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STIGMA

NOTES ON THE MANAGEMENT
OF SPOILED IDENTITY



by Erving Goffman

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of making one aware of identity assumptions ordinarily so fully satisfied as to escape one's awareness. It is also possible to think that established minority groups like Negroes and Jews can provide the best objects for this kind of analysis. This could easily lead to imbalance of treatment. Sociologically, the central issue concerning these groups is their place in the social structure; the contingencies these persons encounter in face-to-face interaction is only one part of the problem, and something that cannot itself be fully understood without reference to the history, the political development, and the current policies of the group.

It is also possible to restrict the analysis to those who possess a flaw that uneases almost all their social situations, leading these unfortunates to form a major part of their self-conception reactively, in terms of their response to this plight.¹ This report argues differently. The most fortunate of normals is likely to have his half-hidden failing, and for every little failing there is a social occasion when it will loom large, creating a shameful gap between virtual and actual social identity. Therefore the occasionally precarious and the constantly precarious form a single continuum, their situation in life analyzable by the same framework. (Hence persons with only a minor differentness find they understand the structure of the situation in which the fully stigmatized are placed—often attributing this sympathy to the profundity of their human nature instead of to the isomorphism of human situations. The fully and visibly stigmatized, in turn, must suffer the special indignity of knowing that they wear their situation on their sleeve, that almost anyone will be able to see into the heart of their predicament.) It is implied, then, that it is not to the different that one should look for understanding our differentness, but to the ordinary. The question of social norms is certainly central, but the concern might be less for uncommon deviations from the ordinary than for ordinary deviations from the common.

It can be assumed that a necessary condition for social life is the sharing of a single set of normative expectations by all par-

¹ What Lemert, *Social Pathology, op. cit.*, pp. 75 ff., has titled "secondary deviance."

THE SELF and ITS OTHER

4.

This essay deals with the situation of the stigmatized person and his response to the spot he is in. In order to place the resulting framework in its proper conceptual context, it will be useful to consider from different angles the concept of deviation, this being a bridge which links the study of stigma to the study of the rest of the social world.

Deviations and Norms

It is possible to think of rare and dramatic failings as those most suitable for the analysis here employed. However, it would seem that exotic differentness is most useful merely as a means

ticipants, the norms being sustained in part because of being incorporated. When a rule is broken restorative measures will occur; the damaging is terminated and the damage repaired, whether by control agencies or by the culprit himself.

However, the norms dealt with in this paper concern identity or being, and are therefore of a special kind. Failure or success at maintaining such norms has a very direct effect on the psychological integrity of the individual. At the same time, mere desire to abide by the norm—mere good will—is not enough, for in many cases the individual has no immediate control over his level of sustaining the norm. It is a question of the individual's condition, not his will; it is a question of conformance, not compliance. Only by introducing the assumption that the individual should know and keep his place can a full equivalent in willful action be found for the individual's social condition.

Further, while some of these norms, such as sightedness and literacy, may be commonly sustained with complete adequacy by most persons in the society, there are other norms, such as those associated with physical comeliness, which take the form of ideals and constitute standards against which almost everyone falls short at some stage in his life. And even where widely attained norms are involved, their multiplicity has the effect of disqualifying many persons. For example, in an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. Every American male tends to look out upon the world from this perspective, this constituting one sense in which one can speak of a common value system in America. Any male who fails to qualify in any of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior; at times he is likely to pass and at times he is likely to find himself being apologetic or aggressive concerning known-about aspects of himself he knows are probably seen as undesirable. The general identity-values of a society may be fully entrenched nowhere, and yet they can cast some

kind of shadow on the encounters encountered everywhere in daily living.

Moreover, more is involved than norms regarding somewhat static status attributes. The issue is not merely visibility but obtrusiveness; this means that failure to sustain the many minor norms important in the etiquette of face-to-face communication can have a very pervasive effect upon the defaulter's acceptability in social situations.

Therefore it is not very useful to tabulate the numbers of persons who suffer the human predicament outlined in this book. As Lemert once suggested, the number would be as high as one wanted to make it;² and when those with a courtesy stigma are added, and those who once experienced the situation or are destined, if for no other reason than oncoming agedness, to do so, the issue becomes not whether a person has experience with a stigma of his own, because he has, but rather how many varieties he has had his own experience with.

One can say, then, that identity norms breed deviations as well as conformance. Two general solutions to this normative predicament were cited earlier. One solution was for a category of persons to support a norm but be defined by themselves and others as not the relevant category to realize the norm and personally to put it into practice. A second solution was for the individual who cannot maintain an identity norm to alienate himself from the community which upholds the norm, or refrain from developing an attachment to the community in the first place. This is of course a costly solution both for society and for the individual, even if it is one that occurs in small amounts all the time.

The processes detailed here constitute together a third main solution to the problem of unsustained norms. Through these processes the common ground of norms can be sustained far beyond the circle of those who fully realize them; this is a statement, of course, about the social function of these processes and

² E. Lemert, "Some Aspects of a General Theory of Sociopathic Behavior," *Proceedings of the Pacific Sociological Society*, State College of Washington, XVI (1948), 23-24

not about their cause or their desirability. Passing and covering are involved, providing the student with a special application of the arts of impression management, the arts, basic in social life, through which the individual exerts strategic control over the image of himself and his products that others glean from him. Also involved is a form of tacit cooperation between normals and the stigmatized: the deviator can afford to remain attached to the norm because others are careful to respect his secret, pass lightly over its disclosure, or disattend evidence which prevents a secret from being made of it; these others, in turn, can afford to extend this tactfulness because the stigmatized will voluntarily refrain from pushing claims for acceptance much past the point normals find comfortable.

The Normal Deviant

It should be seen, then, that stigma management is a general feature of society, a process occurring wherever there are identity norms. The same features are involved whether a major differentness is at question, of the kind traditionally defined as stigmatic, or a picayune differentness, of which the shamed person is ashamed to be ashamed. One can therefore suspect that the role of normal and the role of stigmatized are parts of the same complex, cuts from the same standard cloth. Of course, psychiatrically oriented students have often pointed out the pathological consequence of self-derogation, just as they have argued that prejudice against a stigmatized group can be a form of sickness. These extremes, however, have not concerned us, for the patterns of response and adaptation considered in this essay seem totally understandable within a framework of normal psychology. One can assume first that persons with different stigmas are in an appreciably similar situation and respond in an appreciably similar way. The neighborly druggist might talk to the neighborhood, therefore neighborhood drugstores have been avoided by persons seeking all manner of equipment and medication—persons wonderfully diverse who share nothing but a need to control

information. And secondly, one can assume that the stigmatized and the normal have the same mental make-up, and that this necessarily is the standard one in our society; he who can play one of these roles, then, has exactly the required equipment for playing out the other, and in fact in regard to one stigma or another is likely to have developed some experience in doing so. Most important of all, the very notion of *shameful* differences assumes a similarity in regard to crucial beliefs, those regarding identity. Even where an individual has quite abnormal feelings and beliefs, he is likely to have quite normal concerns and employ quite normal strategies in attempting to conceal these abnormalities from others, as the situation of ex-mental patients suggests:

One of the difficulties centers around the meaning of "reasonable employment." The patients are sometimes unable, but more often unwilling, to explain why a particular job is "unreasonable" or impossible for them. One middle-aged man could not bring himself to explain that he was so terrified of the dark that he insisted on sharing his bedroom with his aunt, and that he could not possibly work where it meant coming home alone in the dark in winter. He tries to overcome his fear, but is reduced to a state of physical collapse if left alone at night. In such an instance—and there were many others—the ex-patient's fears of ridicule, contempt or harshness make it difficult for him to explain the real reason for refusing or not holding the jobs offered to him. He may then easily be labelled as work-shy or unemployable, which is likely to be financially disastrous.⁹

Similarly, when an aging person finds he cannot remember the names of some of his immediate friends, he may shy away from going to the meeting places where he is likely to encounter them, thus illustrating an embarrassment and a plan which entail human capacities that have nothing to do with aging.

If, then, the stigmatized person is to be called a deviant, he might better be called a *normal deviant*, at least to the extent that

⁹ Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

his situation is analyzed within the framework presented here. There is direct evidence regarding this self-other, normal-stigmatized unity. For example, it seems that persons who suddenly find themselves relieved of a stigma, as in successful plastic surgery, may quickly be seen, by themselves and others, to have altered their personality, an alteration in the direction of the acceptable,⁴ just as those who have suddenly acquired a defect may relatively quickly experience a change in apparent personality.⁵ These perceived changes seem to be a result of the individual's being placed in a new relationship to the contingencies of acceptance in face-to-face interaction, with consequent employment of new strategies of adaptation. Important additional evidence comes from social experiments, wherein subjects knowingly take on a defect (temporarily, of course), such as partial deafness, and find themselves spontaneously manifesting the reactions and employing the devices that are found among the actually handicapped.⁶

A further fact should be mentioned. Because a change from stigmatized status to normal status is presumably in a desired direction, it is understandable that the change, when it comes, can be sustained psychologically by the individual. But it is very difficult to understand how individuals who sustain a sudden transformation of their life from that of a normal to that of a stigmatized person can survive the change psychologically; yet very often they do. That both types of transformation can be sustained—but especially the latter type—suggests that standard capacities and training equip us to handle both possibilities. And once these possibilities are learned, the rest, alas, comes easily. For the individual to learn that he is beyond the pale, or not beyond the pale after having been beyond, is not, then, a complicated thing, merely a new alignment within an old frame of reference, and a taking to himself in detail what he had known about before as residing in others. The painfulness, then, of

⁴ Macgregor *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-129.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-114.

⁶ L. Meyerson, "Experimental Injury: An Approach to the Dynamics of Physical Disability," *Journal of Social Issues*, IV (1948), 68-71. See also Griffin, *op. cit.*

sudden stigmatization can come not from the individual's confusion about his identity, but from his knowing too well what he has become.

Taken through time, then, the individual is able to play both parts in the normal-deviant drama. But one must see that even boxed within a brief social moment, the individual may be able to perform both shows, exhibiting not only a general capacity to sustain both roles, but also the detailed learning and command necessary for currently executing the required role behavior. This is facilitated, of course, by the fact that the roles of stigmatized and normal are not merely complementary; they also exhibit some striking parallels and similarities. Performers of each role may withdraw from contact with the other as a means of adjustment; each may feel that he is not fully accepted by the other; each may feel that his own conduct is being watched too closely—and be correct in this feeling. Each may stay with his "own" merely to forgo having to face the problem. Further, the asymmetries or differences between the roles that do exist are often kept within such limits as will further the common and crucial task of maintaining the social situation that is in progress. Aliveness to the role of the other must be sufficient so that when certain adaptive tactics are not employed by one of the normal-stigmatized pair, the other will know how to step in and take on the role. For example, should the stigmatized person fail to present his failing in a matter of fact way, the normal may assume the task. And when normals try tactfully to help the stigmatized person with his difficulties, he may grit his teeth and accept help gracefully, out of regard for the good will of the effort.

Evidence of two-headed role playing is widely available. For example, whether for fun or seriously, people pass, and they do so in both directions, into or out of the stigmatized category. Another source of evidence is psychodrama. This "therapy" assumes that mental patients and others beyond the pale can on stage switch parts and play out the role of normal to someone who is now playing their role to them; and in fact they can per-

form this theater without much prompting and with reasonable competency. A third source of evidence that the individual can simultaneously sustain command over both the normal and stigmatized role comes to us from behind-scenes joshing. Normals, when among themselves, "take off" on a stigmatized type. More to the point, the stigmatized in similar circumstances takes off on the normal as well as himself. He jokingly enacts scenes of degradation with one of his kind playing the role of the crudest of normals while he affects the complementary role for a moment, only to break into vicarious rebelliousness. As part of this sad pleasure there will be the unserious use of stigma terms of address that are usually tabooed in "mixed" society.⁷ It should be restated here that this kind of joking by the stigmatized does not so much demonstrate some kind of chronic distance the individual has from himself as it demonstrates the more important fact that a stigmatized person is first of all like anyone else, trained first of all in others' views of persons like himself, and differing from them first of all in having a special reason to resist stigma derogation when in their presence and the special license to give voice to it when in their absence.

A special case of the light use of self-abusing language and style is provided by professional representatives of the group. When representing their group to normals, they may embody in an exemplary way the ideals of the normal, being partly chosen for being able to do so. However, when attending social affairs among their own, they may feel a special obligation to show that they have not forgotten about the ways of the group or their own place, and so on stage may employ native dialect, gesture, and expression in humorous caricature of their identity. (The audience can then dissociate themselves from what they still have a little of, and identify with what they haven't yet fully

⁷ For example, in regard to Negroes, see Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 92. On the use of "crazy" by mental patients see, for example, I. Belknap, *Human Problems of a State Mental Hospital* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1956), p. 196; and J. Kerkhoff, *How Thin the Veil* (New York: Greenberg, 1952), p. 152. Davis, "Deviance Disavowal," *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131, provides examples in regard to the physically handicapped, pointing out that use of these terms with normals will be a sign that the normals are wise.

become.) These performances, however, often have a cultivated, trim aspect; something has been clearly placed in brackets and raised to an art. In any case, one regularly finds in the same representative the capacity to be more "normal" in manner than are most of the members of his category who orient themselves in this direction, while at the same time he can command more of the native idiom than those of his category who are oriented in this direction. And where a representative doesn't have this capacity to manage two faces, he will find himself under some pressure to develop it.

Stigma and Reality

Until now it has been argued that a central role should be given to discrepancies between virtual and actual social identity. Tension management and information management have been stressed—how the stigmatized individual can present to others a precarious self, subject to abuse and discrediting. But to leave it at this creates a biased perspective, imputing solid reality to what is much shakier than that. The stigmatized and the normal are part of each other; if one can prove vulnerable, it must be expected that the other can, too. For in imputing identities to individuals, discreditable or not, the wider social setting and its inhabitants have in a way compromised themselves; they have set themselves up to be proven the fool.

All of this has already been implied in the statement that passing is sometimes done for what is seen as fun. The person who very occasionally passes often recounts the incident to his fellows as evidence of the foolishness of the normals and the fact that all their arguments about his differentness from them are merely rationalizations.⁸ These errors of identification are chuckled over, gloated over by the passer and his friends. Similarly one finds that those who at the moment are routinely concealing their personal or occupational identity may take pleasure in tempting the devil, in bringing a conversation with

⁸ See Goffman, *Asylums, op. cit.*, p. 112.

unsuspecting normals around to where the normals are unknowingly led to make fools of themselves by expressing notions which the presence of the passer quite discredits. In such cases what has proven false is not the person with a differentness, but rather any and all those who happen into the situation and there attempt to sustain conventional patterns of treatment.

But there are of course even more direct instances of the situation, not the person, becoming threatened. The physically handicapped, for example, in having to receive overtures of sympathy and inquiry from strangers, may sometimes protect their privacy by exercising something other than tact. Thus, a one-legged girl, prone to many inquiries by strangers concerning her loss, developed a game she called "Ham and Legs" in which the play was to answer an inquiry with a dramatically presented posteros explanation.⁹ A different girl with the same plight reports a similar strategy:

Questions about how I lost my leg used to annoy me, so I developed a stock answer that kept these people from asking further: "I borrowed some money from a loan company and they are holding my leg for security!"¹⁰

Brief responses that terminate the unwanted encounter are also reported:

"My poor girl, I see you've lost your leg."
That's the opportunity for the *touché*, "How careless of me!"¹¹

In addition, there is the much less gentle art of "putting the other on," whereby militant members of disadvantaged groups, during sociable occasions, build up a story, about themselves and their feelings, to normals who clumsily profess sympathy, the story reaching a point where it becomes patent that the story was designed to reveal itself to be a fabrication.

⁹ Baker, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-94.

¹⁰ Henrich and Krieger, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹¹ Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 97, in Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

A cold stare, of course, may forestall an encounter before it has been initiated, as illustrated from the memoirs of an aggressive dwarf:

There were the thick-skinned ones, who stared like hill people come down to see a travelling show. There were the paper-peekers, the furtive kind who would withdraw blushing if you caught them at it. There were the pitying ones, whose tongue clickings could almost be heard after they had passed you. But even worse, there were the chatters, whose every remark might as well have been "How do you do, poor boy?" They said it with their eyes and their manners and their tone of voice.

I had a standard defense—a cold stare. Thus anesthetized against my fellow man, I could contend with the basic problem—getting in and out of the subway alive.¹²

From here it is only one step to crippled children who manage occasionally to beat up someone who taunts them, or persons, politely but clearly excluded from certain settings, politely and clearly entering the settings in numbers and with determination.¹³

The social reality sustained by the tractable member of a particular stigmatized category and the normal with civility will itself have a history. When, as in the case of divorce or Irish ethnicity, an attribute loses much of its force as a stigma, a period will have been witnessed when the previous definition of the situation is more and more attacked, first, perhaps, on the comedy stage, and later during mixed contacts in public places, until it ceases to exert control over both what can be easily attended, and what must be kept a secret or painfully disattended.

In conclusion, may I repeat that stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles,

¹² Viscardi, *A Man's Stature*, p. 70, in Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 214. On similar techniques employed by a man with hooks, see Russell, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.

¹³ An experiment along these lines is recorded in M. Kohn and R. Williams, Jr., "Situational Patterning in Intergroup Relations," *American Sociological Review*, XXI (1956), 164-174.

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. These are generated in social situations during mixed contacts by virtue of the unrealized norms that are likely to play upon the encounter. The lifelong attributes of a particular individual may cause him to be type-cast; he may have to play the stigmatized role in almost all of his social situations, making it natural to refer to him, as I have done, as a stigmatized person whose life-situation places him in opposition to normals. However, his particular stigmatizing attributes do not determine the nature of the two roles, normal and stigmatized, merely the frequency of his playing a particular one of them. And since interaction roles are involved, not concrete individuals, it should come as no surprise that in many cases he who is stigmatized in one regard nicely exhibits all the normal prejudices held toward those who are stigmatized in another regard.

Now certainly it seems that face-to-face interaction, at least in American society, is constructed in such a way as to be particularly prone to the kind of trouble considered in this essay. It also seems that discrepancies between virtual and actual identity will always occur and always give rise to the need for tension management (in regard to the discredited), and information control (in regard to the discreditable). And where stigmas are very visible or intrusive, or are transmissible along family lines, then the resulting instabilities in interaction can have a very pervasive effect upon those accorded the stigmatized role. However, the perceived undesirability of a particular personal property, and its capacity to trigger off these stigma-normal processes, has a history of its own, a history that is regularly changed by purposeful social action. And although it can be argued that the stigma processes seem to have a general social function—that of enlisting support for society among those who aren't supported by it—and to that degree presumably are resistant to change, it must be seen that additional functions seem to be involved which

vary markedly according to the type of stigma. The stigmatization of those with a bad moral record clearly can function as a means of formal social control; the stigmatization of those in certain racial, religious, and ethnic groups has apparently functioned as a means of removing these minorities from various avenues of competition; and the devaluation of those with bodily disfigurements can perhaps be interpreted as contributing to a needed narrowing of courtship decisions.¹⁴

¹⁴ For this latter suggestion, I am grateful to David Matza.