

## **SOCIAL STIGMA**

Stigma is the term that describes negative attitudes and rejecting behaviour that is held by members of a group or community, against others who are perceived to be different, in a way that is disturbing or threatening.

These differences may be 'physical factors', such as deformity, obesity and old age; they may be 'psycho-social' factors, such as being weak-willed, homosexual, mentally ill, or having the 'wrong' dress, manners or accent; and they may be 'tribal factors', in terms of race, nationality or religion.

Stigmatising behaviour is a social phenomenon which has deep biological roots within the socialising imperative of the Maternal-Infant Bonding Process. This is fully described in 'The Overview' on the website at [www.felicitystockwell.com](http://www.felicitystockwell.com), but to summarise here, early in the evolution of humans, it became essential for humans to band together and cooperate in rearing their offspring for their prolonged period of dependency. Thus, early humans formed nomadic hunter-gatherer tribes which flourished for many millenia.

The Bonding Process establishes in every individual 'needs' for approval and acceptance, which initiate altruism and cooperation and ensure the safety and well-being of every member of the tribe/group.

To ensure the integrity and survival of the group, the Bonding Process established two reflexes within the neuro-chemistry that recognised threats from members within the tribe. These are members who are unable to conform to the norms and values of the tribe and are uncooperative and aggravating, and others, who through no fault of their own, are unable to conform to the behaviour, values and attitudes of the group because of deformity or disability. It is this second group that are called 'stigmatised'. These evolved dynamics ensured human survival within tribes, which over many millenia, spread throughout the planet.

With the advent of more fertile conditions and the use of tools, a settled life became possible and there was a great increase in the population, and tribes evolved into communities.

**This eventually had the effect of loosening the feedback rewards of cooperative behaviour and allowed much selfishness to pass unnoticed, and avoid the reflex negative responses.**

**Ever since those times mankind has tried to devise means that will control selfish behaviour (greed, pride envy etc.) through religious, political and legal strategies, but none are proving completely successful, and they do not address the reflex rejection of the stigmatised.**

In the modern world, individuals, each needing approval and acceptance from the others, have large numbers of contacts and are members of many groups, from families, communities, and local associations to states and nations, and now, with increased communications, we are moving to becoming members of the global community.

However, Social Needs can only be met by people we know and with whom we have affinity, and this means that subgroups form where the Bonding Process, in both its positive approval and negative rejecting aspects continues to be active all the time. It is because smaller groups within the larger community are of such prime importance to individuals, that other people can readily be seen as a threat to their values, their

aims, and their necessary physical or psychological resources. and the stigma reflex is likely to be elicited.

In modern times, because of the great increase in world population, increasing mobility and competition for resources, this fundamental negative reflex pattern can become the norm for much larger groups of people, and leads to conflict between nations and religions, and can be seen as prejudice, bullying and exclusion in all sorts of social organisations at work and play.

There is a large amount of research and writing about stigma, and there is beginning to be an understanding that it is a pattern of behaviour that is universal and 'biological', which might explain why it is so difficult to eliminate, although religious prescription and legal rulings do try.

It seems that until humans learn to live in an egalitarian manner and to be satisfied with sufficiency, it will be up to small groups of people to recognise where stigma is operating and incorporate, communicate and integrate with them all, and learn that the fears they generate are unfounded and their contributions to the group/community will be positive and worthwhile.

This can best be done when local communities generate activities and clubs that have aims that appeal to the less able and the able, and in working and playing together everyone will focus on their shared humanity and on all the individual strengths. The achievements and sense of belonging soon generate high morale and a sharing of joys and sorrows and, most importantly, laughter, amongst each other and not at each other. Success breeds success and with goodwill – and some funding – it can spread to whole communities, who can then find their 'stigma' attitudes have vanished.

*[There is a word of warning, and that is about the problem of being **patronising**. This is where people want to help the disabled and disadvantaged because they feel sorry for them, and then focus on the problems, rather than engaging with the person's humanity and strengths in a friendly and empowering way.]*

Below is just one example, from many, of a study that refers to more recent understandings of the entrenched nature of stigma

“Research on stigma associated with mental disorders, pointed to a surprising attitude of the general public. Those who were told that mental disorders had a genetic basis were more prone to increase their social distance from the mentally ill, and also to assume that the ill were dangerous individuals, in contrast with those members of the general public who were told that the illnesses could be explained by social and environment factors. Furthermore, those informed of the genetic basis were also more likely to stigmatize the entire family of the ill. Although the specific social categories that become stigmatized can vary over time and place, the three basic forms of stigma (physical deformity, poor personal traits, and tribal out group status) are found in most cultures and eras, leading some researchers to hypothesize that the tendency to stigmatize may have evolutionary roots.

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• Jones, E., Farina, A., Hastorf, A., Markus, H., Miller, D., & Scott, R. (1984).

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