

According To Erving Goffman, When One Is Labeled A Deviant And Experiences Stigma, What Does That Individual

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Erving Goffman, a renowned sociologist and social psychologist, profoundly influenced our understanding of social identity, deviance, and stigma. His groundbreaking work, especially in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, explores how society labels certain individuals as deviant and how this labeling impacts their self-perception and social interactions. According to Goffman, when someone is labeled a deviant and endures stigma, it fundamentally alters their social identity and influences their behavior, relationships, and mental health. This article delves into Goffman's perspectives on deviance and stigma, exploring what happens to individuals subjected to such social processes and how they navigate their altered social reality.

Understanding Deviance and Stigma in Goffman's Framework

What is Deviance?

Deviance, in sociological terms, refers to behaviors, characteristics, or identities that violate societal norms or expectations. Goffman emphasizes that deviance is not an inherent quality of an individual but a social construct—what society deems unacceptable or abnormal.

The Role of Social Labels

Goffman asserts that societal reactions and labels are central to the process of deviance. When society labels someone as deviant, it becomes a master status that influences how others perceive and interact with that individual.

Defining Stigma

Stigma is a powerful social disapproval or discrediting that attaches to individuals who possess certain characteristics or behaviors. It results in social exclusion, discrimination, and a diminished social identity. According to Goffman, stigma operates on multiple levels:

- Physical Stigma: Visible differences such as scars, disabilities, or tattoos.
- Character Stigma: Traits related to personality or moral character, such as dishonesty or criminal behavior.
- Membership Stigma: Group affiliations, such as being part of a marginalized

community.

What Does It Mean When Someone Is Labeled a Deviant and Experiences Stigma?

The Process of Stigmatization

Goffman describes stigmatization as a social process involving:

1. Identification: Society identifies a trait or behavior as deviant.
2. Labeling: The individual is labeled as deviant based on that trait.
3. Discrediting: The label leads to social discrediting, affecting how others view and treat the individual.
4. Internalization: The individual may internalize the stigma, affecting self-esteem and identity.

The Impact on Self-Identity

When an individual is labeled deviant and stigmatized, their self-identity is often profoundly affected. Goffman introduces the concept of spoiled identity, which refers to the damage to an individual's social identity due to stigma.

- Loss of Social Role: The individual may lose their previous social roles or status.
- Altered Self-Perception: They might see themselves through the lens of the stigma, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, or inferiority.
- Disruption of Social Relationships: Stigma can lead to rejection, discrimination, and social isolation.

How Do Deviant and Stigmatized Individuals Respond?

Goffman notes that stigmatized individuals develop various strategies to cope with their spoiled identity:

1. Passing

- Concealing the stigmatizing trait to appear "normal" to society.
- Example: A person with a visible disability may hide their condition to avoid discrimination.

2. Covering

- Minimizing the visibility or significance of the stigmatized trait.
- Example: Downplaying aspects of one's identity that are stigmatized.

3. Challenging the Stigma

- Confronting societal labels and advocating for acceptance.
- Example: Activism and awareness campaigns.

4. Resignation

- Accepting the stigma and withdrawing from societal interactions.
- Example: Social isolation or retreating into stigmatized communities.

5. Reframing the Identity

- Redefining the stigma as a positive or empowering trait.
- Example: Embracing a marginalized identity as part of personal or group identity.

The Social Consequences of Being Labeled Deviant

Discrimination and Social Exclusion

Once labeled, individuals often face:

- Employment Discrimination: Difficulty securing jobs.
- Social Rejection: Ostracization from family, friends, or community.
- Limited Access to Resources: Healthcare, housing, or social services may be denied.

Psychological Effects

The experience of stigma can lead to:

- Low Self-Esteem: Internalized negative perceptions.
- Depression and Anxiety: Emotional distress caused by social rejection.
- Identity Crisis: Struggling to reconcile one's self-image with societal labels.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Goffman highlights that societal labeling can lead individuals to conform to the stigmatized identity, reinforcing the deviant label and perpetuating social marginalization.

Mitigating the Effects of Stigma: Social and Personal Strategies

Societal Level Interventions

- Education and Awareness: Reducing societal ignorance about deviant traits.
- Anti-Discrimination Policies: Protecting the rights of stigmatized groups.
- Promoting Inclusive Norms: Challenging stereotypes and fostering

acceptance.

Personal Level Strategies

- Developing Resilience: Building self-esteem to resist internalized stigma.
- Forming Support Networks: Connecting with others who share similar experiences.
- Advocacy and Activism: Empowering individuals to challenge societal labels.

The Significance of Goffman's Work Today

Goffman's insights into deviance and stigma remain highly relevant in contemporary society. Understanding how labels influence social interactions helps in designing policies, promoting diversity, and fostering inclusive communities.

Applications in Modern Contexts

- Mental Health Stigma: Addressing misconceptions about mental illness.
- Criminal Justice: Reintegrating offenders into society post-incarceration.
- Disability Rights: Advocating for accessibility and acceptance.

Conclusion

According To Erving Goffman, When One Is Labeled A Deviant And Experiences Stigma, What Does That Individual? It signifies a profound transformation in social identity, often accompanied by marginalization, discrimination, and internal struggles. The process of stigmatization not only affects how society perceives the individual but also how the individual perceives themselves. Goffman's analysis underscores the importance of understanding social labels and their impact, emphasizing the need for societal change to foster greater acceptance and reduce the harmful effects of stigma. Recognizing the mechanisms behind deviance and stigma can guide efforts toward more inclusive and compassionate social environments, where individuals are valued beyond their labels.

References

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Note: This article provides an in-depth exploration of Goffman's theories on deviance and stigma. For further reading, consider exploring his original work and related sociological studies.

Frequently Asked Questions

According to Erving Goffman, what happens to an individual when they are labeled as a deviant?

They experience social exclusion and are often viewed through a negative lens, which can lead to further marginalization and stigmatization.

How does Goffman describe the concept of stigma in relation to deviant labels?

Goffman defines stigma as a powerful discrediting attribute that reduces an individual from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.

What is the impact of being labeled as deviant on an individual's self-identity, according to Goffman?

It can lead to a spoiled self-identity, where the individual internalizes the negative label and may experience shame, embarrassment, or a loss of self-esteem.

According to Goffman, how does society's reaction to deviance contribute to stigma?

Society's reactions—such as discrimination and social rejection—reinforce the individual's deviant identity and perpetuate the cycle of stigma.

What does Goffman suggest about the effects of stigma on social interactions for labeled individuals?

Stigmatized individuals often face altered social interactions, where others may avoid or treat them with suspicion, further isolating them.

In Goffman's view, what role does 'spoiled identity' play in the experience of someone labeled as

deviant?

A spoiled identity refers to the damaged self-concept that results from societal stigma, which can overshadow the individual's true self.

How can labeled individuals cope with stigma, according to Goffman's theory?

They may attempt to conceal their label, challenge the stigma, or seek support from subcultures or groups that accept their identity.

What is the difference between primary and secondary deviance in Goffman's framework?

Primary deviance is the initial act of rule-breaking, while secondary deviance occurs when society labels the individual, leading to stigmatization and further deviant behavior.

How does Goffman's concept of stigma relate to the idea of social control?

Stigma functions as a form of social control by discouraging deviant behavior and reinforcing societal norms through the negative labeling of individuals.

What societal changes did Goffman advocate for to reduce the impact of stigma on deviant individuals?

Goffman emphasized the importance of understanding, acceptance, and reducing societal labeling practices to lessen the harmful effects of stigma on individuals.

Additional Resources

According To Erving Goffman, When One Is Labeled A Deviant And Experiences Stigma, What Does That Individual

In the complex landscape of human interaction, societal labels and perceptions play a pivotal role in shaping individual identities and life experiences. Among the most influential thinkers in understanding these dynamics is Erving Goffman, a renowned sociologist whose work on stigma and social labeling continues to resonate today. According to Goffman, when an individual is labeled a deviant and encounters societal stigma, their self-identity, social interactions, and life opportunities are profoundly affected. This article delves into Goffman's insights, exploring what happens to such individuals, how stigma manifests, and the broader implications for society.

Understanding Deviance and Stigma Through Goffman's Lens

Defining Deviance in Society

Goffman's perspective on deviance extends beyond mere rule-breaking; it encompasses societal reactions to certain behaviors, conditions, or attributes that deviate from normative standards. Deviance isn't an inherent quality of an act or individual but is constructed through social processes. For example, behaviors deemed acceptable in one culture or era might be stigmatized in another.

This social construction means that deviance is fluid and context-dependent. It involves a dynamic interaction between the individual and societal expectations, where labels are assigned based on collective judgments rather than intrinsic qualities.

The Concept of Stigma: A Social Mark

Stigma, in Goffman's framework, is a powerful social attribute that discredits an individual, reducing them from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. It functions as a social "mark" that signifies deviation from accepted norms.

Goffman distinguishes several types of stigma:

- Physical deformities or disabilities: Visible markers that signal deviation.
- Blemishes of character: Perceived moral or behavioral flaws.
- Membership in certain groups: Such as racial minorities, ex-convicts, or those with specific health conditions.

Stigma operates at multiple levels, influencing how individuals are perceived, treated, and how they perceive themselves.

The Process of Being Labeled a Deviant

From Behavior to Label

Goffman emphasizes that deviance is often a consequence of societal labeling rather than the act itself. A person's behavior becomes deviant only when

society labels it as such. For instance, a person with a mental health condition might not be considered deviant until society stigmatizes mental illness, associating it with unpredictability or danger.

This labeling process involves several steps:

1. Initial behavior or attribute: The individual exhibits a trait or behavior.
2. Societal reaction: Society responds, often with disapproval or suspicion.
3. Application of a label: An official or informal label is assigned (e.g., "criminal," "mentally ill").
4. Internalization and social exclusion: The individual may internalize the label, leading to self-stigma, and face social rejection.

The Role of Power and Social Context

Power dynamics influence which acts or attributes are labeled deviant. Those in positions of authority—such as law enforcement, medical professionals, or media—play significant roles in reinforcing societal labels. Social context is equally critical; what is stigmatized in one community might be accepted in another.

Furthermore, societal norms evolve, causing certain behaviors to shift from acceptable to deviant or vice versa over time. This fluidity underscores that deviance is not solely an individual trait but a reflection of societal values.

The Impact of Stigma on the Deviant Individual

Internalization of the Label

Once labeled, individuals often internalize society's negative perceptions, leading to self-stigma. This internalization can diminish self-esteem and alter self-concept. For example, a person branded as a criminal may begin to see themselves solely through that lens, believing they are inherently flawed or unworthy.

Self-stigma can have tangible consequences:

- Reduced motivation: Decreased willingness to seek opportunities or help.
- Social withdrawal: Avoidance of social interactions to escape judgment.
- Mental health decline: Increased risk of depression, anxiety, and despair.

Social Exclusion and Discrimination

Stigma often manifests through social exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization. The labeled individual may face:

- Limited employment opportunities: Employers may hesitate to hire someone with a criminal record.
- Restricted social relationships: Family, friends, or community members may distance themselves.
- Institutional barriers: Access to housing, healthcare, or education may be compromised.

Such societal reactions reinforce the deviant identity, trapping individuals in a cycle of marginalization.

Role of the “Master Status” Concept

Goffman introduced the idea of a “master status,” a single attribute that overshadows all other aspects of a person’s identity. For stigmatized individuals, this often becomes the negative label—such as “ex-convict” or “mentally ill”—which dominates perceptions and interactions.

This overshadowing effect leads society to see the individual primarily through the lens of their stigma, overshadowing their other qualities, talents, or potential.

Strategies and Responses of Stigmatized Individuals

Concealment and Passing

Some individuals attempt to hide their stigmatized attribute to escape discrimination. Techniques include:

- Covering: Minimizing or disguising visible signs of stigma.
- Passing: Pretending to belong to a more accepted group.

While these strategies can temporarily reduce social tension, they often cause psychological stress and concealment can be exhausting.

Rejection and Resistance

Others respond by rejecting societal labels or asserting their identity:

- Advocacy: Becoming active in social movements or support groups.
- Reframing: Challenging negative stereotypes and redefining their identity on their own terms.
- Building resilience: Developing mental strategies to cope with stigma.

Historical examples include mental health advocates who have fought to destigmatize mental illnesses, emphasizing recovery and human dignity.

Reintegrative Strategies and Social Change

Over time, some individuals and communities work toward societal change to reduce stigma:

- Education campaigns: Raising awareness about the causes and realities of stigmatized conditions.
- Policy reforms: Enacting laws that protect against discrimination.
- Personal stories: Sharing experiences to humanize and de-mystify stigmatized identities.

Such efforts aim to transform societal perceptions, reduce the power of labels, and foster inclusivity.

Societal Implications and Ethical Considerations

The Ethical Dilemma of Labeling

Goffman's work raises questions about the ethics of labeling and societal reactions:

- Is labeling necessary for social order?
- How can society balance public safety or health concerns with respect for individual dignity?
- What responsibility does society hold in mitigating the negative effects of stigma?

These questions highlight the importance of compassionate, informed approaches to social deviance.

The Path Toward a Less Stigmatizing Society

Creating a society that minimizes harmful stigma involves:

- Promoting empathy and understanding.
- Challenging stereotypes and prejudices.
- Implementing inclusive policies.
- Supporting individuals in reclaiming their identities beyond societal labels.

By recognizing deviance as a social construct and addressing the roots of stigma, communities can foster environments where individuals are valued for their full humanity.

Conclusion: The Human Face of Stigma

According to Erving Goffman, when one is labeled a deviant and experiences stigma, that individual often endures a profound transformation of their self-concept and social standing. Society's labels can diminish personal identity, restrict opportunities, and foster feelings of shame and rejection. Yet, understanding the mechanisms of stigma also opens avenues for resistance, advocacy, and social reform.

The challenge lies in acknowledging the societal roots of deviance and stigma, and in fostering a culture that emphasizes empathy, dignity, and inclusivity. Only through such efforts can the cycle of marginalization be broken, allowing individuals to rebuild their identities free from the distortions of societal labels. Goffman's insights remain a vital reminder of the power of social perception and the importance of compassion in human interactions.

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