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Stigmatisation. The dimension of aesthetics: Ugliness and beauty

Stygmatyzacja. Wymiar estetyczny: brzydota i piękno

Abstract: The large body of research on stigmatisation suggests that a coherent theory of stigma shall emerge in the near future. Certainly, an important component of this theory will be the seven dimensions that have been defined on the basis of numerous studies. These are: openness, process, destructiveness, aesthetics, origin and danger. Nowadays, the role and importance of the aesthetic dimension is becoming increasingly important. In this context, people classified as ugly are progressively subjected to stigmatisation. Although physical beauty has always been valued in society, it is now associated with financial success and improved status in all areas of social life (*beauty pays*). It has become the primary currency in social relations (Welsch, 1999). This particularly affects women and their erotic capital (Hakim, 2010, 2011). The theory of the reflected Self (Cooley, 2024) suggests the personal impact of the abundance of negative, hurtful feedback that ugly people receive. The result is a wounded identity (Goffman, 2007).
The moral and dignity aspects of such unfair and increasingly pronounced social categorisation raise objections far beyond the teaching profession.

Keywords: stigmatisation, beauty dimension, ugliness, the reflected self, wounded identity, categorisation, stereotyping.

Introduction

The concept of stigma, as pioneered by Erving Goffman in the 1960s (Goffman, 1986), has given rise to a plethora of studies, providing a foundation for the formulation of a novel, coherent and productive theory. This theoretical framework has the potential to become a reality in the foreseeable future.

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the nature of the stigmatisation of ugly people, which hurts their dignity and is socially harmful, in the context of the growing prominence of aesthetic values and pictoral culture.

The issues of beauty and ugliness are amply represented in the scholarly literature. In this article, the focus is on references to emerging stigmatisation theory as well as issues - both controversial and less widely known - which may enrich the emerging holistic account of stigmatisation. The analysis and discussion of the findings from the numerous scholarly reports is conducted concurrently therein.

Stigmatisation

An essential component of this theory *in statu nascendi* are the six core dimensions of stigmatisation drawn from numerous studies (Czykwin, 2021, pp. 137-188) which include: openness, process, destructiveness, aesthetics, origin and danger (Czykwin, 2021, pp. 137-8). These dimensions serve to organise and clarify the intricate and multifaceted nature of stigmas, thereby facilitating the development of a comprehensive, disjunctive and criterion-based specification of various stigmas. Moreover, the extracted dimensions act as a source of inspiration for research, enabling the formulation of new analytical concepts[1] and, consequently, the further development of the theory in question.

In the case of multiple stigmas, the specified dimensions intersect, a point at which the destructive function of the stigma on the personal Self becomes particularly pronounced. For instance, mental illness, a subject

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[1]   The metaphor of the 'blinding function of the stigma' seen from the perspective of the stigmatising spectator may be an example of such new concepts. It illustrates the mechanism of treating the stigma as a personal logo which removes other characteristics of the stigmatised person as secondary. As a result, they become 'invisible', 'blinded' by the stigma. Yet another exemplification is the mechanism of 'courtesy stigma' explaining the irrationality of it, as in the case of stigmatisation of a child whose father has a disability.

frequently explored by researchers[2], encompasses both the destructive capacity with respect to interpersonal relationships, and the associated risks. Refugees, as a social group of stigmatised individuals, evoke stereotypical perceptions of destructiveness, danger, aesthetics and openness.

The concept of stigma refers to those aspects of a person's functioning in society that involve the dimension of morality and dignity of a person due to the injustice of their assigned low status. However, it is not to be confused with the term 'discrimination', but rather with the term 'social ostracism or infamy'. Indeed, the word 'discrimination' implies deliberate, intentional exclusion, often legally imposed (e.g. 'racial discrimination' or 'discrimination against women'). In contrast, stigmatisation permeates the 'soft' sphere of social life and is therefore also to some extent unacknowledged by those exercising the stigma. It is often irrational and based on established stereotypes (Sontag, 2016).

Stigma has become the conceptual category which connects spoiled identity and social context. The concept of the reflected Self, a notion that originated in the Chicago School and thus in the period of Goffman's scientific endeavours, facilitates the understanding of how individuals from the same social category (nation, religion, etc.) can exhibit remarkable similarities. This phenomenon can be attributed to the presence of a Self-monitoring mechanism that is influenced by a multitude of feedback signals from others, thereby serving as a form of social mirror. These signals, whether they be expressions of approval or disapproval, often serve as a gauge by which individuals assess their degree of 'social adequacy', that is, their alignment with social expectations. The phenomenon of the reflected Self, in conjunction with the principle of conformism, enables us to function as exemplars of the prototypical etalons within our respective communities.

It is a paradoxical phenomenon in the context of the theory of the reflected Self that the low self-esteem of stigmatised individuals does not invariably manifest. Thus, for example, old people are not necessarily characterised by low self-esteem, nor are black people in the USA (Crocker and Major, 1989; Crocker and Wols, 2001; Fessler and Navarette, 2008; Nelson, 2003, 221-233). This emphasises the necessity to further develop the Self-reflected mechanism, incorporating situational perspectives (Crocker and Quin, 2008) and the emotional experiences of the individual (Turner

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[2]   An example of this is the 492-page textbook published in Cambridge: Vogel D. L., Wade N. G., 'Stigma and Mental Health', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022.

and Stets, 2009) (Scheff and Razinger, 1991), with a particular emphasis on emotions, including shame (Scheff and Razinger, 1991).

Beauty

The focus of sociologists on beauty has not been as extensive as that of philosophers (Dowgiałło, 2013). While philosophers have defined beauty as radiance, purpose, conformity and harmony, which are immanent and permanent dimensions of beauty, sociologists have been inclined to observe the variability of beauty canons and their social genesis. Sociologists emphasise that beauty is inextricably intertwined with social structures, inequality, and symbolic violence (fr. *violence symbolique*) (Bourdieu and Passeron, 2011). The imposition of meanings regarding beauty standards by media entities can be regarded as a form of violence, given that aesthetic standards are presented as exclusive and impervious to alternatives. Consequently, these standards bestow a symbolic legitimacy upon cultural norms and the prevailing social order. This process serves to mask and obscure actual relations based on physical violence, rendering the violence imperceptible and concurrently endowing the entire system with a semblance of legitimacy (Czykwin, 2025).

Stigmatisation is socially defined, thus variable and undesirable for those being stigmatised, engendering feelings of hurt and pain. It constitutes a form of pressure, power exerted on individuals to discipline them. As Michael Foucault insightfully observed:

A policy of coercion is then shaped, which involves working on the body, a deliberate manipulation of its parts, movements, actions. The human body falls into the cogs of the machinery of power, which revises it, takes it apart and puts it back together again. This is the birth of 'political anatomy', which is also a particular form of 'mechanics of power': it determines how the bodies of others can be influenced, not just to do what one wants them to do, but to act as one wants them to act, using predetermined techniques, at a certain speed and efficiency. Discipline thus produces compliant and trained bodies, 'susceptible' bodies. (Foucault, 1998, p. 133)

Drawing on the preceding quote, it is beneficial to direct attention towards the beauty of the body, or rather, its alternative: ugliness as a stigmatising characteristic of a person. The stigma of ugliness can be analysed in two dimensions: overt vs. covert, but above all in an aesthetic dimension.

Aesthetics

Contemporary aesthetic choices are no longer a reflection of social divisions, as was the case in modernism (Veblen, 2008); rather, they have become the basis for social categorisation. Taste has become a criterion for classifying and categorising not only objects but also people, including the subject itself. 'Being in good taste' is of paramount importance since an increasing number of elements of reality is subject to aesthetic transformation (Welsch, 1999). In this sense, reality itself can be regarded as an aesthetic construct, comparable to objects that serve solely a utilitarian function. In alignment with Goffman's notion that trust constitutes the primary bargaining chip in human relationships, Wolfgang Welsch posits that aesthetics has emerged as the predominant asset (Welsch, 1999, p. 23).

This requires a revision of the hierarchy of needs formulated by Abraham Maslow (Rojewska, 2024), wherein the primary needs are those of physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, as well as respect and recognition, which determine personal fulfilment. Aesthetic needs are secondary to these.

In postmodern reality, aesthetic experiences are increasingly becoming the basis for people choosing one another, constructing and strengthening social bonds. Furthermore, the dissolution of these bonds and the emergence of social distances are also rooted in aesthetic experiences.

The meaning of beauty

In the context of aesthetic evaluation of one's 'look', the term 'appearance' is employed to denote not only a person's physical characteristics, but also their attire, hairstyle, manner of moving, gesticulation, and smile. The term 'well-groomed person' is used to signify a particular emphasis on personal appearance and the cultivation of an individual aesthetic style.

While the significance of beauty and the favouritism of those who are regarded as such is not surprising in personal relationships or certain professions, such as flight attendants, models or actors, the importance of beauty extends beyond the scope of other, unrelated professions. At this juncture, a well-known mental cliché association can be applied: 'she was beautiful and good' in contrast to: 'she was ugly and bad', which translates into an irrational connection between beauty and a person's character and abilities.

Since people in large cities engage predominantly in superficial contacts, which results in first impressions becoming particularly important, this is often of an aesthetic nature and related to the *halo effect* (Rosenthal, 1985). The halo effect is that good-looking people are perceived as good, noble and

honest. In addition, such individuals tend to elicit more trust, prompting a greater inclination to extend a helping hand. Conversely, those who initially make a poor impression, which is often the case with those perceived as ugly, are often ascribed a greater number of faults. This phenomenon, known as the *Golem effect*3, involves the combination of positive and negative expectations, leading the observer to modify their behaviour in a manner consistent with these expectations, even in situations that do not necessitate such behaviour. The phenomenon of love/hate at first sight provides a useful illustration of this theory. In this context, expectations act as self-fulfilling prophecies, a concept known as the *Pygmalion effect* (Rosenthal, 1985).

Research has also revealed a two-step mechanism for a particular type of perception of the stigmatised and therefore 'inferior others' (Siller, 1967). The first stage is related to a so-called proximate offensiveness and the second stage to rejection of intimacy. The issue of sexuality, recurring as the 'how does he/she do it?' question, is one that 'normies'4 themselves revisit during long-term relationships of this type. As time progresses, the significance of appearance is diminished in favour of other characteristics such as social competence, emotional warmth, sense of humour, and honesty. Furthermore, the onlookers' familiarity with obese individuals, particularly when such perceptions are unexpected, is significantly mitigated as a result of this familiarisation.

It has been demonstrated that individuals tend to form judgments regarding the personalities of others based on physical appearance, particularly in regard to their facial features. Those who are considered to be physically attractive have been shown to be more likely to secure employment and obtain higher salaries. Furthermore, they have been found to experience more fulfilling social interactions, such as dating, friendships, and professional relationships, and to be more highly regarded and desired as life partners. Physical appearance frequently emerges as the most significant factor in the decision to pursue a romantic relationship with a potential partner.

Nowadays, in the visual age and the abundance of images of impeccably beautiful people in public spaces, there is a heightened awareness

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[3]   The Golem was a character from 16th century folk tales. It was a figure made of clay, resembling a human being but lacking intellect, a soul and speech.

The name Golem itself comes from Jewish folk tales. The Golem was a character made of clay, resembling a human being but lacking in intellect, soul and speech.

[4]   Goffman used the term 'normals' as a non-evaluative, neutral term, as opposed to 'normal'.

of beauty and appeal. Furthermore, an increasing number of people live in cities, where superficial contacts with others are inherently fleeting and incidental, and therefore focus attention on external appearance rather than on the personality traits that are more difficult to access. This tendency is particularly pronounced among younger demographics, who have been socialised in a pictoral culture (Mshelia, 2008) and it is precisely the image that appeals to them with particular clarity.

According to Charles Erickson and Mark Turner, the concept of beauty is primarily an emotional concept that appeals to the human senses (Erikson and Turner, 2016). Beauty is thus associated with pride, and ugliness with shame (Czykwin, 2013). These emotions play a key role in adaptation in social situations. The ideal of beauty varies across different cultures and in occidental culture it is normatively set for various social sectors and stand-ardised as a result of media pressure.

Personal self-esteem significantly correlates in a positive sense with self-assessment of one's own appearance, particularly in women, and with overall self-esteem. Furthermore, temporal perspective significantly alters the meaning and role of beauty (Czernecka, 2018; Malinowska, Dzwonko-wska-Godula, Garncarek, Czernecka and Brzezińska, 2017; Majcher, 2013). It also reveals a depressive character, stemming from dissatisfaction with one's own appearance (Głębocka, 2009).

The hypothesis that individuals who are considered to be 'pretty' are more likely to be better rewarded for the same work outcomes than those who are considered to be 'ugly' is supported by the evidence, although the perception among observers is that 'pretty' people work worse than 'ugly' individuals, especially when they are inclined to overly display their beauty.

The aforementioned observations allow us to discover a truly signif-icant distinction between persons with a visible stigma of 'ugliness', thus referring and alluding to the overtness of the stigma. Unaesthetic stigmas which constitute a source of a person's shame, regardless of their validity, represent a factor that has a destructive effect on the identity of the stigma-tised individual, thus resulting in a notably Goffmanian spoiled identity. Despite a number of situational variables (Crocker and Quinn, 2008), such as the support of significant others, dominant narratives etc., which mitigate the pejorative effects of stigma – the wounded identity remains a vulnerable part of the stigmatised's personal Self.

Beauty and gender

The binary division of the social world into men and women also evokes the distinction between what is considered beautiful for women as an alternative to what is considered beautiful (handsome) for men. Tall men and short, or shorter than them, women represent the paradigm of beauty. In occidental culture, it is also believed that pale complexion, fair hair and blue eyes are more feminine than dark hair, olive skin and dark eyes, which endow men with beauty. Similarly, a low voice (bass or tenor) is considered more appropriate for males, while a high voice (alto) is regarded as feminine (or childlike). Signs of physical strength, such as muscular arms or shoulders, are emblematic of desirable masculine beauty, in contrast to women, who are feminine and therefore weak and frail. Women with substantial body weight are perceived as 'ugly'. Body weight, particularly obesity, is subject to a different social evaluation. The social stigma associated with obesity in women is significantly more pronounced than in men, where it can even be perceived as a positive attribute5.

A prominent bust and slim legs are considered significant assets that enhance attractiveness in women in particular. Furthermore, the 'prettiness' of both men and women undergoes different assessments with age. Women are perceived as 'pretty' during the age range of 22-37 years old, whereby older men tend to see very young women as especially attractive. Whereas men, as perceived by women, may appear physically attractive over a longer period of time, as their evaluation is not solely, or not primarily, based on their appearance but on other aspects, such as their social and economic position (Arcimowicz, 2015).

Although external beauty constitutes, especially in women, a significant resource which empowers and raises their self-esteem, it is not always explicitly perceived as a value. Beautiful women are more often considered materialistic and foolish, as in the 'blonde jokes'. This is also the case, although to a lesser extent, with handsome men stereotypically perceived as vain, snobbish and narcissistic.

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5   As the president of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, stated with regard to the potential ideal candidate for president of Poland (thus excluding a woman) in the 2025 elections, he should be, based on research: 'Young, tall, stately, handsome.' [for:] 'GW' 26.08.2024, p. 1. The above statements, emphasise precisely the superficiality, and in general: the look of the candidate. They say nothing about his competence, character or moral qualities as well as his recognisability or effectiveness.

Furthermore, gender variations in the social relations of those considered 'ugly' play an important role, both for those stigmatised and the social actors and audience. Men are more sensitive to visual stimuli, while women are more sensitive to auditory means (Moir and Jesse, 2014), hence the colloquial expression: 'speak into a man's eye, and into a woman's ear'. In both Western and Far Eastern cultures, striptease has historically been a domain reserved primarily for women, although the pictoral culture has played a role in shaping the initial impressions of these interactions, even involving men in the concern for their own appearance. Historically, women's fashion has been far more intricate and sophisticated than that of men, and the amount of time women devote to maintaining their appearance is a testament to their commitment and dedication. Hair care, for instance, is a time-consuming and labour-intensive endeavour, as is the application of make-up, pedicures, and manicures (Lee Bartky, 1985). Beauty treatments are often painful, whether it is hair removal (including pubic, armpit, lip or eyebrow areas), ear piercing, or cosmetic procedures. Furthermore, female beauty is substantially more expensive, creating a disadvantage for poorer women. Women who do not conform to conventional beauty standards and are also not well-groomed often experience feelings of shame and 'inferiority' in this regard.

Erotic capital

The concept of erotic capital was introduced into the field of sociology by British sociologist and educator, Catherine Hakim (Hakim, 2010), who defined beauty and eroticism as a source of power and profit[6]. This term is a somewhat more confined understanding of the term aesthetic capital (Holla and Kuipiers, 2016), which deepens and develops the concept of human capital by incorporating another important dimension of it. The concept of erotic capital is intricate, encompassing not only physical and sexual attractiveness, but also social competence, temperament, sexuality, and self-presentation skills.

In all societies, the distribution of erotic capital is known to be inequitable, resulting in the activation of the aforementioned halo effect. Individuals who possess significant erotic capital have been observed to enjoy a range

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[6] This line of inquiry has found a number of followers. Relevant literature can be found in a 2024 article by Requean F., Pang W., Ko E., Cho M., 'Physical attractiveness and managerial favouritism in the hotel industry: The light and dark side of erotic capital', *Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science*, 2/2024, pp. 123-142.

of benefits, including higher wages, more stable relationships, and superior academic performance (Andreoni and Petrie, 2008). Thus, erotic attraction can be considered a form of social capital, representing an exchangeable asset that yields benefits extending beyond the immediate realms of appearance and sexuality (Andreoni and Petrie, 2008). This capital integrates social dimensions and physical characteristics, thereby explaining the mutual attraction between men and women (Andreoni and Petrie, 2008, p. 77).

As previously mentioned, positive expectations of attractive people transform attractiveness into significant capital, which brings rewards in often unexpected areas, such as popularity, power or fame. Erotic attraction, as in the case of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or demographic variables, may constitute implicit factors in increasing social inequalities. Beauty contributes to reinforcing these gaps by creating conditions that prevent fair competition.

Hakim (2011) concluded that an individual's beauty value is a function of the potential (capacity) to promote collective emotional fulfilment, and that this capacity is the essence of the power that sexual capital possesses (Hakim, 2011, p. 509).

High heels (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2019) have been identified as a symbol and metaphor of femininity, enabling women to express their sexuality through the exposure of the breasts and buttocks, while also limiting the possibility of escape, thereby rendering women more helpless and submissive. The concept of beauty in relation to an individual's social identity gives rise to a dichotomy between 'beautiful' and 'ugly' people. The construction of one's reputation through appearance and expression, especially upon first encounter, results in individuals being perceived by others as an expression of the overall, generalised life capital of the person.

The emotional coherence of personal identity is constructed through the feedback received from others. This emotionality can be manipulated (Erickson and Turner, 2016), and therefore identity, analogous to social constructs, ideas or thoughts and even physical attributes, may be transformed through new contexts.

Beauty has both a potential of attraction and repulsion. It has the capacity to evoke sentiments of love and hatred, which underscores its relevance to the study of social inequalities and the dynamics of stigmatisation.

The concepts of beauty and eroticism are morally unjust social constructs, rooted in fears, sustained and developed through misjudgements and generalisations. This is exemplified by the controversies surrounding beauty contests, especially those held for children (Skuza, 2024). The universality

of female beauty pageants is regarded as a reduction of women exclusively to their appearance, disregarding their other personal characteristics. Furthermore, the condemnation of participants in such competitions to identity problems, which are established solely on the basis of beauty, is considered to be fragile and problematic in the end.

Evidence that beauty pays and is profitable, in a literal sense, is provided by the existence of a prostitution industry in which sexual capital is an occupational dimension, thereby providing a privileged situation for employment and life success. Statistics demonstrate that men and women without an even average level of beauty earn 17% and 12% less than their good-looking counterparts (Hamermesh, 2013, p. 221). There is a growing recognition among men of the correlation between their physical appearance and professional success, and a concomitant willingness to invest in cultivating a more 'seductive' style, both in personal terms and in the context of marketing communications (Roubal and Cirklova, 2020).

Historically, there has been a societal focus on the concept of erotic capital, which has been subject to restrictive scrutiny, particularly with regard to issues such as homosexuality, contraception and abortion (Dento, 2014). The criminalisation, discrimination and, most notably, the stigmatisation of individuals deemed to be deviating from societal beauty standards has become a prevalent reality.

The stigma of ugliness

The 'lack of beauty' stigma has been shown to result in the stigmatised individuals, predominantly women, becoming generic and prototypical cases of those with the stigma. These individuals are often met with disregard, jokes, irony, calumny, nicknames and other forms of social infamy. The lack of beauty is particularly unambiguous and blatant when body symmetry is distorted, as is the case with people who are missing limb(s), are hunchbacked or walk with a limp. In the case of children, amputee peers are often rejected on the basis of being perceived as 'incomplete' (Centers and Centers, 1963).

Personal characteristics, including obesity, facial deformities and unaesthetic skin conditions, can become the primary catalyst for defining a person due to their enhanced visibility. This visibility is further compounded by the influence of social background, which fosters comparisons with others. In this context, individuals who exhibit a distinct phenotype, such as those who conform to the Semitic beauty standard, black individuals, or Asians against a white background, are more susceptible to acquiring

stigmatised status due to the power of this salient *differentia specifica* (Smith et al., 2018).

An absence of resemblance with the majority, in this case an aesthetic resemblance, can constitute an important variable of a person's attractiveness (Nęcki, 1996; Ziembińska, 2017). The prevailing tendency is to find individuals bearing a resemblance to us more attractive; however, the extent to which we find someone attractive, including in terms of aesthetics, is influenced by three intervening variables (Hendrick and Hendrick, 2011): (1) the degree of similarity; (2) the frequency of interaction; (3) reciprocity. We consider those to whom we are attractive to be attractive to us, and the attractiveness of an individual increases in situations that are perceived as threatening.

Market pressures on external attractiveness are not only exaggerated, but also unified (Melosik, 2014). In this context, people whose appearance varies from the commonly accepted norm are at greater risk of stigmatisation. This applies, for example, to people with a phenotype that differs from a common one. The practice of categorising and stratifying people according to beauty has a significant impact on social relations. The correlation between the evaluation of beauty and social injustice is a salient yet under-researched area, offering novel avenues for exploration.

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