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Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity

An Overview of the Book by Erving Goffman

By Ashley Crossman

Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity is a book written by [Erving Goffman](#) in 1963 about the idea of [stigma](#) and what it is like to be a stigmatized person. It is a look into the world of persons who society does not consider “normal.” Stigmatized people are those that do not have full social acceptance and are constantly striving to adjust their social identities: physically deformed people, mental patients, drug addicts, prostitutes, etc. Goffman relies extensively on autobiographies and case studies to analyze stigmatized persons’ feelings about themselves and their relationships to “normal” people.

He looks at the variety of strategies that stigmatized individuals use to deal with the rejection of others and the complex images of themselves that they project to others.

Three Types of Stigma

In the first chapter of the book, Goffman identifies three types of stigma: stigma of character traits, physical stigma, and stigma of group identity. Stigma of character traits 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 behavior.” Physical stigma refers to physical deformities of the body. Finally, stigma of group identity is a stigma that comes from being of a particular race, nation, religion, etc. These stigmas are transmitted though lineages and contaminate all members of a family.

What all of these types of stigma have in common is that they each have the same sociological features: “an individual who might have been received easily in normal 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.” When Goffman refers to “us,” he is referring to the non-stigmatized, which he calls the “normals.”

Stigma Responses

Goffman discusses a number of responses that stigmatized people can take. For example, they could undergo plastic surgery, however they still risk being exposed as someone who was formerly stigmatized. They can also make special efforts to compensate for their stigma, such as drawing attention to another area of the body or a disabled person learning to swim really well. They can also use their stigma as an excuse for their lack of success, they can see it as a learning

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experience, or they can use it to criticize “normals.” Hiding, however, can lead to further isolation, depression, and anxiety and when they do go out in public, they can in turn feel more self-conscious and afraid to display anger or other negative emotions.

Stigmatized individuals can also turn to other stigmatized people or sympathetic others for support and coping. They can form or join self-help groups, clubs, national associations, or other groups to feel a sense of belonging. They might also produce their own conferences or magazines to raise their morale.

Stigma Symbols

In chapter two of *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman discusses the role of “stigma symbols.” Symbols are a part of information control – they are used to understand others. For example, a wedding ring is a symbol that shows others that someone is married. Stigma symbols are similar. Skin color is a stigma symbol, as is a [hearing aid](#), cane, shaved head, or wheelchair.

Stigmatized people often use symbols as “disidentifiers” in order to try to pass as a “normal.” For instance, if an illiterate person is wearing ‘intellectual’ glasses, they might be trying to pass as a literate person. Or a homosexual person who tells ‘queer jokes’ might be trying to pass as a heterosexual person. These covering attempts, however, can also be problematic. If a stigmatized person tries to cover their stigma or pass as a “normal,” they have to avoid close relationships, and passing can often lead to self-contempt. They also need to constantly be alert and always checking their houses or bodies for signs of stigmatization.

Rules for Handling Normals

In chapter three of this book, Goffman discusses the rules that stigmatized people follow when handling “normals.”

1. One must assume that “normals” are ignorant rather than malicious.
2. No response is needed to snubs or insults, and the stigmatized should either ignore or patiently refute the offence and views behind it.
3. The stigmatized should try to help reduce the tension by breaking the ice and using humor or even self-mockery.
4. The stigmatized should treat “normals” as if they are honorary wise.
5. The stigmatized should follow disclosure etiquette by using disability as a topic for serious conversation, for example.
6. The stigmatized should use tactful pauses during conversations to allow recovery from shock over something that was said.
7. The stigmatized should allow intrusive questions and agree to be helped.
8. The stigmatized should see oneself as “normal” in order to put “normals” at easy.

Deviance

In the final two chapters of the book, Goffman discusses the underlying social functions of stigmatization (such as [social control](#)) as well as the implications that stigma has for theories of [deviance](#). For instance, stigma and deviance can be functional and acceptable in society if it is within limits and boundaries.

References

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

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