

That Indelible Stain

Discussing Social Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination

Scott Stewart, MSW RSW

From the Outside In and from the Inside Out:

Personhood and the Self

- Our understanding of our own humanness is the combination of two fundamental forces: our internal awareness of self and the external influences and pressures of the social world.
- “Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wide social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks” – Erving Goffman
 - **PERSONHOOD** is a social construct – society defines our place within it by ascribing certain attributes to us based on characteristics we possess (or are believed to possess). We advance and project our understanding of our personhood into the social world by way of the SOCIAL SELF (Goffman would call this VIRTUAL IDENTITY).
 - **SELFHOOD** is more complex as it involves how we define ourselves as unique actors or individuals. While the means by which we understand ourselves are socially acquired (i.e. language), we develop our sense of personal identity or TRUE SELF by formulating a set of characteristics we ascribe to ourselves (Goffman would call this ACTUAL IDENTITY).

A Shortcut to
Madness:

The Origins of
Social Stigma

“Once you were marked, the mark stayed with you; visible to all, misunderstood by most, feared by many.”

— Alex Frederickson

A Shortcut to Madness:

The Origins of Social Stigma

- One of the most basic cognitive processes possessed by most animals is the ability to determine ***sameness and difference***. This process occurs automatically and at levels often below consciousness.
- PERCEPTION leads to DIFFERENTIATION, which progresses to CATEGORIZATION and ATTRIBUTION.
- Social stigma arises during categorization and attribution. Cognitively, the brain is looking to quickly make sense of the information it has received, and to attach meaning to it. To conserve resources and to enhance functioning (efficiency), the brain often makes shortcuts rather than fully examining and interpreting the data.
- For humans, these shortcuts involve ***labelling*** as a quick and dirty means of understanding how an individual fits within the social world (in-grouping vs. out-grouping). These labels often have a moral sense (right or wrong, good or evil, normal or abnormal).

A Shortcut to Madness:

The Origins of Social Stigma

- Labels that involve a bias of some kind (negative or positive) from which beliefs about a particular group are formed are called ***stereotypes***.
- When a person possesses or is ascribed an attribute upon which a negative stereotype is applied by other members of the social world, the result is ***social stigma***.
- ***Prejudice*** is the cognitive and affective (emotional) response to social stigma – we think and feel negatively about the stigmatized individual or group. ***Discrimination*** is the behavioural reaction that is driven by prejudice – we act negatively towards the stigmatized individual or group.
- A Negative STEREOTYPE leads to SOCIAL STIGMA, which triggers PREJUDICE that results in DISCRIMINATION

A Shortcut to
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“Words are things. You must be careful, careful about calling people out of their names, using racial pejoratives and sexual pejoratives and all that ignorance. Don’t do that. Some day we’ll be able to measure the power of words. I think they are things. They get on the walls. They get in your wallpaper. They get in your rugs, in your upholstery, and your clothes, and finally in to you.”

— Maya Angelou

A Shortcut to Madness:

The Origins of Social Stigma

- Stereotypes are ***social constructs*** as they often represent agreed-upon beliefs that are disseminated throughout a group and are often passed from one generation to the next.
- Goffman described two types of social stigma:
 - ***EXISTENTIAL STIGMA*** – stigma that is unearned and is ascribed by virtue of an essential trait (i.e. visible ethnicity, SOGIE, mental illness)
 - ***ACHIEVED STIGMA*** – stigma that is earned and is ascribed by virtue of an acquired trait (i.e. SES, religion, nationality, criminality)
- Social stigma (existential or achieved) often arises from a perceived ***deviation*** from a social norm. Social systems, like physical or biological systems, strive for homeostasis (***NORMALCY***). Similarly, when a deviation is noticed, the system reacts. Difference in a social system elicits a response – resources are mobilized to enforce and restore normalcy. Systemic discrimination represents this overarching social response to the stigmatized, creating an environment in which individual acts of discrimination can occur (and are often encouraged and rewarded) and social norms are enforced.

A Shortcut to
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“Stigma is a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity.” – Erving Goffman

“The normal and the stigmatized are not persons, but perspectives.” – Erving Goffman

A Stain can be
seen from
Both Sides of
the Cloth:

The Effects of
Social Stigma

- The impacts of social stigma can be overwhelming and devastating – doubly so, as they can occur both externally (in the form of **public stigma**) and internally (in the form of **self-stigma**). Additionally, these effects are not limited to the stigmatized individual, but can harm future generations as negative stereotypes are passed on, systemic discrimination becomes entrenched, and sufferers are unable to be fully present, healthy and capable caregivers and members of society.
- **PUBLIC STIGMA** is the social reaction to negative stereotypes. Prejudice and discrimination (overt and covert) come from without – from outside the stigmatized individual. Public stigma, in all of its forms, limits autonomy and negatively affects the individual's freedom, security and access to the resources necessary to live and thrive. Public stigma fundamentally insults and degrades an individual's personhood.

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the Cloth:

The Effects of
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“Stigmatization is a much more powerful elicitor of shame and guilt in that it requires a negotiation not only between one's self and one's attributions, but between one's self and the attributions of others.”

— Michael Lewis

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The Effects of Social Stigma

- ***SELF-STIGMA*** is the individual's reaction to negative stereotypes. It is especially malignant as it undermines an individual's selfhood. A stigmatized individual can introject or internalize negative stereotypes that have been imputed to them or imposed upon them.
- ***Shame and guilt*** are pervasive aspects of self-stigma. A person's self-concept and self-esteem become adversely affected, diminishing how they think and feel about themselves. They begin to expect the rejection by others and the structures of society. Stigmatized individuals may discriminate against themselves, either by passive resignation (learned helplessness) or by acting out (which further legitimizes the social stigma).

A Stain can be seen from Both Sides of the Cloth:

The Effects of Social Stigma

- Social stigma profoundly affects *reciprocity* – the process by which individuals and the social world interact and impact each other. People have a tendency to believe and become their labels, which then influences their behaviours, that then influence the behaviours and beliefs of others, ultimately reinforcing the label in the social world.
- In addition, stigmatized individuals face dual adversity from the social world: *targeting and shunning*. Prejudice (and the fear that fuels it) often leads to anger – that the stigmatized individual has committed a violation of some standard and should be corrected or punished. This can lead to hatred and more violent forms of discrimination.
- Shunning involves two ideas: that social and practical resources should only be accessed and shared by those approved by the group; and that stigma can be imputed by association. These beliefs force stigmatized individuals to the margins or the outside of the social group, where resources and social support are scarce or non-existent.

A Stain can be seen from Both Sides of the Cloth:

The Effects of Social Stigma

- “Choose your self-presentations carefully, for what starts out as a mask may become your face.” – Erving Goffman
- When confronted with the prospect of social stigma, some individuals will seek to reengage and/or remain a part of the larger or more powerful social group by hiding or modifying an offending attribute. This is especially true when the attribute is socially invisible or concealable (i.e. SOGIE). This is known as *passing*.]
- The individual adopts a social self (mask) to allow for unmolested passage through the social world. However, the person is then in a state of dissonance – where the social self and the true self are not congruent. This creates a further degradation of the individual’s self-concept and promotes a growing sense of self-hatred.

A Stain can be seen from Both Sides of the Cloth:

The Effects of Social Stigma

- Whether it is from without or within, the major effect of social stigma is **stress**. Stress related to social stigma detrimentally and cumulatively affects the individual's biological, psychological and social functioning.
- Mental and physical health, academic and job performance, and relational functionality are all negatively affected by the stress of social stigma. Studies have suggested that stigmatized individuals engage in riskier behaviours and have less-effective coping mechanisms when dealing with other life stressors.

Lifting the
Stain:

Challenging
and
Overcoming
Stigma

“Negative people will always be there to stain your pure image with their dirty tongues and brushes, but you'll always remain as white as snow, no matter how high the quality of paint they use.”

— Michael Bassegy Johnson

Lifting the Stain:

Challenging and Overcoming Stigma

- Stigma, in all its forms, is very difficult to challenge. The beliefs that underpin the stereotypes involved are often reinforced by multiple aspects of the social world – from fairy tales to movies to advertising to government policies to legislation. Entire social movements and political campaigns are often built upon denigrating and vilifying the “Other”, feeding into our tendency to in-group and out-group.
- However, there are ways to successfully challenge and overcome both self-stigma and public stigma. Narrative approaches can help stigmatized individuals re-examine the harmful experiences that have suffered, reveal the negative beliefs that they have introjected, re-establish more healthy foundations of self-esteem and self-concept, re-introduce more adaptive coping mechanisms, and reinforce resiliency. Individuals can learn methods of self-advocacy to better challenge social stigma at all its levels.

Lifting the Stain:

Challenging and Overcoming Stigma

- Stigmatized communities can form stronger and more resilient forms of support and publically challenge stereotypes and discrimination. These groups can rally against unfair and inaccurate misrepresentations and generalizations and promote opportunities for education.
- One of the most effective means to overcome social stigma is meaningful contact with the stigmatized. The crux of social stigma is the belief that the Other is different than yourself or your group. Ignorance and inexperience breed fear and misunderstanding, which create and perpetuate stereotypes. Programs designed to bring people together, foster dialogue and build shared understanding can have a profound effect on limiting social stigma.

Lifting the
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“Stigma's power lies in silence. The silence that persists when discussion and action should be taking place. The silence one imposes on another for speaking up on a taboo subject, branding them with a label until they are rendered mute or preferably unheard.”

— M.B. Dallochio