

Disability Studies: An Introduction
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Lecture: 5

Stigma: A Universal Phenomenon

Hello all! Welcome back again. Today we enter an interesting topic. It is called stigma and I have shaped it in such a way that it can be divided into two parts. The first part I called “Stigma A Universal Phenomenon” and the second I called “Stigma and Disability”. What can we learn that’s a question mark there. So let's see how we travel together. Let's get straight away into the topic stigma. What is it? Some of you may connect stigma with discrimination. Maybe you were penalised because you look dark maybe one of you is of a short stature, or you have a scar here or some of us are not so sharp, we don't get hundred of hundred all the time, why should we get. Some of us are slow in processing, some of us may be slow or some of us genius, may be you can do abstract algebra at the age of five or write enormous amount of poetry at the age of 10 or you go to America and experience some kind of discrimination. Maybe there, you are asked to say, get out of place because you look different. Maybe one of you is disabled, can't see or have a hearing problem or you have problems with the limbs can't walk, on a wheelchair and so on and somebody says no this is not meant for you, we can't give a driving license and so on. So in broader terms stigma is closely associated with discrimination, but is it that are they synonyms? I would say no. Stigma is a kind of branding, dictionary definition is you brand people. Say maybe say in traditional South Indian villages, people who have committed ghastly crimes for example, may be branded with a stick so that black spots and red spots on the skin, and they may be taken on donkey procession to demonstrate that they are different. Prisoners may be in India and in the rest of the world too may be asked to shave their head eyebrows removed to look all and to look like a prisoner.

Traditionally in India widows have been asked to shave their head and remove their hair and wear white saris. Countless examples to suit a role, as it were. If you are a widow you should look like this, if you are a disable, you should look like this. If you are a woman certain

professions are suitable to you and not others. If you are something else and something else and so on. So in simple words, it is kind of branding. I'm not talking about Reebok and that kind of brands and it's about marking if you like, marking someone as the other, he or she is different and not like my kind and that kind of branding. So well is it everywhere. Yes, it is. Is it a flux? Yes, it is. Is it a form of social reality. Yes, it is. Then if that were the case, how do we study it? Well, like other fields, disability studies has an excellent understanding of what we mean by stigma. I'll come to disability studies in the part two, but here will try to unpack as it were how stigma works. You may observe your niece or nephew of your own little sister or neighbourhood child how they react to people who look different. For example, people who look dark, people with big moustache or a person with a disability. I will tell you my example, when I meet or when I go to a neighbourhood household, a house with little children. Children become curious in the first place. Why is this guy not able to see me or why is he not reacting to my visual stimuli. May be show one finger to him, but he is not reacting. Is he different? They quickly go to their mom and their moms generally quickly grab them and shut their mouths, their moms generally fear that these children may actually wound me by calling something, why can't this uncle see or is he blind or use a Tamil word equivalent or a Hindi word and so on. So their moms and dads become particularly cautious and ensure that they are chup. But the thing is what I learned from such episodes is we always want to gather information about others, don't we? It is curiosity of human cognitive thinking, curiosity of human imagination if you put it that way and rightly so we developed that during childhood, right from the childhood cradle to grave we are curious people and there is nothing wrong with curiosity.

But people who seem to be different from your surroundings can provoke two emotions. One is curiosity on the left side and fear on the right. They more or less go together. Have you seen caregivers frightening children with the sound of a beggar in the street and people who look strangely different. Ayy if don't have this milk, I'll give you to that uncle or a stranger. Naturally in due course, this fear can become a stereotype, oh my God, that uncle who cannot see or aunt who cannot walk properly may be dangerous. The child may assume, and therefore develop fear. So, what was once curiosity can eventually become fear. This is how the child and her crowd if you like little crowd can develop stigma for people who look different, including people with disabilities. Now let's talk a little more concretely, so far, it was just examples, and so on. Now

let's see how we can structurally think. Well, all human relationships will involve three components: one making sense of the other. Suppose you are developing a friendship with someone you are in some kind for curiosity and observation mode and when you're in curiosity or observation mode you want to compare that person with whoever already was with you. Maybe your brother, cousin or another friend whom you were in school and so on. So comparative perspective in other words, our cognitive understanding develops by comparison, stereotypes and so on.

Then the affective component, what is affective, affective is emotional. We need to be friends with someone we need to be emotionally comfortable. If we don't feel a sense of friendship with someone then it is a sure sign that we are emotionally uncomfortable with that person. And the third component that is social control, making sense of your society, and so on. Well you have families talking making sense of neighbours, families making sense of in-laws and one caste community make sense of other cross community in a village. You have one nation as a whole in some sense talking about and making sense of another nation, usually with some prejudice. So coming back stigma has three components. It is cognitive component, affective component and a social control component. Let's talk about it in little more detail so that we understand these three components in much more significant way. Irving Goffman and other sociologists have given this kind of anatomy of stigma, as it were, in the sense that the tripartite division that I've given here are actually borrowed from Goffman. So let me talk about the affective component, emotional one primary emotion that you and I may invoke or grab us is fear and anxiety about the strange, for example, if the eye spot a worm here for the example, I may withdraw and secondly crush it with a book here. This is what exactly happen in human affective component, emotion to strangers. One, there is a possibility that they withdraw immediately, oh my God, let me turn away, he looks different. She looks spotted she looks and maybe she looks inhuman and so on.

The second consequent behaviour it is possible, we do mob lynching, for example, catch a guy who is called a robber, small thief beat him to pulp where the mob lynching behaviour. One of the things that drive this fear and disgust for the person is our propensity to observe, by the way, I would like to give your great resource book about fear and disgust, it's a great book, I think you

should refer to it, it is called Anatomy of Disgust, it walks one through how we feel disgust may be discussed disgust single feel nauseated may be Schuman ways human difference. The cityscapes that look different our own body parts that don't belong to us anymore. Old age, death. All these things can invoke disgust and disgust also depends on your age maturity. I don't mean moral maturity mean maturity to handle problems in life as one progresses in life and so on. Many many factors leprosy can invoke disgust example. So what am I saying now, disgust and fear, one of the primary emotional responses to human difference can invoke or shape stigma. Second Stereotyping, that is the cognitive component. What's cognition? Making sense of something. How you make sense of something? you compare. how you compare? You have certain scale in my good person means this a good-looking girl means this. A man should be of this quality. Childhood means this old age means this. One develops scales in the mind. They reside in your unconscious. What I mean is they indirectly influence you and what we end up doing is we invoke them as scale and compare and stereotype and what is to stereotype- putting things into a mould as it were, and how do we do that, the ways in which one does is staring. Suppose somebody enters in pause for a second and look at the person, that person may be upper-class wears a Reebok shoe just got down from a car and that car also looks expensive or alternatively the person in rags, maybe one should not talk, his English is not American accent should be some low class corporation school stuff, so he must be intellectually weak as well. Don't we make such stupid assumptions? And this is what cognitively happens, so it requires, to get out of the stigma you require to, to use a computer metaphor defragment your mind, your cognitive learning, psychiatrists would call it, cognitive behavioural therapy. I am not getting into therapy angel. We need to, in some sense, relearn and second unlearn many stereotyping scales that we go on to use.

It maybe also useful to consult this book and staring by Rosemary Cullen Thompson, fantastic book on how we stare at others. For example, some staring is meant to collect information. I told about the child right children look at me to collect information, whether this uncle is pretending, does he have a chocolate, how her mom, dad's leading him by hand maybe I should do that is for information. Some staring which women are very acutely aware of, it may be meant to harass, a kind of roguish looking, without reciprocity. So coming back, cognitive, the cognitive affective component we did that, cognitive component we did that, and social behaviour. Well at the end

of the day, we are humans with strict sense of borders, my family, my house, my town, my community, my school. My college, my friend and the borders are infinite. One indulges in stigma to in some sense, achieve coherence and strength within this borders. For example, if I have to feel great about myself. I will typical pick up one of you and say you are bad and vice versa. Some call this dehumanisation basically to achieve intra humanisation that is to feel good within your own community use. Start saying the other caste communities bad. This is caste discrimination and stigma. There is a huge history of caste discrimination in our society based exactly on this principle. Sometimes stigma looks so natural that you don't need to even need to identify that it is a stigmatic to do, one gets used to it. For example, the British in India, for 400 years got used to the idea that they were imperials sun never sets on the British Empire they assumed. And they assumed that the poor infidels here are to give them service for life. But talking about racism we should usually talk about such evils in Indian society like caste.

So intra humanization, to feel good about one's own community in one's own human community. You start brandishing others as it would harm. So social control cognitive and behavioural affective components come together in making stigma possible. Concluding remarks, part one, so in some sense stigma is unavoidable. It is the basis, stigma is a building block, if you like, a cluster of building blocks on which human difference is built, perceived and perpetuated. It is the basis on which people draw patterns of human relationship. They come to terms with the difference the perpetuated difference based on stigma. Am I justifying stigma then? Now this is only a description and the idea to say that it works inevitably within us animals. That is all I want to say in the first part. Thank you.