

The types and definitions of stigma



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Stigma is a Greek word meaning mark, cut or burn into the skin, to identify criminal slaves as polluted and shunned in public. However, in a simple term stigma are classed as being represented for persons who are usually excluded from society due to a condition they themselves did not choose or over which they may have little control over, thus suffer from “ existential stigma”; such as sexual identity, mental retardation or even in such cases, marital status. Moreover, there are other cases whereby a person may experience some sort of “ achieved stigma” to which he or she have somehow contributed to their inclusion in a stigmatized group. Such form of stigma could range from homelessness, immigration, achievement or prostitution. Unsurprisingly, many of us fall into at least one of any categories (some not mentioned) yet no one seems to be accepted from association of some stigmatized group.

In sociology term Erving Guffman described stigma as an “ attribute, behaviour or reputation which is socially discrediting in a particular way”. Guffman also defined the meaning of the word “ stigma” as a special gap between vital social identity and actual social identity.

Guffman's meaning on "vital social identity" relates to the way we represent ourselves with people we don't see and for is take on "actual social identity" he explains it as the way we deal with people in real life.

Social Stigma

Guffman named "abomination of the body" (physical deformities) as a "character" (dishonesty, mental disorder, and homosexuality) tribal (race, sex, religion) as the three types of stigma.

In the case of "abomination of the body" people living with the HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) are vulnerable to stigmatisation; this is because our society has built up our perception to live in fear and to regard such virus as a fatal sin. Unsurprisingly, in this modern day people live in the fear that being around someone living with HIV virus enhances the chances of them being contaminated by them. Some have the belief that the virus is contagious by being around or sharing a cup from the person affected with the virus will virus.

Generally the forms of stigmatization usually associated with HIV are groups of people such as homosexuals, ethnic minority such as Black people and drug users, as they believe such groups are the ones who carry the virus around due to the kinds of activities they pursue or the way they live their lives. Possibly in some case you may find that are person within this group requiring medical assistance for whatever reason leads to negative impacts towards their care and health.

In some cases you may find that individuals that are infected with the virus are more often shun by families and friends, forcing them to move from their

home and sometimes suffer from physical violence or in some extreme cases are even murdered. Unfortunately this is quite evident in third world countries, whereby HIV patients may encounter difficulties and are denied health care, employment and the ability to move from one country to another. In such situation, this fear of stigma causes those affected to ignore sickness test to determine whether they are affected and require treatments, consequently deciding to remain silent about the virus, leading to them being denied the essential treatment and social care. In the long run they eventually deteriorate painfully.

Mental Stigma

Drug addiction, alcoholism impressments are mental illnesses that relates to all part of the character of being stigmatised. This is down to the individual being dishonest. Personally I believe the media plays a vital role in people suffering from mental illness in to being stigmatized, as I am lead to believe they allow it to happen through the negative views they air out to the public. For people that suffer this mental illness really goes out of their way to commit gruesome crime, whilst a majority of mental illness patients live a quiet and peaceful life others experience something of an unimaginable life, which merely cause them to their death. We learn about this disease in rare cases when a person may decide to discuss their experiences with others. Within some families this is kept as a taboo, as to not allowing other families to discover that a member of a family suffers from mental illness whether it be alcoholic or any other forms of mental difficulty. Such situations are avoided due to what is said or written in the media that becomes their perception of what mental illness means. Whenever we hear about

gruesome crimes being linked to mental illness we tend to gain a stronger stigma surroundings mental illness. It is also common for people with this disease to be an easy target for criminals as mental illness interferes with the sufferer ability to socialise with people, thus leaving them unaware, vulnerable and careless of their surroundings; not forgetting homeless.

At times such stigmatised group may experience difficulties of having no access to jobs, education and sometimes even a home. As Bill Clinton once said “ mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of, but stigma and bias shame us all”

Physical Stigma

Tribal is another form of stigma, which can be in the form of race, sex or religion.

A good example of such stigma would be the albino race for instance; a hereditary condition caused by the lack of pigmentation (melanin) which leaves the skin whiter. As like Black (and other ethnic minorities) may experience some form of stigmatisation within their lifetime. Albinos, just like many other races may usually find it difficult, living within society. Sadly, albinism in Africa for instance is widely regarded as a form of deformity, for reasons that are non-explanatory. Living as an albino in such country is horrifying, as such race are treated like outcasts, and are made to feel as an underdogs; unable to find jobs. Undoubtedly they are made to feel unwelcome in such community and are very much rejected by their own people.

Living in Africa, in many cases you will mostly find albino women end up being single parents because, as most men in some African countries believe in the perception that albino women will have albino children, and also believe that by sleeping with an albino woman they will end with the HIV virus for some reason or another. Which is why you will most likely find albino women dropping out of school due to the immense discrimination, therefore in many cases they may end up selling fruits in the streets due to the lack of education they may have received.

As you can imagine, albino children find it hard adjusting to school life, as they are frequently picked upon, cursed at and most times end up at home with no education to look forward to. “Albinism in Africa is regarded as a curse from God” (BBC News), a type of stigmatisation that sometimes leads to an unimaginative future as an individual.

Physical stigma

Obese individuals face different forms of discrimination and prejudice, one of the most commonly known stigmatisations. Men as well as Women are faced with such conditions due to the way they look as opposed to an average size body, whereby usually in some cases a diet is regarded as a cure to overcome such “physical deformity”. People suffering from such stigmatisation would tend to experience refusal of being hired on a job, and in extreme cases being told to pay for two (rather than one) seats on an airline in order to travel. Attitudes of obese people have become more stigmatised, so much so that people feel it is one that can be excused, of telling someone they are worthless because of their weight. Stigmatizing on weight has become so common that someone has even commented on the heavier a

person is on an airline means that that they require more fuel to take the required weight.

Unfortunately most people never seem to realize that a weight of a heavy person is linked to uncontrolled health problems, but usually have a strong belief that it is due to the person's fault; and the person lacks exercise and eats far too much than required. An obese individual experiencing stigma would no doubt go through life being referred to as either “ ugly, unattractive or awkward” and that it is the personal responsibility of the individual of not being in such a way .

Unknown to most, such stigma leads to the obese individual of gaining even more weight due to the intense stress such person may go through, and by this I mean; they may find that the lack of courage may enhance such weight to be added on.

You would usually find that the higher a person's body mass is then the less respect they may gain from society, some would even go as far as telling you that sitting next to an obese person is a shame and a sickening thought because they are perceived as unclean and smelly people, who are unable to wash and look after themselves.

No matter what anyone may think, fat stigma affects everyone's health, fat, thin or in between. Recently a story was told of how an overweight teenage girl whose school was going through a “ wellness campaign.” Hallways were plastered with posters saying “ Prevent teenage obesity.” After the posters went up, the girl said, schoolmates began taunting her in the halls, pointing at the obese girl on the posters and saying, “ Look at the fat girl.” The moral

to this story is that heavier girls at the school were now made to feel conscious about what they consumed, yet the thinner girls were able to eat their choice of lunch without the aid of some snide nasty and disrespectful comment, even if the lunch were similar to the children deemed to be the heaviest.

Stigmatization gave the thinner children permission to think there's something wrong with the larger children, which doesn't help them look at their own health habits either.

In Goffman's theory of stigma he distinguishes three categories; "the own", "the wise" and "the normal" (Goffman 1963). He describes "the own" as a group that represent stigmatized society. "the wise" in Goffman term are people who assign stigma and feels that life is better to them with few complains. Whereas "the normal" are people with empathy towards others and therefore help them fit into society.