



What Can Cognitive Media Studies Bring to Social Justice?

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Abstract: This special issue is dedicated to research on cognition, stigma, and inclusion in film and media studies. We aim to highlight existing research in cognitive media theory and social justice, and also to bring in diverse perspectives from adjacent fields to foster interdisciplinary research into the future. In bringing these voices together, we hope to demonstrate the diverse nature of current research in cognitive film and media theory, and to disentangle cognitive traditions from their place in a historic binary opposition of cognitive and cultural approaches in screen studies.

Keywords: cognitive film theory, cognitive media studies, equality and diversity, inclusion, interdisciplinarity, social justice, stigma

This special issue is dedicated to research on cognition, stigma, and inclusion in film and media studies. We aim to highlight existing research in cognitive media theory and social justice, and also to bring in diverse perspectives from adjacent fields to foster interdisciplinary research into the future. In bringing these voices together, we hope to demonstrate the diverse nature of current research in cognitive film and media theory, and to disentangle cognitive traditions from their place in a historic binary opposition of cognitive and cultural approaches in screen studies. This is a notion with a long history, perhaps most clearly articulated by Robert Stam (2000, 241), who wrote in his influential chapter on cognitive and analytic theory that “in cognitive theory, a raceless, genderless, classless understander/interpreter encounters abstract schemata.”

In this chapter, Stam represented a prevalent fear of naturalizing discourses and the harm they could do to the social justice aims of mainstream film theory—namely, the fear that striving to understand universal features of the mind or the underlying mechanisms that carry cultural variation is a threat to diversity. This fear partly derives from a difference between the scientifically descriptive aims of cognitive theory and the politically prescriptive aims of much film theory and screen studies. For many scholars in cultural studies, the descriptive, explanatory aspect of cognitive theory has been overstated as a means to present acts of interpretation as neutral or objective, or as a meaningful alternative to the existing grand theories underscoring the evaluative work of screen studies, including the Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches that Noël Carroll (1988) critiqued

in *Mystifying Movies*. Meanwhile, many cognitivists find value in attempting to set aside ethics and politics in investigation of a given issue, which should not preclude acknowledgment of authorial positionality or the later application of findings to a political argument; nor does such an endeavor make any empirically derived claims unimpeachably “neutral.”¹

These misconceptions set up an enduring false dichotomy between apparently “universalizing” cognitive film theory and “particularizing” screen theory, resulting in a disciplinary boundary that this issue contests and looks beyond. The divisions perceived between these approaches are, in fact, more porous than one might expect on encountering either side of this debate. For example, bell hooks (1992, 115–131) noted that the grand theories that screen theory relied upon were equally universalizing (in particular, psychoanalysis) and often elided other aspects of identity such as race. Early cognitivists including David Bordwell (1989, 135–137) also made note of evident cultural variability in the schemata they were theorizing. Theoretical focus on differences and commonalities across populations is not mutually exclusive; in fact, acknowledging and analyzing both are necessary for mapping and evaluating mechanisms of stigmatization and social exclusion through media.

At its foundation, cognitivism is an interdisciplinary project that comparatively invites diverse forms of evidence from research methods addressed to the mind and all its interactivities (see Nannicelli and Taberham 2014). In the following, we discuss contentions around the boundaries of cognitive interdisciplinarity. We argue that empirical methods and other modes of analysis addressed to cultural variation and politics offer differing tools that can be fruitfully brought together; we thus demonstrate the great potential in cognitive media theory for further research on social justice. This issue highlights some of the current work already performed at such a cross-disciplinary juncture.

We begin by historicizing a narrative of opposition between cognitive and cultural approaches in film and media studies (across screen theory, cultural studies, and critical theory). We point to some of the persistent anxieties on either side and some genuine difficulties in aligning the goals of each. In each case, we locate points where further collaboration across disciplines could be productive in addressing social justice on-screen. We end with an articulation of our own goals for this issue, including accounts of stigma, inclusivity, and related concepts, and how they are motivated by our contributors. We thereby move from historical and theoretical concerns toward a set of principles that might be put to practice in the present.

One might discern the negotiation of three voices in the ensuing article, too, given that the co-editors of this issue each identify as cognitivists in different ways: an ethicist with an interest in moral and cognitive uncertainties and how they are resolved in media, a film theorist influenced both by the “second generation” of emotion-focused cognitive researchers as well

as embodied cognition paradigms, and a practice-led researcher interested in the pragmatics of stigma reduction in media-making. This plurality of perspectives, we hope, comes together to demonstrate an approach to cognitive interdisciplinarity that characterizes the issue.

Between Cognitive Film Theory and Screen Theory

When introducing students to cognitive film theory, presumably many of those within the cognitive community will have emphasized features of the mind shared by humans. This focus on human nature, and on scientific explanation, is largely what has made cognitive film theory controversial in the humanities. Yet investigating the cognition and affect brought to screen media has generated a great deal of valuable research on some features of human psychology that are relevant to the experience of watching stories on-screen and that are also relevant to questions of stigma and inclusion. Cognitive film theory, we believe, ought to be seen as complementary rather than opposed to the differences, divergences, and alterities that screen theory has often focused upon. For example, Dan Flory's important work on racialized disgust across film history, from *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) to *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), draws on research from cognitive psychology and philosophy to explore how the negative emotion of disgust is used to fuel antipathy felt toward villains in film, who are typically racialized, as well as the cinematic uses of moral and aesthetic disgust in challenging racism (e.g., Flory 2016, 2019, 2021, 2023).² He thereby demonstrates how making sense of film is intrinsically bonded with problematic aspects of cognition that call for further attention, including biases and harmful ideologies such as white supremacy (see also Smith 2022, 256–257).

With regard to the opposition between cognitive film theory and screen theory, we identify four primary contentions that have been raised against cognitive theory's capacity to address the politics of screen media: (1) cognitivists have relied too heavily on the figure of a rational viewer actively making sense of screen media at the expense of understanding those aspects of cognition that are less rational; (2) cognitivists omit history and culture and thereby misconstrue the variability and politics of cognition; (3) cognitivists overvalue empirical forms of evidence to the detriment of other methods and knowledge communities; and (4) cognitivists conceive of science as politically neutral. However, cognitive film and media theory is a tradition with a long history involving many debates over generations of scholars in relation to these points. While each point may contain a kernel of truth, crucially each is a matter of emphasis, not of doctrine. The misleading strawman, at this oppositional level of discourse, is to assume an either/or, true or false position in each case, when in fact all disciplines and methods necessarily choose to emphasize some kinds of knowledge at the expense of others; thence the value of interdisciplinarity that is showcased across the ensuing articles.

Fully mapping shifts and tendencies in cognitive film theory is a complex endeavor, and requires more space than is available to us in this introduction. Instead, we argue that the oppositional approach has been both misleading and limiting, and persists today in theoretical, methodological, institutional, and pedagogical contexts that sequester cognitivism from other interests in the arts and the humanities. Cognitive theory is in fact more ecumenical than these grand oppositions would suggest. It includes scientists and philosophers of very different backgrounds; it accommodates reasoned humanities essays as much as it does empirically gathered data. But it also emphasizes the value of empirical work in the cognitive sciences as the starting point to reason from. Cognitive media studies has thereby accentuated what is observably stable in individuals more than culturally mutable across populations, albeit again *de-emphasizing* rather than denying the influence of culture and with less attention paid to differences in, for instance, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and disability, which this special issue addresses. This has led to a *rhetorical* emphasis on psychological phenomena that often attempts to locate a politically neutral position, but does not theoretically deny its own positionality.

These emphases need not be understood as weaknesses, but as defined areas of study that are even stronger in concert with fields of differing emphases, such as, for example, anthropology's more granular focus on diverse cultural phenomena, or newer, more politically engaged research in stigma studies. Our position, therefore, is not that cognitivism has to change. Nor do we argue that cultural studies and screen theory are inferior for not embracing cognitivism. Rather, cognitive film and media theory can retain its methodological focus on empirical studies and its analytical rigors, and yet also adapt approaches from cultural studies to address political problems. Cultural studies can likewise consider cognitive models to further explore the multi-layered intricacies of stigma and inclusivity in media production and reception. In this special issue, Patrick Colm Hogan's analysis of *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Biyi Bandele, 2013), for example, brings together postcolonial and cognitive theory.

The perceived move to quarantine political concerns from cognitive film analysis is not purely imaginary, however. From its beginnings, cognitive film theory was conceptualized in opposition to the Marxist critical theory of screen studies, which was seen as overly politicized by some cognitive film theorists. Cognitivists allowed for a new strand of research on film to be apolitical. Yet for critics such as Stam, this move was seen as conservative and reactionary, and so as tacitly political after all.

To understand Stam's objection, consider for a moment the descriptive statements "not all men are abusive" and "non-whites can be racist too," which present as self-evident truth claims but actually make a rhetorically prescriptive case about what is worthy of attention and investigation. While these remarks do not represent majority discourses in cognitive film

theory, they do help to illustrate Stam's objection to rhetorics of observation and description that present as universal rather than positional: even in choosing what to emphasize as foundational to human nature, or what is worthy of closer study, political choices are made. We know more about men's health than women's health, for example, due to the culturally informed parameters of what scientists have chosen to study over the centuries; this makes it hard to support either the notion that empirical choices can ever be truly neutral, or the epistemic case that scientifically derived observations represent the sum of reliable human knowledge.³ Few cognitivists would make either claim; however, these perceptions of the over-extension of scientific methods have resulted in a recurring challenge for cognitive theorists working in the humanities, which remains today—to defend attempts to describe mental mechanisms against the charge of inherent conservatism.

At their foundation, then, cognitive film theory and screen theory did define themselves in opposition to one another—perhaps excessively so, and in ways that might have hindered veins of research in stigma and inclusion from reaching their full potential. Yet we are evidently not alone in calling for the building of more bridges between the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities to properly address issues in social justice. For example, Ib Bondebjerg (2015) argues that such an interdisciplinary approach is essential for understanding the way cognition and emotion operate in the study of film, television, and social media, and how media texts can trigger bias, prejudice, and discrimination. He urges media scholars to embrace an interdisciplinary agenda that explores the biological, cultural, and social layers of spectatorship, building on C.P. Snow's (1965) classic call for a dialogue between the sciences and humanities in order to address the world's problems—what Snow refers to as a “third culture.” Murray Smith (2017) carefully explores how such a third cultural or naturalized approach to film can be found, for example, in the study of the emotions of the film-viewing experience, drawing on ideas from the arts, the humanities, and the sciences. The open-minded receptivity of these perspectives paves a way for new interdisciplinary encounters, as explored in this issue.

Between Inclusivity and Assimilation

Similarly to Bondebjerg, Snow, and Smith, we have made a very compatibilizing case regarding diverse research *means* across cognitive and cultural studies, empirical methods, and screen analysis, but one could also ask how we might align the different political *ends* these approaches have in mind. Even where research methods are compatible, the socio-political use they are put to is not always so accordant.

On the whole, in those corners of cognitive media studies that explore its political applications, this has evinced an interest in how audiovisual media can support prosocial goals, how people come to care about hy-

pothetical others through media, perhaps especially via relations to fictive characters (Eden and Grizzard 2023), and how those engagements might generalize toward dispositional and/or behavioral changes over longer periods of time (Oliver 2023), often called “cultivation” (Bilandzic 2023). This work tends to be interested in effects *across* an individual’s media engagements more so than the analysis of singular texts. Given the importance of these questions in cognitive media studies, we have included an introduction to an influential yet potentially under-utilized theory at the beginning of this issue: Edward Schiappa’s parasocial contact hypothesis, which illuminates the conditions of interactivity between viewer and screen character that may reduce prejudice and foster inclusivity.

Jane Stadler (2022) summarizes a majority approach to cognition and social justice in reference to Karen Stenner and Jonathan Haidt’s (2018) work on authoritarianism in the media. She writes: “Democracy, compassion, and tolerance might be better served by stories that reinforce established institutions and shared rituals . . . Narratives that foreground difference, diversity, and multiculturalism provoke intolerance and fear of ‘the other’ among those who value oneness, sameness, and stability” (Stadler 2022, 198). A similar emphasis can be found in the work of prominent cognitivists such as Carl Plantinga (2018) and Noël Carroll (2002), who posit narrative arts’ capacity for both moral education and the clarification of existing moral positions when stories elaborate on character virtues and vices. Changing the identity of characters who exhibit virtues and vices can thereby attempt to modify broader identity schemas (for an example that looks closely at the politics of race and characterization, see Lalita Pandit Hogan’s discussion of *Othello* adaptations in this issue). Many of these traditions draw on research in moral cognition, such as Haidt’s social intuitionism and moral foundations theory.

While the volumes of work on media’s capacity to productively modify or expand group identity is inestimably valuable, one could reasonably object that a sustained focus on the needs of a potentially intolerant spectator delimits what screen arts can offer and holds hostage expressions of wider difference for fear of misinterpretation. This would be a bad, homogenizing result for the diversity of stories that different communities can tell, or need to tell, as it would appear to agree to the demands of intolerant media users to put their needs first at the expense of diverse forms of expression. The problem arises from the impulse to collect evidence for the best media mechanisms for attitudinal change: what of those who do not need to change their attitudes? What of those who simply need their own stories reflecting their own voices, their own being in time and place? Is minority media then reduced to the singular function of outreach to others, to be evaluated against its capacity for what Suzanne Keen (2007, 159) calls “ambassadorial empathy”?

To crystallize some of the implicit rifts between cognitive studies and other fields invested in political media, including forms of critical theory,

one could take an example such as the antisocial turn in queer theory. This intervention, beginning with Leo Bersani's (1987) "Is the Rectum a Grave?", rejects recuperative aims such as "recognition" and "pride" that collaborate with heteronormative cultures in striving to integrate with them, updating normative hierarchies and placing the burden of assimilative progress on the heroic disruptions of queer sexualities. Lee Edelman's (2004) later provocation in *No Future* is pivotal to this strand of theory: the appeal to embrace rather than resist an anti-positionality historically foisted on queer subjects in a world that endlessly defers progress to tomorrow, to children, to the normative temporalities Edelman dubs "reproductive futurism." *No Future* requests the reader agree to a condition of perpetual rivalry where, according to José Esteban Muñoz's intersectional critique, the gay white man must make an "antirelational" case for his difference in opposition to "contamination by race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference" (2006, 825).

Other scholars such as Lauren Berlant and Jack Halberstam are less forthrightly nihilist and retain interest in progressive politics (which implicates some manner of deliberative futurity) while pointing in various ways to the centrality of queer negativity—as affectively driven political intervention, as expression of negative experiences, or as alternative art, in Halberstam's words, "high and low cultural productions of a funky, nasty, over the top and thoroughly accessible queer negativity" (2008, 154). This includes expressions of gender as well as sexual difference, explored more recently in Hil Malatino's (2022) *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*. Thence, we could distinguish the emphasis on "counter-intuitive and patently queer forms of negative knowing" (Halberstam 2008, 140–141) in affect theory from a strong thesis derived from queer negativity—the antisocial position that ergo we ought to strive for a more divided world to protect those differences, at once disarming the concerns of social justice that one may presume to be at the heart of much critical theory. Queer theory provides just one example, too, although note that there are many other explicit divergences of this kind; consider work in various forms of Afro-pessimism (cf. Wilderson III 2020) that stress the fixity of structural exclusions and permanency of slavery as a "social death," rather than surveying means for "emancipation" or striving for equality.

Of course, this is just one historic contention within the much broader field of queer theory, with its own highly explorative and experimental approach to research and writing—much of which is not so committed to negative emotions, but instead pushes back against erroneous notions of normative sexualities and pushes understandings of both gender and sexuality liberally outward, often joyously. This work would be more compatible with the aims of cognitive researchers working on issues of social justice; however, the antisocial tradition does bring to the fore conflicts

between political commitments and theoretical aims. We raise them here so that we may address them.

Between Co-operation and Confrontation

So, the goal of antisocial theory is not a world of more inclusive harmony but one that fights for oppositional differences and radical alterities. These affect theories are motivated in part by the perceived threat that discourses advocating prosocial inclusivity betray their own homogenizing impulses. Their various resistances present a challenge to what some writers in cognitive theory might take to be self-evident goals: the desirability of media that deigns to help forge a world of more inclusivity and less stigma. In problematizing the universal subject that cognitive theory often relies upon, as an ideal that matches cognitive norms, these theories also broach the broader contention of *who media should serve*. Even the notion that liberal spectators (not just intolerant spectators) ought to encounter a range of human differences presumes benefits to a normative spectator. Emphasizing universals without contextualizing them can lead to generalized prescriptions of what *everyone* needs.

Yet confrontation is not necessarily virtuous or emancipatory either. From our perspective, a world of more inclusive discourses, as projected in the humanist leanings of the cognitive theories, is one in which distinctiveness might flourish without fear of stigmatizing retaliation. Broader acceptance of human difference in turn emboldens a greater range of voices and expressions of being, including the expression of negative experiences and difficult feelings.⁴ With cultural and institutional shifts to invite a greater range of storytellers and communicators—such as, for example, diversity and inclusion guidelines by the BBC and the British Film Institute, or consultative approaches facilitated by national peak bodies such as First Nations Media Australia—comes a more diverse media and more diverse forms of expression, which are simply capable of doing more things with screen arts: not just persuading people to care about one another, but expressing and exploring a wide range of lived experiences and inter-group dynamics (for further examples, see Mette Hjort's Roundtable contribution on care and public value and Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo's consideration of new works in Black American cinema).

Social psychologists within the field of inter-group relations also note that key benefits arise from embracing inter-group differences and clearly demarcating certain out-groups, while still emphasizing inter-group commonalities. One benefit pertains to Gordon Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis and Schiappa and colleagues' (2005) parasocial contact hypothesis. Both argue that to reduce inter-group prejudice (in life and in media spectatorship, respectively), it is paramount to foster inter-group co-operation that relies on similarities and differences between the involved in-group and out-group. Degrees, manifestations, and consequences of such similarities and differences are highly complex and vary depending on social,

cultural, political, economic, and historical contexts. “Co-operation” and “similarity” in this context entail in-groups and out-groups having the same social status (neither feels socially inferior or superior) and collaborating toward a common goal. “Difference” means that in-groups and out-groups must maintain their social identity, or else attempts to reduce inter-group prejudice are unlikely to be successful.⁵

Any group is generally resistant to renouncing, redefining, or sharing its salient identity, which is due to the fact that the construction and preservation of social identity operates through inter-group distinction in the first place (Gaertner et al. 2010). Therefore, when media de-emphasize inter-group distinction to foreground similarities, certain viewers from both represented groups may simply reject these attempts. For example, aiming for “color-blindness” in character and representation can be more likely to raise suspicion and further prejudice (Jowett 2018; Otten and Matschke 2008, 341; see also Amy Cook’s Roundtable contribution in this special issue for further consideration on the politics of casting). Simply put, flattening differences and diversity in media to surface-level acts of representation is not reflective of the role that identity plays in lived experiences. Where lived experience is ignored as part of social identity—as in this case—it is counterproductive.

Note too that some inter-group distinctions and resultant acts of discrimination are necessary for a greater good, including, for instance, legally managing conditions for perpetrators of violent crime. Media must also be able to represent and consider the ramifications of inter-group separability in these cases (as in much of the true crime genre). The long history of popular screen stories devoted to fascination with serial killers, for example, presents a range of discourses regarding the social norms of “justifiable” stigmatization, including its psychology, its effects, and its extent. Some cases also reveal a more problematic public ambivalence regarding the extent of inclusion and stigmatization for particular groups. An article by Kuansong Victor Zhuang, Sze-Hwee Jace Tay, and Gerard Goggin in this issue explores ableist attitudes and ambivalent boundaries in relation to the medical model of disability, using depictions of autism in *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (ENA, 2022) as a primary case.

Our work in this special issue thus supports cognitive theoretical orientations that broadly work toward a future of less stigma, more diversity, and more equity and inclusion, rather than the pessimistic view that conflict will or should endure. Yet any such orientation must also include attentiveness to the experiential worlds that give rise to inter-group conflicts, and cannot simply will away or ignore inter-group differences. Theories built on opposition to caring about the future or equality, often branded with “negativity,” “antisociality,” or “pessimism,” may embed their own naturalizing thesis in arguing for the inexorability of exclusion within a sole facet of experience or identity; however, they also find new ways of writing difficult feelings and ideas, and as situated expressions

of the experience of stigma, abuse, and abjection, they are worth listening to. In honestly encountering the spiky, uncomfortable specifics that critical fields survey, the remit of cognitive media ethics could grow outward—and vice versa. Where cognitive theory does not encounter and understand these experiences as lived (with all the complications to neat universals a lifeworld entails), at worst it can proffer simplistic solutions to entrenched problems.

Listening and scrutiny across disciplines remain intellectually important, even in spaces where much effort is put into maintaining boundaries between theoretical traditions and the identities that attach to them. Given the birth of cognitive film theory as a provocation within screen studies, cognitivists should likewise understand the value of well-targeted provocations in paving the way for new and more rigorous approaches. This is true of provocations that appear to push interlocutors away, in theory as in art and media practice. It is evident to us, at least, that a lot more could be done with cognitive theory, not only to document how people come to care about others, but also to interrogate the many other politically dynamic functions of screen media—and for more audiences than can be reached in reference to a normative spectator.

On Co-operation between Disciplines

This leads us back to our call for further collaboration across cognitive media studies and cultural studies. There is much more to be learned at their intersection, and any resultant theory of political media, social justice, inclusivity, or stigma would be enriched not only by encountering the various kinds of evidence each field draws from. It would also be enriched by encountering differences in the political agendas that are equally well-reasoned and well-informed across these fields, and the arguments, ideologies, and positions they implicitly share.

A tension clearly remains, however, and we must acknowledge that it is not easy to build these bridges with simple exhortations to interdisciplinary co-operation: while many cognitivists will admit a degree of interdisciplinarity, most will not want to engage with disciplines they believe to be peddling pseudoscience. Classical psychoanalysis, for example, might be seen to rely upon a set of unempirical claims, which stands in contrast to contemporary psychoanalytic approaches that employ empirical methods. Even if some branches of psychoanalytical theory remain grounded in claims made by Freud with scant evidence, there are observations about the world collected by psychoanalysts that can be fruitfully compared against cognitive methods—not to crown one knowledge world as primary, but to locate points of agreement to be brought forward. For example, Vaage (forthcoming) argues that psychoanalytically informed feminist film theorists made valuable observations about the empowering nature of watching female avengers on-screen, and she turns to the psychology and philosophy of emotion to expand on the productive func-

tions of anger in stigma reduction for rape survivors as a continuation of this branch of film theory, thus expanding the interdisciplinary reach of cognitive film studies.

So, one need not agree with all the goals or presuppositions of a theory, or all the conclusions of an author, to locate their value. All interdisciplinary approaches must choose their boundaries, put aside claims taken to be untrue to progress their own line of inquiry (or, with less hostility, put aside claims deemed to be less fertile than others), and at least consider the potential limitations of including unverifiable claims; but this should not excuse one from deep reading to locate insights across fields that have a stake in one's specialism. This is especially true in any study that presumes to speak for or about a community without hearing from that community, with phenomenal regard to their own understanding of their own experiences. It is also why the cross-disciplinary integration of different manners of evidence from fields such as anthropology and phenomenology remains important in augmenting cognitive accounts in film and media studies—a case made by Robert Lemelson and Annie Tucker in this issue's Roundtable.

Perhaps the borders of cognitive interdisciplinarity have been too narrow, fortifying a homogenized view of the media that matter. We do not advocate that all cognitivists must engage with any specific critical theory, and we recognize the value of research into underlying cognitive mechanisms; yet there is a new, wide field open to explore when the politically disinterested study of cognition collaborates more open-mindedly with approaches invested in cultural specifics, rather than rigidly defending one type of research as the only serious scholarly agenda. This includes fields such as cultural psychology as much as it does more polemical work in screen studies and critical theory. It also includes diverse and novel methods addressed to new screen technologies. For example, in this special issue Robert G. McNamara and Pia Tikka investigate the effects of computer-generated characters and ChatGPT4 on biases in processing asylum-seeker narratives. Research such as this forges new directions for cognitive and cultural agendas addressed to new moving-image media.

Key Premises in Stigma and Inclusivity

For the purposes of this special issue, and in light of the perspectives surveyed above, we now turn to highlight three cross-disciplinary premises for scholars who engage in the study of media and inclusivity. They pertain to the operations of stigma, social identity formation, and intersecting social identities in audiences. These premises are not prescriptive or exhaustive. Rather, they appear to be common terms of reference that, in one shape or another, recur across the articles in this special issue. They also constitute areas of concern addressed in fields that study prejudice, bias, sociopolitical conflicts, diversity, and inclusion. These include social cognition studies, stigma studies, ethnography, health studies, disability studies, post-colonial studies, gender studies, queer studies, and psychosocial studies.

The first premise is that *stigma* entails social separation and exclusion. Stigma occurs when a particular social group is rejected, devalued, ignored, or oppressed because of associated group attributes, which negatively affects the group members' social status, social mobility, economic status, well-being, self-esteem, self-perception, group identification, motivation, social interaction, and achievement-based performance (Goffman 1963; Levin and Van Laar 2006). Figure 1 shows the four constituent mechanisms of stigma (Link and Phelan 2001). Through labeling, social groups are identified in a generalized and oversimplified manner. Through stereotyping, the stigmatized group is associated with personality traits that are undesirable, leading to negative attitudes toward them. Stereotyping is linked to separation, which delineates the binary of “us,” the “normal” people (in-group), versus “them,” the “abnormal” people (out-group). The social manifestation of this phenomenon is discrimination, through which the stigmatized group is subjected to harmful behavior (for example, racist microaggressions) and social conditions (for example, disadvantageous policies).

Fueled by discriminatory social conditions and corresponding dispositions in media content creators, media representations play a significant role in labeling, stereotyping, and separation through narrative and audiovisual means. At the same time, media can reduce stigma by fostering inclusion, which involves the deconstruction of divisive social boundaries and status hierarchies. For example, Brylla (2023) develops a variety of models by which media texts can reconfigure labeling, reduce the activation of stigmatizing stereotypes, and mitigate the formation of clearly delineated binaries that separate in-groups and out-groups.

The second premise is that *social identity formation* is the foundation of stigma and social exclusion, yet can also be instrumentalized for social inclusion. Individuals categorize themselves and others as belonging to various groups based on gender, ethnicity, profession, religion, or any other significant affiliation, making group belonging an essential part of a person's sense of their own social identity, often in contrast to other people's

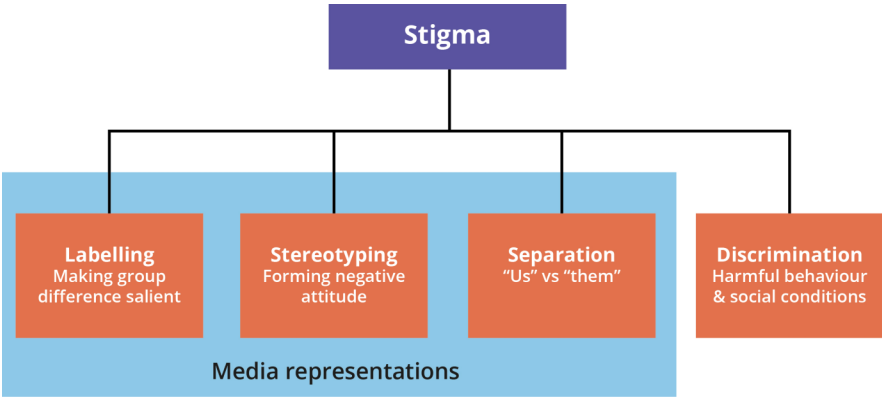


Figure 1. Mechanisms of Stigma (adapted from Link and Phelan 2001)

social identities (Tajfel and Turner 1979). This has a significant impact on cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses when perceiving other people in life as in media texts. Some of these responses include social categorization, stereotype activation, emotion generation, attitude formation, and situational engagement with others.

The salience of social identity categories depends on three aspects (Bodenhausen and Macrae 1998, 11): the first is *context*, which refers to an observed person's relation to the social backdrop in a given situation (including mediated situations). The second is *priming*, through which recently or chronically used categories tend to influence category perception. In relation to media content, category-priming takes place through the use of paratexts, such as trailers, synopses, title sequences, the repeated media portrayal of particular categories, exposure to other cultural narratives in one's communities, or an unrelated activity undertaken before viewing. The third aspect is the *momentary goal* of the observer, which addresses the relevance of the social category to the perceiver's goal in a certain situation. For example, film narratives often employ perspective-taking strategies to align the spectator with a certain character's goals, which can render corresponding on-screen categories more salient. Or, the viewer can simply have the goal of lifting their mood by perceiving an on-screen social category that they associate with positive emotions.

Humans are, however, complex amalgamations of *multiple* social identities, and any of these can be made contextually salient in media narratives. Thus, our third premise is that to understand stigma and inclusivity in media texts, it is important to study *intersecting social identities* through concepts such as multiple social categorization (e.g., Crisp and Hewstone 2006) or intersectionality (e.g., Crenshaw 1991). While many disciplines study the complex interactions and interdependencies in intersecting social identities, a key disciplinary difference is how the intersection is evaluated. For example, cultural studies have tended to examine how this intersection exacerbates stigma and exclusion. The "double jeopardy" hypothesis holds that Black women and older Black Americans experience increased stigma due to the overlap of two stigmatized categories: ethnicity intersected with gender and age, respectively (Bazargan et al. 2023; Crenshaw 1991; Hancock and Daigle 2021). By implication, this results in the reverse effect of "multiple advantage" for other groups, such as young white men (Mügge and Erzeel 2016). Applied to media representations, these concepts are valuable for studying how on-screen representations may feature additive, linear combinations of social categories and converging stereotype tropes that reinforce stigma (Singh et al. 1997). Tina M. Harris, Srividya Ramasubramanian, and Omotayo O. Banjo expand on these issues of intersectionality in the ensuing Roundtable.

Social psychologists, however, have also investigated how intersecting social identities can *reduce* stigma. Four such stigma-reduction models are adapted by Brylla (2023) to media studies and media practice:

1. “Surprising category combination” involves the unexpected combination of identity categories, in the hopes that a viewer may perceive a new, emergent, and intersected identity that mitigates reliance on stigmatizing stereotypes (see Crisp 2010). For example, films including *37 Seconds* (Hikari, 2019) and *Pulse* (Stevie Cruz-Martin, 2017) narrativize seldom-explored intersections of disability and sexuality.
2. “Cross-categorization” fosters a sense of inclusion toward out-group characters based on an additional, shared in-group identity (see Crisp et al. 2003). For example, *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* (Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn, 2019) explores an uneasy building of trust between Kwakwaka’wakw woman Rosie and Áila, who is Blackfoot and Sámi; while they come from different social classes and backgrounds, an implicit shared identity helps them navigate an instance of domestic assault.
3. “Dual identity” emphasizes a new, superordinate, and common in-group category that the in-group viewer and out-group character belong to while simultaneously preserving the salience of the original in-group–out-group distinction (see Dovidio et al. 1998). The documentary *The Masses* (Dorothy Allen-Pickard, 2019), for instance, represents a Bangladeshi Muslim, a Nigerian Christian, and an English football fan, acknowledges their distinct ethnic and religious categories, and retains a strong emphasis on their common identity as Londoners.
4. “Decategorization” represents the screen character through at least five unrelated social identities in combination with personal relatability, both of which render them a unique, complex, and rounded individual that the viewer cannot easily categorize and thus stigmatize (see Miller and Brewer 1984). The TV drama *I May Destroy You* (BBC One and HBO, 2020), for example, portrays a character who is a Black woman, a writer, a rape victim, a daughter, and a friend, thus mitigating stereotype activation in any of these categories.

All of these techniques in various ways motivate a complexifying view of others by signaling a multiplicity of social identities. They aim to supplant the simplifications of stigma and stereotyping with a more generous view of others’ social complexity, which is key to many treatises on narrative ethics (cf. Moss-Wellington 2019, 2021).

Lastly, for a special issue such as this one, one must also account for the composition of intersecting social identities in the role of the media researcher—not just in a hypothetical perceiver of media texts. Does the scholar share or not share any social identities with the media characters and social groups they study? Does the scholar assume a spectator composed of the same or different social identities to them? How may this inform their implicit or explicit bias in assessing the media text’s narrative

and aesthetic elements? Establishing positionality allows the researcher to understand their own implicit biases not only toward the research design, but also toward the very social groups about whom they are writing. It may also mitigate any third-person effect—the impression that media has a stronger effect on others rather than on themselves (Potter 2012, 74). For the reader, positionality illuminates the researcher's goals, their selection and analysis of case studies, and their selection and synthesis of particular ideas and models.

Conclusion

One value of cognitive media theory is its interdisciplinary orientation. Cognitivism's openness to collisions of knowledge worlds that pave new directions for intellectual inquiry is one of its key strengths. We call for a broadening continuation of this interdisciplinary project, yet we do not only call for further studies of stigma and inclusion in media by turning to the sciences; we also encourage building bridges between disciplines that have traditionally excluded each other within the humanities. Furthermore, when we call for collaboration across these complementary fields, we do not suggest that all future studies must be interdisciplinary to have value, only that researchers can always benefit from consulting findings in other disciplines. This helps us remain aware of limitations as well as opportunities within our respective fields. It stops us from being too sure in those places where we should not be.

All this points to the need not simply to gather more evidence for stigma, stereotyping, and division, but to find new models to address their impact on us, to locate new paths forward, and, ultimately, to *limit* the many abuses of power that have become so familiar in our politically mediated worlds. We believe that cognitive theory's foundational orientation as an openness to innovative interdisciplinary collaboration, with keen interest in the differing kinds of evidence each field gathers and the knowledge worlds that result, will remain valuable toward these ends. We hope that this special issue speaks in some small way to that work and to what cognitive media studies can bring to issues of social justice.

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Notes

¹ Positionality in research here refers to the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions, as well as their assumptions about human nature (Holmes 2020). These assumptions include beliefs about what social reality is, how we can understand it, and how we interact with and relate to it—what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) referred to as a "habitus."

² See also Flory's contribution to the Roundtable in this special issue, which brings together diverse disciplines, methodologies, and scholars with a stake in cognition and social justice.

³ Likewise, there are problems in generalizing from a Western film canon, or from the cognitive responses of WEIRD subjects (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic), to a human nature per se (Henrich et al. 2010).

⁴ In the more radical positions, there can be no real acts of resistance in rhetorics of prosocial inclusivity or incremental reforms that are assimilative in nature and that co-operate with entrenched powers in the liberal state; however, we believe that pitting social justice against radical politics in this way is another false binary and strawman, as their aims are not opposed.

⁵ Note, too, that some struggle to find a sense of belonging with any group or choose to resist potentially salient group identities.

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