CHAPTER 3

Stigma as a Social and Cultural Construct

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Much of the sociological and psychological literature on stigma focuses on the individual as the central unit of analysis, with little if any discussion devoted to the sociohistorical context or the cultural milieu within which the individual experiences stigma. With this focus, however, an important key to understanding the puzzle of stigma is omitted. It is our contention that modes of analysis that begin with the social, cultural, and historical contexts of stigma provide a necessary framework from which to view the individual. In this chapter on stigma, we address the gap in the literature by presenting three levels of analysis: the sociostructural, the cultural, and the individual. Our aim is to reveal the social and cultural backdrop against which stigma occurs, including who disqualifies whom from social acceptance and the nature of the interactions between stigmatized persons and non-stigmatized persons.

The concept of “tribal” stigma described by Goffman (1963), in which an entire racial group is stigmatized, illustrates the need to ground theoretical problems of stigma in their social, cultural,
and historical contexts. If we assume that societal values, beliefs, and mores are dynamic and are especially so in rapidly changing societies, then we may also assume that interactions between blacks and whites will be affected by such sociocultural shifts. Without empirical testing, we cannot necessarily assume that interactions between blacks and whites will remain the same regardless of social climate or historical period. Broad sociocultural and historical forces play critical roles in the way stigma is interpreted by the individual, and the dynamics of a social group’s response to a stigmatized status are affected as well.

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The concept of stigma is apparently universal. Every society has norms and values that define acceptable attributes and behavior for its members. What is more, each society has mechanisms of social control to ensure that the majority of its members conform to these norms. Persons who do not conform or who break cultural taboos are sanctioned by society.

Broad views about what constitutes stigma are generally shared by members of a society. They will hold common beliefs about both the cultural meaning of an attribute and the stigma attached to it. These beliefs about stigma dictate the nature of a stigma, the specific attitudes people hold about a given stigma, and the responses of stigmatized persons. These factors will also greatly affect the way in which a stigmatized individual is integrated into a social group or kept marginal to it.

Although the concept of stigma is universal, perceptions of what constitutes stigma vary from one society to another. This is due to differing cultural norms, values, and structures. A system of cultural beliefs is guided by a template of culture that individuals carry with them, underlying thought and action. It shapes and patterns beliefs in a systematic manner. As individuals, we are often unaware of this process; we seldom stop to ask why we think and behave in the way we do because culture is by and large