

Somers, et al.
Stigma

• CHAPTER SEVEN •

Affect, Inhibition, and Response Variation

NO ACCOUNT OF THE STIGMATIZING PROCESS would be complete without some consideration of the emotions that are entangled with the labeling of deviance and generated in marked relationships. It is well understood that attributional reasoning and social definitions can influence one's feelings about markable people. The vast literature on prejudice and stereotyping provides abundant evidence that labeling processes, which are themselves to a large extent arbitrary, can nevertheless liberate the kinds of intense emotions observed in racial terrorists and lynch mobs. Social psychologists characteristically treat such instances as examples of affect determined by cognitive preconditioning, although they acknowledge that the affect can also be fed by frustrations in other spheres.

When one looks at the full range of potentially stigmatizing conditions, however, it is natural to wonder whether some of them elicit affect that is not mediated by labels or causal attributions. That is, are there deviant conditions that automatically elicit "primitive" affective responses in the beholder? Perhaps the candidates that come most readily to mind are various physical anomalies: facial disfigurements, withered arms, mastectomy cases, tumors, and hunchbacks—and most obviously, dead and dismembered bodies. Although adaptations to such conditions can undoubtedly occur (one assumes that they occur almost routinely in the medical or nursing professions), most of us experience something ranging from vague uneasiness to extreme revulsion in the presence of such deviant conditions. This is also true with regard to a few behavioral anomalies like grand mal seizures or unrestrained and violent psychotic behavior. It is hard to believe that the initial emotional responses to these conditions are culturally conditioned, although it is obvious that individual experiences can shape and modify the degree and nature of the affect involved.

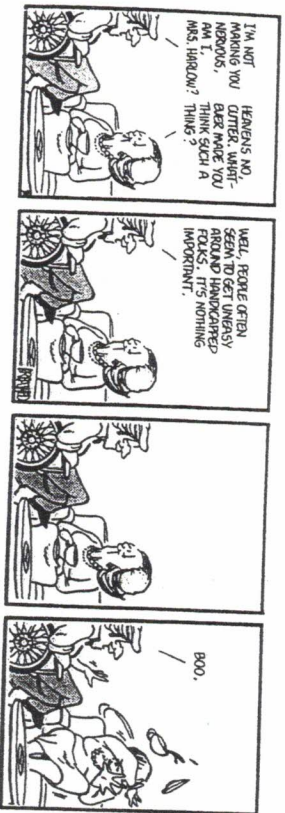
It is also obvious that there is no simple way to demonstrate the untutored, primitive quality of the human reaction to physical or behavioral deviance. An indirect approach to the question of unmediated affect is to consider the evolutionary significance of stigmatizing responses, as inferred from the data of animal behavior. In short, what do we know about animal responses to physical and behavior anomalies?

The information about such matters is surprisingly sparse and almost entirely anecdotal. The dominance literature of sociobiology (e.g., Wilson 1975) makes it clear that in many species the weak, scrawny, injured, or disabled members are either attacked or forced to the bottom of the hierarchy in obtaining food or nesting space. There is also some evidence that dolphins respond with altruistic behavior when "school" mates are wounded or injured (Pilleri and Knuckey 1969), and other instances of rescue behavior have been observed in wild dogs, elephants, and baboons (Wilson 1975). Fedigan and Fedigan (1977) describe the helpful reactions of other members of tribe monkeys to an infant monkey severely handicapped by cerebral palsy. Not only was the mother unusually solicitous in her efforts to feed her and keep her in contact with the tribe, other adults and even some of the handicapped monkey's peers performed some of the same protective, prosocial functions.

Hebb and Thompson's (1954) anecdotal accounts of chimpanzees in the Yerkes primate colony are among the few descriptions of response to anomalous physical shapes and "dead" (anesthetized) members of the same species:

Mars, a young animal who had been anesthetized by Nembutal, in order to make physical measurements, was carried out and shown to four of the adults, Jack, Dick, Don, and Delta. The first three of these were markedly excited . . . and Don attempted to attack. . . . Since the sight of an anesthetized infant being carried by one of the staff was common, the observations of above were later repeated with an anesthetized adult. . . . Don, under Nembutal, was wheeled on a hand cart up to the cages of nine other adults. Ami, Nira, and Vera showed fear, and Dena and Bokar did also but then followed this by a show of aggression at a distance; Kambi showed generalized excitation in screaming only; Frank, with hair erect, spat at the anesthetized Don; Pam first avoided then attacked through the cage wire; and Lelia, with general excitation but not avoidance, also attacked. (The youngsters in the infants' enclosure were afraid, one very much so, and all showed signs of marked excitation.) (p. 549)

Here the apparent emphasis is on the diversity of response, but Hebb and Thompson try to summarize the chimpanzee reaction to anomaly under the rubric *excitement*. It is also exceedingly interesting to note their suggestion that this excitement has many of the features of ambivalence, of a mixture of abasement and aggression, and this inherent conflict or ambiguity may account for the wide variations in the overt responses of individual animals.



A similar picture of aversion is captured by Van Lawick-Goodall (1971) in her account of reactions to "Mr. McGregor," a chimpanzee whose legs were paralyzed from the waist down. He was a large, powerful male, one of a group of chimpanzees that Van Lawick-Goodall's team had been observing in the wild state. Mr. McGregor was able to drag himself painfully across the ground, but this left his bottom raw and bleeding, and his thighs, urine-soaked from incontinence, were covered with flies. Van Lawick-Goodall relates:

One of the most tragic things about the whole tragic affair was the reaction of the chimps to the stricken paralyzed male. Initially, almost certainly, they were frightened by the strangeness of his condition. We had noticed the same thing when some of the other polio victims appeared in camp for the first time. When Pepe, for instance, shuffled up the slope to the feeding area, squatting on his haunches with his useless arm trailing behind him, the group of chimps already in camp stared for a moment and then, with wide grins of fear, rushed for reassurance to embrace and pat each other, while staring at the unfortunate cripple. Pepe, who obviously had no idea that he himself was the object of their fear, showed an even wider grin of fright as he repeatedly turned to look over his shoulder along the path behind him—trying to find out, presumably, what it was that was making his companions so frightened. Eventually the others calmed down, but, though they continued to stare at him from time to time, none of them went near him, and eventually he shuffled off, once more on his own. Gradually the other chimps

became accustomed to Pepe, and soon the muscles in his legs were strong enough to enable him to walk about upright, as had Faben from the start.

McGregor's condition was patently far worse. Not only was he forced to move about in an abnormal manner, but there was the smell of urine and the bleeding rump and the swarm of flies buzzing around him. The first morning of his return to camp, as he sat in the long grass below the feeding area, the adult males, one after the other, approached with their hair on end, and after staring began to display around him. Goliath actually attacked the stricken old male, who, powerless to flee or defend himself in any way, could only cower down, his face split by a hideous grin of terror, while Goliath pounded on his back. When another adult male bore down on McGregor, hair bristling, huge branch flailing the ground, Hugo and I went to stand in front of the cripple. To our relief, the displaying male turned aside.

After two or three days the others got used to McGregor's strange appearance and grotesque movements, but they kept well away from him. There was one afternoon that without doubt was from my point of view the most painful of the whole ten days. A group of eight chimps had gathered and were grooming each other in a tree about sixty yards from where McGregor lay in his nest. The sick male stared toward them, occasionally giving slight grunts. Mutual grooming normally takes up a good deal of a chimpanzee's time, and the old male had been drastically starved of this important social contact since his illness.

Finally, he dragged himself from his nest, lowered himself to the ground, and in short stages began the long journey to join the others. When at last he reached the tree he rested briefly in the shade, then, making the final effort, he pulled himself up until he was close to two of the grooming males. With a loud grunt of pleasure he reached a hand toward them in greeting—but even before he made contact they both had swung quickly away and without a backward glance started grooming on the far side of the tree. For a full two minutes old Gregor sat motionless, staring after them.

And then he laboriously lowered himself to the ground. As I watched him sitting there alone, my vision blurred, and when I looked up at the groomers in the tree I came nearer to hating a chimpanzee than I have ever been before or since. (Pp. 221-2)

[Van Lawick-Goodall, J. *In the shadow of man*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1971.]

An alternative way to approach the question of primitive or unlearned reactions is to search for crosscultural commonalities of emotional response to deviant or anomalous conditions. Such response commonalities might be evidence for innate biological arousal, but the preferred interpretation of most anthropologists is to stress cultural imperatives, when and if such common reaction patterns are observed. In her treatment of "purity and danger," for example, Douglas (1966) emphasizes the role of order and good form in establishing culturally valid cognitive meaning: "Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces, except at the risk of forfeiting confidence. This is why, I suggest, we find in any culture worthy of the name various provisions for dealing with ambiguous or anomalous events" (p. 39). Douglas takes an example relevant to stigma from Evans-Pritchard's study (1956) of the Nuer tribe. When physically deformed infants are born to the Nuer, they are instantly treated as baby hippopotami accidentally born to humans, and the adults gently lay them in the river where they belong. This convenient reclassification appears to be one way of avoiding the severe emotional implications of anomaly.

In general, Douglas argues, negative emotional reactions are inherent in the symbolic social dangers posed by deviant persons. "A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed some line which should not have been crossed. This displacement unleashes danger for someone" (p. 113). Whereas cultural imperatives can be thus identified as the bases of some types of negative emotional response to anomaly, the most impressive feature of such responses is their variability and plasticity. Although it is generally the case that all cultures develop more or less elaborate ritual responses to death and disfigurement, crime, and illness, it is also obvious that these rituals take almost infinitely diverse forms.

If there is some natural, unlearned tendency to respond affectively to deviant appearance or behavior, it is by no means clear that the response

can always be labeled as simply aversion or revulsion, or even as predominantly negative. In his "Totem and Taboo" (1913), Freud makes a strong case for human ambivalence toward tabooed objects and topics. Traditionally, the totem is both sacred and dangerous. Tabooed objects are fascinating and appealing, but they represent danger and arouse disgust at the same time. This ambivalence is perhaps still reflected in contemporary society in our morbid fascination with scatology, sexual deviance, and death. The dirty joke is a wide and cluttered canvas of man's ambivalence toward tabooed subjects. The same may be true of many forms of ethnic jokes that may combine a mixture of knowing affection with an awareness of specific deviant features.

We are also tempted to emphasize the ambivalence theme as underlying the success of graphic portrayals of violence in movies. Patrons seem to be simultaneously horrified and fascinated by the realistic portrayal of bullets entering flesh and axes decapitating heads.

Of more direct relevance to the specific question of stigma is an interesting set of experimental findings by Langer et al. (1976) which is consistent with the notion of anomalous or novel stimuli generating ambivalence. Those investigators showed in one study that their subjects, given an opportunity to gaze unobtrusively at a target person who was either normal, pregnant, or wearing a leg brace, gazed for a longer time at the disabled person. In a second experiment, subjects given a prior opportunity to gaze unobtrusively at a prospective conversational partner in a leg brace, subsequently sat closer to the partner than those subjects who were not given the same opportunity of prior, unobtrusive gazing. The difference between the prior-gaze and the no-gaze conditions was not observed when the target person was normal. The conclusion that one may draw from these experiments is that normal people are not simply repelled by physical deviance. In a way, they are fascinated enough to gaze at the deviant person, if it can be done unobtrusively. Without such an opportunity to gaze, however, the normal person, when instructed to engage in a free discussion, feels awkward and uncomfortable in the presence of the disabled and tends to sit at a greater distance from such a person than from normal subjects. These results do not compel an ambivalence hypothesis, but they are consistent with the idea that we are both intrigued by physical deviance and uncomfortable in its presence.

To summarize, it seems reasonable to propose that there are instances of primitive emotional arousal to certain extremes of physical or behavioral deviance. We know amazingly little about the response of animals and primitive peoples to various kinds of anomalous human conditions. The

very notion of "unmediated affect" seems to be almost a contradiction in terms. No matter how widespread and uniform the emotional response to particular deviant marks, the response is nevertheless triggered by a perceptual process. Scholars of perception have learned that factors of meaning and motivational significance can enter the perceptual process at or near the earliest stages of its development. In any event, the affect that seems on occasion to be immediately aroused by exposure to the anomalous is very quickly shaped by cognitive factors deriving from cultural and/or individual experience. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the allegedly "unmediated" emotional reaction is altogether negative. There seems to be evidence of fascination mixed with aversion in many responses to "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966). Since the role of affect is so important to the study of the stigmatizing process, we turn to a brief analysis of the nature of emotional experience in general.

THE NATURE OF EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Psychologists have speculated, researched, and written about emotion for many decades, but emotional experience is such a complex and elusive phenomenon that it still is not well understood. Since the early 1960s, the main theoretical controversy has centered around the role of cognitive factors in emotional experience. There are two issues involved, both of which are clearly relevant for understanding the role of affect in the stigmatizing process. The first issue is the extent to which emotional reactions are automatic responses to certain stimulus events—an issue that we have already touched upon in the preceding section. The second issue is the extent to which emotional reactions map, reflect, and are dictated by particular patterns of physiological arousal. In other words, are anger and ecstasy defined by different autonomic events, or is there a common arousal pattern that is experienced differently as a function of context-elicited cognitive factors?

Schachter (1964; Schachter and Singer 1962) has taken the most extreme view on the second issue, arguing that individuals will label physiological arousal states in terms of the cognitions available to them: "precisely the same state of physiological arousal could be called 'joy' or 'fury' or any of the great diversity of emotional labels, depending on the cognitive aspects of the situation" (1964, p. 53). Tomkins (1981) is the most vigorous critic of that position. He champions a theory of innate activators of affect. The primary affective responses of interest, enjoyment, surprise, fear, anger,

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