



Stigma

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The term "stigma" refers to a condition of existence where an individual carries an attribute that discredits her or him as a "normal" person, an attribute that bestows moral, mental, or physical impurity.

Of course, since all people engage in deviant behavior, hold deviant ideas, or develop physical ailments at some point in their lives, we all have attributes that discredit us to some degree. However, seeing others as stigmatized allows "normal people" (*normals*) to avoid identifying with those who carry such polluted selves, without worrying about being contaminated by them and without worrying about the unfairness with which such people are treated.

There are two kinds of stigma: stigma that is outwardly visible to others and stigma that can be easily hidden. Additionally, the stigmatized differ in terms of whether they were born with their stigma (as in a person with a birth defect) or whether they acquire it later in life (as in a person who experiences a disfiguring injury as an adult). Stigma is an ascribed characteristic, which means that it is attached to individuals because of their actual or perceived membership in a stigmatized group. All members of such a group are perceived as carrying the stigma.

Once stigma is ascribed to an individual, it is nearly impossible to remove it. It then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the treatment that the stigmatized individual receives begins to have an effect on the individual's own behavior, reinforcing the stigmatized identity.

Even when stigmas are not outwardly visible and reacted upon by others, their presence affects the behavior of their bearer. For instance, stigmatized individuals may work hard to conceal their stigma for fear of the treatment that they would receive were it known or for shame of its existence. They may also come to see themselves in a negative light because of the existence of the stigma, internalizing negative attitudes about themselves and their group.

The only way that an individual can be rid of a stigmatized identity is to be considered "cured." For instance, if someone is stigmatized because of a speech defect and goes to speech therapy, she or he may be able to escape the stigma if the treatment removes all discernible defect. However, this is rare. Think, for example, of cancer as a stigma: people who have had cancer and no longer do so are not entirely free of their stigma. They are referred to not as normals but instead as cancer survivors or people in remission.

Stigma and glbtq People

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, as well as questioning one's sexuality or gender identification, are stigmatizing identities in contemporary society. The existence of this stigma can be seen by examining the language used to describe glbtq people, words that are often used as slurs in everyday slang; the media representations of glbtq people, which are often one-sided and stereotypical; the lack of societal heroes and role models that are acknowledged as being glbtq; and the existence of discriminatory laws and regulations relating to marriage, child rearing, and other normal activities of life.

Stigmatization of glbtq people is not limited to those who are visibly out. Those who simply appear to be a glbtq person, as well as those who are associated with queerness in some other way (as relatives or friends of glbtq people or as heterosexual participants in glbtq rights organizations and movements) are also touched by the stigma. These allies may be able to escape the stigma to some degree by disavowing their connection to glbtq people or groups, but stigmas are hard to dissolve.

Stigmas have consequences for individuals' daily lives. These consequences are not only the emotional ones discussed above, but also behavioral. For instance, the stigmatization of homosexuality has the effect of making some glbtq people reluctant to act in a stereotypical fashion, even if internally that is how they would like to act. Conversely, some people who may not naturally possess stereotypical mannerisms may acquire them, because they believe this is how members of their group are expected to behave.

These stigmas also affect the behavior of heterosexual people, as they may restrict their behavior and/or appearance to avoid being perceived as gay. Examples of these restrictions are women who choose not to participate in athletics because female athletes are seen as lesbians, or men who do not engage in close friendships with other men because they believe these friendships will be seen as gay.

Stigmas have particularly strong effects on young people, who are often more susceptible to peer pressure than are adults. The stigmatization of glbtq youth is one of the factors leading to their higher suicide rate. Supportive peers and adults who can see past the stigma are important for maintaining the mental health of stigmatized youth and helping them grow into healthy, well-adjusted adults who can live in society while compensating for the stigma they experience on a daily basis.

Stigma and AIDS

HIV and AIDS are a major stigmatizing factor around the world today. Despite the medical knowledge that HIV cannot be transmitted through casual contact, many uninfected individuals are afraid of being near, eating with, or simply touching HIV-positive individuals.

An additional factor is that, at least in advanced cases of AIDS, the disease leaves a visible physical presence on its sufferers, such as lesions. The stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS is not only about contagion, however.

This stigma also carries with it a moral judgment that people living with HIV/AIDS "deserve" their fate because of the risky behavior in which they may have engaged. The moral judgment allows uninfected individuals to avoid feeling guilty about their treatment of people with HIV/AIDS.

Stigmas surrounding HIV/AIDS are also extended to gay and bisexual men more generally, as society sees them as the agents of HIV transmission. Bisexual men in particular bear this stigma because of the belief that bisexual men acquire HIV by engaging in homosexual sex and then transmit it to their "innocent" female sex partners.

The presence of these stigmas may lead some gay and bisexual men to believe that getting infected with HIV will be inevitable, and therefore they should not bother trying to protect themselves. Efforts to avoid stigmatization may also lead people at high risk for contracting HIV to hide their behavior and avoid being tested for the virus, as well as leading people already infected to conceal their status from sex partners.

Ending Stigma

Most stigmatized groups work to change this fact of their lives. While it is difficult to be rid of stigma completely, groups can make changes in the degree to which they are stigmatized. Evidence of these changes in the stigmatization of glbtq people can be seen in the fact that homosexuality is no longer

considered a mental disorder, their media presence is slowly expanding, more politicians and cultural figures are being truthful about their glbtq identities, and changes in the legal status of glbtq people have occurred.

Particularly important in ending stigma will be the Supreme Court's decriminalization of sodomy in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), because when sodomy was a crime, all sexually active lesbians and gay men were implicated as criminals, the ultimate bearers of stigma. However, legal and cultural changes do not remove the entire stigma that a group experiences. It takes generations for a stigma to completely disappear, as the stigmatized group slowly fades into the mass of normals that comprise society.

Meanwhile, groups and individuals must continue to work to lessen the stigma attached to glbtq identities. Most important, glbtq people must cope with stigma in daily life by maintaining a healthy self-esteem even in the face of social disapproval and disparagement.

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