Stigma, and Its Discontents

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By

Kenneth McLaughlin

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

I recall a conversation with a newly appointed Professor of Social Justice. After offering my congratulations and him saying how pleased he was to get the job, he added that if he was honest he did not know what the term 'social justice' actually meant. This was not an admission of ignorance but an acknowledgement that it is actually a more complex term than is often believed.

Despite such complexity, the declaration that one is an advocate or activist in the pursuit of 'social justice' is one that is frequently heard today. It is not uncommon for people to have this commitment pinned to their social media profiles, as well as their personal and professional biographies. There are also many who wear badges or ribbons in support of a particular issue, whether health related, of personal significance, or more political in orientation. Such contemporary signs are meant to express the moral worth of the individual and, in an increasingly secular age, seem to have replaced the old religious symbols as expressions of the individual's belief in a project bigger than, and outside of, the self.

The complexity of the term 'social justice' is often rendered invisible by those who use it as a mantra, as an *a priori* good that is beyond question, its utterance not merely signifying an outwardly oriented social and political goal, but also a marker of the speaker or activist's moral credentials. What is often overlooked is that what social justice entails and how it is to be achieved is not only an extremely complex issue, it is also a very contentious one, within which there are various opinions and competing ideological perspectives that can all claim to have a commitment to this ephemeral thing called social justice. Unfortunately, rather than engage with and try to resolve some of these tensions there is a tendency for retrenchment into the safety of black and white thinking, where you are on the side of good and those who disagree with you are seen as fundamentally bad, as morally and ethically inferior to the true believers in social justice. They are on the side of good, their opponents on the side of evil; or social injustice, to use its contemporary term.

When pushed to explain what they mean by social justice, a common reply would be a world of 'equality', which seems reasonable enough, but is, on inspection, just as vague a concept as 'social justice'. Both terms are key points of philosophical and political discussion that have great implications for how we view, structure and intervene in the world, guiding our relationships with our fellow human beings and ourselves. If Nietzsche was right, and God is indeed dead, then we are alone. The rules of good moral behaviour, of what an equal and just society should look like are not given *to* us, they are given *by* us. Without firm foundations, we are 'condemned to be free' (Sartre, 1997, p.34). We are, as the title of a collection of Hannah Arendt's work reminds us, *Thinking without a bannister* (Arendt, 2018). Our route to a just society is a precarious one lacking a firm foundation with no teleological, pre-ordained endpoint.

In this respect, rather than attempt to define social justice or equality I aim to illuminate the concepts by focusing not on them in and of themselves, but from the perspective of those who have been cast as inferior beings, as unequal in various ways whether due to social status, physical or mental attributes, immorality or deviance. In short, *it is those who are subject to, and objects of, stigma, that are the focus of this book*. However, my concern is not only with the processes by which individuals or groups are stigmatized, but, importantly, on how they have challenged and attempted to change their stigmatized status. In the process, many previously held assumptions, whether related to class, disability, mental disorder, sex and gender have been called into question. Today, the very idea of a bannister, a guide or border to help us make sense of ourselves and our place in the world, is undermined by some, and seen as inherently problematic by many.

My intention is to uphold the scepticism towards an ahistorical human essence whilst avoiding the trap of an anything goes relativism whereby the very act of social or human differentiation is seen as upholding the stigmatized status of individuals or groups. Therefore, in order to understand contemporary developments, of individual and collective forms of consciousness over the causes and cures of societal problems, I adopt a dialectical approach, not one handed down from above or emanating from within the individual. As C Wright Mills put it in *The Sociological Imagination* 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (Mills, 1959, p.1). 'Stigma' then is not interrogated as a stand-alone term but as a *keyword* imbued with meaning that has an effect at an individual, social, political and ideological level. The meanings and challenges to it can therefore differ historically and culturally.

Stigma as keyword

Stigma and attempts to alleviate the negative effects it can have on the stigmatized has increased in prominence in recent years, with anti-stigma campaigns instigated and/or supported by various policymakers, social commentators and political activists. Whilst these can have many positive aspects to them, what we often overlook is that within such campaigns and accompanying rhetoric lie some less progressive implications, both theoretical and practical. Given its ubiquity in contemporary discourse, *stigma* can be viewed as a keyword within social policy, public and political discourse.

The notion of 'keywords' I take from Raymond Williams, whose book *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, is essential reading for those interested in the power of language (Williams, 1976). It focused on 110 keywords that he saw as requiring critical analysis to help us understand the contemporary culture, society and politics of the time (a further 21 were added to the second edition published in 1983). Williams was at pains to show how words that were often taken for granted, unquestioned and used uncritically, were actually embedded with social and political significance. As political and cultural language and the significance afforded to it changes over time, the meanings behind some words change, new words enter our vocabulary and others drop from common usage. It is this necessity that has led to a renewed interest in critically interrogating keywords of relevance to the present period (e.g. Thomson et al. 2016; Parker, 2017; Garrett, 2018).

This is the approach I adopt in relation to *Stigma and its Discontents*. By discontents, I am referring to those who seek to challenge stigma in its various guises, those individuals and groups who are concerned with the treatment of people who are stigmatized, and of their attempts to ameliorate such a situation. In so doing, I consider a variety of responses, both theoretical and practical that have been adopted in relation to four main areas: class, mental health, disability and gender (specifically transgender). Whilst these are considered separately, I attempt to show the overlaps between them, so that political interventions and theoretical influences that I only touch upon in some chapters are considered in more detail in others. However, I hope to have shown the links between them and in so doing allow the reader to utilise them in relation to the other topics in the book. My hope is that the book will also offer insights that they can adopt to help their understanding of other areas related to their own particular topic of interest.

It is essential to analyse keywords in the context of the social conditions in which they arise. Words do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in webs of meaning, power and resistance that are influenced by the material circumstances of the day. However, we must be wary of the cul-de-sac down which many cultural and discourse theorists end up whereby they see a focus on language and the disruption of meaning as being enough to bring about social and economic change. As Bourdieu (2000) reminds us, we must not mistake an 'academic commentary as a political act or the critiques of texts as a feat of resistance, and experience revolutions in the order of words as radical revolutions in the order of things' (p.2). Having a sensitivity towards language is important, but we need to acknowledge that this, in and of itself, does little to change the material hardships that many people face.

Stigma has become something of a floating signifier in that it can be a word used by people to criticise or condone almost any form of behaviour. To judge something wrong, immoral and detrimental to society, or to criticise a certain look, attribute, behaviour, belief or fetish is held to stigmatize the referent from a normative framework, one that seeks to maintain existing power relations that discriminate against those deemed outwith the normative moral order. However, their replacement is often a relativistic moral order, one with no agreement over what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable human attributes or behaviour. In upholding stigma as a solely negative term, we can undermine our ability to make judgements over the merits of any individual behaviour or character trait.

Whereas previous discussions tended to focus on specific social groups or traits, such as those discussed in subsequent chapters, more recently we have seen the growth of people and groups highlighting the stigma they face due to various attributes. For example, being overweight or obese (Hussin at al. 2011), travelling by bus (car owners being seen to possess higher status) (DJC, no date), having ginger hair (Shute, 2013), or indeed no hair (Therrien, 2013). The stigma facing mothers who lose custody of their children via the child protection process has been highlighted (Morriss, 2018), whilst others are concerned about the way that sex work is stigmatized (e.g. Berthe, 2018). Studies have looked at the stigma some professional groups face on account of them being deemed morally suspect, such as those in the advertising industry (Cohen and Dromi, 2018).

Likewise, some of the responses to stigma indicate that not only can anything be stigmatizing, measures must be put in place to alleviate the negative impact it can have on the stigmatized. A school in Northumberland, England, has banned pencil cases in a bid to stop pupils from poor families

being stigmatized if they could not afford one, or had a cheaper product than their more wealthy peers. The school has also decided to cut down on the number of dress-up and fundraising days it holds so as not to stigmatize those pupils who may struggle to make the requested financial donation. The *Poverty Proofing the School Day* project, led by Children North East, has encouraged teachers to look at ways in which some pupils might be unwittingly excluded, and also suggested that it is best for teachers not to ask children what they did at the weekend as this can stigmatize those from low-income backgrounds (BBC News, 2020). Here we see an assumption that not only are the poor psychologically weak, but that ignoring the problem, pretending it does not exist, is a progressive act. The instigators of this project seem to forget that children will discuss what they do out of school, compare possessions, homes and holidays (or lack of them) with their peers, irrespective of some well-meaning but ultimately demeaning initiative.

For some commentators, the very term 'stigma' is itself stigmatizing as it is not a neutral term but a political one, and that what is presented as objective and value-free research in reality is often hiding a political agenda (e.g. Corrigan and Ben-Zeev, 2012). This is something we discuss in more detail in the following chapter, but we can see how initiatives such as the *Poverty Proofing the School Day* project can inadvertently help maintain the status quo in its 'best not to talk about it and pretend it does not exist' approach. Stigma may be reduced, although that is highly debatable, but poverty itself, its causes and effects, is left unchallenged.

In recognition of some of the problems in using the term stigma, some prefer to talk instead about 'social inclusion', prejudice and/or discrimination. As we will see throughout this book, language and terminology has become a hotly debated issue, it being noted that language does not simply reflect a pre-existing reality, but, on the contrary, it also has a role in constructing and maintaining reality (Parker, 1998). In this respect, gaining consensus on preferred terminology, given the diversity of perspectives within advocacy groups, is far from easy.

If some challenge the concept of stigma, others argue that it plays an essential role in the maintenance of the moral order. For writers such as Charles Murray and Melanie Phillips, it is the decline of stigma that is the problem today, with behaviours that in the past would have induced shame now more or less accepted, a process that for them has had a deleterious effect on social cohesion (Murray, 2009; Phillips, 2004). They accept that stigma can be damaging for individuals, but argue that it is a social good

and may, ultimately, benefit rather than hinder the individual. Whether it is drug misuse, relying on welfare benefits, irresponsible or harmful behaviour, the threat or fear of social opprobrium can increase resilience and help improve socially undesirable behaviour. In other words, from their perspective we need more, not less, stigma.

Structure of the book

I begin by discussing the various ways stigma has been conceptualised both historically and in the contemporary period. I then focus on particular areas to illustrate how stigma works and the way it objectifies individuals and groups whilst simultaneously framing social problems in such a way that they can be individualised, medicalised and moralised, a process that can mystify the workings of power. A variety of theoretical sources are engaged with throughout the book that are relevant to each chapter, such as materialism, social constructionism, anti-essentialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism and queer theory. Whilst many of the writers associated with these ideas can at times express their thoughts using tortuous, almost impenetrable, prose, I have attempted to ensure that I have conveyed them in such a way that the book will be accessible not only for academics, but also for politically engaged members of the public.

In an attempt to avoid repetition of theoretical positions, each chapter prioritises some more than others do. For example, whilst the hostility to binary classifications is evident in chapters three and four, it is discussed in greater detail in chapter five. Therefore, whilst each chapter can be read as stand-alone discussions, a full reading is necessary in order to fully locate later conceptual viewpoints in earlier ones, and vice-versa, as earlier discussion of the workings of stigma can be seen in subsequent chapters.

Chapter one provides a brief history of stigma, discussing its origin as a term in Greek culture, and as a bodily signifier to identify someone as of flawed status, for example in the branding of slaves or criminals, a practice that can be seen in more recent times in relation to the transatlantic slave trade and the Nazi Holocaust. Conceptual understandings of stigma are also considered, with a primary focus on the sociologist Erving Goffman's book *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, which is held to be a key contribution to our understanding of stigma and how it operates (Goffman, 1963). Whilst considered a landmark text, Goffman's work has been subject to much critique since its publication, with his ideas being both challenged and developed over the intervening years. In particular, his focus on the workings of stigma at the micro level of human interaction has been

criticised for neglecting a more detailed structural analysis, and also for failing to adequately account for the way social and political *power* operates in the creation and objectification of the stigmatized. The chapter concludes by acknowledging Goffman's contribution whilst highlighting the need to analyse stigma not only as a process imbued by power, but also by situating it in relation to how it has been challenged by the stigmatized, and how this interaction is itself influenced by changing social and political dynamics.

Social welfare, class and stigma is the focus of chapter two. The interaction of all three is discussed in order to illuminate the way the poor and working class are often portrayed as lacking moral character, which is, to a large extent, seen as contributing to their impoverished situation. The division between the 'deserving and undeserving' poor and related policies and procedures are discussed in historical terms. However, the main focus is on contemporary forms and processes of stigmatization of society's disadvantaged, with particular emphasis on the 'underclass' debate and the emergence of the CHAV as its embodiment. There has always been a form of disdain for the working class by middle and upper class sections of society. My key argument is that this disdain remains prevalent today, albeit in a slightly modified form. I illustrate this by highlighting the political and media reaction to the 2016 United Kingdom (UK) referendum on whether the UK should remain in, or leave, the European Union, which went the way of the latter option. In so doing I show that today, disdain for the working class is just as likely to emanate from those who see themselves as on the progressive left of politics as it is to come from the conservative right.

This chapter has less of a focus on protest and action than the following chapters. Instead, it serves to highlight the workings of power and of the way stigma is utilised for political and economic means. This is a process that can allow an insidious form of governmental control to function in such a way as to individualise social and political problems, scapegoat specific groups and in the process help maintain the status quo.

Chapter three discusses stigma in relation to mental health. Theoretical and practical challenges to psychiatric orthodoxy are discussed, as are changing attitudes to the treatment and acceptance of those deemed mentally ill. Despite recent advances in our understandings of mental distress, and improvements to public attitudes to those suffering, such mental states still carry much stigma. How many reading this would have little problem informing their employer that their sickness was due to a physical disease such as cancer, or that they had to go in for tests due to heart palpitations? Would you feel the same telling them your absence was due to schizophrenia,

or that you had to go in for tests due to experiencing delusional or harmful thoughts? My guess is that the latter example would be more likely to be kept as hidden as possible.

The chapter discusses various challenges to such stigma from a variety of perspectives, from those who advocate paternalistic and libertarian approaches to those who argue that we should see mental health and illness as existing on a continuum, and of the need for large and small-scale legal changes to alleviate the stigma faced by current and former psychiatric patients. Finally, recent attempts to reduce stigma by 'raising awareness' of mental health problems are discussed not only as to their efficacy, but also to highlight aspects of such approaches that, albeit inadvertently, locate the problems facing the mentally ill as being due to an uneducated public and can take attention away from the parlous state of frontline service provision.

Chapter four is divided into two separate but interrelated sections. The initial discussion concerns physical disability and the mechanisms by which disabled people have challenged their portrayal and treatment, focusing on some of the theoretical assumptions that have been influential in wider activist circles. In challenging the medicalisation and individualisation of disability, disabled people developed new ways of thinking and tactical approaches in order to challenge political and professional power over their lives. This process helped disrupt conventional ways of thinking about what it means to be seen as fully human. Some of the theoretical points discussed in the preceding chapter, such as the disruption of binary ways of categorising and thinking about people are further developed as we consider such questions as who is considered 'normal' and who decides which side of the line we are on? Where is the boundary between able-bodied and disabled? As the discussion develops, we see a change in focus from one that emphasised potential and strength, despite the hardships of living with a disability, to one in which vulnerability was embraced as a political strategy.

The chapter then turns to a discussion of the way that other campaigning groups have taken up and internalised this notion of vulnerability; the public expression of vulnerability increasingly used as a political demand for more favourable treatment and protection from harm, whether of a physical or psychological form. I conclude the chapter by arguing that an unintended consequence of the radical use of vulnerability has led to the rise of a generation of vulnerable radicals.

Many of the trends identified in the book so far are illustrated further, and in greater depth, in chapter five, where we immerse ourselves in the increasingly

toxic and divisive sphere of transgender politics. Here, debates over what it means to be human, of what makes someone a man or woman, have come to the fore, making us question some previously held assumptions. The stigma faced by those who deviate from societally sanctioned gender roles is discussed and the theoretical and practical challenges to such normative constraints highlighted. The subject of transgenderism has made society consider how it should respond to those who suffer from 'gender dysphoria', people who do not wish to be the sex and/or gender that they were born as and/or into (on reading the chapter you will realise why the / between and/or in this sentence).

The conclusion ties together the main points of the previous chapters, detailing the key and overlapping theoretical and practical developments as the concept of stigma has been challenged. It also examines how these have been utilised in various forms by specific groups in order to challenge their stigmatized status and improve the way they are perceived and treated within society. The questioning and disrupting of social categories and traditional ways of thinking and behaving have proved positive in challenging existing power relations and allowing more people to claim their status as a human subject entitled to equal rights and societal respect. However, such disruption of social categorisations and accepted modes of behaviour should not lead us to embrace a form of moral relativism whereby any articulation of social norms or human differentiation is seen as not only impossible, but as inherently oppressive. The quest for a universalism underpinned by moral and societal norms may be an ideal that can never be fully achieved. Nevertheless, in its very pursuit, we may find ourselves closer to a society worthy of all humanity.

CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUALISING STIGMA

Introducing stigma

The term 'stigma' originates from the Greeks where it referred to bodily signifiers designed to expose the flawed moral status of the signified. They were largely marked upon the body, such signs being '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 spaces' (Goffman, 1963, p.1). In Christian times, stigma, or stigmata, could represent bodily signs of grace or divinity marked by eruptions of the skin, a view that declined as the rise of medicine led to more medical explanations for physical disorder becoming prominent. Today, it is the Greek view that holds common currency, stigma being a sign of a flawed moral status rather than an indicator of divinity.

The physical infliction of stigma is not a mere historical phenomenon; it has many contemporary manifestations, for example in the branding of slaves, to the tattooing of prisoners during the Holocaust. In each instance, the physical sign is intended to mark the bearer as not fully human.

Tattooing of the body is now a fashion accessory for many people and it is increasingly common for high-profile celebrities to publicly display them, a trend that has been adopted by a growing number of people within mainstream society. Whilst this is self-inscription through choice rather than coercion, it can still be a marker, a signifier of the ascribed status of the bearer. These ascriptions are often diffracted via the prism of class and gender, as in the term 'tramp stamp', a disparaging slang term for women with lower-back tattoos that were popular in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and seen as an indicator of promiscuity (Stewart, 2014).

The spectacle of public shaming has likewise oscillated from extreme to more subtle forms. Examples of the former being the stocks of the 16th and 17th centuries and the public humiliation of Jewish people in German

occupied Europe during the Second World War.[1] Following the war, similar treatment was meted out to women alleged to have had sex with German soldiers (by the forced wearing of placards, being paraded through the streets, their heads shaved etc.). In the current period, whilst it is rare to see such extreme manifestations, public shaming still exists. In some countries, for example the USA, courts have been known to force offenders to wear placards detailing their crimes. Likewise, media reports of criminal convictions play an important role in making court proceedings visible, but they are also a form of public shaming, stigmatizing the offender by detailing their deviance from socially and morally acceptable behaviour.

More subtle, but still powerful signifiers of the societal status of the signified can be seen in the issuing of vouchers to the poor and asylum-seekers for the purchase of food from certain designated shops or charitable food banks. A non-physical but nevertheless powerful contemporary manifestation of the spectacle of public humiliation is via social media campaigns targeting people for holding views that are deemed unacceptable by others. Failure to adopt the correct political or cultural position on a variety of issues can lead to vitriolic attack, harassment and campaigns directed at your employer to have you removed from your position.

Stigma then, as most commonly understood, can lead to a reduced social standing and to the loss of social rights and social existence. For example, the Romans denied social rights to those who were born unable to hear or speak. They were forbidden to marry and had state guardians appointed to them. In more recent times, the mentally ill, homeless and beggars have been likened to animals. The belief that they are less than human means they can be treated as such:

> They are dirty, and so there are mass cleaning facilities. They are like animals, so they have to be "kept" in asylums designed for supervision. They have no aesthetic sense, so the institutions are drab. Their inability to learn means they are not allowed privacy, property, communication, relationships with each other, or individuality.
> (quoted in Spicker, 1984, p.161)

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim, although he tended to focus on deviance, was the first to explore stigma as a social phenomenon:

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[1] Of course, such shaming proved merely a precursor to the widespread murder of millions of Jewish people in the Nazi death camps.

Imagine a society of saints, a perfect cloister of exemplary individuals. Crimes or deviance, properly so-called, will there be unknown; but faults, which appear venial to the layman, will there create the same scandal that the ordinary offense does in ordinary consciousnesses. If then, this society has the power to judge and punish, it will define these acts as criminal (or deviant) and will treat them as such.
 (Durkheim, 1938 [1895] pp.68-69)

In what became known as *labelling theory*, the conventional notion of deviance was turned on its head. Rather than social control being seen as a *reaction* to deviance, labelling theorists argued that, on the contrary, social control in effect *produced* deviance (e.g. Becker, 1963). It is when certain forms of rule-breaking become codified that deviance is produced; 'social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance' (ibid. p.9). Or, as Jenkins (2008) puts it, 'Disorder is the product of ordering; definition generates anomaly; and similarity begets difference' (p.96).

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) notes that social status is not a material thing 'to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated' (p.81). If we deviate from what is deemed appropriate we can be ostracised and, in extreme cases, institutionalised, where we can be moulded towards more socially acceptable conduct. This is a subject Goffman discusses in *Asylums*, his account of the workings of total institutions such as the mental hospital, prison, army camp, boarding school and monastery (Goffman, 1961). The important point is that what is deemed appropriate or of moral worth is not natural or God given but the product of human interaction. What is considered 'appropriate' can differ between one social interaction and another, and in both historical and cultural terms.

The relativist dimension of this is clear to see. If deviance is socially constructed, then not only does any behaviour have the potential to be classified deviant, but in different circumstances, historical or cultural contexts, any behaviour can be socially legitimated. Of importance is the power dynamics in the labelling process as it highlights,

The capacity of particular agents, occupying particular *positions* – the police, social workers, psychologists, judges and juries, and so on – authoritatively to identify others in consequential ways, moving us beyond the interaction order, into the institutional order.
(Jenkins, 2008, p.98, emphasis in original).

Of course, as we discuss in later chapters, the labelled or deviant are not mere passive recipients of this process and can actively resist, either individually or collectively, such ascription and the consequences to which it can give rise.

Deviant behaviour or negative attributes can lead to the attribution of stigma to the person who deviates from normative social expectations. Arguably, the most influential sociologist of stigma is the aforementioned Erving Goffman. Since his classic work *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (Goffman, 1963), the concept of stigma, and the negative effects it can produce, has seen a significant growth within a variety of academic, activist and governmental fields. It permeates, in various guises or modifications, social policy, claims for social justice, self-justification and the therapeutic management of social interaction. For Goffman, stigma can be defined as 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance' (1963, preface).

Goffman was aware of a burgeoning psychological literature on stigma and sought to uncover what this might yield for sociology. He differentiated stigma into three very different forms:

> 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 tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family.
> (ibid. p.4)

He also differentiates between three main concepts of identity in relation to stigma. First, *social identity*, which considers the process of stigmatization. Second, *personal identity*, which concerns the role of information control in stigma management. Third, *ego identity*, which is concerned with how the individual may feel about stigma and its management, something that may be shaped by the information he is given regarding these matters.

Stigma and the process of stigmatization therefore involves a narrative of social relations: an attribute that shames bearers at one spatio-temporal juncture can pass them by at another. Goffman (1963) also made a conceptual distinction between people who are 'discredited' and 'discreditable', the

former being conspicuous, the latter whilst often able to be hidden risk being exposed at any time. Someone with an obvious physical disability would be classed as discredited, their stigmatized status being clearly visible. The criminal or homosexual would be discreditable, they could 'pass' amongst the 'normals' but are always at risk of being exposed. The process of concealing some discrediting information about oneself in a social situation, such as having a criminal record or psychiatric history, is known as 'passing'.

Goffman is primarily concerned with what he terms 'mixed contacts', those occasions when stigmatized and normal are in the same social space, whether in a conversation like encounter or unfocused gathering. For him,

> stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a pervasive two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections and in some phases of life. *The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives.*
> (pp.137-138, my emphasis).

In other words, on occasions we can be the stigmatized and on others we can be the ones who do the stigmatizing. Think for example of a racist homosexual, who whilst seeing some others as not of full social standing on account of their race, she/he is viewed similarly by some heterosexuals (including those of the ethnic group she/he stigmatizes). Of importance is that whilst stigma refers to a deeply discrediting attribute it needs to be seen as 'a language of relationships, not attributes' (Goffman, 1963, p.3). In this respect, the same behaviour can carry no shame for one person but be something another wants to hide. This can apply even at the micro, mundane level of life. Goffman gives the example of a middle-class boy feeling no compunction in going to the library, but then quotes a professional criminal who on entering his local library would check over his shoulder to ensure no one he knew was watching. For Goffman (1963) then, stigma is a 'relationship between attribute and stereotype' that is deeply discrediting, reducing the stigmatized person's social standing, a process that sees them viewed as not fully human. There is a deviation from societal norms, an othering process that differentiates 'them' from 'us'.

Onwards from Goffman

The concept of stigma has been extensively discussed, critiqued and developed since Goffman. Thornicroft et al. (2007) view stigma as referring

to problems of knowledge (ignorance), attitudes (prejudice) and behaviour (discrimination), whilst Scambler (2009) argues for a distinction between stigma (an 'ontological deficit' associated with shame) and deviance (a 'moral deficit' associated with blame). Stafford and Scott (1986) define it as 'a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit' (p.80), in which a norm is a 'shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time' (p.81). For Link and Phelan (2001), the process of stigmatization can be broken down into four conceptual components: labelling, stereotyping, being set apart as different, and various forms of disapproval, exclusion and discrimination. Of importance from their perspective is access to social, economic and political power.

It is not possible to encapsulate stigma within one theoretical framework, which necessitates utilising various theoretical tools in order to better grasp it as a social phenomenon. Rogers and Pilgrim (2014) suggest we need to consider 'labelling theory, social network theory, the social psychology of prejudice and discrimination, and theories of the welfare state' (p.197). Interestingly, in the second edition of their book, published in 1999, there is no section on stigma, indicating that sociological and psychological interest in it had risen in the intervening years. Whilst not without merit, what is missing from their suggestions is the role of politics, materialism and historical change in how we conceptualise and attempt to combat stigma in the contemporary period.

Some take issue with Goffman's contention that stigmatization is the spoiling of social identity, a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity. For example, Spicker (1984) claims that this is an unsatisfactory proposition because,

> social identity is defined by society, and it is unclear how someone can be "proved" to be different from that definition [and] there is no reason why a person who is discredited because of an attribute or characteristic he actually possesses should not be said to be stigmatized.
> (p.156)

There is then wide variation in how stigma is defined. Following a discussion of the diversity of the experience of stigma, Spicker (1984) goes on to argue that it could therefore be seen as a not very coherent concept. Nevertheless, he argues that:

> the underlying coherence of a concept rests, not in an attempt to confine its use to a specific or unambiguous use, but in a pattern of 'family resemblances' which defines similarities between related clusters or factors. The idea of

'family resemblance' recognises that two members of the same family may be quite unlike, but they are linked to the family by their similarity to other members.
(p.162)

For Link and Phelan (2001), whilst there are many reasons for the different definitions of stigma, two are most prominent. First, as we discussed in the introduction, the concept has been applied to a wide and varied set of circumstances, and second, the multi-disciplinary interest in it from psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists etc. has, not unexpectedly, led to each discipline defining the concept in different ways. They also see two main challenges to the stigma concept. First, that most social scientists do not belong to stigmatized groups and therefore those who study stigma do so from a position that does not take into account the lived experience of the stigmatized group. They give the example of research around disability, in which disabled people are often seen as objects of study for able-bodied medical and academic researchers. Second, they note how the study of stigma tends to be from an individualistic perspective, focusing on the person stigmatized rather than wider social, political or cultural factors in the construction of the stigmatized person. The rejection of an overarching form can be located within labelling theory, whereby Becker (1963) argues that dominant social groups create deviance 'by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance' (p.9).

There have been attempts to rectify both these problems. Many research groups, although admittedly still a minority, will have input from those with lived experience, although it is worth noting that such groups are not homogenous so it does not follow that the lived experience of research participants will necessarily reflect those of the wider group. There has also been an increasing emphasis on moving away from individual analyses to ones that engage with wider structural and systemic issues. In each case the issue of power and who holds it is crucial.

Power and stigma

Link and Phelan (2001) define stigma as 'the co-occurrence of its components - labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination' and, importantly, emphasise that 'for stigmatization to occur, power must be exercised' (p.363). Power then is crucial in the stigma process as it is 'access to social, economic and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the labelling of persons as different and the execution of disapproval and discrimination' (quoted in

Rogers and Pilgrim, 2014, p.183). This is a key problem with Goffman's work in that while he theorises stigma as a language of relationships, he 'excludes the fact that social relations are always already structured through histories of power' (Tyler, 2020, p.99).

Whilst acknowledging that Goffman's work has been put to good practical use by many social progressives, Tyler is concerned that there has been little development in our sociological understandings of stigmatization since Goffman's pivotal contribution. She draws on the work of Jameson (1976), who argued that Goffman's interactionist approach tended to neutralize the social and historical material from which he drew. For example, he wrote *Stigma* during a heightened period of racial tension amid the rise of the black civil rights movement in the USA. However, his analysis of it in relation to race fails to 'reflect on how social and political upheavals effected by movements for the equality of black humanity might trouble the stigma of "racialised interactions" or consider how stigma is a fundamentally racializing force' (Tyler, 2016, online). In short, while he acknowledges that the norm in 1960s USA was coterminous with being white, and being black was seen as other to the norm, he offers little account of how and why this set of social relations originated or prevails.

So, whilst many are taken by Goffman's conceptualisation of stigma as a social relation, he has been criticised for using norms in such a way as to obfuscate and naturalise historical arrangements (Tyler, 2020). His strategies are for the management of stigma, not for questioning and challenging it. It is unclear as to whether Goffman's 'here and now' focus was a purely conceptual error or one that was striving to maintain the status quo due to concern over rising social conflict and challenges to the then dominant norms associated with race, gender and sexuality. His was a focus on description rather than causation or the proffering of solutions to the ills of social life, a process he acknowledged but that led many sociologists to view his work as trivial (Rosenberg, 2020).

It would be unfair to single out Goffman in this regard, with many disciplines complicit in downplaying or ignoring wider operations of power within social interactions and interpersonal life experiences. For example, social work theorising was likewise berated for having 'no discussion of the creation of social reality by hegemony…. Social worker and client relations are never explored in terms of power' (Bailey and Brake, 1975, p.9). Similarly, psychology was criticised for individualising social problems and for working *on* people to fit into the system rather than questioning or

challenging processes that impoverished and alienated people in the first place (Parker, 2019).

In another, more moral sense, Goffman's work lacks objective standards of achievement. There is no metaphysical Kantian categorical imperative toward which human action should be directed. This can help explain the lack of any detailed analysis of power or strategies for social change in Goffman's work. What counts as success in Goffman's moral universe is that defined by the individual role-player. As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntryre puts it:

> The unit of analysis in Goffman's accounts is always the individual role-player striving to effect his will within a role-structured situation.[2] The goal of the Goffmanesque role-player is effectiveness and success in Goffman's social universe is nothing but what passes for success. There is nothing else for it to be. For Goffman's world is empty of objective standards of achievement; it is so defined that there is no cultural or social space from which appeal to such standards could be made. Standards are established through and in interaction itself; and moral standards seem to have the function only of sustaining types of interaction that may always be menaced by over-expansive individuals.
> (MacIntyre, 2007, p.115)

In addition, if presentation is key to successful role-playing, lack of recognition can be internalised as a grievous attack on the integrity of the self. An actor requires an audience, and an appreciative one at that; to question the act is to question the actor herself. Non-recognition is taken as an insult. MacIntyre argues that in the pre-modern age to insult the honour of someone deemed of higher social status could at times be a matter of life or death (think of duels for example), whereas 'in modern societies we have neither legal nor quasi-legal recourse if we are insulted. Insults have been displaced to the margins of cultural life where they are expressive of private emotions rather than public conflicts' (ibid. p.11).

Such a claim may have been accurate at the time MacIntyre was writing but could hardly be further from the truth today. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, but specifically in chapter five regarding the transgender debate,

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[2] This refers not only to *Stigma* but also to his other works such as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959) and *Strategic Interaction* (Goffman, 1971). However, it is important to note that Goffman was well aware of the wider social structure and thought that it was knowable to an extent in that we could make valid generalisations about it. His focus however tended to be at the micro level of human interaction.

disputes over terminology, forms of address and personal insults have increasingly become a matter for the police or employers to concern themselves with, the aggrieved turning to the state rather than the duelling sword or pistol to address the perceived sleight. In this sense, Goffman's distinction between the formal and the informal role-play settings, the front stage and the backstage regions, of, for example, how we act at work with colleagues away from the gaze of management or the public compared to when dealing with customers or managers, is not as valid today. In a world of social media and almost constant technological surveillance, the backstage space has been severely eroded, with hitherto private behaviours, opinions or thoughts subject to public gaze and potential ridicule or sanction. In other words, informal relationships are now more likely to be externally monitored and subject to external codes on how such interactions should proceed.

Link and Phelan (2001) point out that 'as long as dominant groups sustain their view of stigmatized persons, decreasing the use of one mechanism through which group disadvantage can be accomplished simultaneously creates the impetus to increase the use of another' (p.375). There may be some truth in this but we should not take from it that the stigmatized are mere passive objects at the mercy of power. To do so risks further stigmatization as they are seen as helpless and in need of care. Stigma may be entirely dependent on power, but the relatively powerless are also able to mobilise resources to instigate positive social change. Nevertheless, as they point out 'the simple fact that these forms of resistance exist suggests there *is* something out there to avoid and that there *are* powerful constraining forces at work' (p.378, emphasis in original).

The importance of power can be illustrated by the example of psychiatry, not only in the coercion that can be justified via mental health legislation, but also at a more interactive level. On the ward, the patients may make disparaging remarks about the staff, give them derogative nicknames etc. but this does not make the staff a stigmatized group. The patients simply lack the social power to make their prejudices matter. This power imbalance can also influence life chances post-discharge. For example, NIMBYism (not in my back yard) can lead to community care facilities being located in the poorer areas of towns and cities, as their residents lack the social capital to object to such projects, unlike their neighbours in more affluent and connected middle-class areas. Those in receipt of care services may therefore find themselves in areas with fewer social amenities, higher crime rates and more problematic alcohol and drug misuse.

Discrimination here does not simply refer to one individual's treatment of another, but to structural or institutional discrimination (that is, to a 'disabling environment'). Stigma then can lead to a denial of citizenship.

As mentioned, Goffman has been criticised for implying that stigma is a personal flaw, for example in the way he describes stigma as variously 'a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap' (Goffman, 1963, p.3), 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting' (p.13), 'an attribute that makes him different from others… and of a less desirable kind' (p.13) and 'a shameful differentness' (p.10). In this respect, it has been pointed out that stigma is itself stigmatizing as it locates the problem with the individual. In relation to physical disability, Oliver (1990) argues that stigma is not a useful concept due to its inability to 'throw off the shackles of the individualistic approach to disability with its focus on the discredited and the discreditable' (p.14). This often translated into an intensive medical and sociological interest in 'labellees', a more micro analysis of the stigmatizing process that often downplayed wider issues, such as the political economy and the vested interests behind medicine's construction and application of diagnostic labels. Instead, researchers focused their attention on the 'personal tragedies' such labels identified, which meant that 'the labellee becomes a victim with a personal tragedy to resolve' (Scambler, 2016, online).

Such narratives can be internalised by the stigmatized themselves. The impact of internalised stigma can be self-fulfilling in the sense that if someone perceives negative reactions due to a stigmatized trait they may then avoid social situations out of fear of getting a negative reaction, which, in turn, leads to isolation and further loss of social interaction and status.

Belonging to a stigmatized group does not mean that stereotypical attitudes will not be internalised. Goffman gives the example of a homosexual who was surprised to meet another who was traditionally masculine and did not fit the more effeminate stereotype of common discourse. He also quotes a disabled person who was surprised to find that rather than the tragic figures of popular stereotype, 'cripples could be comely, charming, ugly, lovely, stupid, brilliant – just like all other people' (quoted in Goffman, 1963, p.40).

Stigma can, at times, lead to 'secondary gains', for example, it can be a 'hook' onto which are hung all life's frustrations. If the stigma is removed, the person may find, 'to his surprise and discomfort, that life is not all smooth sailing' even for those without such stigmatized characteristics (ibid. p.10). If the internalisation of stigma can impact deeply on an individual's sense of self-worth and severely inhibit their life chances/choices, it is

important to note that this is a reaction to stigma, and not due to 'stigma' residing in the person's body.

Aware of the danger of locating the problem within the individual, some critics prefer the term discrimination over stigma as it tends to focus 'the attention of research on the producers of rejection and exclusion – those who do the discriminating – rather than on the people who are the recipients of these behaviours' (Link and Phelan, 2001, p.366). They prefer the term 'label' over 'attribute' or 'condition' for similar reasons and also because it emphasises the objectification of the stigmatized individual or group. After all, a label is something you fix onto something, usually an object. Some stigmatized groups have taken this further and direct their attention onto the 'normal' world, holding conferences such as *Normalcy*, where the focus is on why the 'normals' are so obsessed with them and their minds and bodies; asking, *what on earth is wrong with them*? (Normalcy, 2016).

Writing in 2001 Link and Phelan make the point that it is only some differences that are seen as socially relevant, for example race and sexuality can be stigmatized in a way that food preferences or eye colour are, for the most part, seen as inconsequential. Interestingly, in recent years, food preference has become loaded with moral and political significance, with celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver routinely berating the masses for eating food which he deems unhealthy for them (Lyons, 2006).

In this respect, it is important to note that the types of behaviours and/or markers that connote a discredited moral status can, and do, change both culturally and historically. This was something that struck me on my first encounter with the concept of stigma in sociological terms. It was 1986, I was in my early twenties and studying for an A level in sociology one evening per week at a Further Education college. In a discussion of social class the lecturer mentioned the stigma attached to various things, two of which caught my attention; living in a council house and receiving free school dinners. As someone who was brought up in a council house (housing association if we're being pedantic), and who also received free school dinners the idea that there was a stigma attached to them was news to me. Growing up in a working class area just outside Glasgow, Scotland, virtually everyone I knew rented their house from either the local council or a housing association. In fact, I can recall some childhood conversations in which the consensus was why would anyone want to buy a house when the council would give you one. Likewise with free school meals. Those of us who received them did not feel different, or if we did, it was not a stigmatized difference. On the contrary, I often felt lucky for not having to