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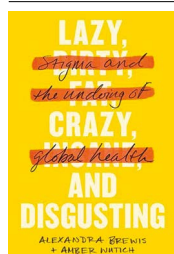
A person with HIV in the Mae Tao Clinic in Thailand.

# How stigma subverts public health

A hard-hitting study exposes the devastating effects of shame and discrimination. **By Julie Pulerwitz**

**A**s a public-health researcher working on HIV around the globe, I have seen the devastation that stigma can cause. It leads to people being shunned and isolated, and discriminated against in health care, at work and at school. And it inhibits them from accessing life-saving services and medications. As a new book by medical anthropologists Alexandra Brewis and Amber Wutich convincingly argues, stigma strips people of dignity and exacerbates the already-difficult circumstances of the poorest and most vulnerable. It can itself have major impacts on health, such as depression and even suicide.

Brewis and Wutich work in low-income countries. Their book's title, *Lazy, Crazy, and Disgusting*, highlights their areas of focus: obesity, mental illness and community sanitation. The authors focus on detailed,



**Lazy, Crazy, and Disgusting: Stigma and the Undoing of Global Health**  
Alexandra Brewis & Amber Wutich,  
Johns Hopkins University Press  
(2019)

qualitative case studies in diverse arenas. These demonstrate three things: how stigma arises and affects the most marginalized; why stigma is so difficult to combat; and how public-health efforts can unwittingly fuel it.

It is this third issue – the unintended consequences of big campaigns – that forms their main argument. And it is a rarely heard and compelling one. When, for example, the US public-health community framed smokers as putting others at risk of getting cancer from 'second-hand' smoke, the messages hit home. Social norms regarding whether it was acceptable to smoke changed, and many smokers were motivated – and managed – to quit. But there were also negative consequences. Smokers were blamed for their addiction, and people with smoking-related diseases (even those who had never smoked) were often castigated as bringing their conditions on themselves. Meanwhile, tobacco companies escaped criticism.

Similarly, the authors demonstrate how concerns about the effects of obesity – such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease – have led to fat-shaming, depression and more. Yet obesity is strongly linked to socio-economic



circumstances, and a lack of access to high-quality foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables. It is counterproductive and unfair to blame individuals. As obesity and associated conditions become increasingly prevalent across the global south, Brewis and Wutich caution against a snowball effect of harmful messaging and impacts.

The book is less strong on ways forward. I second the authors' calls for increased awareness among health practitioners, for tracking of stigma levels and for policy to be evidence-based. But, in my view, a more comprehensive and nuanced response is needed. There are important distinctions between, for example, public-health measures to reduce people's internalized feelings of blame and shame, and legislative efforts to minimize 'enacted' stigma – that is, instances of discrimination. Internalized stigma might lead to depression, and those who experience it might benefit from counselling, say. By contrast, human-rights abuses must be countered with anti-discrimination policies and laws.

Moreover, Brewis and Wutich fail to explore an important concept: intersecting stigmas. For example, a person with HIV who works in the sex industry and injects drugs might experience compounded bias and discrimination. The authors use HIV as an example of a success story in which concentrated efforts from the global health community, such as health policies and mass-media campaigns, have greatly reduced stigma.

But this is true only in some communities

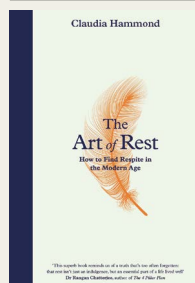
**"I second the authors' calls for increased awareness among health practitioners."**

– especially in high-income countries where living with HIV has been transformed into a chronic illness through the use of anti-retroviral medications. These medications are often not reaching the most vulnerable, and in many contexts – for example, where drug users are criminalized and struggle to access health care – intersecting stigmas remain rampant.

This engaging book nevertheless fills a significant gap in the literature by providing a wake-up call to scholars and practitioners unfamiliar with the topic. And it reminds me that we should all be working together to avoid any unintended consequences of promoting health.

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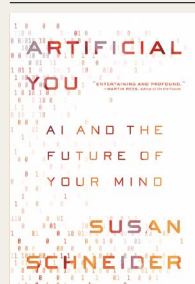
## Books in brief



### The Art of Rest

Claudia Hammond Canongate (2019)

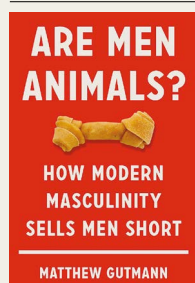
In 2014, journalist Claudia Hammond, presenter of BBC Radio 4's *All in the Mind*, joined a group studying rest at London's Wellcome Collection. She proposed a radio survey called the Rest Test. Responses from 18,000 people in 135 countries yielded a top ten of restful activities, and they inspire the titles of her informative chapters interlacing findings from dozens of studies. Intriguingly, the top five are largely solitary. Number one is reading, which "not only allows us to escape other people, but simultaneously provides us with company", she notes.



### Artificial You

Susan Schneider Princeton University Press (2019)

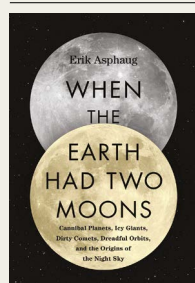
Artificial intelligence (AI) technology will raise increasingly difficult ethical issues, argues philosopher, cognitive scientist and self-confessed technotopian Susan Schneider in this demanding dialogue between philosophy and science. How would you feel, she begins speculatively, about purchasing a "Hive Mind" – a brain chip permitting you to experience the innermost thoughts of your loved ones? That presumes, however, that future AI can capture consciousness with computation – which she argues is unlikely.



### Are Men Animals?

Matthew Gutmann Basic (2019)

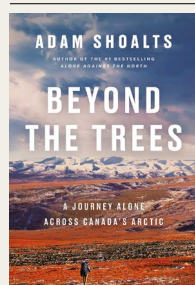
Anthropologist Matthew Gutmann has spent 30 years exploring concepts of masculinity across the United States, Latin America and China. "We place unreasonable trust in biological explanations of male behaviour," he argues in this wide-ranging book, which discusses US mass killings by men, Donald Trump's presidency and much more. Yet, he contends, there have been no major discoveries of a link between testosterone and aggression since 1990, despite a boom in scientific articles on the topic.



### When the Earth Had Two Moons

Erik Asphaug Custom House (2019)

The days of the week are named after bodies in the Solar System and a diverse mix of Norse and Roman deities. So notes Erik Asphaug, a planetary scientist who is part of the team behind two lunar and planetary NASA missions. But if the planets were born out of material orbiting the Sun, like raindrops condensing from a cloud, why do they differ so much in structure and chemical composition? This detailed book assesses the astronomical and geological evidence on the origin of planetary diversity.



### Beyond the Trees

Adam Shoalts Allen Lane (2019)

In 1967, the centennial of Canada's confederation, ten teams of canoeists paddled from central Alberta to Montreal. In mid-2017, to mark the 150th anniversary, explorer, historian and geographer Adam Shoalts travelled across the Canadian Arctic by canoe and on foot. His journey took him from the Yukon to Nunavut: across the terrestrial world's largest expanse of wilderness outside Antarctica. It proved less stressful than his normal "modern, hyper-connected world", he avers in his engaging, hazard-strewn account. **Andrew Robinson**