



Stigma: How We Treat Outsiders

Gerhard Falk

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What is it in human nature that leads us to label some as insiders and stigmatize others as outsiders?

Sociologist Gerhard Falk examines the social psychology that motivates this process of exclusion, focusing on the outcasts in contemporary American society and comparing current experience with examples from the past. Referring to the work of Emile Durkheim and Erving Goffman, Falk reviews the whole range of stigmatized people from the mentally ill to ordinary people with unpopular occupations, like undertakers and trash collectors. Amid the wide diversity of stigmatized persons, he finds two basic types of outsiders: the "existential" and the "achieved." The first group comprises those who are stigmatized because of their very existence, regardless of their specific actions: the mentally handicapped, for example. The second group describes those whose actions or life conditions have resulted in stigma: from high achievers (often subject to resentment) to criminals. Falk also looks at the ways in which writers past and present have dramatized stigmatized characters in literature.

This fascinating overview of a long-standing and widespread social problem will be of interest to all those concerned about creating a more fair-minded society.

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