmatized person is assumed to be (as a function of visibility and acknowledgment).

These findings are important because they provide evidence of the psychological process underlying the beneficial (or detrimental) effects of stigma acknowledgment. However, evidence of mediation, while suggestive, does not provide conclusive evidence of a causal relationship.

Current Research

For this reason, we are currently conducting an experiment in which impressions of a stigmatized confederate's psychological health are manipulated.

Procedures are similar to the previously reported study, except that, prior to exchanging information with the confederate, participants complete a bogus personality measure. Participants are informed that their personality scores will be viewed by the confederate, and they view the confederate's scores. These scores portray the confederate as *high* or *neutral* in psychological health.

- **High Psychological Health:** average extroversion, high agreeableness, realistic and positive self-esteem
- **Neutral Psychological Health:** average extroversion, moderate agreeableness, moderate self-esteem

Then, participants view a photo of a male confederate in a wheelchair. In the *acknowledgment* condition, he mentions using a wheelchair. In the *no-acknowledgment* condition, he does not mention using a wheelchair.

We hypothesize that acknowledgment will lead to more positive evaluations of the confederate, but only when the confederate is believed to be psychologically healthy. If confirmed, our research will explain the psychological process underlying benefits of stigma acknowledgment. As such, we will be more confident in recommending acknowledgment as a simple, yet effective, proactive coping strategy for individuals with (visible) stigmas.

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