

**Divna Plavšić<sup>1</sup>**  
**Vanja Nišić<sup>2</sup>**  
*Faculty of Political Science*  
University of Banja Luka

*Review*  
**UDC 159.923:316.4**  
**DOI:10.7251/SOCEN1204085P**  
*Accepted: 15.10.2012.*

## **Stigma and Identity**

The word “stigma” and its original meaning have their origins in ancient Greece. For them, the term was meant for the mark on the body, which pointed to some shortcomings of personality that was characterized by it. Stigma is referred to a situation in which an individual is not fully accepted by society. The book *Stigma* (Erving Goffman) explores the relationship when the stigmatized and the normal people are in the same social situation, ie. when they are geared to one another, either through conversation or meeting or are only found in the same particular situation. Erving Goffman seeks to explain in this book the position of stigmatized people in society, citing the examples of people who are in any way rejected in society. The term stigma is used to indicate a feature that is deeply discrediting. It is viewed in two ways: whether stigmatized person believes that what makes it different from others is already known and obvious at first glance or they think that the ones that are present know nothing about that, and they do not notice it. In the first case, a person is in a position of discredited one, and in the second case in a state that discredits. “There are three types of stigma: The first is physical disfigurement-various body deformities. The second type is a weakness of character, which manifests as a weak-willed, dominant or unnatural passions, doubtful or rigid beliefs, dishonesty, which is derived from all cases reported, for example, mental disorders, custody, abuse, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicide attempts and radical political behavior. The third type of stigma is tribal, ethnic and religious, which is a kind of stigma that is passed on from generation to generation and equally affects all members of the family”<sup>3</sup>. Author divides the virtual and actual social identity by marking the virtual social identity as the identity of the person who we impute our feeling towards, while the actual social identity represents the actual categories of characteristics. What is stated as an undeniable fact is that the stigmatized person has the same beliefs as to the identity as we do. We create a stigma theory,

---

<sup>1</sup> FPN, Banja Luka, study of sociology, divna\_90@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup> FPN, Banja Luka, study of sociology, vanjanisic@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma*, Novi Sad: Mediterran Publishing, 2009, p.16.

ideology, we believe that a person with a stigma is not a human being, and with various forms of discrimination we reduce the possibility of the person's life. When normal and stigmatized find themselves in direct contact with the intent to achieve communication then occurs one of the main sociological scenes when the causes and consequences of stigma must be faced by both sides. Erving Goffman illustrates this situation by the example when a person who is blind, sick, deaf, crippled never know what the attitude towards her will have some new acquaintance until contact is achieved. "The stigmatized person always have that feeling: They do not know what others "really" think about them"<sup>4</sup>. There are people who are sympathetic to the stigmatized people believing that she is a human being just like everyone else. In this regard, we are mentioning two categories: The first group includes those who share their stigma with them, because knowing from their own experience what it means to have a certain stigma can help by providing a variety of directions. Normal people with stigmatized first mention their handicap, and only after that achieved or possible successes. The author explains this through the example of former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt where some additional information are attributed to his high position, and that he suffered from polio. The second group consists of people who are normal, but some special situations addressed them into the secret life of the stigmatized individuals and they are sympathetic to them and by acceptance they feel as privileged members of the clan. Two types of insiders are offered: a person with knowledge of the results from work in an institution that is oriented to the needs of those with a certain type of stigma (eg, nurses) and the other composed of individuals who, through social structure are associated with the stigmatized person (eg ex-con child will be stigmatized by others even when the parent is in prison and served his sentence).

In the second chapter, entitled Control of information and personal identity, the author introduces us to the importance of social information that is most important in the study of stigma. This is information about an individual because it informs about its more or less permanent features, as opposed to moods and emotions expressed in the given time. It can be congenital or acquired, and what is an issue is when they arise do they become part of that person. For example, color of the skin-innate; crippling-lasting, but not innate. There are also features that have social information, but have surface informative function (ie traces of dots at addicts). Goffman quotes visibility as a factor of crucial importance because it informs the social identity of the person that is important to others, and herself. There are more and more cases where we want to adopt an identity that is not a personal or we want to rid of our personal identity.

---

<sup>4</sup> *The same*, p. 26.

Under the personal identity we include the clear features and identificational wedges. Personal identity is connected with the assumption that a person is different from others. Stigmatized people are less accepted by foreigners than by persons close to them. They sometimes want from people closest to them to hide their stigma, for example, homosexuals. Every person is a kind of base for the upgrade of resumes, all a person does is considered as a part of her biography. What is in the consideration is the relationship of personal identification and social identification. During the construction of personal identification are used all aspects of her social identity. When we personally identify a person we have a base for the organization and consolidation of information for the social identity of the person. When a person is among strangers it is for them a current social identity and those others are beginning to form her own personal identification or will refrain from creating assumptions. The term "cognitive recognition" means placing someone either through certain social identity or personal identity. Goffman points out that one of the known ways to hide and multiply signs of stigma is a name change. The strategy of discredited person is to take risks and share the world into two groups: those whom they do not confide anything and those who are entrusted everything and then they rely on them. On the other hand stigmatized are trying to conceal their stigma and they do not want the knowledge of that stigma too be spread. The most interesting part is the coverage term that is associated with the organization of social situations, for example, a person who has a hearing problem should learn how loudly to speak in order to adapt to a particular situation.

In the chapter Alienation from the group and ego identity the author first makes difference between personal and social identity. Social and personal identities are part of the definitions and attitudes that are performed by other person on the identity of some person. The views and definitions of personal identity may be established before a person is born and may continue after her death. On the other hand, ego identity is a subjective attitude, thought process that is inextricably linked to what a person feels. The concept of social identity allows us to study the stigma, while the concept of personal identity, the role of information control to deal with the stigma. Setting ego identity allows us to study what people may think of stigma and our relationship to it and makes us pay special attention to the advice given in connection with this problem. What Goffman suggests as a problem is the estrangement out of the group. Stigmatized person is asked to see themselves from the point of view outside of their group, the group of normal and the larger society to which it belongs. Stigmatized people should not be ashamed or embarrassed to others who have the same problem, or to discredit themselves by trying to hide it. They should help the normals to cope with the situation when they are together to facilitate

or reduce the tension of the situation. They often use humor as a defense mechanism. In order to facilitate the realization of communication they should accept help, even when it is not needed. On the other hand, people from stigmatized people do not expect just to stick to their roles, but also to know their place. Thus, the author gives an example of: the “cripple who has been incapacitated to climb the stairs of a restaurant and was forced to crawl on his knees (to show that he is not disabled), and this time the waiters ran to him, but not to help him, but to tell him that they can not serve him because people have come to enjoy, not to watch the depressing sight of one cripple”<sup>5</sup>. The example shows how stigmatized people want to display themselves without its stigmas and live like other “normal people”, while on the other hand normal people do not want to recognize how limited and intolerant they are. Normal people often expect from stigmatized to behave in a way that their burden is not heavy, nor that makes them different from others.

The section titled *Self and Its Double* author begins with deviations and norms. Managing stigma is a general feature of society because it is a process that is triggered wherever there is a norm of identity. The role of normal and stigmatized role is part of the same complex clipped from the same standard material. Goffman quite convincingly shows that stigmatized and normal have the same mindset and that it is the standard in our society. He states the following example: “A person who is advanced in years realizes that it can no longer remember the names of its closest friends, and it happens that it is overwhelmed by shame and stops visiting places where it is likely to meet them”<sup>6</sup>. In these situations, the stigmatized person gets name deviant, and more appropriate name would be “normal deviant.” In life of people can happen two kinds of changes, from normal to stigmatized and vice versa. Over time, people get used to playing both roles in others: normal-deviant. Stigmatized and normal are connected to each other, because if one is vulnerable it can be expected from others also. Errors in identification are often the subject of derision, exultation of those who pass and their friends. Stigmatized should be aware of their reality and be ready for all kinds of questions and observations.

In the final part of the book Goffman uses the terms “deviant of the group” and “social deviant.” Deviant of the group is only in one group and its belonging to the group differs it from other types of deviants -isolated individuals from a group that is part of a group in social situations, but it is not one of them. Those who are part of the milieu or sub-community can be nominated as social deviants, and their collective life would be called deviant communities. In many cases, social deviants often feel that they are not equal to normal, but that they

<sup>5</sup> *The same*, p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> *The same*, p. 144.

are better than them and that they live a life better than the one that they would have lived if they are someone else. Deviant of the groups, social deviants, minorities and lower-class people are likely to find themselves in a position to feel like stigmatized people, unsure of how they will be received in direct contact.

*Stigma* provides a detailed description of how stigmatized people live in the society and the society towards them, which affects the formation of both personal and social identity. Goffman's book provides an overview of how would normal people should treat stigmatized and vice versa, which is illustrated by various examples of people who are in any way rejected in society.

He introduces us to situations in which there are people who are unable to meet the standards of the company called 'normal'. For stigmatize it can be said that this is a social process of labeling all of those groups and their individuals who differ from the majority of normalcy in their social environment, and this environment constructs social acceptability no matter what difference was at stake. Any man by constructionist is the product of specific cultural and historical specificities, and their study will have a certain historical and cultural stamp. For something to be socially constructed it is necessary that people agree on that. To socially construct stigma, means to insist on language because through the language, particular social relations and verbal communication are established. And it is through that communication that people construct specific measures which they use to evaluate the other person. If we look at some stigmatized individuals we understand what is their struggle to build their personal identity in a variety of prejudices that circulate about them. In a series of examples that Goffman notes we notice stigmatized individuals striving to build their personal identity in addition to the label that marks them. Society tends to impose and construct personal identity of others ie. stigmatized and thus limit their life. The question is how strong is the human will in the social construction of certain events that come after this construction and the theoretical framework? Stigmatized do not have a problem with construction of personal identity only in society but also in their group, at the same time it should be borne in mind how much and what to accept from society so they would not their personal identity totally subordinate to the social. It can be concluded that the greater the degree to which people see themselves as normal, less likely is to experience themselves as stigmatized person even though there are contexts in which they will confirm their stigma. As Goffman has said that in life can happen two kinds of changes, from the normal to the stigmatized, and vice versa. Over time, people get used to playing both roles in others: normal-deviant. What is acceptable is easy to change the status from stigmatized to normal, but what is an issue is when normal people get status of stigmatized. In life it is always easier to get used to the good changes, and harder to those that are worse. In the end the question is

whether to be „normal” means being fully accepted by society, and yet on the other hand to be stigmatized, to be rejected? And therefore there is a connection between normal and stigmatized. Stigmatized tend to be normal, and the normal fear of being stigmatized. In fact, it is a circle of life, the only question is who is where and where anyone could be. We believe that everyone should have equal access and opportunity to build their personality. With being we are born, and person we become.