One reason why it is difficult to approach the study of stigma with much confidence is that there are so many kinds. Consider just a short list: old age, paralysis, cancer, drug addiction, mental illness, shortness, being black, alcoholism, smoking, crime, homosexuality, unemployment, being Jewish, obesity, blindness, epilepsy, receiving welfare, illiteracy, divorce, ugliness, stuttering, being female, poverty, being an amputee, mental retardation, and deafness. One of the few common denominators of these characteristics may be that all of them generate ridicule and scorn. However, there is another, more important reason why the study of stigma must be approached cautiously. Conceptualization and use of the term have been so vague and uncritical that one may reasonably ask: What is a stigma? To many, the answer is simply a “flaw,” “shortcoming,” “blemish,” or “taint,” but that answer does little except to imply that stigmas are opprobrious.

Then consider the notion that stigma is synonymous with deviance (in the sense of a norm violation) and involves efforts at
social control. That notion is at once conventional and controversial—conventional in that stigma is more likely to be linked with deviance and social control than with any other concepts (e.g., Elliott, Ziegler, Altman, & Scott, 1982), but controversial in that very few discussions of deviance and social control cover as wide a range of phenomena as listed above. We will argue that much can be gained from such a notion, but considerable work is needed since, in many ways, “deviance” and “social control” are no less primitive terms than “stigma.”

DEFINITIONS OF STIGMA

Goffman (1963) notes that the ancient Greeks used the word *stigma* to refer to bodily marks or brands exposing the bearers as persons to be avoided (e.g., slaves, criminals, or sinners). “Today,” according to Goffman, “the term is ... used in something like the original sense, but is applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it” (pp. 1–2). Stigma is equated with an “undesired differentness,” of which there are three types: (a) physical deformities; (b) “blemishes of individual character” such as homosexuality and unemployment; and (c) “tribal” stigmas of race, nationality, and religion (Goffman, 1963, pp. 4–5).

The following definitions illustrate other ways of conceptualizing stigma:

We ... reserve the concept of stigma for outcomes of a discrediting process, where the target person is viewed as morally flawed and arouses revulsion. (Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, & Scott, 1984, p. 297)

In brief and in theory, stigma denotes one’s morally spoiled identity, one’s social undesirability. (Pfuhl, 1980, p. 202)

Stigmatized persons ... are little valued as persons. (Schur, 1983, p. 31)

[When it comes to stigma,] we are discussing the entire field of people who are regarded negatively, some for having violated ... rules, others just for being the sort of people they are or having traits that are not highly valued. (Birenbaum & Sagarin, 1976, p. 33)

Stigma ... conjures up images of blemished selves and discredited bodily or moral attributes that automatically exclude the bearer from