

Goffman (1968) defined a stigma as any physical or social attribute or sign that so devalues an actor's social identity as to disqualify him or her from full social acceptance.

The study of stigma formed part of the study of the presentation of self that formed the unique focus and contribution of the American sociologist, Erving Goffman, to the study of sociology in the 1960s and 70s. Goffman's style of sociology was highly individualistic and difficult to categorise but influenced by the ideas of George H. Mead and symbolic interactionism. He sought to analyse human interaction and the way people 'present themselves in everyday life, particularly in public situations. Self-image, its creation and its maintenance and defence formed the heart of his approach and in his pioneering work *Stigma* (1968; originally published in 1961) Goffman turned his eye from the way 'normal' people present themselves to the strategies employed by the 'abnormal', those with 'spoiled' identities or 'stigmas'; those cast out by society or locked away from normal life – the physically disabled, the mentally ill, the drunk, the criminal, the disabled and the discriminated against.

Ever been stigmatised? Ever been labelled as odd, disfigured, different or deviant? Ever been made to feel excluded, rejected or an outcast because of your physical features or the way you act? Then you know only too well not only the intense emotions that such labelling provokes but the sense of despair and humiliation that quite easily turns into anger and frustration, or worse, self-loathing and self-hatred. You come to accept that you are odd and abnormal, and you start to live up to the label, to dress strangely and to act in the manner expected, seeking out others of a similar nature and finding comfort and support in their company as a way of defending yourself, as a way of reaffirming yourself against the 'outside' world, where everyone seems to hate and despise you.



Erving Goffman
Stigma



University Press, Oxford,
University of Chicago Press,

London – overview of the

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Stigmatised are not, therefore, a reflection of inherent weaknesses in a person's body or character. They are a social label created by the 'reaction' of others in society. The individual involved falls to live up to people's expectations and stereotypes about normal looks or behaviour and so is 'disqualified from full social acceptance'. The study

all play 'two-headed roles' as we joke about or sympathise with the stigmatised. abnormal in one situation may not be in another. Thus we are all 'normal deviants', we which varies according to the people, time, place and situation involved. What may be two separate classes of people but the two faces of stigma, two ends of a continuum up to everyday situations. So, argues Goffman, the normal and the stigmatised are not prejudice about them. Yet we are all well aware of our own imperfections as we face the 'handicapped' as inferior or a threat, in order to justify our rejection, fear and manner. It is we 'normals' who discriminate, segregate and construct an ideology about stigma. The other is society at large and its definitions of normality. We are the audience whose reactions force the abnormal and the deviant to act in an unusual

However, as Goffman emphasises, the stigmatised are only one of the two 'faces' of and their private lives. Their egos are rarely intact. strangers in their own society and face enormous strain between their public images result say of a crippling car accident or an addiction to drink. Such individuals feel where they are not considered complete, are looked down on and often segregated. *career*, a particularly painful socialisation process, as they learn to live in a society like Gay Lib or Black Power to force society to change its view of them and grant them their defects are considered normal. Some even fight back by forming pressure groups capped into homes, junkies into a drug culture - into the security of 'worlds' where sneers and looks of others by joining in 'normal' society. Others withdraw - the hand- involved and how visible it is. Some try to 'repair' it, for example, through plastic surgery or by going 'straight'. Some try to hide it by wearing special clothing, dark glasses or using an alias. Some learn how to pass it off in public or how to prevent the wide variety of strategies people use in response to being stigmatised or to prevent such a label being applied in the first place. Much obviously depends on the defect

The essays in Goffman's study of *Stigma* are a rich and penetrating discussion of the visible than say insanity.

less easy to manage and control than a 'social' one; blindness is far more immediately whether the stigma is visible or invisible. A physical defect, for example, is generally Different implications inevitably follow for the stigmatised person depending on of public sympathy like polo, or one of public shame, like being an ex-convict, prostitute, or it may be an invisible but 'dark' secret like alcoholism. It may be a source something you 'earn'. It may be highly visible like having no nose or being known as a Stigmatised may therefore be *ascribed* or *achieved*, something you are born with or

- physical defects such as being a cripple, a dwarf or deaf;
- personal weaknesses or blemishes on a person's character or background such as a prison record or being unemployed;
- social stigmas due to the company a person keeps or the racial or religious group he belongs to, for example ethnic minorities.

He identified three main types of stigma:

KEY IDEAS IN SOCIOLOGY: MODERN

of stigma, therefore, but of a particular human as a way labelling people in Faced by the 'abnormal' and the highly applied and the his such social labelling could recover meant giving in to more positive attitude proved correct. They enjoy a much more admit their deviant optimistic about the particular - are less stigma that may v

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brilliantly conveyed themselves to the way those it they become stigmatised, individual esteem, insane deviant, is a brilliant point focusing as it c attempts to take Goffman's work a profound effect symbolic interaction images, Goffman *themselves* roles, it is also sought to explain *than in its cause* order, social in everyday social what he regards distinction be

Goffman's work equally inspired enormous interest within the academic world and had a profound effect on many professions and their treatment of their patients. Whereas symbolic interactionism had tried to examine how people create or negotiate their self-images, Goffman focused on 'how society . . . forces people to present a certain image of themselves . . . because it forces us to switch back and forth between many complicated roles, it is also making us somewhat untruthful, inconsistent and dishonest for others sought to explore and explain social action in terms of 'its meaning for others rather than in its causal origins' (Burns 1992). He focused in on the relationship between social order, social interaction and the self, the interrelationship between society at large and everyday social intercourse, between macro and micro sociology. He wanted to provide what he regarded as a distinctly sociological account of the individual to analyse the distinction between the self as a character or personality and the self as a social

ERVING GOFFMAN'S ESSAYS ON STIGMA (1964) AND SELF (1956) HAVE TO BE READ themselves to be appreciated. They are full of intricate and intimate detail and brilliantly convey the emotions and minute planning and interaction that goes into the way those in prisons or asylums respond, react and re-analyse themselves once they become stigmatised by normal society and try to restore some semblance of self-esteem, individuality and freedom against the crushing power of being labelled deviant, insane or criminal. The book and the film of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a brilliant portrayal of the sorts of ideas Erving Goffman was seeking to describe, focusing as it does on the lives and characters of a mental institution and their attempts to take over the asylum and re-establish some control over their lives.



While Goffman sought to identify and explain the various ways in which stigmas are applied and the highly creative strategies that the stigmatised use to resist or reject such social labelling, he was ultimately optimistic that the majority of those stigmatised could recover and embark on relatively normal lives – even if on occasion this meant giving in to the stigma, admitting one's guilt or illness and asking for forgiveness or treatment so that the professionals in control relaxed their pressure, adopted a more positive attitude and approach to rehabilitation because they had 'won' or been proved correct. The mental patient or prison convict, the alcoholic or drug addict, all enjoy a much more relaxed relationship with their doctors or prison officers once they admit their deviance and accept treatment or punishment. Goffman, however, was less optimistic about the attitudes of society at large. The general public – employers in particular – are less forgiving and the label ex-convict, ex-mental patient is a powerful stigma that may well last a lifetime.

of stigma, therefore, is not only an analysis of a special form of 'image management' but of a particular form of social control. The abnormal are labelled deviant and sub-human as a way of controlling or excluding them. Ironically, in Goffman's view labelling people in this way creates the very behaviour it was designed to suppress. Faced by the 'abnormal' reactions of ordinary people, the stigmatised inevitably act strangely!

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He died in 1982 at the peak of his fame. He had attained almost a cult status and was seen as something of a sociological maverick, a leading social theorist in the 1980s and elected President of the American Sociological Association in the year he died. Although often perceived as an exponent of symbolic interactionism, he himself would not have accepted any such label. Rather, his studies were highly original, highly individualistic, informed as much by anthropology and social psychology as sociology.

Like its parent philosophy, symbolic interactionism, Goffman's theory of stigma was criticised for failing to explain where such social labels, such social stigmas come from, who has the power to stigmatise and why some groups suffer such discrimination and that, works like *Stigma* (1964) and *Asylums* (1961a) continue to stimulate and entrance, are full of depth and colour and add enormously to our understanding of the various social 'worlds' that make up society. Few writers have given sociology such style, individuality and such insight; few have inspired the sociological imagination as much as Erving Goffman.

performer, managing and defending his or her social image in a multitude of face-to-face situations. The self, therefore, is multi-faceted or multi-faceted, capable of putting on the image or social mask the situation demands and moving in and out of different social situations as needed. Goffman's focus not only on the way people react to being labelled but the way labelling often creates 'abnormal' behaviour, forced many doctors, psychiatrists and social workers to re-examine the very basis of their relationships with their patients or clients. By labelling – or worse, stigmatising them as sick, insane or deviant – were they changing their self-image, making them feel odd and abnormal, isolating and humiliating them so that they lost the will to recover or reform and instead adopted a new lifestyle, self-image and friendship pattern that both insulated and isolated them from normal society – the homeless in a refuge, the hooligan in a detention centre, the terminally sick in a hospice. The labelling process has the inbuilt potential to be a self-fulfilling process, a process by which the label, the stigma, becomes the reality, those labelled insane 'become' insane, those labelled as sick or deviant become social outcasts forever. Stop labelling and stigmatising people in this way and possibly they will remain in mainstream society and re-establish normal lives and identities. Profound though Goffman's work was – and is – it too was subject to criticism and counterclaim.



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