Dancing with Discrimination: Managing Stigma and Identity

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ABSTRACT

Fans are a group that are stigmatized and discredited, at least to some degree, by their 'deviant' and common form of symbolic consumption. At stake in the process of stigmatization is the very identity of the individual fan, and their symbolic and emotional well-being. This paper reports on an interpretivistative study of one particular group of fans - *Star Trek*Star Trek fans (or 'Trekkies') - and explores the complex identity issues articulated by them as they 'manage' their problematic public identity. Drawing upon interviews conducted with 18 Trekkies, the article describes how this stigmatic identity is organized within a disciplinary matrix that operates at a micro level through two key processes: humour and self-surveillance. In particular, we highlight their struggle with the dilemmas of exposing their private fandom in a public context, and the highly ambivalent manner in which they seek to escape stigmatization.

KEY WORDS: stigma, *Star Trek*Star Trek, consumption, identity, humour, surveillance

The imposition of stigma is the commonest form of violence used in democratic societies (…). Stigmatization is a highly sophisticated form of violence in so far as it is rarely associated with physical attacks or threats. It can be best compared to those forms of psychological torture in which the victim is broken psychically and physically but left to all outward appearances unmarked. (Pinker, 1971-: in Page-, 1984: 146-147).

INTRODUCTION

The term stigma is derived from the Greek word for 'tattoo-mark', and refers in its historical context to the use of a hot brand for 'marking' the status of a person either as a devotee to the services of the temple, or by contrast, as a criminal or runaway slave (Osborne, 1974). In this latter sense, a stigma is some kind of 'mark', attribute or characteristic of an individual or a group that is regarded by others as flawed, deviant or inferior. For many individuals, these stigmas engulf others' impressions of them, such that it can become difficult for others to see past beyond a stigma, e.g. seeing a disabled person solely in terms of their disability. In this sense, a stigma often plays the role of so-called 'master-status trait', since it is assumed to be central to the identity of the individual and becomes their perceived defining feature. Usually stigmas assume master-status trait because they represent, to use the sociological term, a 'major norm infraction', that is they stand for significant deviances from perceived social norms. However

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stigmatization ,—i. i.e., the process of recognizing and accepting that a mark renders one socially inferior resulting in feelings of shame/fear/embarrassment,— need not always be associated with these major social fault lines. Being a size 16, having acne, wearing black, preferring Sum 41 to Britney Spears; these seemingly trivial or inconsequential characteristics can in particular contexts – for example a high school – act as vehicles for stigmatization and can carry significant emotional baggage. In this respect, fandom might also be viewed as a basis upon which stigmatization could be enacted. Indeed, Lewis (1992) points out that fans represent a social group often stigmatized by others for a myriad of diverse and often contradictory reasons. Our study focuses on issues of stigma for one particular group of fans: 'Trekkies', or fans of the American television series *Star Trek*Star Trek.

We begin the paper with a brief discussion on the phenomenon of fandom before developing our conceptual frame for this article. We then describe the methodological basis of the interviews carried out as part of the study. The bulk of the paper presents an interpretation of two key processes articulated by the respondents in their management of stigma – that of humour and self-surveillance. We end with a conclusion emphasizing the highly ambivalent way in which the respondents seek to escape stigmatization.

FANDOM: A CASE OF STIGMATIC CONSUMPTION

The fact that fans of *Star Trek*Star Trek are stigmatized on the basis of their interest in the show is most visibly illustrated in the ubiquitous stereotype of Trekkies. According to this stereotype, the programme's archetypal consumers are social misfits, feminized and/or desexualized, infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature, and mindless

consumers who are unable to separate fantasy from reality (Jenkins, 1992). This indictment of ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans springs from their transgression of two basic cultural assumptions relating, on the one hand, to their *object* of consumption and on the other, to the *manner* in which, as a group of fans, they consume this object. First of all, *Star Trek*Star Trek is often seen as an inappropriate object for their desire because it is highly disposable pop culture (inexpensive and widely available) rather than timeless high culture (more expensive and rare) and second, because it is a blatant fantasy rather than 'serious reality'. With regard to the first point ~~here~~, the stigmatization of Trekkies might be said to play off well-rehearsed themes in critical cultural theory about divisions of high and low culture and their relation to perceptions of good or bad taste. Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) seminal text on the relationship between consumption, taste and social status is instructive here. Based on a view of consumption as an act of sociocultural differentiation, Bourdieu argues that through the consumption of particular goods/services/experiences, social actors can display their possession of good taste. For Bourdieu, this has important social functions since it serves to classify not only the meanings attached to the object itself, but more importantly to assign a particular social status to the person displaying the good taste and exploiting its cultural capital. In that sense, the display of good taste classifies the classifier as well. Given the negative stereotype of *Star Trek*Star Trek fans, any act of consumption is likely to classify a person as, in this particular instance, having bad taste.

We can, however, go beyond this by exploring ~~at a general level~~ how the *manner* in which fans consume objects might be regarded as deviant. Continuing with Bourdieu, he observed that one of the distinctive oppositions differentiating bourgeois art from popular

entertainment is the notion of "'distance'" over "'participation'". In his view, The "'bourgeois aesthetics'" consistently values a detached, indifferent and unemotional mode of consumption. In stark contrast, fandom involves excessive behaviour – loud emotional displays and a seeming lack of self-restraint (screaming and fainting, autograph hunting, chanting and hooliganism). At rock concerts, soccer matches and so on, the boundary between the audience and performer breaks down – members of the audience are active and important participants in the event. Similarly, Jenson (1992) suggests that at the root of our distinction between 'aficionados' and 'fans' is an Enlightenment-originated notion of rationality that constructs a dichotomy between reason and emotion:

> Reason is associated with the objective apprehending of reality, while emotion is associated with the subjective, the imaginative, and the irrational. Emotions, by this logic, lead to a dangerous blurring of the line between fantasy and reality, while rational obsession, apparently does not (p. 21).

For William Shatner (a.k.a. Captain Kirk), this irrational behaviour was clearly manifest in *Star Trek*Star Trek clubs and conventions:

> I was asked to appear in an auditorium of some 8,000 to 10,000 people, there just because of "*Star Trek*Star Trek." They were crazed. I don't know why the fanaticism has attached itself to the show. You wouldn't believe what they have at these conventions (…….). What is happening defies rational explanation. (Quoted in Jewett and Lawrence, 1977:, p. 2)

While Shatner might consider fandom to be beyond explanation, there have been numerous attempts to explain *Star Trek*Star Trek's popularity by likening it to a religious

movement (e.g. Jindra 1994; Tyrell 1977; Jewett and Lawrence 1977). The word ""fan""
is, of course, an abbreviated form of "fanatic" and so has been linked to excessive forms
of religious zeal right from its inception. The abbreviation was no doubt intended as a
humorous hyperbole, yet for some the association is taken quite literally. Jewett and
Lawrence (1977), for instance, suggest that television has become the modern church,
with Trekkies being a sort of congregation who blindly worship the show's optimistic
liberal humanist "pop theology". They argue that television, through the presentation of
unchallenged or consciously observed myths, blurs the boundaries between fantasy and
reality, potentially altering the world-view of its audience to such an extent that it may
lead to pathological behaviour such as suicide. Whereas Shatner believes Trekkies to be
out of control, and Jewett and Lawrence maintain that they are *under the control* of
hidden persuaders, both uses of the fandom-as-religion metaphor indicate an underlying
concern with being *in control*. In effect, by stigmatising fans (by defining them as
opposite to us) we are projecting on to them our unconscious fears of losing touch with
reality, of cracking under the pressure of modernity (Jenson 1992). Of course, the
metaphor of religion is used not only to problematise fandom, but is applied to
consumerism more generally, which has itself often been regarded (especially amongst
neo-Marxian and Frankfurt School circles) as a manifestation of the prevailing
(modernist) conception of consumption as a profane, value destructive act (the opposite
of production). In other words, fandom as an extreme form of consumption is doubly
perilous, since if consumption is bad, then unrestrained consumption must be very bad.
This stigmatic 'double-whammy' represents a double challenge to a social order

mediated by the conventional symbolic privileging of rationality and production over irrationality and consumption.

As we explain in the next section, stigmatization is a mode of social control (Schur, 1980) which works at symbolic and moral levels, regulating alternative identities and behaviours through the continuous reproduction of social values and mores, and through this regulation, inflicting a kind of 'symbolic violence' on those misfits such that they might 'fit in'. Whilst this symbolic violence will not necessarily result in the kind of psychological torture referred to in the quote from Pinker right at the beginning of this article, it might certainly arouse negative feelings amongst Trekkies. Viewed as a deviant cultural activity, and certainly one of 'bad taste', being a Trekkie often involves a sense of embarrassment or shame.

ON STIGMA AND IDENTITY

The phenomenon of stigmatization has been studied in depth in a number of fields ranging from medicine and psychiatry, to clinical and social psychology, and sociology. It is these latter two broadly conceived fields that form the basis of our theoretical reflections in this article. Despite speaking for conceptually and substantively different terrains, recent literature on the stigmatization process in social psychology and sociology has been marked by broad agreement amongst scholars that stigmas are not inevitable or objective social phenomena based on *a priori* social facts (Schur, 1980; Jones et al., 1984). In addition, both literatures reflect the epistemological vicissitudes of sociological theory on deviance and labelling, two cornerstones of research into stigma. In this regard, Schur neatly summarises a shift in sociological research on deviance away from a

concern with deviating behaviour, individual deviators and causality towards a greater emphasis on the processes of defining and reacting to deviance. Whilst the former view saw social control as a reaction to deviance, this new perspective drew upon labelling theory to suggest that social control necessarily produces deviance (Jenkins, 1996). Key to this epistemological shift in the study of deviance and its relation to notions of social control was the groundbreaking work of Howard Becker in whose 1963 text *The Outsiders* he commented that:

> (…) social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rile and sanctions to an "offender". The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied (…). (p. 9)

It is thereby through definitions, responses and policies that particular behaviours, conditions and individuals acquire their deviantness (Schur, 1980). This emphasis on definitional social processes as the arbiter of deviantness is reflected in Goffman's (1963) foundational work, *Stigma: Notes on a Spoiled Identity*, in which he calls for a "language of relationships, not attributes" (p. 14) to talk about stigma. Bearing this potted history in mind then, stigma is to be seen, to quote Jones et al. (1984: 80-81):

> (…) both as an emergent property, as a product of definitional purposes arising out of social interaction, and not as an attribute that people automatically have when they acquire a trait or quality that may be discrediting. Stigmatization is seen as a

process in which particular social meanings come to be attached to categories of behaviour and to individuals.

This conceptual imperative on process and, more particularly, on the epistemological effects of definitions, categories and institutional policies is redolent of Foucault's work on discipline and surveillance as a mode of social control (1975/1979) and its conceptual extension into notions of subjectivation and the production of the subject (1978, 1984). Foucault's ~~early~~ work centres our attention on how behaviours unfold within a self-disciplinary matrix, in contrast to Goffman's dramaturgically inspired theory that focuses on the presentation of roles on a public stage that actors enter and exit. One theme that Foucault has examined is the perplexing question of ~~'s later work concentrates on the relationship between discipline and desire and, in particular, his inquiries into~~ "the apparent 'willing' involvement of subjects in systems of power that could be construed as working against their own best interests" (Starkey, 1998: 231). This question is at the heart of our research and we will use Foucault's ideas to examine and explain the phenomenon ~~ese ideas will be explained and deployed~~ in contextually specific ways in our interpretations of the data. We use them as an extension to Goffmanian ideas about stigmatization and in response to oft-made criticisms that Goffman's work lacks an adequate theory of the subject (Jenkins, 1996).

As Jones et al. (1994) note, at the heart of issues of stigmatization lie the very identities of the 'marked'. Famously, Goffman coined the phrase 'spoiled identity' to refer to the public identities held by stigmatized or marked groups and to signify that all forms of stigmatization will affect the ways that individuals relate to themselves and to others in symbolic, moral and affective terms. Implicit in Goffman's analysis is a division

between public and private aspects of an individual's relation to themselves, i.e. to their identities. Much of Goffman's book looks at how individuals manage the discrepancy between their virtual social identity – that is how they appear to others in interaction – and actual social identity. The latter might be (problematically) described as some kind of reality that closer inspection would reveal to be different or the same as the reality ascribed by others. For Goffman, stigma is this gap between the virtual and the actual. As Jenkins (1996) suggests, one of the important features of Goffman's work is its emphasis on the way in which others make demands on us on the basis of our public image. As we mentioned earlier, others actively constitute our identities and they do so not only in terms of naming or labelling, but also in terms of how they respond or treat us based on this public image. And for *Star Trek*Star Trek fans, the problem is one of managing the 'known-aboutness' (Goffman, 1963) of the *Star Trek*Star Trek stigma and the potentially negative repercussions of its public image. Hogg and Abrams's (1988) work in social psychology is useful here since it suggests that this public image forms part of *Star Trek*Star Trek fans' *social* identity. As proponents of social identity theory, Hogg and Abrams argue that individuals define themselves in terms of their social group membership and, as Turner (1988) points out, that 'group-defined self-perception' will have particular (psychological effects) on behaviour. Social identity can therefore be viewed as part of the self-concept that derives from group membership. To that extent then, the management of stigma can be read as the working in (or out) of the negative public image of *Star Trek*Star Trek-affiliation as part of the social process of a group-defined self-perception. Based upon interview material with a sample of *Star Trek*Star Trek fans, this article asks how they manage the burden of the negative public image of

their group affiliation and their concomitant perception by others. How do they handle the 'known-about-ness' of their stigma and potentially, the symbolic violence done to them by others?

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this paper emanates from a broadly interpretivist study of ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans. Whilst there is no definitive understanding of 'interpretivism' as a social scientific concept, there are certain commitments that ensue from a broadly-conceived interpretivist approach to methodology. In a seminal article in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, van Maanen (1979) highlights the fact that interpretivist approaches are methodologically committed to interpreting the *meanings* of various forms of social action, a point which he contrasts with the positivist commitment to the frequency of statistical items as a point for analysis. In interpreting the meanings of social action, interpretivists are committed to taking the actor's point of view, that is, to understand how individuals themselves interpret and confer meaning upon their own actions. As Giddens (1976) clarifies, the researcher should attempt to draw upon the same sorts of resources as 'laypeople' in making sense of the conduct that it is his/her aim to explain. Thus the researcher endeavours to take on the perspective of the subject through relations in which empathy with or Verstehen of the Other is pivotal to interpretation of their subjectivities (Smircich, 1983). Given that our focus in this article is on how ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans manage their potential stigmatization where stigma is viewed as an outcome of definitional and meaning-making social processes, an interpretivist approach to methodology was particularly appropriate for our study.

Essentially then, we are concerned with meaning and interpretation rather than empirical truths. We are interested in describing and explaining the world of the Other, where the Other is the community of ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans. Our primary empirical source was eighteen in-depth interviews (average duration being approximately eighty minutes) with a convenience sample of ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans regarding their interest in ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek and their experiences of being a fan. The selection criteria were extremely broad, requiring only that informants define themselves as being 'a fan'. What that actually meant and, in particular, the level of involvement in fandom varied quite dramatically across informants, and this diversity was deliberately sought after when recruiting participants. Half of the informants were very active in fandom - five were Star Fleet captains, two ran an official Leonard Nimoy fan club, one wrote and performed Filk music and was fluent in Klingon. The remaining nine informants were not members of ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fan clubs or organisations, and activities engaged in by these fans included watching the programme regularly, collecting videos, books and memorabilia, decorating accommodation with Trek posters, wearing T-shirts, chatting with friends, publishing web pages, and so on. The sample consisted of eleven men and seven women, and comprised a variety of nationalities (nine Irish; seven English; two American) and ages (late teens to early fifties). On account of geographic separation, the majority of our interviews (i.e. fifteen) were conducted either over the phone or by email. In addition to the in-depth interviews, a number of briefer question/answer sessions were conducted by email with informants who did not have the time to take a phone call or commit to a protracted email interview. Besides interviews, other sources of data included books and

articles written by, for, and/or about ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans and fandom, as well as fan submissions to newsgroup discussions on the Internet.

Following Glaser and Strauss (1967), this was an inductive study with data collection and analysis following an emergent design rather than being specified in advance by a ~~particular theoretical framework~~ set of circumscribed readings. In line with this approach, data collection and analysis occurred in tandem so that each successive interview was guided by an analysis of the previous ones and we continued recruiting informants until the ideas discussed in our paper were adequately elaborated and tested, therefore leaving further data collection unnecessary. The interviews were initiated with broad questions (e.g. "Starting from the beginning, can you tell me about your interest in ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek?") that were designed to get fans talking about what it means to be a fan in as open-ended and unprompted a manner as possible. Informants were encouraged to elaborate on general perceptions with specific examples of experiences they themselves had had (rather than letting the discussion stay at an abstract level) and these critical incidents then became the focal point of the discussion. Naturally, as the research project progressed and the themes discussed in this paper started to emerge, the probing of informants' responses became more focused~~, although the interview style remained the same.~~.

THE DISCIPLINARY GAZE

To get a handle on the manner in which these discourses of good and bad taste affect how fans (as individuals and a group) organise their identity, Foucault's notion of the disciplinary gaze proves especially useful. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the*

Prison Foucault charted the decline of 'sovereign power' (which was based on the public torture of individuals) and the emergence of 'disciplinary power' (which coerces individuals by strictly regulating their movements and placing them under close surveillance) as the predominant means of controlling criminals. In the prison the exercise of disciplinary power became possible with the construction of the Panopticon, an architectural device located in the centre of the prison that allowed guards to see clearly into all cells at all times whilst not themselves being observed. Foucault argued that the Panopticon produced in inmates the sense of being under constant surveillance, which in turn caused inmates to internalise the prison guard's gaze. This disciplinary gaze, or self-surveillance, resulted in individuals acting as their own disciplinarians, conforming to normative conventions regardless of whether they were actually under the surveillance of another. Rather than being restricted to the prison, Foucault considered the Panopticon a metaphor for the operation of power in society at large – a society socially controlled through systems of surveillance. This idea is illustrated in the following story by Sara, an Irish college student who describes her family's attitudes towards her interest in Star Trek:

To get a handle on the manner by which this discourse affects how fans (as individuals and a group) organise their identity, Foucault's notion of the disciplinary gaze – a form of social control that results from the sense of being under constant surveillance – proves especially useful. Foucault's basic point is that individuals act as their own guards or disciplinarians, conforming to normative conventions regardless of whether they are actually under the surveillance of another. Take for instance the following informant, an

Irish college student, Sara, who describes her family's attitudes towards her interest in
*Star Trek*Star Trek:

> I think it is something they associate with college students basically. *[Informant laughs]* Em, I'm the first one in my family to go to college for a long time so I think they just kind of assume the two coincided, they just kind of think it's something off the wall, something a student would only do, like. And my mother doesn't like the series at all, she, it's like really you have to book time on the television to even watch it, like. My brother just thinks I'm cracked to spend money on it at all in any shape or form. And my sister is a closet Trekkie, she'd sit down and watch them all the time if I'm there, but she would never really admit to watching it on her own. So, it is more or less of a joke really. But it's kind of one of Sara's idiosyncrasies.… So they keep me grounded in reality all right. You know, they don't allow me to go too over board on the thing…. I got *The Enterprise [model Star-ship]* off them, that was a joke. Literally, it was just like Hello, we're acknowledging your addiction here you know, like get real you know. And em, then had I asked them to buy it for me they wouldn't have you know. They would have said come on get real like…. I suppose I was hinting to them for years about it, coming up to birthdays and Christmas, well you can always get me Star TrekStar Trek you know, knowing full well that they wouldn't, like. It's just not a present for them to get. And they actually did and I was completely shocked when they did. It was like woo, you remembered *[laughs]*, you know. But em, as I said it was more of a practical joke on their terms like. It was kind of like Sara and her little idiosyncrasies again like.

This story is not framed as being in any way untoward or injurious, and Sara gives no indication that she feels under an oppressive pressure to conform.Clearly, Sara's interest

in Star Trek comes under the close critical surveillance of her family and they attempt to define its meaning in line with the discourses of self control and rationality outlined earlier. ~~Yet her family are contesting her interest and attempting to define for her its meaning.~~ First, they try to force her to accept their assessment of ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek and her interest in it as ~~, i.e. something~~ off-the-wall, ~~silly,~~ frivolous~~, a little childish~~and ~~,~~ certainly not indicative of mature adulthood. Second, they try to dictate how ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek should ~~and should not~~ be consumed by ~~. They~~ suggest~~ing~~ that she takes it too seriously (she gets too "carried away"), and that to prevent herself from losing touch with reality she should approach it with a critical sense of humour ("get real"). Finally (and ultimately), they attempt ~~re is an effort by the family~~ to impose an identity on her in line with their disregard for her tastes by ~~, i.e. they~~ assum~~ing e~~a correlation between the frivolity of ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek and Sara's supposed idiosyncratic personality. What is just as clear, however, is that Sara tacitly agrees with her family's beliefs and their efforts to control her behaviour (she even expresses gratitude that they keep her "grounded in reality"), so much so that she becomes intimately involved in the disciplining of herself. The giving and receiving of the gift is an interesting instance of this process. On one level the gift of the Enterprise model symbolises the family's acceptance of Sara's interest ("woo, you remembered"), but this acceptance is on their terms. The gift is meant as a practical joke, with ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek and this aspect of her identity being constructed as something to be laughed at. *They* are acknowledging *her* addiction. By happily accepting the gift and cherishing it as a sign of their affection she tacitly accepts the symbolic meaning they have imbued it with and integrates it with her own sense of identity. ~~Significantly, she defines her family's minor but perpetual efforts to discipline~~

her as just, and even stresses her gratitude that they keep her "grounded in reality". Sara holds as valid the same basic beliefs and values, the same notions of good taste, and the same concern with self-control and rationality that her family does.

Foucault's earlier work focused on the operation of particular technologies (or microphysics) of power, such as the panopticon. One interesting mode through which power operates, though this is not explored by Foucault, is through humour. According to Powell (1988), humour is an important (albeit mild) means by which a group clarifies its norms, negotiates or maintains shared notions of reality, and socially controls deviance. By getting the joke and responding in an appropriate manner one demonstrates "one's grip over and understanding of the way things are" (Powell, 1988: 99). Not getting the joke puts those meanings under threat and ultimately jeopardises one's social standing. The social pressure to 'get the joke' can be so strong (particularly when one is in a subordinate position) that people frequently respond to a joke even when they do not actually understand it, or when they disagree with its import. In this way humour works to reinforce the dominant ideological position, or, using Foucault's language, it can be a potent part of the disciplinary gaze. Sara is an interesting example because, despite her embarrassment, she was in complete agreement with the notions of reality that were expressed in the humour. While she may have been the butt, she was in on the joke rather than an outsider (indeed, she laughed at herself throughout the interview). The jokes should be read, therefore, as a context for the group as a whole to profess and reinforce their shared sense of reality. Furthermore, we can talk about the social control dimension of humour as being *invisible* because the joke's meaning was implicitly understood and responded to by Sara but it was not

consciously or critically evaluated as such. The joke, then, is analogous to the Panopticon since it creates in the deviant the sense of being under close surveillance without actually revealing the disciplinarian.

A more questioning approach to ~~the direction~~ humour ~~takes~~ is illustrated next by Robert as he explains the difficulties he faces when handling challenges to his tastes:

> If I first meet somebody and they've come across with a humorous remark, if I
> don't get offended, if I don't go overboard, then I will accept that they're just using
> humour to add to the dimension of how I am, you know, how they view me. But
> on occasions I've seen some people who have gone much further than that. And I
> mean, they really want to knock what you believe…. I accept [sarcastic remarks]
> as they come most times. But I think if I know the person and I understand that he
> doesn't really mean, you know, he is just having a laugh here and there, then I will
> have a laugh and joke with him…. But if I feel that he is using it to bait me and to
> attack me and my particular thoughts and beliefs, then yes, I will attack back…. I
> had one issue a couple of years ago with a friend of a friend who I met through
> work. Somehow ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek cropped up, I don't remember how. But em,
> he started making jokes, and I just sorta like laughed early on because I didn't know
> him that well, so I just sort of humoured it off. But then he went on and on and on
> and I drew the conclusion that he wanted me to bite back and I think I did in the
> end. I actually did, because I got fed up with it. It was nasty criticisms he was
> making about ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek and how he perceives ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans to
> be, you know, who are nutty weirdoes. *Aren't ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans a bit weird*,
> and that sort of thing.

Robert suggests that there are two basic types of humour: (a) good-natured humour that is not intended to be malicious, and where the butt is in on the joke, and (b) humour (e.g. mocking, sarcasm) that is an act of aggression and is intended as a personal attack. There is no intention in the second for the butt to enjoy or appreciate the humour – it is entirely at his or her expense. This distinction is interesting because it dominates Robert's decision-making regarding whether or how he should react to critiques of his tastes. Comparing him to Sara, one might argue that since Robert consciously evaluates and critiques these humorous exchanges ~~direction of humour~~ there is the possibility that he might resist the transfer of meaning embedded in these jokes. However, this does not seem to ~~actually~~ happen. Taking the good-natured humour first, while this often jars with his own beliefs he still sees it as legitimate and ~~. He does~~ not ~~define it~~ as an attack ~~or as something~~ he has the right to defend himself against. Instead, it is looked on as part of the everyday banter that one must just accept. Going "overboard" – that is, being offended or taking issue — is not an acceptable response. Significantly, he recognises that these exchanges have at their heart the goal of defining who he is and, while he ~~. He~~ is not happy with the definition being proposed, ~~but~~ he ~~also~~ accepts this objective as legitimate. Second, while he makes a qualitative distinction between good-natured and aggressive humour, Robert finds that distinguishing between the two is not always easy. Because he sees it as legitimate for others to question his tastes in a good-natured way, he must ~~therefore~~ be careful not to misinterpret someone and over-react. He ~~. He~~ can only legitimately react if he is sure their joking is a clear act of aggression. In other words, the difficulty with distinguishing between good-natured and aggressive humour adds an element of nervousness and caution to his handling of jibes he disagrees with. This

dichotomy ~~of his~~ (while attractive) is of course rather spurious and Robert fails to see that there is an effort to control even in good-natured humour. In addition, it should be pointed out that Robert's hesitancy to disagree with the humour also reflects the fact that humour operates in such a way as to protect the joker and the joke against attack. Jokes take place in a framework where actions and words are defined as not serious or significant – as being without consequence. The ultimate defence of the joker who has been challenged, then, is to simply claim 'I wasn't serious' or 'I was *just* joking', which shifts the blame back on the critic by implying that he is 'too sensitive' or cannot 'take a joke', and therefore is not quite normal (Powell 1988). If the Trekkie does ~~n't~~not "get the joke" it is doubly incriminating. Not only is he too serious, he is also too serious about ~~*Star Trek*~~Star Trek, which was the basic point of the joke in the first place.

STRUGGLING WITH AMBIVALENT IDENTITIES

> Fans discriminate fiercely: the boundaries between what falls within their fandom
> and what does not are sharply drawn. And this discrimination in the cultural sphere
> is mapped into distinctions in the social – the boundaries between the community
> of fans and the rest of the world are just as strongly marked and patrolled. Both
> sides of the boundary invest in the difference (…). ~~e…~~ (Fiske 1992: 34)

For fans, the process of mapping out and patrolling boundaries (between fans and non-fans and between identities within themselves) is clearly important. At the same time, these boundaries are ~~very much~~ illusionary ~~,~~ and maintaining an internal consistency is something of a struggle for ~~all~~ fans. In this section we describe the various forms of these struggles.

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Struggling to Create Distance from the Deviance

~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fans often use extreme imagery - such as of obsessions, addictions, crazes and compulsions - to characterise their own behaviour.[1] While they are usually joking, these *confessions* illustrate that they have internalised the social~~/personal~~ imperatives of self-control and rationality, which produces an ~~(~~unconscious~~)~~ ambivalence towards their own tastes. Foucault (1979) spotlighted the importance of the confession for the operation of power in ~~the~~ disciplinary society. In the confession (e.g. the confession box, the psychoanalyst's chair) individuals seek to admit and then redeem themselves for their perceived transgressions, but in so doing, they also ensure a hierarchical observation of those violations. In effect, the fan's open acknowledgements of his 'guilt' excuses him of responsibility for his 'crime'. While acknowledging transgression, the joke framework, discussed earlier, communicates their normality because they have perspective ~~(something about irony). O~~; on balance they still consider themselves normal. By contrast, from both those fans active and not involved in fandom there was a regular expression of the belief that some fans, ~~(~~though probably only a small minority~~)~~, *truly* do have an unhealthy obsession with the show, and take that interest to unnatural extremes. However, what exactly constitutes extreme behaviour is by no means clear or unambiguous. Behaviours that some informants felt were over-the-top were seen by others as harmless fun. Indeed, it is interesting that as individuals become more involved in fandom and engage in those activities taboo to non-fans, they still invest importance in the notion that there are other really "hard-core Trekkies." ~~In~~

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[1] One fan, Hilary Palencar (1996), even wrote a book about herself and ~~Star Trek~~*Star Trek* in this vein - *Confessions of a Trekaholic*. In the book she admits to feeling "a certain shame" when she was a nightly viewer of ~~Star Trek~~*Star Trek* since such "dependence" was "undeniable proof that I had become a Trekkie."

~~fact, one~~This suggests ~~conclusion~~ that the belief in the existence of hard-core Trekkies reflects less the reality of actual fan behaviour and more the need to resolve the ambivalence fans feel towards their tastes. ~~from this~~~~our study is that there is actually no such thing as a "hard-core Trekkie", that it is just a construction. What is more~~S significant~~ly, ~~is that~~ informants tended to introduce the notion of a lunatic fringe in the context of describing themselves. They contrasted themselves with the extreme — they were in control whereas other fans were not. Constructing *some* fans as Other alleviates their deep-seated fear that they actually *are* taking it to extremes, that they have lost control. The chastisement of 'hard-core Trekkies' by 'normal' fans can be quite venomous~~,~~ and they are often held partly accountable for the rest of the fan community getting a hard time. An example of this venom is one informant, Mary, who attended a "Trek-Dinner" (i.e. a "casual get-together" of fans in her locality) once a month.[2] When introducing her story she qualified it by saying that she did not "like it there all *that* much, because a lot of those people there are "hard-core" fans, and I am not, you see." In the following passage she explains her dislikes of these "hard-core" fans ("out-of-touch-with-reality-types"). It is worth noting that ~~this informant~~Mary got married in a Star Fleet uniform and published the photographs on the Internet. So, by most people's standards she would be a clear-cut example of a hard-core Trekkie:

> So, I hear (read) you ask, what *IS* a hard-core fan? Well, in my opinion (the
> humble one), it's a matter of attitude. A HCF (hard-core fan) wouldn't understand
> that any other person (i.e. "beginner" Trekkie) doesn't know the latest fact from the
> ST universe. After all, anyone who considers himself a Trekkie knows every

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[2] This interview was conducted by email. We retain misspellings and grammatical errors in all quotes from email correspondence in order to retain the look and feel of the original messages.

single episode off by heart, right?? (NOT!) A HCF will in all seriousness engage

you in a conversation about the Cardassian alliance with the Dominion. I have

done role-playing games in my time, but I could always distinguish between fact

and fiction, I am not sure if a HCF can. They don't seem to, but just thinking they

can't gives me the shivers. Oh, and of course, every fan of the series has their

favourite characters, and characters they don't like. I, for example, like Q (quite a

few women do, I have noticed). Anyhow, a couple of months ago at the Trek

Dinner, I was sitting opposite a guy and we started talking about various Trek

topics. It started off lightly ("so, what did you think of that and that episode, did

you like it?"), and then we got round to Q. I mentioned that I rather like him ("If I

weren't married to a wonderful guy, I wouldn't push him from my bedside"), and

that HCF-guy got into an awful huff: "How can you? How can you possibly? Don't

you remember what this guy did to the crew of the Enterprise? And that he trapped

the innocent alien creature at Farpoint, don't you care about that?" Erm ... don't you

agree that this guy seems to slightly have lost touch with reality and sanity? And

THAT's a HCF. Sorry that I can't explain more in detail. It's less of a definition for

me, than a feeling. And why is the difference so important to me? Mh, maybe just

because I don't like being associated with looneys? Actually, they embarrass me,

but don't ask me why, I don't know. I just know they do.

It is impossible to say exactly what happened at this dinner, but even without hearing his

side it is safe to doubt that this guy actually had really "lost touch with reality and

sanity." Perhaps he had a different sense of humour, perhaps his notion of what the Trek

dinner was about differed from hers, or perhaps their personalities just clashed. Maybe it

was none of these things. What is significant here is that Mary she interpreted their

encounter in terms of the discourse of self-control and rationality. This *character*

performs two functions. First, although he has essentially been produced by the discourse he is also a walking and talking proof of its validity. It is, of course, a tautological proof, but, nonetheless, the notion that there is a boundary between fantasy and reality which should be maintained is reinforced by the existence of people like this who have *clearly* 'lost a grip.' Second, by introducing this character she is also positioning herself in the debate on the side of normality. He is introduced as a concept in order to define herself as the opposite. She knows that Star TrekStar Trek is just a TV show – she maintains that important critical distance. And by defining 'extreme' as being a matter of 'attitude' she neatly excludes her own behaviour (and herself) from any suspicion or blame. Of course, another person's attitude is difficult to gauge and so the theory of a lunatic fringe is pretty reasonably immune to empirical testing.

Struggling to Find a Suitable Label

Taking a Foucauldian perspective, the act of labelling can be viewed as part of the process of putting into discourse, of generating knowledge, and ultimately may be seen as part of an effort to gain control over the object or phenomenon that has been labelled. In this case, then, the 'Trekkie' label may be a means of categorising and gaining control over the deviance of fandom. Indeed, the fact that Trekkies are the only fans listed by name in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is emblematic of their unique visibility as a group. But individuals also use labels for the purposes of mapping out their own sense of self-identity. The existence of such a well-known label complicates the process of integrating *Star Trek*Star Trek with one's identity, and this is reflected by the fact that the question of what they should call themselves is a hotly debated topic amongst fans. Many see the label as a media construction that was foist upon them and which is

belittling. Labels are often a focal point of conflict or resistance from 'deviants', and

dealing with the label is frequently seen as necessary if they are to reclassify themselves

as 'normal'. One strategy is to suggest and promote an alternative label that circumvents

the negative connotations of the original. For instance, many fans reject the 'Trekkie'

label and adopt the name 'Trekker' instead. One informant, Jack, pointed out that for

fans the suffix 'ie' is perceived as having a comical and diminutive meaning ("Doggie"),

whereas 'er' is more of an action suffix ("Faster"). And yet many other fans reject any

such attempt to suggest an alternative label. Indeed, ~~the informant who explained the~~

~~significance of the 'ie' and 'er' suffixes~~ Jack prefers to call himself a Trekkie:

> I use "Trekkie" cause I don't take myself or my love of the show too seriously. I
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> am a little worried about the (die- hard, know- every bit of useless trivia, my entire
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> life revolves around the show) fans that act like cult followers. It's my way of
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> saying "Hey, Lighten up." I think that to combat people who would mock us we
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> should adopt the name as our own. If "Trekkie" is considered an insult then by
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> embracing it we take away it's power.

Jack's ~~His~~ tongue-in-cheek adoption of the 'Trekkie' label is an ironic display that

broadcasts his acceptance of the need for rational self-control ~~dominant discourse,~~ since

he frames this decision in terms of not taking his love of the show 'too seriously' and of

maintaining a healthy balance. For most fans, regardless of whether they prefer the label

Trekkie or Trekker, their own ambivalence and/or the social pressure to conform leads

them to use different labels at different times and places. Indeed, most simply prefer

"~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fan", which, —while still being a declaration of identity, —involves

locating oneself as part of a larger and less contentious social category. In other words,

their identification with the show is not stable but rather constantly oscillating to and fro.

Struggling to Rationalise One's Tastes in Positive Terms

One way that fans deal with the show's negative connotations is to characterise themselves as observers rather than participants. So, for instance, some fans informed us that they just passively "trundled along" to conventions because friends were going or just "out of a general interest to see what the hell goes on". Similarly, they often stress the functionality of their Trek-related purchases and or their thriftiness (e.g. they were bargain hunting or buying presents). This is an extract from one interview:

> I am not particularly interested in walking around with a comm. badge on my chest or any of that sort of thing. Most of what I ever had were bought for me by other people…. I suppose for me wearing a comm. badge is like a really dopey thing to do. It is of absolutely no use at all. I suppose, well, you could pretend you are wearing a broach or something. I mean, it is not like it's going to beat me up or anything like that, em, it just seems very much cornier than wearing a T-shirt. Wearing a T-shirt might be corny but at least it is functional in that it is a piece of clothing, there's that element there.

By spotlighting the rationality and lack of self-indulgence of her consumer spending, this fan seeks to create a dispassionate distance between herself and the object of desire.

Another important way that stigmatization is managed (or organised) is through the development of alternative, more affirmative and fan-friendly discourses of

Star TrekStar Trek. These alternative discourses present 'reasons' explaining why it is a quality television series, and, in turn, why being a Star TrekStar Trek fan is to be valued. So, for instance, they convert Star TrekStar Trek's status as an undifferentiated commodity ("just a show") into a decommoditised phenomenon invested with special meaning by its followers. This 'decommodification' or 'singularisation' of a commodity is effected through a variety of consumer practices, such as the addition to a collection or through ritualistic behaviour (Belk et al., 1989; Kopytoff, 1989). These alternative discourses may also lead to the (partial) neutralisation of the dominant cultural critique. In effect, if fans have at their disposal logical and legitimate explanations of their tastes there is a greater chance that they will be able to reduce their ambivalence towards those tastes.

And there are many such alternative discourses. For instance, Star TrekStar Trek is considered by many to be an allegory in the tradition of *Gulliver's Travels*, and, as with all allegories, what is important is its background meaning.   Thus, the series is repeatedly framed in the context of the American civil rights movement, the women's liberation movements, the power of utopian visions to effect change, and the expanding space programme of the sixties. Many fans, of course, have critiqued the optimistic, 'cowboys-in-space', original series and prefer the later *The Next Generation*, or the darker, more ambivalent later series, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*.[3]   Moreover, since pleasure largely eludes our rational consciousness, we have reason to be sceptical about accounts of why individual fans like or dislike particular programmes (Ang, 1985). In the

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[3] Significantly, *Deep Space Nine* is set on a stationary outpost in space, symbolising the exhaustion of the original utopian narrative. Likewise, *Voyager* is about a space craft and its crew that are desperately trying to come home.

following quote another informant, (Johanna,) outlines how she handles criticisms of her tastes:

> Well people would say, *Oh God you are not into that*, or whatever. And I would go *well whatever you're into*. I am not a confrontational person. But if I thought there was any use in it I would often say things like *Ah Ah, first inter-racial kiss on television* to a friend, and they would be like *what?* You know, that would end up getting a conversation going. A great way to feel self-righteous. But no, no, I didn't take it so seriously that if anybody said anything bad about it I would go *how dare you.* I mean it was just a TV programme ultimately

Johanna deals with the criticism in two ways. First, she can reject any attempt to pass judgement on her tastes as an unjustified attack on her freedom. This is what Ang (1985) referred to as the 'ideology of populism' - "well whatever you're into". Second and more convincingly, she argues that Star TrekStar Trek is a fantasy *and* an allegory: it contains an edifying message that is not obvious to those who have not studied it deeply. At the same time, it is clearly not something that goes to the heart of why she watches the program, but she brings it up because it gives her a more compelling and legitimate justification of her tastes. It does not eliminate her ambivalence though. Indeed, it is obvious that she herself feels there is something absurd about the notion that Star TrekStar Trek has a vision.

Another (related) (related) defence of Star TrekStar Trek is that it offers us a real glimpse of the future, and even inspires that future. Informants were quick to mention that Star TrekStar Trek anticipated the mobile phone and a host of other modern inventions, and the producers and stars of the series regularly report receiving mail from fans who say

that they have been turned on to science, physics, mathematics, and so on as a result of their interest in ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek (Zoglin, 1994). So the ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek fantasy is routinely framed in the context of education and real science. Moreover, ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek and NASA enjoy something of a symbiotic relationship; while the romantic link with NASA has enhanced ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek's credibility, NASA has also acquired a useful ally for the purposes of promoting the value of its work to society and the future. (The first space shuttle was called *Enterprise* because President Gerald Ford had received four hundred thousand letters from fans of the show). Ultimately, ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek has helped to spark the popular imagination by providing a potent vision of the type of future NASA might deliver~~,~~ and so it can lay claim to a certain amount of ownership over that future.

Despite the fact that both of these explanations of ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek's quality provide Trekkies with a more principled position from which to justify their tastes, neither of them actually challenge the logic underlying the dominant discourse of taste. The opposite is actually the case: they both attempt to reclassify ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek within its terms. In essence, they propose that ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek is an exception to the rule, and therefore the rule itself – the distinction between art and entertainment and between fantasy and reality —is cast under no suspicion. It might appear, then, that there is no chance of escape for fans.

THE SUBTLE CONTROL OF INFORMATION

Fans are the most visible section of an audience and are almost defined by their public and emotional displays of affiliation. However, we found that ~~But~~ coinciding with th~~is~~ise

flamboyance there is an element of caution - a desire to control information about their tastes. In most cases, the concern of our informants was not so much to keep secret or hide (i.e. deny their interest) but rather to decrease the extent to which that interest becomes a central aspect of their public identity. The fear is that being a fan of Star Trek may subordinate other aspects of one's public identity:

> The reputation, if I try to articulate it, seems to be an expectation for me to *always* want to watch Star Trek, and to talk about Star Trek.... Basically it comes across to me that people assume I live nothing but Star Trek. (John)

Since liking Star Trek is not deeply discrediting, there is no need to deny that particular fact. Nonetheless, one frequently finds efforts to prevent their interest from looming too large, from dominating their relations with non-fans. One informant who collected videos and had a very large *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* collection mentioned that he would keep his video collection in a very prominent place and "kind of always keep the Star Trek videos maybe, you know, somewhere else." On seeing the mass of Star Trek videos, new friends often had "strange reactions" - "Kind of like *you watch a lot of Star Trek then*." By camouflaging the Star Trek videos within his large collection, he could minimise their discrediting impact - "*this guy is just a nut for collecting videos as opposed to being a ridiculous Star Trek fan*." The Star Trek videos themselves are not so much the problem but rather the overwhelming quantity, which gives rise to the implication of excessive consumption. Once understood within the context of the larger more respectable video collection their ability to discredit was greatly diminished. So in this

case we cannot really say he is keeping a secret, but that he is merely choosing to stress other information. Such strategic management of symbolic cues is ~~especially~~ likely to be more important early in relationships when one's public identity is still being formed and therefore rather fragile. Once a positive identity has been established such information is ~~no longer so~~less dangerous. An unusual interest is seen then as a "quirk" or a "little idiosyncrasy" rather than evidence of being a "geek" or a "nerd." Friends might play with the notion that you are a Trekkie from time to time, but the full import of this diminutive stereotype is not seriously applied to you. Similarly, when information is offered it may have to be introduced carefully. ~~One informant~~John explains:

> After a person has gotten to know me, I lay it on the line. I tell the person flat out that I like ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek, but to a mild degree. I tell them that I know there is a stereotypical image of Trekkies, and I also remind them that up until now they hadn't even considered me filling that mould. So, by being very frank about it with others, I am pretty much able to avoid any problems before they happen.

Of course, John ~~he~~ is not really being frank because he chooses the moment and manner that information is released very carefully. His frankness or matter-of-factness is just another part of the performance that conveys the basic message that this is not an important issue and that he is in control. Ironically, denying the public expression of their interest, which they recognise as an important constituent of their identity, is frequently rationalised in terms of showing people who they *really* are. Again John~~For instance~~, an ~~one~~ American University student, ~~who~~ always watched ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek alone in his dormitory room but watched other programmes in the common room,

describing ed his motivation as being to allow people "to get to know me for who I am, and to see the commonalties we share."

ESCAPING THE GAZE

Role-playing and identity-play are important aspects of Star TrekStar Trek consumption that, which appear to be clear transgressions of the cultural imperative of maintaining a safe and critical distance from the object of consumption. Dressing up in costume and pretending to be an alien character, for instance, seemingly involves the complete immersion of oneself and one's self-identity into the Star TrekStar Trek fantasy. However, it should be noted that this sort of public identity play tends to only take place at very specific times and places – i.e. fancy dress parties, charity events, club meetings or conventions. Clearly, t. There is something about these times and places that permit such transgressions. Robert An informant describes the process of getting into his Star TrekStar Trek self that coincides with the journey to a Trek convention:

> Once I walk through the doors, I'm still dressed in civvies as I call them, normal
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> clothes, but on the way up my mind is starting to immerse in the club and my plans
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> for the day. And it's all science fiction obviously, and all Star TrekStar Trek, so
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> when I walk in, once I've got through the door, suddenly the outside world has
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> been shut away and I'm now in a completely different … like another planet. I
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> mean, I'm on another planet, I'm in another world, and the normal then is people
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> who are dressed up in alien races. It's not abnormal for me. You know, there is a
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> completely different, like a brick wall. On one side of the brick wall is normal civi
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> street, real life. You cross over through a door and in a couple of seconds you are
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> completely in a different world…. I will then literally change into my uniform,

which makes a statement about who I am, and I will then take on a role as

captain… And I'm then known as, you know, captain Robert Dillon of the USS

Victoria…. I think the difference between me as Robert in real life and me as a

captain in a ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek role, I basically forget about the outside world. I

literally almost forget about all the problems I have outside in real life and immerse

myself in problems that are in ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek, in the ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek world.

They are two different characters; they really are in some ways.

Robert ~~This informant~~ suggests that the convention is a form of 'escapism' in the sense

that when he is there he forgets the mundane routines and problems of everyday life and

becomes immersed in a more exciting reality. But the convention also seems to allow

Robert to escape the fields of visibility we discussed earlier. First, he escapes the gaze of

others. The hotel's brick walls "shuts away" the taunts, jibes and sniggers of strangers

that his behaviour might attract outside, plus there is no danger of being observed by

family, friends, colleagues or passing acquaintances that do not share his interest.

Ultimately, in the convention everyone shares his interest so nobody really cares how he

behaves. ~~Indeed,~~ Sartelle (1992) argues that ~~Star Trek~~Star Trek conventions and Gay

Pride Marches are similar to the extent that both are characterised by extravagant and

shameless displays because participants at each share an exhilarating sense "that one is

not alone in one's desires and interests, that there are others out there just like oneself."

The convention also seems to offer the possibility of a sort of invisibility for participants.

Robert, for instance, ~~seemed~~ suggested that he ~~to feel~~felt like ~~that~~ he was absorbed by the

crowd ~~-~~; that the sheer number of similarly dressed and acting fans shroud ed ~~s~~ him in a

cloak of anonymity. For others~~,~~ the costume itself obscures their identity. Those who

wear masks and heavy prosthetic make-up are nearly impossible to identify and this is

likely to lead to more ambitious identity transformations. Robert undergoes only a slight transformation in that he is simply playing himself as a Star Fleet captain (as opposed to Captain Kirk, Captain Picard etc.). Contrast this with a fan quoted in *Cosmopolitan* who described how she turns "into someone utterly different":

> When I'm Carol, I'm shy - but after an hour spent applying my wig, prosthetic face and make-up, I take on another personality. If someone bumped into me in the street I wouldn't ask for an apology. But if someone does the same when I'm in a costume I growl at them and threaten them with my Klingon ceremonial sword. (in Gill 1999)

The hours spent getting into costume corresponds with Robert's crossing of the hotel lobby, i.e. it creates a tangible barrier between herself and the 'real world'. Her shyness disappears because her 'real self' has also disappeared from external view.

Besides escaping external criticism, Robert also seems to have silenced his own self-criticism ("It's not abnormal for me"), thus enabling him to . That is, he seems to have momentarily escaped the disciplinary gaze and become wholeheartedly immersed himself wholeheartedly into the action of the convention. As is illustrated by the phrase "It's not abnormal for me", Robert is comfortable with his behaviour (the flip side of this statement is that he usually regards it as abnormal). To understand how this is achieved we need to re-examine the emphasis he places on the *clear* boundary line between the convention and the "outside world." He describes this boundary in physical terms, as a brick wall, which metaphorically implies that the boundary is tangible, absolute and impenetrable. We should, however, see the boundary as a largely subjective construction in the mind of the informant, as a manifestation of his ambivalence. This is a moral

boundary — the hotel walls keep fantasy and reality separate. Passing the threshold of the hotel lobby symbolises his movement from one world (reality) into another (fantasy). The two worlds do not mix. In other words, he convinces himself that he does not confuse fantasy with reality, that he has managed to maintain a healthy balance. Of course, the notion that fantasy and reality are separate is questionable, and Fiske (1992), for instance, argues that fantasy should not be opposed conceptually to reality as if the concepts were mutually exclusive because reality is socially constructed and can never be objectively known. "The difference between fantasy and a sense of reality is one of modality, for both are cultural representations: One is not real and the other false" (p. 124). The superficiality of Robert's distinction is illustrated by the fact that he admits that he begins to immerse himself in Star Trek as he drives down to the convention. Nonetheless, the notion of a strong boundary (although illusionary) authorises these little excursions into fantasy and so he can enjoy without guilt. These boundaries may not be as absolute for all fans – Robert characterises himself as more cautious than most – but all fans place boundaries around their activities and these boundaries tend to be rationalised in terms of a need to maintain the distinction between fantasy and reality.

The construction and maintenance of these boundaries is ultimately a group activity and it is imperative that a consensus exists among convention participants as to how their behaviour is defined. The convention goers we interviewed stressed that it was all "just a laugh" or "a bit of fun". In other words, they see the action as mere play, as not significant, as not having implications beyond the context of the convention,

and so it can be sanctioned. This is also how participants to a fancy dress party define their behaviour: it is implicitly understood by all that the costuming is merely a playful imitation. In Fine's (1983) terms the convention is a *shared fantasy - ,*a fantasy that is collectively constructed for their mutual enjoyment of a group of participants. Because there is joint engrossment in this fantasy the sense of reality and thus the enjoyment each participant experiences is reinforced. At the same time, because the fantasy requires a consensus amongst participants its but concomitantly, the fantasy's continuance is more susceptible to the disruptions of individuals participants. For the fantasy to continue, all participants must be willing to maintain the same understanding of what the action means (Hickey, Thompson and Foster 1988). For this reason participation is sometimes even compulsory. In the annual Bournemouth Star TrekStar Trek convention, for example, all attendees sit down for dinner together on the Saturday evening and are required to wear fancy dress. One informant explained: "because they're all dressed up then they don't care. It's the people who turn up in jeans and a T-shirt that feel stupid."

CONCLUSION

Fans are a group that are stigmatized, at least to some degree, by their 'deviant' and common form of symbolic consumption. Our research has focused on the productive yet ambiguous 'processes of devaluation' that are central to the very identity of the individual fan and her symbolic and emotional well-being. Theoretically, our research connects in with Goffman's understanding of stigma as a largely negative process, but it also articulates with a more Foucauldian perspective which shows not only how power can be seen to work, but also how it acts in a productive manner. At a micro level, fans' stigmatic identity is organised within a disciplinary matrix that is centred on two key

processes: humour and self-surveillance. Fans are engaged in and with this disciplinary matrix in a highly ambiguous manner, constructing and sustaining it while also seeking escape. The metaphor of 'dancing with discrimination' captures this ambiguity of simultaneous engagement, enjoyment and escape that are central to fans' construction and negotiation of their stigmatic identity. ~~The dismissal and stigmatisation of *Star Trek* activities says something important about our understanding of 'normal' organisations. Drawing on Brewis and Linstead's (2000) recent study of sex work, we can consider *Star Trek* fandom as another instance of the *abject* – the unacceptable part of experience that we reject or suppress. Following on the writings of Bataille and Kristeva, they see the abject as the "loathed and denied part of the self [that] continually flows back into the subject's experience" (2000: 26). Applied to our study, their argument suggests that the very existence of *Star Trek* clubs and organisations is troubling because it reminds us that 'normal' organisations and 'normal' organising practices lack something important and are therefore unfulfilled. Paradoxically, *Star Trek* clubs and organisations are important – at least to students of organisation – precisely because they are dismissed as trivial and inconsequential. In other words, these clubs and organisations are crystallised instances of the abject (that which is cast aside or stigmatised; the lack in the 'normal') and it is this that makes them important and worthy of study. Furthermore, it is in this sense that we can say that stigmatism inhabits the 'normal' organisation. The problem for fans, of course, is that they are tied to both perspectives, in so far as they inhabit both the normal and the abject.~~

~~to be amended… perhaps draw on::~~

~~The issue is the relation of~~

Goffman to Foucault, which I think definitely needs commented on given that

the paper might seem to 'promise' Goffman and then switch to Foucault in an

unspecified move. Now the relation could be articulated through the idea of

stigma understood as a distinguishing character that leads to the devaluation

of the individual—the word for me here is devaluation. I think that

emphasizing the productive and intensifying nature of processes of subjection

would help us suggest that a Goffmanian understanding of stigma as a largely

negative social process could be 'rounded' out by showing not only how power

can be seen to work, but also how it acts in a productive manner.

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