

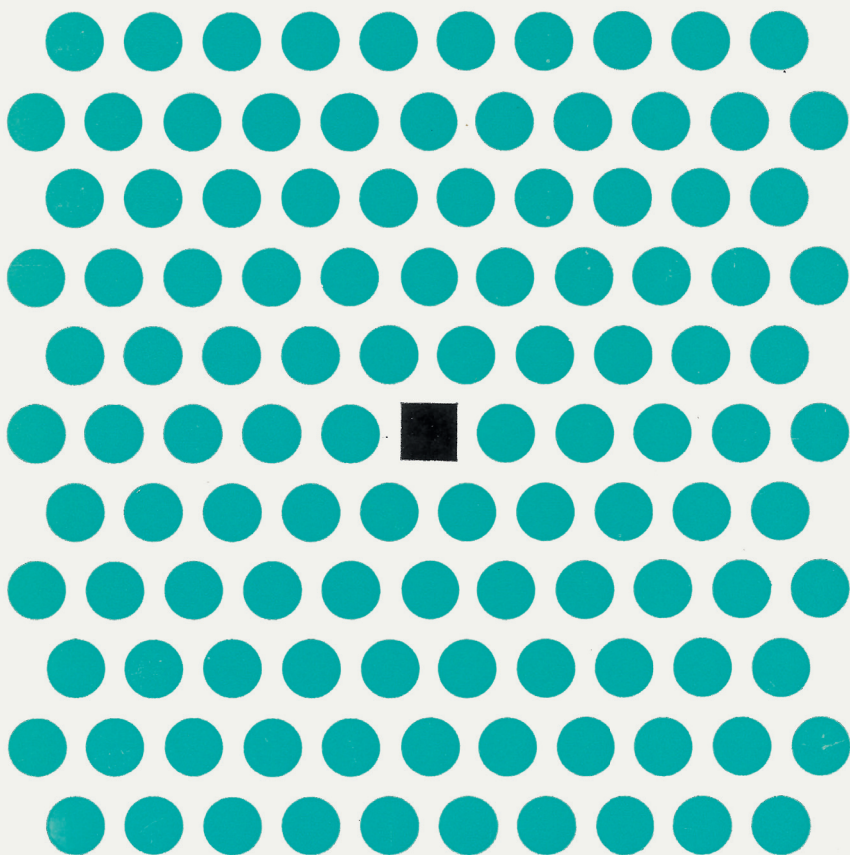


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Erving Goffman

Stigma

Notes on the Management
of Spoiled Identity



Stigma

Erving Goffman (1922–1982) is widely considered to be one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century. His study of human behaviour, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), provided a ground-breaking analysis of face-to-face interaction that would impact on almost every facet of the humanities and social sciences. Goffman would go on to expand his framework to encompass more specific contexts: first in *Asylums* (1961), which examined social conditions within the ‘total institution’, and then in *Stigma* (1963), which considered the experience of those branded with social rejection. He was the Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and the 73rd president of the American Sociological Association.

ERVING GOFFMAN

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Dear Miss Lonelyhearts

I am sixteen years old now and I dont know what to do and would appreciate it if you could tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids on the block makeing fun of me, but now I would like to have boy friends like the other girls and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose – although I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes.

I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I cant blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she crys terrible when she looks at me.

What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didn't do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesn't know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I dont believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide?

Sincerely yours,
Desperate

Preface

For over a decade now in the literature of social psychology there has been good work done on stigma – the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance.¹ This work has been added to from time to time by useful clinical studies,² and its framework applied to ever new categories of persons.³

In this essay⁴ I want to review some work on stigma, especially some popular work, to see what it can yield for sociology. An exercise will be undertaken in marking off the material on stigma from neighbouring facts, in showing how this material can be economically described within a single conceptual scheme, and in clarifying the relation of stigma to the subject

1 Most notably, among sociologists, E. Lemert; among psychologists, K. Lewin, F. Heider, T. Dembo, R. Barker and B. Wright. See especially B. Wright, *Physical Disability – A Psychological Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), which has provided me with many re-quotable quotations and many useful references.

2 For example, F. Macgregor *et al.*, *Facial Deformities and Plastic Surgery* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1953).

3 For example, C. Orbach, M. Bard and A. Sutherland, 'Fears and Defensive Adaptations to the Loss of Anal Sphincter Control', *Psychoanalytical Review*, XLIV (1957), 121–75.

4 An earlier summary version is printed in M. Greenblatt, D. Levinson and R. Williams, *The Patient and the Mental Hospital* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1957), pp. 507–10. A later version was presented as the MacIver Lecture at the Southern Sociological Society, Louisville, Kentucky, 13 April 1962. Assistance with the current version was received from the Center for the Study of Law and Society, University of California, Berkeley, under a grant from the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency.

Preface

matter of deviance. This task will allow me to formulate and use a special set of concepts, those that bear on 'social information', the information the individual directly conveys about himself.

Stigma and Social Identity

The Greeks, who were apparently strong on visual aids, originated the term *stigma* to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor – a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places. Later, in Christian times, two layers of metaphor were added to the term: the first referred to bodily signs of holy grace that took the form of eruptive blossoms on the skin; the second, a medical allusion to this religious allusion, referred to bodily signs of physical disorder. Today the term is widely used in something like the original literal sense, but is applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it. Furthermore, shifts have occurred in the kinds of disgrace that arouse concern. Students, however, have made little effort to describe the structural preconditions of stigma, or even to provide a definition of the concept itself. It seems necessary, therefore, to try at the beginning to sketch in some very general assumptions and definitions.

Preliminary Conceptions

Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories. Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there. The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated

others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his 'social identity' – to use a term that is better than 'social status' because personal attributes such as 'honesty' are involved, as well as structural ones, like 'occupation'.

We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands.

Typically, we do not become aware that we have made these demands or aware of what they are until an active question arises as to whether or not they will be fulfilled. It is then that we are likely to realize that all along we had been making certain assumptions as to what the individual before us ought to be. Thus, the demands we make might better be called demands made 'in effect', and the character we impute to the individual might better be seen as an imputation made in potential retrospect – a characterization 'in effect', a *virtual social identity*. The category and attributes he could in fact be proved to possess will be called his *actual social identity*.

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap. It constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity. Note that there are other types of discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity, for example the kind that causes us to reclassify an individual from one socially anticipated category to a different but equally well-anticipated one, and the kind that causes us to alter our estimation of the individual upward. Note, too, that not all undesirable attributes are at issue, but only those which are incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be.

The term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself. For example, some jobs in America cause holders without the expected college education to conceal this fact; other jobs, however, can lead the few of their holders who have a higher education to keep this a secret, lest they be marked as failures and outsiders. Similarly, a middle-class boy may feel no compunction in being seen going to the library; a professional criminal, however, writes:

I can remember before now on more than one occasion, for instance, going into a public library near where I was living, and looking over my shoulder a couple of times before I actually went in just to make sure no one who knew me was standing about and seeing me do it.¹

So, too, an individual who desires to fight for his country may conceal a physical defect, lest his claimed physical status be discredited; later, the same individual, embittered and trying to get out of the army, may succeed in gaining admission to the army hospital, where he would be discredited if discovered in not really having an acute sickness.² A stigma, then, is really a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype, although I don't propose to continue to say so, in part because there are important attributes that almost everywhere in our society are discrediting.

The term stigma and its synonyms conceal a double perspective: does the stigmatized individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is

1 T. Parker and R. Allerton, *The Courage of His Convictions*, London, Hutchinson, 1962, p. 109.

2 In this connexion see the review by M. Meltzer, 'Countermanipulation through Malingering', in A. Biderman and H. Zimmer, eds, *The Manipulation of Human Behavior*, New York, John Wiley, 1961, pp. 277-304.

neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them? In the first case one deals with the plight of the *discredited*, in the second with that of the *discreditable*. This is an important difference, even though a particular stigmatized individual is likely to have experience with both situations. I will begin with the situation of the discredited and move on to the discreditable but not always separate the two.

Three grossly different types of stigma may be mentioned. First there are abominations of the body – the various physical deformities. Next there are blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behaviour. Finally there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family.³ In all of these various instances of stigma, however, including those the Greeks had in mind, the same sociological features are found: an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated. We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the *normals*.

The attitudes we normals have towards a person with a stigma, and the actions we take in regard to him, are well known, since these responses are what benevolent social action is designed to soften and ameliorate. By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we

3 In recent history, especially in Britain, low class status functioned as an important tribal stigma, the sins of the parents, or at least their milieu, being visited on the child, should the child rise improperly far above his initial station. The management of class stigma is of course a central theme in the English novel.

exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class.⁴ We use specific stigma terms such as cripple, bastard, moron in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery, typically without giving thought to the original meaning.⁵ We tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one,⁶ and at the same time to impute some desirable but undesired attributes, often of a supernatural cast, such as 'sixth sense', or 'understanding'.⁷

For some, there may be a hesitancy about touching or steering the blind, while for others, the perceived failure to see may be generalized into a gestalt of disability, so that the individual shouts at the blind as if they were deaf or attempts to lift them as if they were crippled. Those confronting the blind may have a whole range of belief that is anchored in the stereotype. For instance, they may think they are subject to unique judgement, assuming the blinded individual draws on special channels of information unavailable to others.⁸

Further, we may perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect, and then see both defect and

4 D. Riesman, 'Some Observations Concerning Marginality', *Phylon*, Second Quarter, 1951, p. 122.

5 The case regarding mental patients is presented by T. J. Scheff in a forthcoming paper.

6 In regard to the blind, see E. Henrich and L. Kriegel, eds, *Experiments in Survival*, New York, Association for the Aid of Crippled Children, 1961, pp. 152 and 186; and H. Chevigny, *My Eyes Have a Cold Nose*, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, paperbound, 1962, p. 201.

7 In the words of one blind woman, 'I was asked to endorse a perfume, presumably because being sightless my sense of smell was super-discriminating.' See T. Keitlen (with N. Lobsenz), *Farewell to Fear*, New York, Avon, 1962, p. 10.

8 A. G. Gowman, *The War Blind in American Social Structure*, New York: American Foundation for the Blind, 1957, p. 198.