7.1C: Deviance and Social Stigma

Social stigma in deviance is the disapproval of a person because they do not fit the require social norms that are given in society.

Learning Objectives

• Describe the meaning of stigma through the work of two sociologists

Key Points

• Social stigma is severe social disapproval of a person because of a particular trait that indicates their deviance from social norms.
• Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of the social sciences, began to address the social marking of deviance in the late nineteenth century.
• Erving Goffman presented the fundamentals of stigma as a social theory, including his interpretation of “stigma” as a means of spoiling identity. By this, he referred to the stigmatized trait’s ability to “spoil” recognition of the individual’s adherence to social norms in other facets of self.
• Without a society, one cannot have stigma. To have stigma, one must have a stigmatizer and someone who is stigmatized. As such, this is a dynamic and social relationship.

Key Terms

• **stigmatized**: Subject to a stigma; marked as an outcast.
• **stigma**: A mark of infamy or disgrace.
• deviance: Actions or behaviors that violate formal and informal cultural norms, such as laws or the norm that discourages public nose-picking.

Social stigma is the extreme disapproval of an individual based on social characteristics that are perceived to distinguish them from other members of a society. Social stigma is so profound that it overpowers positive social feedback regarding the way in which the same individual adheres to other social norms. For example, Terry might be stigmatized because she has a limp. Stigma attaches to Terry because of her limp, overpowering the ways in which Terry might be social normative—perhaps she is a white, Protestant, or a heterosexual female with a limp. The limp marks Terry, despite her other traits.

Stigma plays a primary role in sociological theory. Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of the social sciences, began to address the social marking of deviance in the late nineteenth century. Erving Goffman, an American sociologist, is responsible for bringing the term and theory of stigma into the main social theoretical fold. In his work, Goffman presented the fundamentals of stigma as a social theory, including his interpretation of “stigma” as a means of spoiling identity. By this, he referred to the stigmatized trait’s ability to “spoil” recognition of the individual’s adherence to social norms in other facets of self. Goffman identified three main types of stigma: (1) stigma associated with mental illness; (2) stigma associated with physical deformation; and (3) stigma attached to identification with a particular race, ethnicity, religion, ideology, etc.

While Goffman is responsible for the seminal texts in stigma theory, stigmatization is still a popular theme in contemporary sociological research. In Conceptualizing Stigma (2001), sociologists Jo Phelan and Bruce Link interpret stigma as the convergence of four different factors: (1) differentiation and labeling of various segments of society; (2) linking the labeling of different social demographics to prejudices about these individuals; (3) the development of an us-versus-them ethic; and (4) disadvantaging the people who are labeled and placed in the “them” category.

Ultimately, stigma is about social control. A corollary to this is that stigma is necessarily a social phenomenon. Without a society, one cannot have stigma. To have stigma, one must have a stigmatizer and someone who is stigmatized. As such, this is a dynamic and social relationship. Given that stigmas arise from social relationships, the theory places emphasis, not on the existence of deviant traits, but on the perception and marking of certain traits as deviant by a second party. For example, theorists of stigma care little about whether Emily has a psychiatric diagnosis, but rather on how Sally perceives Emily’s psychiatric diagnosis and, subsequently, treats Emily differently. Stigma depends on another individual perceiving and knowing about the stigmatized trait. As stigma is necessarily a social relation, it is necessarily imbued with relations of power. Stigma works to control deviant members of the population and encourage conformity.

Be Aware: End the Stigma Against Mental Illness: Be Aware is an awareness campaign that aims to end the stigma against mental illness.
The Stigmatization of Homeless People: Homeless people are regularly stigmatized by society for being unemployed while living in the streets.