

# *Stigma, Trauma and Resilience During COVID-19 in China*

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**Abstract:** The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic has caused a serious stigma in China. The purpose of this study was to explore the stigma in China against the background of COVID-19 and analyze its causes. This study also explores the negative consequences of trauma caused by stigma on people. Moreover, it explored the reasons for wound relief and identified the elements of resilience. Through analysis of existing relevant literature, it was found that the stigmatization phenomenon in China during COVID-19 was mainly targeted at people, patients, and medical staff in areas with severe epidemic situations. The main reasons for the emergence of stigma are improper information content used in mass media reporting and social media dissemination. The impact of trauma on people is in terms of self-identity and self-esteem, self-behaviour, and physical and mental health. Finally, the main factors contributing to resilience are family support, policy support, and personal regulation.

**Keywords:** stigma, trauma, resilience, COVID-19

## **1. Introduction**

Since December 2019, the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has spread rapidly around the world, posing a huge threat to global public health and leading to a serious economic downturn. China was initially hit hard by the epidemic. Throughout human history, experience has shown that during pandemics, prejudice can often spread alongside the virus. Examples of this include the labelling of COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus,” which has given rise to regional discrimination, as well as the use of the racial label “yellow race virus” [1]. Especially those infected with COVID-19 have experienced various forms of humiliation and discrimination, leading to psychological trauma. The social stigma suffered by COVID-19 patients has a broad impact on their physical and mental health and social status. China has a large population, and the negative emotions caused by stigma will inevitably affect the vast majority of the Chinese people and then affect all aspects of society. In such a situation, research needs to explore the concept and role of resilience in-depth and understand its importance in psychological trauma treatment. Resilience refers to the ability of individuals to gradually recover their normal state and function after appropriate adaptation and coping strategies under adversity and stress. It is a complex and diversified individual difference behaviour manifestation. Therefore, the author further studies the formation and components of resilience and explores the formation process and factors of resilience to help society understand the importance of psychological trauma treatment, as well as the influence and mechanism of resilience components, to provide a good reference for social mental health.

By reviewing and analyzing the existing literature, the purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of stigma in China in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and analyze its causes. It also explores the relationship between stigma and trauma and what kind of trauma stigma causes. Finally, it explores the reasons for trauma relief and draws the elements of resilience.

First, this paper discusses the issue of stigmatization in depth. As a social event, the formation and evolution of the stigma phenomenon are influenced by various aspects of society. To solve the problem of stigmatization, not only individual self-regulation and social support are needed, but also more policies, regulations and systems are needed to cooperate and promote so as to achieve the purpose of alleviating stigmatization.

Second, the research results of this paper help to understand the impact and mechanism of the stigma phenomenon on individual trauma and provide a new perspective and idea for research in the field of trauma. Through a thorough analysis and summary of the trauma caused by stigmatization, there can be better recognition of its obvious negative impact on various aspects of mental health and provide effective ways to improve the level of mental health for individuals and society.

Third, this paper analyzes the formation and factors of resilience in detail, which helps to help people who suffer from trauma gradually establish correct cognition, attitude and action patterns, gradually get out of trouble, and rebuild life and work order. The analysis and research of resilience aim to provide effective methods and suggestions for psychological health recovery for individuals and society.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Stigma and COVID-19

Stigma is a crucial area of focus in social research on diseases. Following Goffman's introduction of the concept of stigma into psychology in 1963, research on stigma in the social sciences has rapidly expanded. Link defines stigma as a negative attribute bestowed on a group by mainstream society resulting in its loss of social value and status. Shame arises from these negative attributes and the marginalization of these groups, perpetuating exclusion and discrimination at the social level and resulting in the loss of social values and rights [2].

There is a close relationship between stigma and disease. Bagcchi discusses the impacts of stigma on individuals and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlights the negative consequences, such as discrimination and social exclusion, as well as how it accelerates the spread of the virus [3].

Stigmatization phenomena also frequently occurred in China during the COVID-19 epidemic. Some researchers described and assessed the COVID-19-related stigma in Zhangjiajie City, China, and the differences among patients, their relatives, and healthy residents. The results showed that in terms of personal and perceived stigma, most participants agreed that they should keep a distance from COVID-19 patients and that they were dangerous. In terms of social distance, 30% of the participants said they would not marry someone with a family history of COVID-19 [4].

Yuan compared the differences in the perceived shame between COVID-19 survivors and healthy people after the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. The results showed that survivors would feel more shame than healthy people, especially in terms of social exclusion, financial status, and family relationships [5].

The research explored the sense of shame in recovery from COVID-19 that affected Wuhan, China. The results showed that there were three profiles of perceived stigma among the participants, "low perceived COVID-19 stigma" (12.8%), "moderate perceived COVID-19 shame" (51.1%), and "severe perceived COVID-19 shame" (36.1%). Multiple logistic regression analyses showed that older age, living with others, anxiety, and sleep disturbance were positively associated with moderate

perceived COVID-19 stigma, while higher education level was negatively associated with moderate perceived COVID-19 stigma [6]. Female gender, older age, living with others, anxiety, and sleep disturbance were positively associated with severe COVID-19 shame, while higher education level, social support, and inner peace were negatively associated with severe COVID-19 shame. The study provided evidence for implementing relevant psychological interventions for COVID-19 RD [6].

## **2.2. Trauma and COVID-19**

There is no specialized definition of trauma in academia, so the concept of trauma used in this article refers to psychological harm [7]. Trauma in mental health due to stigma is also an important aspect of infectious disease research. Wang investigated the mental health levels of Chinese citizens during the early stages of the epidemic. The study found that more than half of the respondents rated the psychological impact of the COVID-19 outbreak as moderate-to-severe, and about one-third reported moderate-to-severe anxiety. Female gender, student status, specific physical symptoms, and poor self-rated health status were significantly associated with a greater psychological impact of the outbreak and higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression [8].

Qiu et al. found the psychological problems caused by COVID-19 outbreaks that sudden high-intensity quarantine policies triggered an increase in anxiety and depression levels among the population. In implementing measures for epidemic prevention and control, the balance between collective interests and personal interests is also crucial for maintaining the psychological health level of the public [9].

## **2.3. Resilience and COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought widespread impacts on the physical and mental health of people around the world, increasing the attention of researchers and practitioners on the topic of resilience. Resilience is the ability of individuals to gradually adapt and restore normal life status based on their own psychological and physiological elasticity by changing their adaptive thinking and behavioural modes when facing difficulties and challenges in life. In the field of psychology, resilience is regarded as a positive manifestation of the internal resources of individuals and the ability to overcome the trauma suffered in setbacks actively [10].

Therefore, exploring the formation of resilience will play an important role in alleviating the trauma caused by the pandemic. Researcher Zhang reviewed the research on resilience from the past several decades, focusing on how to cultivate resilience at the individual, organizational, community, and national levels from a socioecological perspective in emerging situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Although previous research has greatly enriched and deepened the understanding of the concept, predicting factors, processes, and outcomes of resilience from different disciplines and levels, future research still needs to have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of resilience, including establishing an integrative and interdisciplinary framework for cultivating resilience, understanding resilience from a life span perspective, and developing scalable and cost-effective interventions to enhance resilience and improve pandemic preparedness [11].

A study assessed the role of resilience in the stigma and mental disorders among COVID-19 survivors and used a quantitative research method to investigate the relationship between mental health, resilience, and stigma among COVID-19 survivors living in Wuhan. The results showed that stigma would exacerbate the psychological trauma of patients, while resilience could alleviate this impact [12].

According to the existing literature review, it is found that there is a lack of classification and analysis of the causes of the stigma phenomenon that occurred in China during COVID-19. At the same time, there is also a lack of discussion on the trauma caused by stigma and a summary of the

factors that form resilience to cope with trauma. Therefore, this paper aims to make a broadening and summary in this context.

### **3. Stigma of COVID-19**

#### **3.1. The Emergence of the Stigma Phenomenon**

After the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, there was a phenomenon of stigmatization of China in the global scope. Some foreign media, politicians and masses associated it with China's unique culture and values, disparaged China's reputation and image, and called it the "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" [1].

These derogations and prejudices not only damaged China's international image but also had many negative impacts on the mental health of Chinese people. Domestically, the stigma phenomenon mainly targeted people, patients and medical workers from Wuhan and its surrounding areas. Some people were stigmatized because they came from or had been to the Wuhan area and were excluded from society. Some medical staff also suffered unfair treatment because they were infected with the virus or accidentally spread the virus. These phenomena directly hurt the victims' self-esteem, self-identity and emotional reactions and brought them serious psychological pressure and trauma. In addition, the grief and anxiety atmosphere of COVID-19 also had an impact on the mental health of Chinese society as a whole. People worried about their own and their family's health and future, and the social instability and loss also made people feel panic and helpless. These negative emotions and anxiety permeated all levels of society and further aggravated the impact of stigmatization, making many people fall into depression, anxiety and psychological imbalance.

#### **3.2. Causes of Stigma Phenomenon**

The emergence of the stigma phenomenon during COVID-19 in China is a complex process involving various factors. On the one hand, the virus spread from Wuhan in China, which triggered some countries' criticism and accusation of China, followed by discrimination and stigmatization against Chinese people and Chinese people abroad. On the other hand, there was also a stigma phenomenon against people, patients and medical workers in the Wuhan area in China, which were the main cause of the stigma phenomenon [13]. From a social psychological perspective, the emergence of the stigma phenomenon is because people define and distinguish different groups by evaluating their differences in behaviour, thought, habit and culture and then judge different groups accordingly. Secondly, mass media also plays an important role. In the early stage of COVID-19, some media reported on areas where COVID-19 was severe by linking them to the virus. Moreover, since the spread of the virus was caused by population movement, the association between these areas and their people's behaviour and the virus was deeply implanted in the public's mind, causing panic among the public. Thirdly, social media also plays an important role in the emergence of stigma. After the outbreak of COVID-19, a large number of malicious comments and stigmatized remarks about patients appeared on social media. Patients are described as potential sources of infection because the popularity of social media makes it difficult for people to distinguish between true and false information. This statement has sparked public panic and dissatisfaction, becoming an important driver of stigma.

### **4. Trauma of COVID-19**

#### **4.1. Impact of Trauma on Self-identity and Self-esteem**

The stigma phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic has caused great harm to individuals' self-identity. Self-identity is one's definition and evaluation of oneself and is one of the key factors in

personality formation. Therefore, the harm caused by the stigmatization of self-identity is one of the main factors leading to individual psychological trauma.” Stigmatization can cause individuals to feel that their identity has been denied and become marginalized in society. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people in Wuhan, patients and medical staff were attacked and stigmatized, making them feel that their identity had been seriously degraded [14].

This can make individuals feel unrecognized in society and lead to anxiety and depression. When individuals are attacked and stigmatized, it can also cause damage to their self-esteem. Individuals who are stigmatized are more likely to be affected by negative external evaluations and become more sensitive to negative external evaluations. This cognitive bias may lead individuals to be overly sensitive to negative evaluations of themselves, which can affect their emotional responses and behavioural performance. At the same time, this cognitive bias may also lead individuals to have strong self-doubt and self-denial emotions, which can affect their mental health. At the same time, the decrease in self-identity and self-esteem will breed negative emotions, which will also affect trust in others and society, causing negative effects on epidemic prevention work and creating a vicious circle.

#### **4.2. Impact of Trauma on Behavior**

The appearance of trauma also affects people’s behaviour. First, stigmatization can easily lead to individuals’ self-deprecation and self-restraint, reducing their social ability. Individuals may be abnormally sensitive in social situations because they are afraid of being stigmatized and excluded, so they may have behaviour of shrinking from new social opportunities or even fall into a state of social phobia. This leads to an increased sense of distance between them and those around them, making it difficult to form good interpersonal relationships. Second, stigmatization affects individuals’ self-efficacy, making them lack the courage and confidence to pursue their goals. With the intensification of stigmatization, individuals may feel helpless and self-abandoned, and these emotions will further consume their psychological resources, so they will feel very difficult or even give up when trying to achieve their goals. Third, stigmatization also affects individuals’ self-regulation ability. In adversity, individuals’ self-regulation ability plays a very important role. Due to the influence of stigmatization, individuals may show emotional disorders and behavioural disorders. These problems may make it difficult for individuals to cope with environmental changes normally, leading to a decrease in quality of life.

#### **4.3. Impact of Trauma on Health**

The experience of trauma brought by stigmatization also has an impact on people’s physical health. A large number of studies have found that stigmatization can cause various harms to physical health, such as causing psychological tension, sleep disorders, muscle pain, digestive problems and more. Specifically, stigmatization may cause individuals to be physically tense and restless, which is because the emotional response to stigmatization has a negative impact on physical health. Long-term worry, fear and depression may cause damage to the body’s hormones and immune system. In addition, mental health problems may also lead to various physical problems, such as insomnia, appetite changes and fatigue. Persistent psychological stress may cause problems with the immune system, which increases the risk of individuals being infected with viruses. Therefore, individuals who are stigmatized are more likely to be infected with COVID-19 and suffer from other diseases. This psychological stress will also lead to physical tension, increased blood pressure, increased heart load, gastrointestinal discomfort and loss of appetite, insomnia and decreased sleep quality.



## 5. Resilience and Formation Factors

In response to the impact of stigma on individual mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to understand the role of individual psychological, physical and emotional self-awareness abilities in resilience formation. Self-awareness refers to the ability to perceive and understand one's own thoughts, emotions and behaviours, including the cognition of self-image, self-esteem and self-meaning [15].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the existence of stigma, many people have suffered different degrees of psychological trauma. In this situation, the individual's self-awareness ability plays a vital role. First, individuals need to perceive their emotional responses through self-awareness, including their feelings and reactions to stigmatization and being stigmatized, so as to understand their psychological support needs better. Second, individuals need to evaluate and correct their behavioural performance through self-awareness so as to reduce the self-denial and uncertainty caused by stigma. Finally, individuals need to confirm their physical state through self-awareness, including physical condition, health status and feeling status, so as to timely detect and cope with the possible impact of stigma on physical health. Therefore, individual psychological, physical and emotional self-awareness abilities are key elements in resilience formation. For these elements, the following strategies can be adopted: through psychological diagnosis and treatment, cultivate individual cognition of their emotional responses; through self-reflection, help individuals evaluate and think about their behavioural performance; strengthen the understanding and confirmation of physical condition and health status, so as to improve self-protection awareness.

### 5.1. Family Support

Family support and family functioning play a vital role in the recovery of individual mental health. Family, as the most basic social unit, can provide people with the support and security they need, which helps to alleviate their psychological stress. Family support can provide emotional support for individuals. After experiencing psychological trauma, individuals often face emotional difficulties, and family care and comfort can make them feel loved and understood. Family members' concern and care can improve an individual's self-esteem and self-worth and help them cope better with setbacks and difficulties in life. When suffering from trauma, individuals can shift their focus to the concern and care of their family members, thereby reducing the anxiety and alienation of individuals in interacting with the outside world.

### 5.2. Policy Support

During the COVID-19 pandemic, local government policies and governance measures play a vital role in the formation of resilience. The essence of resilience is a complex process with emotional, social and physiological aspects. Local government policies and governance can create favourable conditions for the formation of resilience by providing guidance, resources and social security. The following aspects are used to analyze the role of local government policies and governance in the formation of resilience. Local government policies and governance can reduce social panic and negative emotions by providing accurate, timely and fair information. In the early stage of the pandemic, people often have panic and distrust emotions due to the lack of accurate information and guidance, leading to more adverse consequences. Local governments should use health departments and media resources to timely announce the trend of the pandemic and prevention and control measures, clarify policy guidance, and provide effective information support for the public. At the same time, the local government's authoritative recognition can also effectively reduce public panic. Secondly, local governments can provide the necessary support for fighting the pandemic by providing medical resources, materials and financial support. The formation of resilience requires a

good material basis, especially during the pandemic; the supply of medical resources and other materials is essential for the formation of resilience.

### 5.3. Agent Self-regulation

Self-regulation and behavioural change are important factors in the formation of resilience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the psychological trauma caused by the pandemic, many people experience emotional instability, emotional stress, and a lack of coping ability. Therefore, how to carry out personal self-regulation and behavioural change, and help oneself recover mental health as soon as possible, has become an important research topic. Personal self-regulation includes a series of self-control and emotional regulation methods and skills. Individuals can help themselves recover mental health by remembering some interesting, positive and motivational words and self-admonitions, practising mindfulness and meditation, exercising regularly, maintaining good sleep and diet, trying physical relaxation techniques, paying attention to leisure time and other methods. These methods can help individuals recognize their emotions, better control their emotions, maintain an optimistic attitude in difficult times, and overcome negative emotions such as fear and anxiety. In addition, behavioural change is also an important way to recover mental health. Individuals can gradually change their behavioural patterns by planning and making feasible behavioural plans, regularly reflecting and reviewing their own behaviours and emotional states, changing bad behavioural habits, and actively participating in beneficial social interactions and activities. These methods can help individuals better adapt to changes, improve psychological resilience, have more decision-making ability and adaptability when facing difficulties, and thus better recover mental health.

## 6. Conclusion

Stigma during the COVID-19 epidemic is a harmful social and cultural phenomenon that can have negative impacts on individuals and society at emotional, psychological, and social levels. Coping strategies are necessary to address this issue. This article categorizes the types of stigmatization phenomena in China during the COVID-19 epidemic as regional stigmatization, patient stigmatization, and stigmatization of medical staff. The main reasons for the occurrence of stigmatization are the improper use of language in mass media reports and the spread of difficult-to-distinguish true and false information on social media. The government needs to do a good job in the scientific dissemination of virus information and the protection of patient information. Stigma during the epidemic can cause negative impacts on self-identity, self-esteem, self-behaviour, and physical health. Resilience is an essential factor in addressing psychological trauma caused by stigma during the COVID-19 epidemic. Support from families, policy support, and self-regulation are factors that contribute to resilience formation. Resilience can help individuals overcome negative emotions, enhance their ability to cope with adversity, re-establish connections with the outside world, and find direction in their lives. Resilience training is especially important during the COVID-19 epidemic as it can contribute to an individual's recovery and reduce the negative impact of society on stigmatization through positive social interaction. The formation of resilience requires multiple approaches, such as individual self-awareness, family support, and social support. Therefore, the formation of resilience should receive attention from society to better provide help and support to people who are troubled by stigma and trauma.

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