

## Social and Psychological Aspects of People's Stigmatization

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*SUMMARY. Stigmatization is defined and reviewed as discriminative practice in social interactions. The examples of stigmatization and other discriminative practices are given in the context of social life in Poland. The causes and consequences of stigmas are presented and discussed. Moreover, negative effects of stigmatization are described from the point of view of education and social functioning of the men.*

### Introduction

Stigmatization is labeling someone, condemning and marking with socially pejorative characteristic. In other words, it is devaluating, i.e. decreasing the values of individuals or social groups. It is also labeling unaccepted characteristics or accusing of morally censurable behaviours. Stigmas are very different and present in various places of social life. There are moral stigmas ("liar"), legal ("offender", "criminal", "crook"), nationalistically ("Fritz", "Paki"), sexual ("sod"), religious ("heretic", "atheist"), political ("one of them", "red"), racial ("nigger", "coloured"), psychiatric ("freak", "nuts"), school ("sissy", "toady", "sluggard"), intellectual ("twit", "moron"), sometimes stigmas are combined, e.g. "jewishcommunist". Stigmatization is a single action or long lasting process in which people must accept new identity through reconciling themselves to directed at them stigmas. It is one of many discriminative practices. Stanislaw Kowalik proposed five stage continuum of intensity of these discriminative practices (Kowalik 1992). According to this continuum, distancing is weaker than stigmatization. It is not personal, "cold" perceiving of other people, mentally reatriting of them, refusal to support them; in this way it is passive discrimination. Distancing is present in various interpersonal relations, it happens between divorcing spouses, students at school, sometimes a teacher might distance of some pupils.

"Segregation", "delegitimization" and "extermination" are stronger than stigmatization and discriminative practices.

And so: "delegitimization" is putting some individuals or social groups into the category of "unhuman" or "underpeople". Because of such procedure they do not have any human rights. In the consequence of delegitimization such people are fully or partially excluded from social life, they find themselves "beyond the line not only in psychological dimension but also legal" (Kowalik, op. cit.). At school, delegitimization consists in, for example, dismissing a pupil from an educational institution or taking student's name off the books. "Segregation" - is physical isolating one social group from others, in the way of creating worse life conditions for such group (flats, work, entertainment). The segregated group is also deprived of properties, which are used by the groups that are not discriminated. Segregation does not apply to single persons - it applies to larger social groups or categories of people, who are thought to have permanent characteristics negatively evaluated by society" (Kowalik, op. cit.). The threat of segregation and delegitimization of some people and social groups was present in the political life of our country in politicians' statements under the banner of decommunization. The phenomenon of segregation is in some extent present in the system of education in which economical qualities decide about accessibility to better or worse schools or decide about the chances to study at universities. The most powerful discriminative practice is extermination, i.e., biological destruction of people belonging to certain category or social group. It is quick and brutal or slow and more sophisticated taking people's lives. During latest election campaign the threat of extermination appeared, and it was euphemistically called "mushrooming". One of the politicians said "you go out with a scythe and cut heads off" (St. Ty., 1993). Sometimes it happens that stigmas are supported with documents such as for example, famous "files" of secret collaborators of security service, copies of verdicts stating someone's criminal past, medical testimonials about someone was "bad pupil". Decision about labeling some persons or group with certain stigmas are very often undertaken in dramatic situations having very symbolical meaning, which decrease possibilities of resistance or defiance. Ceremony of lawsuit in which someone gets a stigma of criminal - crook, thief, pervert, might be a good example. Political rally in which with great dramaturgy and pathos someone is called "the public enemy number one" is another example. School and supporting it institutions (for example, counselling and educational guidance centres) sometimes issue documents proving principle of some stigmas (i.e. immaturity, maladjustment or low level of skills). In this way they decide about promoting someone to the next class, sending him/her to another school or assigning a special place in a classroom (front or back desks, together with girls, in the corner, or in so called "dunce's desk"). As stigmatization usually runs in public, triggering of stigma (if it happens) runs quietly and unnoticeable because the groups or the institutions do not predict any special procedures of unlabeled attributed before stigmas. Acts and processes of rehabilitation of stigmatized person and groups

usually run very silently and peacefully. In this way the persons still stay stigmatized persons are apologized that for example they were not "secret collaborates - agents" usually cause less interest than earlier showering slander on them. The positive characteristic of a pupil leaving educational institution usually is unnoticed and his environment still treats him as person having stigma of "a thief" or "a rascal".

## 2.

Stigmatization might be a spontaneous act or process when it is direct response of environment to certain behaviours of a person or a group. It also might be an act or process steered by some, usually privileged social groups, organizations and institutions. Stigmatization may be provoked and caused, special barriers may be created to unable being "normal persons". Some groups, institutions, and social organizations which have in the society control functions (court, church, psychiatric hospital) usurp rights to specialization in the stigmatization. These institutions want to be perceived as the highest authorities which stigmatize "objectively. Courts specialize in legal stigmas, church decides who is a heretic or an atheist, psychiatric hospital considers its label of "madness" as the only sure one, school thinks that it is its task to give reliable stigma as "sluggard" or "moron". There are some social and psychological factors which foster the phenomenon of stigmatization. It increases especially in social conditions when some groups compete with themselves for economic rewards (jobs or land), political ones (power), or religious (right to be practising some kind of religion). This phenomenon is very visible when inclination to contact with other groups and tendency to close in own group and holds conservative social belief (Łodziński 1990). In such circumstances of such "cultural closure" appears ethnocentrism, a belief that other groups, especially those who are very different, have negative features. Those, who do not fulfill social expectations; those, who do not want to or are not able to be such as their associates want them, are stigmatized. People who are different, non-typical according to their physical, social, and psychological characteristics are mostly stigmatized. Generally, persons who are privileged are stigmatized. Those who have political power are very often called, for example: "thieves", "crooks", "jewishcommunists", and "udetion" (a term coming from Polish term describing political part "Democratic Union" and having very strong connotations with colloquial word for communistic secret service). But sometimes those who have power also use stigmas and call others "little mongrels". At schools of all levels teachers are commonly stigmatized. Stigmas are used more willingly by persons and groups feeling economical or political threats, those who are frustrated with their impossibility to achieve desired goals. In these cases stigmas have the function of "scapegoat", the goat is a person who is responsible for other people problems and who is not able to defend himself. Some local minority groups like Gipsies, Roumanians, or Germans become a scapegoat. At school, a scapegoat. At school, a scapegoat might become, for example, pupils less fit religious minorities. Eliot Aranson (1987) observed that different discriminative practices

become more intense when political or economical life conditions are difficult and the goals of some social groups can be realized only at the cost of other groups' interests. It has been observed, for example, that discrimination, prejudices, and tendency towards dehumanization increase very rapidly when there is too little work and when people compete for jobs.

Some social groups are stigmatized due to historical reasons, that is because of tradition of interactions. The best example is stigmatization but also deligitimization, segregation, and extermination of Jews. Other individuals or groups are stigmatized because their environment knows nothing about them - does not know their culture, customs, habits. For example, at school, there is very common phenomenon of stigmatization of very "fresh" pupil.

The very important reason of stigmatization is also socialization and education which form universal tendency to undertaking hostile relation against weaker persons or groups. According to Aronson (op. cit.), there are individuals who through identification with their parents take their hostile attitudes towards certain social groups. St. Kowalik expressed that "a human being in its childhood is seemingly programmed to be prejudiced" (Kowalik 1992). This universal inclination to use different discriminative practices is often seen among people having so called, dogmatic mind (Rokeach) and authoritarian personality (Adorno), that is persons open to strong intergroup categorization and ethnocentrism. Their own group and its culture become the measure and the comparative scale to other groups and their values and to stigmatization of every feature that is different than their own ones.

Psychologically stigmatization is something like a parody, described by t. Sullivan and K. Thompson (1988), of human tendency for categorization. Because the social and physical world is very differentiated and developed, human beings need to simplify it via thinking in generalized categories and via adapting to each other elements having common characteristics. The simplest way of categorization of social world and as well the basis of negative valuation is, according to E. Tajfel (quoted according to Łodziński 1989), differentiation "us - them". In this case, dichotimization leads to readiness to stigmatize "them" - literally, the others.

Stigmatization is also often a way of verbal expression of negative feelings toward certain people, and this is expressing them indirectly - in spite of telling someone "I don't like you" there is a label like: "you are a stinker, a tyke" and so on. In the words of transactional analysis it is communicating "you are not OK".

Stigmas can also be seen as burdening someone with a responsibility for negative activities' consequences in which the person take part. From attribution theory we can interpret, that surrounding stigmatize a person because: 1) explaining his negative behaviour, surrounding has a tendency to find rather internal than external attributions (so called "fundamental attribution error", 2) in attributor's opinion - surrounding of negative responses of other people are rather the

symptoms of their personality characteristics, not the effect of the influence of situation-forces (so called "actor-observer effect") (Maruszewski 1983). Stigmas can be also seen as deformations of social perceiving, and so as a result of so called devil's effect. . Thus, on a basis of one negative feature someone labels other negative characteristics. At school, unattractive pupils may be worse valued and their bad behaviours can be seen as attributs of their peronalities, pupils who are attractive can be valued better, and their bad behaviors might be seen as caused by situational factors (Dobińska 1993).

### 3.

Real or intended effects of stigmatization have both social and psychological character. Stigmatization causes the increase of tension and hostility among social groups, causes the lack of confidence, cooperation and mutual understanding, it favours "witches' hunting" and anarchizing of public life. Stigmas force particular individuals and groups to occupy unfavoured for them position in social hierarchy (for instance, to resign from a post, to withdraw from the fight for power), and so less chances in life. Stigmatization leads to increase of intolerance, that means to unadmit things that are different and unknown (Kozakiewicz 1963), to aversion and antiothy towards others.

Thanks human skills to stigmatize others, to unhumanize and to demonize "he is able to tell himself that his opponents are not the human beings but animals or very dangerous monsters who should be (or even it is a duty) physically and morally eliminated" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1987, p. 123). Stigmatized individuals and groups indulge specific needs of those, who has done stigmatization - reinforce their feelings of superiority and generosity ("we are neither communists nor Jews, we are the real Poles, catholics"). So stigmatized individuals and groups inform public opinion who is the enemy and what the evil looks like. Stigmatization improves the feelings of comfort of those who use it, their self-consciousness is better when stigmatized enemy's feelings are worse, the more they humillate the better they feel.

According to the theory of social labeling (kojder 1980, Kwaśniewski 1982, Pawłowska 1985, Welcz 1985, Poznaniak 1988 and 1991) a person who is stigmatized is punished for his trials to get rid of stigma. The trials to get of forced stigma have no chances of success and even act against protesting person's interests because they cause additional stigmative responses forcing the person to accept the stigma. Environment wants the labeled person to accept the stigma and to behave according to its psychological content. In this way, the pupil who does not want to accept deviative stigma of "idiot" or "freak" imposed by parents ot teachers, may be sent to psychiatric centre where the diagnistic interpretation of his behaviour will turn all the forms of his rebellion against him. The psychiatric or psychological diagnosis becomes thanks it a factor creating and forming the stigma (Poznaniak 1988). Resistance against stigmatization may be, for examle, seen according to the contens of stigmas, and so, for example: "every crazy person will not say that he is

crazy, so his defence is the best confirmation that he is the actual "nuts", or "any secret confident can not say that he is or was the secret confident". However, the person who accepted his stigma is for his compliance in some ways rewarded because he is defended and privileged, for example, he does not have to fulfill some of his duties (Kojder 1980, Kwaśniewski 1982).

The persons, who are weak and helpless (and groups too) towards stigmas, are more efficient and easier stuck with stigmas, if they are not able to find any anti-stigmatizative support in their surrounding, and if the stigmas come from persons, institutions, or groups that are seen as worthy of respect and appreciated by public opinion. Thus might happen the worst - stigmatized persons or groups begin to consider whether they really are as their labels suggest. because of stigmatization they change their ways of thinking, start to think in the suggested by stigmas categories. And this is the greatest success of those who threw out stigmativ mud - stigmatized persons begin to believe in suggested stigmas and even identify themselves - "because the others permanently say that I am bad and abnormal probably I really am like that". In this way stigmatized persons fulfill at last expectations put in stigmas and begin to see themselves with the eyes of those who labeled them.

According to the research, children stigmatized by their teachers and parents most often think about themselves in the categories of these stigmas, e.g. "naughty", "malicious", "stubborn" or "stupid" (Poznaniak 1988 and 1991). If the labels are so important in children's self-concept we may consider their education as having a lot of stigmatizing elements, their education is directed towards looking for symptoms of deviation and evil. At the very beginning some behaviours are stigmatized, later not only the behaviour but the pupil in general, his whole person. Stigmativ education exposes them to a lot of repressions from their surrounding, which are associated with the process of labeling (sneers, reprimands, disapprovals) and they additionally isolating them from their environment. Stigmas change their position, prejudice, distrust, and fear, and suggest that those pupils are the ones who behave in the way stigmas predispose, and they are dangerously different (Cohen 1966, Pawłowska 1985). The pupil, to whom stuck the stigma of "sluggard", "coward", "nuts" or "twit", has less chances to become a normal pupil because his companions, parents and teachers will not let him, openly or unconsciously treating him through the glass of stigmas and expecting him to confirm stereotype in his behaviour (he has to behave like a "sluggard", "a coward", "twit", or "nuts" is supposed to). Stigmatized pupil usually feels threatened, held up to ridicule, and helpless, it is a very difficult task for him to convince his environment that he is clever, brave, hard-working and even-tempered (Poznaniak 1991).

Stigmatization is therefore contradictory to education because it puts the pupil in the compulsory situation - he is forced to be a subject of expectations included in stigmas. Stigmas decrease the feeling of psychological safety, cause increase of

threat and low level of confidence. Eibl-Eibesfeldt put it in such words: "Making someone unhuman but rather it is raising fear and distrust towards him" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1987, p. 123) which block process of communication and close the door between people. Adults who stigmatize children use their power against them, destroy the feelings of confidence children had had before towards them. This lack of confidence becomes one of the reasons of misunderstandings in communication of both sides. Stigmatized individual is less or more helpless to assigned him labels, it is a kind of learnt helplessness because he learns that he has no influence to change his environment attitude - that he is stigmatized. If an individual, who wants to fulfill environment's expectations, has a feeling of "not being OK" and claims that stigmatizing surrounding also "is not OK", he can not find acceptance and support both in himself and his environment. An individual found in such a situation withdraws from all his interpersonal contacts admitting that there is no hope for him (Harris 1987, Johnson 1985).

Negative consequences of stigmatization for human functioning comes also from the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies, in which an individual behaves in the way that he is expected to, and the consequence of these expectations is specified self-concept. It means that by stigmatization of someone we do not only change his behaviour, but also his self-concept, in which the person has to behave in the way that confirms labeled stigmas, and what, is the most important the way he thinks about himself. Self-fulfilling prophecies are also called "Galatea ' effect" while negative expectations lead to "Golem"s effect". In the last case, it means negative expectations in stigmas. We may meet self-fulfilling prophecy in the version of "Golem's effect" in school situations when a teacher convinced about some pupils' lack of skills later says that the effects of their learning are very poor. Rosenthal, Jacobson, Epstein and ass. (cit. Kowalik, Brzeziński 1991) found that children perceived by the teachers as happy, interesting, adjusted, sociable and sensitive, perform better at school than children seen by teachers as less interesting and maladjusted. Sylwia Seul discusses the research, in which it has been found that pupils seen by their teachers as less skillful are more often criticized, a teacher calls them less, gives them less time, and their tasks are rather simple. Teacher does not provide the same level of possibility to present their intellectual potentials as to the pupils whom he sees more skillful. (Seul...). Eliot Aronson noticed, that self-fulfilling prophecies influence the way people think about themselves: "unhandsome children may begin to think, that they really are "bad" or unfriendly if they are permanently treated, that they really are "bad" or unfriendly if they are permanently treated in the same way as in the beginning (Aronson 1978, p. 289).

Negative effects of human stigmatization does not have to be unavoidable, as the above considerations suggest. High level of self-evaluation, self-confidence, feeling of autonomy, receiving support from close persons may efficiently protect from the consequences of stigmatization. An individual does not feel very

dramatically that he is worse and different if he perceives, that he is not the only person stigmatized, but also the other people, similar to him and important. That is why different minority groups stigmatized considering their ethnical, racial, religious, or sexual differentiation, sometimes have surprisingly good level of self-evaluation.

Stigmatized persons protect themselves against stigmas by labeling the opponents with stigmas like: "racist", "chauvinst", or "fanatic". Stanisław Kowalik has written that "the victim of discrimination happens to unhumanize his oppressors" (Kowalik 1992). Stigmatized persons use the strategy of self-defence which is internal attribution - "we are stigmatized by them because they are racists". It is the kind of self-defence in which the oppressed attribute their oppressors internal (dispositional factors) they behave like that because of their personality - "they are like that" - not situational ones.

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