

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "WALKING AROUND LIKE A PANDA BEAR": FEELINGS OF STIGMA AMONG NONTRADITIONAL-AGE STUDENTS

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Conceptions of the creation and maintenance of stigma center on interactions and the role of external feedback. Substantive work on stigmatized groups illustrates that cognitions play a role in stigma development, but does not use a social psychological approach to examine this systematically. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 undergraduates age 25 and older to highlight the role of cognition in stigma maintenance, even in situations in which there is little or no negative feedback. Results show that, even in the absence of negative feedback, reflected appraisals and social comparisons produce three aspects of stigma – a sense of: 1) standing out; 2) exclusion; and 3) others' negative evaluation of them. Results show that social comparisons maintain and moderate stigma. Results highlight the importance of cognition in the maintenance of stigma. Implications for studying stigmatized groups, such as racial minorities and the physically disabled, are discussed.

“WALKING AROUND LIKE A PANDA BEAR”: FEELINGS OF STIGMA AMONG
NONTRADITIONAL-AGE STUDENTS

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Conceptions of the way in which stigma is created and maintained have centered on interactions and the role of external feedback. In fact, social interaction between individuals is the foundation of the major theory on stigma (Goffman 1963). Three elements of stigma – feeling like one stands out, feeling excluded, and thinking others' evaluations are negative or that others have rejected you – are produced through face-to-face encounters and socialization regarding group stereotypes (Goffman 1963). I argue that although Goffman (1963) acknowledges the role of cognition in the production and maintenance of stigma, he does not elaborate on it, and therefore his theory is underdeveloped.

Theories of the role of cognition in the formation of the self-concept, particularly self-esteem (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]), clarifies the role of reflected appraisals, or our beliefs on how others evaluate us, and social comparisons, or how we believe we measure up to others, in raising or lowering our self-esteem. This work, however, has been limited to the examination of self-esteem, a potentially connected, yet separate, concept from stigma. Additionally, Rosenberg (1986 [1979]) has not examined the way in which these concepts play out during the meaning-making process by using qualitative methodologies, such as in-person interviews and participant observation. I propose that clarifying the relationship between social interaction and the social psychological concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons can help shed light on ways in which theories of stigma could be specified further. I also illustrate that Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) ideas may be fruitfully used in new ways to examine new areas, such as stigma, by using qualitative methodologies.

Finally, substantive work on stigmatized identities (Bettie 2003; Feagin 1991; Herdt and Boxer 1992; Waters 1999) describes stigmatized individuals' thoughts about what they believe others think of them and how they evaluate themselves relative to other groups, as well as feelings associated with these thoughts and evaluations, as they go about making meaning of their stigmatized identities. Although these descriptive accounts imply that the use of cognitions, such as reflected appraisals and social comparisons, play a role in meaning-making for stigmatized individuals, scholars do not explicitly use these terms, nor do they use a social psychological approach to examine systematically the role of these cognitions and the complex ways in which they relate to the maintenance of stigma. I propose that explicit use of the social psychological concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons could further our understanding of the maintenance of stigma across a wide variety of stigmatized groups.

This paper uses the case of nontraditional-age undergraduates attending a university to highlight the ways in which reflected appraisals and social comparisons contribute to the maintenance of stigma, particularly when negative interactions are absent. Nontraditional-age undergraduates attending a university campus are a useful group with which to illustrate how these theories can be expanded. In a university context, when one thinks of a "college student" it is likely that the first image to appear in the mind's eye is a young person, dressed casually, living in a dorm, who is trying to balance academic work with an active social life. This stereotype is reinforced by the media's portrayal of college students, by the invisibility of some older university students who appear very young, and by the concentration of older undergraduates in two-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics 2002:7) and in distance learning (NCES 2002:10). However, this picture does not reflect the reality of the diversity of

students at many campuses. Defined as at least 25 years of age, nontraditional-age students made up 27% of the total undergraduate population as of 2003. Although older students make up a full 37% of undergraduates at two-year colleges, they also constitute a substantial minority (22%) of the undergraduates at four-year colleges (U.S. Census Bureau 2005:10).

Despite this relatively high percentage of older undergraduates, graduation rates for this group are strikingly low. The dropout rate within three years for highly nontraditional-age undergraduates whose stated goal is to receive a Bachelor's degree is 50%, while that of traditional-age students is only 12% (NCES 2002: 12)¹. In the contemporary U.S. economy, a college degree is increasingly a necessity for a stable economic future and quality of life for oneself and one's family. Many nontraditional-age students' return to college is driven by the desire to get a better job (Breese and O'Toole 1995; Davies and Williams 2001) or by major life transitions such as divorce or job loss (Breese and O'Toole 1995) which may impact one's financial stability. When older students drop out, they and their families are at high risk for future economic instability. Many of them are already disadvantaged regarding income attainment, wealth attainment and occupational opportunities because of ascribed characteristics such as race/ethnicity and class of origin (NCES 2003).

Comfort levels and a sense of belonging on campus may be precarious for nontraditional-age students, and it is arguable that a feeling of discomfort on campus could be a factor in dropping out, which could result in negative economic consequences

¹ Highly nontraditional students are defined according to Horn's (1996) scale, in which they must have four or more of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment; financial independence; no high school diploma; single parenthood; part-time attendance for at least part of the academic year; full-time employment while enrolled; dependents other than a spouse. Many of these characteristics correlate with being older. All my participants met the first two of these requirements and many also met some of the other criteria as well. The comparable dropout rates for moderately (2 to 3 of these criteria) and minimally (1 of these criteria) nontraditional students are 42% and 23%, respectively (NCES 2002:12).

for the student and her/his family. The lack of finding acceptance in a community on campus results in a higher risk of dropping out for traditional-age students, and nontraditional-age students are even more likely than traditional-age students to experience problems becoming a community member (Tinto 1988:445). Traditional-age students, because of their large presence in the institution, may be key to whether nontraditional-age students come to feel accepted or rejected. Current literature on nontraditional-age students has not systematically examined stigma among this group, nor has it examined the stigma process through the lens of social psychological theories.

In an attempt to contribute to the literature on cognition's relation to stigma, and to fill gaps in the literature on nontraditional-age students, this paper asks the following research question: What is the role of reflected appraisals and social comparisons in the maintenance of three elements of stigma – feeling like one stands out, feeling excluded, and thinking that one has been or will be negatively evaluated or rejected by others?

In sum, an examination of the relation of cognitive processes, specifically reflected appraisals and social comparisons, to stigma will help clarify our understanding of the way in which stigma is maintained. This further understanding may be applied to the study of a wide variety of stigmatized groups, such as women in the military, racial and ethnic minorities, and the physically disabled.

In the first section, I will discuss Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) model of the self-concept, particularly the core concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons. In the second section, I discuss Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma. I illustrate that Goffman (1963) suggests three key elements of stigma - feeling like one stands out, feeling excluded, and thinking one has been or will be negatively evaluated or rejected by others - even though he does not explicitly identify them. I then show that Goffman's

(1963) conception of the way in which stigma develops centers around interactional processes, but that he does acknowledge the role of cognitive processes in stigma development. In the third section, I illustrate that current empirical research on people with stigmatized identities (Bettie 2003; Feagin 1991; Herdt and Boxer 1992; Waters 1999) describes their meaning-making in ways reflective of Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons, that this research is not systematic about the use of these terms and does not closely explore the implications of using these social psychological processes in understanding the maintenance of stigma.

Chapter 2: Cognitive Dimensions of the Self-Concept

In this section I describe cognitive dimensions of the self-concept as put forth by Rosenberg (1986 [1979]), focusing particularly on his core concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons. I first describe these concepts, then discuss limitations of Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) work and note the way in which his ideas may be fruitfully used in new ways to examine new areas, such as stigma, by using qualitative methodologies.

Reflected Appraisals

A role identity, such as parent, worker, or student, is based on one's conception of what one must do and be when in a particular social location (McCall and Simmons 1978 [1966]). Each role identity has an idealized version, about which there is widespread agreement (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]; Stryker 1991). As we are socialized, we role-take, or put ourselves in the place of others to understand their expectations for us in a particular role and how they will respond to a particular behavior (Stryker 1980:62-63). We do this through the use of reflected appraisals, or our evaluation of ourselves against an idealized version of a role identity, based on: 1) direct reflections, or the actual responses of others; 2) perceived selves, or what we think specific others think of us, and how we feel about that perception; and 3) the "generalized other", or the imagined attitude of society-at-large (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]:62-67). Our beliefs about the criteria that we think others use to evaluate us, as well as how we think we have been evaluated by them affect our understanding of our identity as well as our self-esteem (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]). I emphasize that an important point here is that it is not just

our interactions with others that affect our behavior, but how we *imagine* they might react to us in particular situations or if we take certain actions.

Social Comparisons

Social comparisons occur when we compare ourselves against another reference group in order to self-evaluate where we stand in terms of similarity/difference and superiority/inferiority (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]). These social comparisons may be based on reflected appraisals. People often enact social comparisons so as to enhance their self-esteem by placing themselves in the most positive intersection along the axes of superiority/inferiority and similarity/difference (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]). The choice of referent others, as well as on which characteristics or domains the individual compares her/himself, and how important those domains are to the individual, also affect our social comparisons, and thus our self-esteem (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]:69).

Nontraditional-age students may choose to evaluate themselves by comparing themselves against traditional-age students, other nontraditional-age students, faculty, or a group of same-age peers who are not students, and each could potentially produce different self-evaluations. Additionally, nontraditional-age students may choose to compare themselves in terms of the academic versus social domain if they do not highly value on-campus social activities.

Summary

Reflected appraisals and social comparisons, because of their focus on similarity/difference and superiority/inferiority, are a useful in examining stigma which, as I will show in the next section, has rejection and difference as two of its key elements.

However, Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) work has been limited to examining self-esteem, a potentially connected, but separate, concept from stigma. Additionally, Rosenberg (1986 [1979]) has not examined the way in which these concepts play out during the meaning-making process by using qualitative methodologies, such as in-person interviewing and participant observation.

Reflected appraisals based on specific others and the generalized other, as well as social comparisons, will be this paper's focus, since these concepts are underexamined in stigma theory and literature, as I will show in the following sections. I argue that we may gain a fuller understanding of the way in which reflected appraisals and social comparisons function in day-to-day life during meaning-making processes for stigmatized individuals by systematically examining those concepts using in-person interviews and participant observation.

Chapter 3: Stigma

In this section, I describe the general theoretical concept of stigma as proposed by Goffman (1963), giving special attention to his primary focus on interaction as the means by which elements of stigma are maintained. I show how Goffman (1963) suggests, but is not explicit in stating, that feeling like one stands out, feeling excluded, and thinking one is evaluated negatively or is rejected by others are all key aspects of stigma. I also discuss areas of his work in which he suggests that cognition also plays a role in maintaining stigma and show that, although Goffman (1963) acknowledges the role of these as factors, these concepts are underdeveloped. Throughout this section, I argue that our understanding of the way in which stigma is maintained can be enhanced by using a social psychological framework, in particular the concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparison.

Goffman's Conception of Stigma

A stigma is “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” yet stigma arises primarily through interactional processes and is about “relationships, not attributes” Goffman (1963:3). A stigmatized person is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” - different from others, less desirable and “incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be” (Goffman 1963). Stigmas may be major (e.g., ex-convict) or minor (e.g., holder of a college degree in a job where it is not expected) (Goffman 1963: 3; 50).

Feeling like one stands out, feeling excluded, and thinking one is evaluated negatively or is rejected by others are all key aspects of stigma, as suggested by Goffman (1963). First, standing out is an important aspect of stigma. When “normals” cast their

attention on the stigmatized person, particularly in the form of staring, “he is likely to feel that to be present among normals nakedly exposes him to invasions of privacy” (Goffman 1963:16). Beyond the actual interaction in which one gets stared at, one may develop such anxiety about the possibility of standing out that s/he avoids mixed social situations (Goffman 1963:12; 17), particularly if her/his stigma involves a visible physical characteristic (Goffman 1963:16). Goffman (1963) focuses on the interactions that produce thoughts of the possibility of standing out and associated anxiety. But in noting the stigmatized person’s consideration of what *could* happen, he acknowledges the role of cognition in stigma. In one example involving an unemployed man, Goffman (1963:17) implies that these cognitions can occur even when the stigma is not visible or known to the general public. Standing out is a key element of stigma, and I argue that although Goffman (1963) acknowledges the role of cognitions, he does not sufficiently develop the way in which they help to produce stigma.

Second, feeling excluded is also an important aspect of stigma. Since “social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there” then “normative expectations... righteously presented demands” that these categories be met may arise (Goffman 1963:2). In other words, if someone does not meet these categories, they are expected not to be there, and may be excluded if present. Stigmatized individuals may think about these scenarios preemptively and may “arrange life so as to avoid [normals]” (Goffman 1963:12). In other words, they know (or believe) that they don’t belong and will be excluded, so they avoid the situation in order to avoid its emotional consequences. I argue that the preemptive consideration of the consequences of being in a particular social setting and the decision to self-exclude rather than be excluded by others is an example of Rosenberg’s (1986 [1979]) reflected appraisals. For

example, a middle-aged undergraduate might believe younger students will avoid her due to her age if she tries to participate in campus social events, and so may choose not to participate. In other words, the stigmatized person thinks about what others will think and how they might evaluate him. I also argue that social comparisons are used when the stigmatized individual decides that he measures up negatively in those people's evaluations. Finally, I emphasize that Goffman (1963), while recognizing the role of cognition in stigma production, does not fully flesh out the role of these social psychological concepts.

A third key aspect of stigma is thinking one is evaluated negatively or is rejected by others. A major facet of stigma is the lack of acceptance by others due to inferiority (Goffman 1963:7-8). It is "the central feature of the stigmatized individual's situation in life" (Goffman 1963:8). This rejection is absorbed by the individual as he self-evaluates (Goffman 1963:9). Stigmatized individuals may perceive that others evaluate them negatively, even when others try to treat them normally (Goffman 1963:7; 14). The stigmatized individual may evaluate the situation and others in it, becoming "self-conscious and calculating about the impression he is making" in an effort to avoid negative evaluations (Goffman 1963:14). Once again, Goffman (1963) hints at the role of reflected appraisals and social comparisons in producing stigma, but does not elaborate upon it. Although he emphasizes interaction in the production of stigma, he acknowledges that stigma can arise when the stigmatized person is alone by stating "Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess...[S]elf-hate and self-derogation can also occur when only he and a mirror are about" (Goffman 1963:7). To use Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) concepts, these self-perceptions and self-evaluations can be

categorized as the cognitive and emotional/evaluative components of reflected appraisals and social comparisons. I emphasize once again that these social psychological concepts are left underdeveloped by Goffman (1963).

Interaction is the main emphasis for Goffman (1963) in his explanation of the way in which stigma arises. In any given situation we have stereotypes about the kinds of people we will encounter, and expectations for their behavior in that situation (Goffman 1963:2). Stigma arises during “mixed contacts” between the stigmatized person and the “normals,” when they are in “one another’s immediate presence” (Goffman 1963:12-13). During an interaction with normals in which the stigmatized individual is treated negatively or is rejected, stigma arises. For example, an unemployed man encounters former friends who act less cordial and welcoming toward him than when he had a job. This man then absorbs the negative evaluation implied by that treatment, stating “How hard and humiliating it is to bear the name of an unemployed man...I feel myself wholly inferior” (Goffman 1963:17). In other words, Goffman (1963) illustrates that it is primarily the negative interaction, rather than the stigmatized characteristic or one’s own internal cognitive processes about the stigma, which produces stigma. He suggests that stigma arises when others “fail to accord him the respect and regard which the uncontaminated aspects of his social identity have...led him to anticipate receiving” (Goffman 1963:9) The stigmatized person then, to a greater or lesser degree, absorbs the negative evaluation that underlies this treatment (Goffman 1963:7).

Further evidence for the interactional nature of stigma development is the tendency for group alignments to form with other stigmatized individuals – the “own” – and those who understand and are sympathetic to a particular stigma – the “wise” – in order to retain some sense of normality and acceptance (Goffman 1963:19-23). Using

Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) concepts, however, we could say that in these situations, social comparisons temporarily shift from difference to similarity when comparing oneself with the "own," with whom the stigma is shared, and that feelings of inferiority are reduced and even switched to superiority when aligning with one's own stigmatized group and gaining support from its members.

Interaction plays a further role in terms of the various kinds of strategies that must be employed depending on which group a stigmatized individual aligns with, a process with both interactional and cognitive elements. During alignment with those who share his stigma, s/he is expected to be loyal to the stigmatized group, speak positively of them, and proudly display what becomes stigmatized during interaction with "normals" (Goffman 1963:112-114). When aligning with "normals," one must display the non-stigmatized aspects of her/his self, be ready to feel sorry for their misunderstanding of the stigma or guide them toward understanding and respectful interaction with the stigmatized (Goffman 1963:114-119). Although Goffman (1963) does not develop this point, reflected appraisals are a key element in group alignment, because it is crucial to estimate the way in which others might react to a given behavior in order to elicit a desired behavior from each group.

Crises can arise during interaction for stigmatized people. For example, if one's stigma is not visible or immediately known to others, the risk of one's stigma becoming public when encountering someone who knows her/his biographical history is critical, and the threat of discovery must be managed (Goffman 1963:75). Another crisis is when one must also at times make difficult choices of whether to align with the stigmatized or the normals, such as when a gay man laughs at gay jokes in the company of "normals" (Goffman 1963:87). Stigmatized individuals also encounter others' pity, as well as

attempts to praise them in ways that come across as insulting, such as complimenting a criminal on his choice of literature over paperback novels (Goffman 1963: 14-16). Finally, stigmatized individuals encounter physical, verbal and emotional persecution (Goffman 1963:17).

Stigmatized individuals often spend a great deal of energy managing information and social situations and must pay more attention to aspects of interaction than do the non-stigmatized (Goffman 1963:88), including avoidance of the non-stigmatized (Goffman 1963:12, 99). In other words, Goffman (1963) suggests they do not manage the stigmatized attribute, but rather the interactions. Socialization, an interactional process, is the way in which the stigmatized individual comes to learn what is expected and the way in which his particular stigma is negatively evaluated (Goffman 1963:32). However, the socialization process is one “through which the stigmatized person learns and incorporates the standpoint of the normal, acquiring thereby the identity beliefs of the wider society...” (Goffman 1963:32). Using social psychological language, one’s reflected appraisals are based on the generalized other (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]). Knowledge of what is normal allows one to know when s/he is stigmatized (Goffman 1963:32).

Temporary protection from these interactions with normals, by contrast, will lead to a non-stigmatized self-concept, yet eventually interaction with normals will occur, giving rise to a crisis as s/he is discredited and rejected in this stage of her/his “moral career.” The normals compare the stigmatized individual against the expected stereotype, then treat and evaluate them negatively, which leads to stigma (Goffman 1963:32-33). A change in social contexts, leading to interactions with new types of people different from

herself/himself who evaluate her/him negatively against the expected stereotype, will also lead to crises of stigma (Goffman 1963:35).

Although Goffman's (1963) work on stigma focuses mostly on interactional processes as the factor that leads to the production of stigma, he also acknowledges that social psychological cognitive factors may have a role in that process. In other words, the factors producing stigma are not only interactional but also cognitive. Anticipatory worry about encountering normals can occur outside of interaction, and a stigmatized person may spend mental energy worrying about how others see her/him, resulting in uncertainty about others' evaluations of her/him regardless of the way in which s/he is treated (Goffman 1963: 7, 12-14). This is an example of Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) reflected appraisals and social comparisons. The stigmatized person tries to figure out what others think of her/him, and how s/he measures up in comparison to them. The stigmatized individual also must evaluate and be highly aware of her/his impression management, more so than normals (Goffman 1963:14). Although not elaborated by Goffman (1963), this is also an internal cognitive process, which is likely used within and outside of interaction, as the individual continuously gauges reflected appraisals against her/his behavior. The perception that s/he stands out makes the stigmatized person feel "nakedly expose[d]...to invasions of privacy" (Goffman 1963:16), which can be fruitfully seen as another example of reflected appraisals. Finally, the stigma that results from interactions may be moderated by a feeling of "group superiority" (Goffman 1963:21) of the stigmatized group. I propose that this process can be described in Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) social psychological terms by stating that social comparisons are made between the stigmatized individual (through her/his group) and "normal" groups. During the social comparison, s/he initially knows s/he falls on the inferior side

of the superiority/inferiority axis, but by claiming stigmatized group superiority to “normals”, the position on which they fall on the dimension of superiority/inferiority is reversed. Once again, although Goffman (1963) hints at cognitive processes in his discussion of stigmatized groups framing themselves as superior to normals, worries about contact with normals, and a high level of awareness of impression management, he leaves this aspect of stigma underdeveloped in favor of a focus on the interactional aspect of these processes, such as avoidance of interaction with normals and choosing to associate with other stigmatized people.

To summarize, Goffman (1963) suggests that stigma arises due to external factors, specifically interactions. He implies, but does not fully develop, the point that stigma can arise via other mechanisms. Although he does not use the terms reflected appraisals or social comparison, I argue that he illustrates that they can play an important role, even though he portrays them as less important in the process. Although Goffman (1963) hints at the role of these social psychological processes, for example, by describing stigmatized individuals’ anticipatory worry about upcoming contact with normals (Goffman 1963:12) or their concern about and/or perception of others’ negative evaluation even when they try to treat them normally (Goffman 1963:7), he does not explicitly call out the role of those processes. Additionally, he does not elaborate on them or discuss at length how these processes may produce stigma when divorced from immediate interaction. Instead, his focus is on interaction as the primary means by which stigma can arise and what must be managed. Goffman’s (1963) overall view is that our identities (included stigmatized ones) arise based on a specific interaction at any particular moment. However, I argue that he also discusses situations in which stigma may arise when alone, yet is ambiguous about how soon before or after a negative

interaction these cognitions, as well as stigma, arise. Developing the role of cognition in general, and reflected appraisals and social comparisons in particular, stands to help elaborate a key mechanism in the creation of stigma.

Nontraditional-Age Students as Potentially Stigmatized

Nontraditional-age students qualify as stigmatized based on Goffman's (1963) definition and examples of stigma as described in the previous section. Since roles are often age-graded, there are expectations about their sequence and timing, as well as the age appropriate to each role (Elder 1994). According to the construct of a normative life course – a sequence of school, work, marriage, children – individuals are expected to finish their education before entering the full-time work force (Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld 1987). In other words, education is for the young. Nontraditional-age students violate this expectation, which could lead to questions about why they did not complete their education earlier. The belief in American meritocracy likely leads to the assumption of personal failure as the reason, leading to potential stigma for the older undergraduate.

Supporting the idea of self-perceived stigma among nontraditional-age students are studies showing that they may feel a “sense of [prior] educational failure,” (Reay 2002), worry about failure in the present or future (Davies and Williams 2001), and feel academically incompetent or insecure (Weiss 1999). They also feel “inauthentic” as students (Reay 2002) and feel out-of-place on an “elite” college campus where they have “insufficient peer support” (Bird and Morgan 2003). Although some nontraditional-age students have positive relationships with faculty (Kasworm 2005; Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood 2000), others feel like faculty gears their lectures to younger students and minimizes older students' external responsibilities (Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998),

which may make them feel out-of-place or like they stand out. Older students also report feeling invisible, ignored or avoided by traditional-age students (Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998). Some older students report negative and hostile treatment by younger students (Kasworm 2005) and professors (Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998), and that they are resented by younger students (Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998). Although we do not know if the hostility, avoidance and negative treatment are real, the older students believe they are real. All these perceived instances are examples of reflected appraisals and social comparisons that lead to the feeling of standing out, being excluded, or being rejected or negatively evaluated by others.

Although these studies do not use the terms reflected appraisals or social comparisons, nor do they analyze these processes systematically from a social psychological perspective, previous research clearly shows that these processes actively maintain elements of stigma in nontraditional-age students. Additionally, all these feelings and thoughts illustrated by these studies indicate comparison to a particular standard which they believe has gone unmet. Since as college students they are “incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be” (Goffman 1963:3) in age and perceived competence, their general insecurities may also leave them vulnerable to feeling stigmatized.

Why Study Nontraditional-Age Students?: Consonance and Dissonance

The consonance or dissonance between one’s own characteristics and those of the social environment affect one’s self-concept. According to Rosenberg (1986 [1979]), a consonant context is protective for self-esteem because one is shielded from put-downs by another group. For example, Rosenberg (1986 [1979]:171) believes black children in

his study compared themselves with other black children rather than white children because they lived in a predominantly black neighborhood and attended predominantly black schools, and that this helped keep their self-esteem relatively high.

Although some attributes are seen as stigmatizing across a variety of spheres (e.g., ex-convict), a stigma is often associated with a particular sphere in which the person is assumed to be tainted. For example, an ugly person is most discounted in social situations (Goffman 1963:50) as opposed to, say, a sports competition. To extend this idea to the school sphere, a 24-year-old who looks her/his age and attends high school as a sophomore will likely be stigmatized when at school, yet would be viewed as normal when shopping, going to work, etc. because her/his age does not conflict with those roles. Middle-aged adults would be viewed as normal at work or a shopping center, but on a university campus, that mature adult student becomes a member of an age-based minority, and may be stigmatized if her/his older age is visible and not common. Nontraditional-age undergraduates attending a university campus are a useful group with which to illustrate how theories of stigma can be expanded because of the potential conflict between the expectations of the student role and the role of someone who is an older age.

Nontraditional-age students note “not belonging” and “standing out” because of being older in a youth-oriented college environment (Bird and Morgan 2003; Gallacher, Crossan, Field, and Merrill 2003; Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998; Sandler 1999), discomfort with professors, and feelings of being invisible, ignored or avoided by traditional-age students (Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998). Nontraditional-age students may perceive (correctly or incorrectly) that younger students are hostile toward them (Bishop-Clark and Lynch 1992; Kasworm 2005; Kasworm, Sandmann and Sissel 2000;

Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998, 1994; Peabody and Sedlacek 1982). Empirical work shows nontraditional-age students' perceptions of negative treatment increases on campuses with a lower percentage of older students (Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998) – in other words, in a dissonant context.

As suggested by Goffman (1963), the studies above punctuate the importance of social context for the production of stigma. However, to date most research on nontraditional-age students has been conducted on campuses on which they are a large minority or even the majority (Lynch and Bishop-Clark 1998). Stigma is likely enhanced on campuses on which they are a small minority. Moreover, qualitative work exploring the identity meaning-making processes of nontraditional-age students is virtually non-existent. For this reason, the prevalence and depth of perceived stigma for nontraditional-age students on a university campus, and its association with the student identity, should be examined.

Summary

Although Goffman (1963) acknowledges that social psychological processes such as reflected appraisals and social comparisons play a role in the production of stigma, he does not label them as such, and his primary focus is on the role of interaction in producing same. An examination of the processes of reflected appraisals and social comparison in the development of stigma will help researchers expand on Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma. This may also help us understand more clearly the indicators of stigma – feeling one stands out, feeling excluded, and thinking one is or might be evaluated negatively or rejected by others – reported by nontraditional-age students, as well as other stigmatized groups, and may clarify the process by which these arise.

Chapter 4: Substantive Conceptions of People with Stigmatized Identities

In this section, I will describe the way in which current empirical research on people with stigmatized identities uses Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons to make sense of stigmatized individuals' identity meaning-making processes, but are not systematic about the use of these terms and do not closely explore the implications of using these social psychological processes in understanding the maintenance of stigma. I then will argue that doing so will help researchers understand stigma maintenance in a wide variety of substantive areas.

Substantive work on people with stigmatized identities, such as black immigrants (Waters 1999), lower class girls (Bettie 2003), middle class blacks (Feagin 1991), and gay men (Herdt and Boxer 1992) describes some of the social psychological processes, such as reflected appraisals and social comparisons, that these groups go through as they make meaning of their stigmatized identities. However, this work is typically done by experts in their respective substantive areas (race/ethnic studies, class, etc.) and does not explicitly use a social psychological framework to systematically analyze the role of social psychological processes in meaning-making for people with a stigmatized identity.

For example, black immigrants' identities are partially formed through actual interactions with the white majority group. In particular, encountering white racism on an interpersonal level changes the interpretation of what being black means from what it was in their culture of origin. This ultimately affects their choice of a racial versus cultural identity (Waters 1999). Black immigrants begin to believe there are "bad vibes' coming from whites" (Waters 1999:168). Additionally, the role of black immigrants' expectations of structural, but not interpersonal, discrimination causes a shift

in the way in which they conceive of the meaning of being black in America (Waters 1999:140-141; 164). Although Waters (1999) describes their perception of “bad vibes” in new situations (albeit based on past stigmatizing experience), and situations in which they compare themselves positively to native-born black Americans, she does not use Rosenberg’s (1986 [1979]) terms reflected appraisals or social comparisons, nor does she elaborate on these social psychological processes’ role in making meaning of a stigmatized identity. However, use of these concepts could help us understand that, through reflected appraisals, cognition plays an important role in perceiving these “bad vibes” and that, through social comparison, the stigmatized individual views other groups along the axes of similarity/difference and superiority/inferiority (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]). This could illuminate our understanding of how stigmatized groups make sense of their stigmatized identities.

Other studies involving stigmatized groups similarly imply that reflected appraisals and social comparisons are used by individuals in these groups to make sense of their identities, but do not explicitly use Rosenberg’s (1986 [1979]) terms or delve deeply into the implications of these cognitions. In her ethnographic study of Mexican-American and white working class high school girls in California’s Central Valley, Bettie (2003) shows how they make meaning of their identity across race, class and gender lines. The girls’ behavior captures the multiple potential meanings of being “female” and they use interaction and reflected appraisals and social comparison to do so. They exhibit familiarity with stereotypes of people in their particular class-gender-race location (Bettie 2003:61), using the process of reflected appraisals to do so. They rank cliques on a hierarchy based on race, gender and class (Bettie 2003: 49) and use self-presentation to either conform or differentiate oneself from other groups. These social comparison and

reflected appraisal processes are well-described as being in relation to what they think others think of them individually as well as other's opinions of their class group. For example, Liz, a working class white girl, describes how she thinks middle class female classmates evaluate her negatively when she cannot afford to take a the trip the middle class girls are planning:

It's kind of like, in my eyes, sometimes people, like, look down on me, you know, because they'll be like, "Hey, let's go to Disneyland" or "Let's go to Monterey" or something. And I can't go because I have to work. And they're like "Well, can't you get out of it?" I'm like, you know, I gotta pay rent, and I gotta pay bills...And it's like their parents provide all that...[S]ometimes they're like "You're exaggerating," but I'm not! (Bettie 2003: 116)

This quote implies the use of reflected appraisals. Liz believes others think certain things of her, such as that she is exaggerating. This quote implies the use of social comparisons. Liz believes they look down on her; she is comparing herself negatively to them because she believes they think this about her. However, Bettie (2003) never explicitly examines comments of this nature by using the concepts of reflected appraisals or social comparisons. Like Waters' (1999) work, Bettie (2003) does not flesh out the role of these social psychological processes in making meaning of a stigmatized identity.

Another study that suggests the use of reflected appraisals without explicitly using the term or elaborating on the significance of the concept is Feagin's (1991) study involving middle class blacks. Stigma arises for middle class blacks from interactions in which they are rejected, such as poor service (Feagin 1991:106), as well as from reflected appraisals, such as believing they are being watched carefully in stores or preemptively assessing a situation (Feagin 1991:107-108). He suggests that middle class blacks must spend a great deal of mental energy considering what might occur in encounters with

whites, such as being pulled over by the police (Feagin 1991:114). However, although this work describes the operation of reflected appraisals in middle class blacks' daily lives, it primarily examines it through a race-relations, rather than social psychological lens. Taking a social psychological approach could allow us to examine the ways in which these processes operate for people with stigmatized identities in general, and the findings could be extended across stigmatized groups.

The final study I will use to illustrate the use of social psychological concepts without elaboration upon them is Herdt and Boxer's (1992) ethnographic study involving gay men. Research suggests that many gay men transition from a "homosexual" identity, characterized by a feeling of shame, to a "gay" cultural identity, still stigmatized but characterized by perception of a relatively cohesive culture, an increasing sense of pride and the incorporation of other aspects of the self having little to do with sexuality. Becoming part of the "gay culture" requires "restructuring of personhood and social surround, not just changes in cognitive category or self-identity" (Herdt and Boxer 1992:32). This occurs primarily through interaction with a supportive gay community as well as "coming out" to significant others, but also through comparisons to others and thinking about what others may think of them (Herdt and Boxer 1992). Although Herdt and Boxer (1992) never explicitly name these cognitive processes, nor do they explore them in depth or give them a primary role in identity construction, they describe examples showing the role each of these processes plays. There are signs that there may be parallels to Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons. For example, they note that "adolescent homosexuals *privately experience* isolation; they feel stigmatized" (emphasis mine) (Herdt and Boxer 1992:8). This implies that feelings of exclusion can occur cognitively because of reflected appraisals and social

comparisons in which they feel different and inferior to heterosexuals. Another step in taking on a “gay” identity is one in which s/he feels s/he must be like all other gay people because s/he is like them in sexual preference (Herdt and Boxer 1992:8), a good example of the cognitive social comparison of one’s “gay” self as similar to other gay people. Later in the gay identity process, the individual begins to socially compare oneself to other gay people as simultaneously similar and different (Herdt and Boxer 1992).

In this section, I have shown that many studies on people with stigmatized identities use Rosenberg’s (1986 [1979]) concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons, yet they do not do so using those terms, nor do they analyze identity meaning-making processes by using those social psychological concepts. I argue that our understanding of the production of stigma could be clarified by closely examining reflected appraisals and social comparisons, particularly whether these cognitive processes may occur independent of interaction. A more complete understanding of people with stigmatized identities could thereby be gained. The clarification of these processes in maintaining stigma could provide insights which could then be widely applied to the study of a variety of stigmatized identities.

Chapter 5: Data and Methods

Purpose of Study and Research Question

The aim of this study is to examine the way in which cognitive processes, specifically reflected appraisals and social comparisons, play a role in maintaining stigma for undergraduates age 25 and older on a university campus. I ask the following research question: What is the role of reflected appraisals and social comparisons in the maintenance of three elements of stigma – feeling like one stands out, feeling excluded, and thinking that one has been or will be negatively evaluated or rejected by others?

Sample and Design

Characteristics of Sample and Methods

The sample consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 undergraduates² aged 25 and older at a large public university in the Mid Atlantic region, at which approximately 3% of undergraduates are age 25 or older. (See Appendix A for interview questions.) All interviews except two³ were conducted in a private room in the sociology department at the university. Three rooms were used for the interviews: a small graduate student classroom, the small sociology library nearby, and the teaching assistant office. Additionally, 15 participant observations were conducted. I shadowed 8 individual participants on 11 occasions as each went about her/his daily school routine in

² One was interviewed twice and another three times.

³ One was conducted in a participant's home at her request and another was conducted in a private conference room at the participant's workplace on campus.

class, at lunch, at the library and other places on campus from one hour up to six hours, with an average observation length of about two hours. I conducted 4 additional observations at organized social events and classes specifically for nontraditional students, which were created and managed by the university's support program for nontraditional students (the Welcome Back program). Two of the students selected to be shadowed individually more than once were chosen because one was a good example of someone who strongly identified as a student and the other an example of someone who identified very little with the student role.⁴ One participant also volunteered a copy of her journal from her first month on campus.

Participant Characteristics

Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 53 (median age 29.5). Nine participants were men and 11 were women. Fifteen participants were white, two were African-American, two were Asian, and one was Latina⁵. Although I did not explicitly ask about country of birth, three participants volunteered that they were born outside of the United States. Five participants were sophomores, ten were juniors and five were seniors. Fifteen of the 20 participants had been on this campus four semesters or less. Only four participants worked for pay more than ten hours per week, and all of these were native born.

⁴ The participant who identified very little with the student role during her initial interview developed a student identity by the time shadowing began. In the initial interview, she stated: "I'd like to say [I feel like a student], but I really don't...I don't fit in...I don't fit the mold." Six months later she stated: "Now I really feel like a student because I've been hanging out with the younger students so much. I feel 18."

⁵ In quotes and field notes from participant observation, characteristics of some participants, such as specifics of appearance, major/course name, job title, etc. have been modified to protect participant confidentiality. No characteristic that bears on outcomes was modified.

Four of the 20 participants were coming back for a second bachelor's degree, although two⁶ of these four had attained the equivalent of a bachelor's degree outside the United States. One of these two attained the equivalent of a master's degree outside the United States. Five participants had a two-year degree from another institution, and one of these five attained the equivalent of an associate's degree outside the United States. Fifteen participants, including the nine mentioned above, had attended college at some point when they were between the ages of 18 and 22. Seventeen of the 20 participants attended full-time (at least 12 credit hours).

Researcher Characteristics and Recruitment

Participants were recruited by posting flyers on campus (3 participants) and distributing them in person at events and classes hosted by the Welcome Back program (8 participants). Additional recruitment was done by sending e-mails to a mailing list for nontraditional-age students gathered by the Welcome Back program, and to the campus listserv for nontraditional-age students (5 participants). Snowball sampling was also used in recruitment (4 participants). All participants were entered into a drawing for the chance to win a \$25 Starbucks gift card as an incentive to participate, and one participant won the gift card after interviews were completed.

I, as the researcher, am a white woman in my late thirties, and a former nontraditional-age undergraduate. I disclosed my former nontraditional-age undergraduate status at the start of each interview to facilitate comfort levels regarding interactions with and feelings about traditional-age students that might seem sensitive, such as being annoyed by them. Disclosure of this type would be much less likely if the

⁶ Both were born outside of the United States.

participants thought I had experienced undergraduate life at a traditional age. However, my disclosure may have made them more reluctant to identify with traditional-age undergraduates, and may have enhanced the salience of their age within the student role. Given that this study involves an examination of stigma, I chose to disclose this status with the intent of increasing my chances of capturing experiences of stigma and facilitating comfort. Although my own former nontraditional status provided me with insights that led to valuable research questions, I gave special attention to evidence that could disconfirm my own experience.

Data Analysis

Brief participant observation notes were taken on-site, and an audiotape was made of my recollection of events immediately after the observation and before leaving campus. In-person interviews were tape recorded, and transcribed verbatim, and an analytic memo was written to summarize ideas about each interview (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006; Miles and Huberman 1994). Interviews were coded for themes (Lofland et al. 2006), such as feelings of stigma, on- and off-campus friendships, definitions of “student” for themselves and in general, feelings about traditional-age students, perception of traditional-age students’ thoughts about them, relationships external to campus (such as family, co-workers, etc.), and feelings of similarity and/or difference from traditional-age students. Each instance of the themes was noted and coded. Coded items were then given an additional code based on valence to illustrate the confirming or disconfirming nature of the evidence (Linn and Erickson 1990; Lofland et al. 2006; Miles and Huberman 1994). A summary code was then assigned to the

participant to indicate his/her overall orientation to the theme. Additionally, data matrices were used to examine trends (Miles and Huberman 1994) and check for disconfirming evidence (Linn and Erickson 1990).

Chapter 6: Results

There are signs of intellectual difference and underdevelopment in the current literature on the production of stigma. As I showed, according to Goffman (1963), stigma arises primarily during interactional processes. The current study explicitly uses Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons to show that elements of stigma are predominantly maintained cognitively, even when divorced from interaction. I will show that participants reported feeling stigmatized in three ways: 1) feeling they stand out; 2) feeling excluded; and 3) thinking that others did or might evaluate them negatively or reject them. Additionally, I will show that participants coped with these elements of stigma by using social comparisons that placed them in a more positive location along the superiority/inferiority axis. Each of these instances of what I term self-perceived stigma occurred through cognitive processes, as students used reflected appraisals to understand the meaning of being an older student on a university campus.

Absence of Signs of Stigma During Participant Observation

Participant observation revealed no rejection or negative interactions between nontraditional-age and traditional-age students. Instead, observations showed at worst neutral interactions, and at best friendship and acceptance by traditional-age students. For example, field notes from observing Sarah, a slightly overweight 28-year-old in her late twenties who looks young enough to be a traditional-age student, illustrates friendship and acceptance from her three friends, all of whom know her age:

It is about 4:30 on a sunny clear 80-degree day in April... I am with Sarah, Chandra, and two of Sarah's other younger friends, Erica and Aleia, at a coffee shop near campus. We find a black wire metal table and chairs

about three feet from the main entrance door. Sarah sits with her back to the glass storefront. I sit to her right. Chandra is to Sarah's left. Erica sits directly across from Sarah and Aleia sits to my right. Erica's and Aleia's backs are to the parking lot...Sarah has ordered an egg salad sandwich with the price - \$5.25 - marked on the square plastic container, and an iced coffee with cream. Sarah wears no visible make-up and has clear, porcelain skin. She is bubbly and talkative, giggles a lot and jokes around frequently. Today, she dresses casually in a kelly green t-shirt with slightly darker shiny green lettering in its center stating "Ireland", and a white t-shirt peeking out from underneath, and jeans...Her clothing is similar to the jeans or shorts and t-shirts, with words promoting the university's women's hockey team or a popular alternative band, worn by the rest of the group.

They discuss how a roommate and her boyfriend had been having sex in the lower bunk of the dorm bunk beds. They all agreed that this was disgusting and unacceptable, even though it was the roommate's bunk. Their gestures when talking are similar. Their palms face upward, with pointer and middle fingers extended, twisting wrists toward the group, and they often intone their voices up at the end of sentence, like a question, and pause in between pieces of the sentence. As they discuss academics, Erica mentions that Sarah was "anal" last semester about her schedule. Sarah notes that she registered for classes very early and was voicing stress to Erica about getting the exact classes she wanted. Several were booked. Erica had let her know to register anyway onto the waitlist and that it would be okay because people drop classes and that Sarah would get in. Sarah says she is not so anal this semester about her schedule and registration, and she laughs. Sarah says that this semester, her grades are dropping. She is now getting Cs & Bs because she's "socializing so much." Chandra notes that she and Sarah hang out for about five hours every day and Sarah confirms this. A young student walks by and Sarah waves, explaining to me that he is the president of a campus group with which she's involved. [Field Notes, Sarah, age 28, junior, coffee shop]

These field notes illustrate that, not only are elements of stigma – standing out, exclusion, and being viewed negatively or being rejected by others – absent, but that the reverse is true. Sarah blends in, and is included and accepted into the group. Positive interactions such as this are unlikely to produce feelings of stigma. However, an hour later, while sitting on the campus green under a tree in front of the library with Sarah and Chandra, Sarah tells that she had formerly been concerned about deciding to reveal her

age to Chandra, whom she had known for about three months. Field notes illustrate this point:

Sarah tells me about when she met Chandra and how, at one point, she decided she needed to tell Chandra her age but really didn't want to. Sarah tells me she thought "I like her. Oh God, I'm gonna have to deal with the 28 [age] thing." She notes that she was very concerned she wouldn't be accepted and says "It's like telling your husband you've been sleeping with another man." She reports that she was pleasantly surprised and relieved when Chandra seemed not to care that she was older. Chandra chimes in nonchalantly: "Yeah, I didn't care." Chandra also notes that Sarah is only the second friend she's made – spring semester is her first semester. [Field Notes, Sarah, age 28, junior, coffee shop]

Despite her existing friendship and positive interactions with Chandra during the spring semester, as well as two friendships that she had maintained since fall with younger students who knew her age, something else was occurring with Sarah internally. Her reflected appraisals centered on what Chandra's potential negative evaluation and rejection of Sarah if she were to reveal her age. This example shows how Goffman's (1963) primarily interactional approach to stigma development can be elaborated upon by looking at the role of reflected appraisals.

Field notes from participant observation of Andy also revealed no rejection or negative interactions between he and traditional-age students, but rather showed a comfortable camaraderie:

It is about 3:00 p.m. on a 60-degree cloudy, slightly humid day in late April...I am spending the day on campus with Andy, a very friendly and talkative, slender, white 27-year-old of average height, with metal-rimmed glasses and black buzz-cut hair, who is so energetic that he seems almost hyperactive at times. We are with the chemistry club of which he is a member, standing outside in a grassy courtyard enclosed within the square of a four-story building. The club is preparing for a large university promotional event in which the chemistry department will run experiments for spectators. There are seven students present, including a female graduate student who leads the club. This is an undergrad chemistry club, but two of the seven tell me they are grad students. The others appear to

be age 20 or so. Five are male, two are female, plus me...Earlier in the day, Andy had told me this would be a good day to observe because they were going to “blow up a trash can” in chemistry club – that it would shoot 15 feet into the air...Andy chats, with Robert, a traditional-age undergraduate, most of the way. Andy acts very silly, laughing, and physically acting out things that could go wrong with chemical reactions and their potential effects on people.

The chemicals are prepared and put into an empty clear water bottle, which is placed underneath the upside-down plastic trash can. We wait for about five minutes and absolutely nothing happens. There is some discussion among the students about whether it’s working or not, and people offer various ideas. One person mentions that we should check it, to which several people laugh and indicate that THEY aren’t going to be the ones to do that. Three or four students yell down at us from a second floor window, jokingly mocking the lack of action in this experiment. Andy pulls out his camera phone, ready to videotape the blast. He stands next to a traditional-age student and shows him this camera, which he holds horizontally, and keeps it running. He explains to that student that he has to start it over every 15 seconds because he only has 15 seconds worth of video time available. What looks like smoke starts to creep out from under the sides of the cylindrical trash can. Several students are talking quietly, but excitedly, and Andy and the young student he has been talking to continue to look at the camera phone. Finally, the trash can shoots about 15 feet into the air with a loud “bang!” The students cheer and yell and Andy says “Awww maaan!” He then explains that his girlfriend called at the very moment the trash can exploded and that this could have interrupted getting any of the audio and video footage. When he checks the footage, it is there and he’s very excited about it. He replays it for the young student next to him at least twice and yells and laughs in excitement each time. He then plays it for a couple of other students, then for me. [Field Notes, Andy, age 27, sophomore, chemistry club]

As with participant observation with Sarah, elements of stigma – standing out, exclusion, and being viewed negatively or being rejected by others – are absent in Andy’s interaction. Instead, he blends comfortably into the group, socializes and appears happy. Others respond to him as an accepted group member.

Although participant observation did not reveal negative interactions or rejection between traditional- and nontraditional-age students, several participants did report having had negative interactions and rejection in the past. Field notes from spending

time sitting on the campus green with Sarah and her friend Chandra illustrate Sarah's report of past rejection:

Sarah reported that a "Greek girl" had been friendly with her until Sarah told her her age. The "Greek girl" repeatedly said, in a shocked voice, "Oh my God! Oh my GOD! You're 28???" Since then, when Sarah encounters her in the stairway, Sarah told me the girl will not speak to her even when Sarah asks her school-related questions. [Field Notes, Sarah, age 28, junior, outdoors on campus green in front of library]

It is important to note, however, that although the reported rejection occurred after Sarah told her her age, the actual reasons why the girl never spoke to Sarah again are unknown. What is significant here is that Sarah interprets this as being due to her age. This interpretation is a cognitive process – a reflected appraisal based on a specific other, the "Greek girl."

Finally, it is important to keep in mind the fine line between perception and actual events in a study of the perception of stigma. However, the negative interactions and rejection were real to participants, whether or not they actually occurred exactly as stated. Yet I could not confirm their stigmatizing experiences through participant observation during this study.

If Goffman's (1963) theory is correct, stigma should arise primarily through interactions. However, although I carefully watched the ways in which younger and older students treated one another, participant observation revealed no negative or discriminatory behaviors toward older undergraduates and no exclusion. In fact, several observations indicated that traditional-age students accepted and befriended older undergraduates. These results support the idea that much, if not all, of the feeling of stigma is due to their own perception and cognitions during the reflected appraisal process.

Perceptions of Standing Out

Nontraditional-age students worried that they might stand out as different from other students on campus. This occurred even when their appearance was indistinguishable from that of traditional-age students, as in the case of Rodney, a soft-spoken government and politics major who looks much younger than his 29 years. Rodney takes a few moments to think about his answers before answering, and begins to use descriptive language that seems intended to pinpoint his exact meaning as he states that although he is not sure whether or not others actually see him as different, he feels like they do. Rodney's self-perception of being different occurs entirely as an internal, cognitive process, without any actual confirming interactions, and Rodney's awareness of this as potentially all internal does not expunge the impact it has on his feeling of standing out:

*I realize that I'm different. Am I being perceived that way? ...[I]t made me think back to earlier semesters that I had on campus and there was maybe a person or two here or there that was significantly older. Perhaps it was evident to people, perhaps it wasn't. And I don't know if it was, you know, some weird paranoia or if there was something actually to it, but I got the feeling, those first couple of weeks on campus that people were just *staring* at me...My sister made up this expression...it just felt like...the expression's "walking around like a panda bear." Like, if you were walking around as a panda bear on campus, you'd probably get a couple looks. And I, I just felt like I was walking around like a panda bear. [Rodney, age 29, sophomore]*

Rodney's concern about standing out and being different do not simply occur as passing insignificant thoughts. Rather there is a sense of pain evident in Rodney's comments. Being different and being stared at produces self-consciousness, embarrassment, and possibly shame. He spends mental energy worrying about whether his age is known. Rodney's perception of standing out, based entirely on his reflected

appraisals, maintains his sense of stigma. This is especially interesting because his age was probably not visible.

Debbie also believes that her age makes her stand out on campus and that she does not look like she belongs there. Like Rodney, her belief does not appear to emerge from an interaction in which she was rejected – in fact she explicitly states that she’s “sure no one cares” - but rather from reflected appraisals, based on the views of the generalized other, regarding how old one should be as a college student on campus:

I feel like there’s no.. good place for me to go during the day to like study and get work done, where I don’t feel weird...I feel very...conspicuous at the library. I don’t feel like I blend into the background...I feel like I don’t look like I belong there...because I’m older. I’m sure no one cares, but I do...I don’t feel comfortable going and sitting at a table full of young kids. It’s just like “ugh.” [Debbie, age 28, senior]

Debbie’s reflected appraisals make her feel “weird” and “conspicuous,” and her quote, like Rodney’s, implies a sense of shame – that she has no right to be on campus as an undergraduate and is intruding where she does not belong. Her reflected appraisals maintain a sense of stigma.

This also occurred with Karen, a single mother of three children. She is a 31-year-old talkative and friendly family studies major. She fiddles with the cords of the Ipod she wears around her neck but maintains eye contact with me as she tells me that she knows she looks young enough to pass for a traditional-age student:

[T]hey’re all amazed by my age, you know (laughs). I get that all the time. You know, I look very young for my age...They tend to be shocked, not just [because I have] kids, just because of my age. And a lot of them think that I’m their age. [Karen, age 31, senior]

But Karen explicitly calls out that it is not what other students actually think at all which makes her feel she stands out. Rather her own cognitions about what is a proper role for someone her age make her feel out of place:

I was really nervous about goin' into class, even though...none of the students think that I'm [early 30s]...It's not like I thought somebody was gonna be like "oh you're too old to be here." I think it's just a matter of my own internalizing of what I think I should be doin' and shouldn't be doin'. [Karen, age 31, senior]

Karen's reflected appraisals produce in her a sense of nervousness about standing out. She indicates that she's not sure she "should be" a student, implying that a part of her feels ashamed or at least conflicted about it. This painful conflict between the desire to be a student and feeling that she "shouldn't" be one because of her age is evident.

All of these examples illustrate how reflected appraisals, or what we think others think of us, produce an element of stigma – the feeling of standing out. Additionally, these results suggest that this feeling can be produced cognitively even without interaction that confirms that is what others think, and even when the individual knows that this feeling may be produced internally. Goffman (1963) does not explicitly put forth these possibilities.

Perceptions of Exclusion

Nontraditional-age students felt excluded from the larger campus community and worried that others might exclude them and reject them during interaction, due to their age. However, participant observation revealed no evidence for this actually occurring. Laura is a married business major with one child, who speaks in the accent of her native country. Laura is a 40-year-old married business major with one child. She is short and heavy around the hips, with blonde shoulder-length hair and wrinkles around her eyes

when she smiles. Her quiet, shy demeanor at the start of the interview who gradually became more talkative as the interview progressed. Although I judged Laura to be in her mid-thirties (she is actually 40), in a twist on the theme of feeling like one stands out, she notes that she believes others can not tell she is a nontraditional-age student. Yet her reflected appraisals reveal concern about exclusion on campus if her age were to become known:

This is my assumption...If they know I'm older they make a distance...They don't like to do things with old people. Every time I try to engage with other student [sic], if they find out that I'm older than them [I think], they keep a distance [sic]. So in the future I probably should avoid to tell them how old I am... But I, I don't, I don't like to hide that. I want to tell to them what really I am. [Laura, age 40, sophomore]

Note that Laura recognizes that her worry about exclusion may only be her own assumption and not reality. She is concerned. She does not want to be excluded, but believes she must make a choice between letting students know “what she really” is – a middle-aged woman – and being included in social interaction. Laura’s cognitions stemmed from past interactions with a male traditional-age undergraduate with whom she sat in class and spent an hour with between classes twice a week. He told her she was “old” but claims the student was accepting of her age:

When I told him my age [he said] “You old!” (laughs) But he’s okay with that so I’m glad. [Laura, age 40, sophomore]

However, her worries about exclusion remain with her after the interaction has passed, and her reflected appraisals center around the perceived stigma that could occur if she reveals her age. Laura also attributed another instance of social exclusion to her age, yet her description of the situation reveals that it may have actually been her status as a

parent, or her lack of availability for a school project, that sparked the exclusion.

Nevertheless, she interprets it as being due to her age:

INT: When they find out your age, they make a distance. Can you tell me a specific time that that happened?

LAURA: [T]his semester also happen even [sic]. I have a...person who always...sits by my side during to lecture [sic]. Then he make, he make comment with my handwriting. He said "Oh you have a good handwriting." In my culture people believe that a person who has good handwriting they have a good heart." And one day, we get in a conversation in cafeteria and... we talk about the... school activity, I mean like organization. Oh, I, I cannot, I definitely cannot involve because I have a kid. He usually was to talk to me and say hi. Now just "ohhh" (laughs).

INT: Did you tell him how old you were at that time?

LAURA: No no. I just mention that I have a child. [Laura, age 40, sophomore]

Her reflected appraisal is that she believes he excluded her from future social interaction because of her age, and she does not recognize other possible reasons. Her reflected appraisals and the choices she believes she must make between hiding her real self and having social interaction produce in her a sense of loneliness and exclusion.

This perception of exclusion because of being a student at an older age could extend off-campus, for example to a peer group of same-age friends. The exclusion of Lisa from further social interactions was real, and coincided with her entry into college, which she had told one friend about. She did not know for sure why her friends cut off contact with her. Nevertheless, her reflected appraisals centered on her incongruent age and student status. She believed that a friend of hers, whose child was on the same swim team as Lisa's child, excluded her from future social contact, and said negative things about her to the group of friends they shared, because she told her she was going to college:

[W]ho I've had reactions with are in my peer group...This one woman in particular... I told her I was going. ..[and she said] "Oh that's great!" and never talked to me again...We had been pretty friendly and she just stopped talkin' to me. She'd gone to high school and that's as far as she went to school. So I don't know if it was intimidating to her because I was goin' back to school. I was the same person that I was before. I just was takin' a couple of classes, but she totally stopped talking to me... [S]he must have said something about me because at that point that whole group of friends just stopped communicating completely...I think she was intimidated...[F]rom what I found out later she could be a very vicious person. I think she told them something besides that about either me, my husband or the two of us or whatever and that was it... I think she thought that I would think that I was better than her. [Lisa, age 47, junior]

It is a hurtful event when others gossip negatively about you, whether it actually happens or whether it is your suspicion that it has happened. Lisa's friends' cessation of contact with her was real, and although Lisa was unsure as to why it occurred, her reflected appraisal is that her friend was intimidated by her pursuit of higher education, and went so far as to make up stories about her and her husband to get others to exclude her. Using reflected appraisals, she attributes her exclusion to others' discomfort with her pursuit of education. This is a complex interrelation of interaction, reflected appraisals, and possible actual exclusion. Lisa recognizes that most people in her friendship circle who are similar to her in age are not college students. Since "social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there" (Goffman 1963:2), Lisa's comments suggest that she interprets her exclusion as being due to this incongruence between age and student status, or not meeting the "normative expectations... righteously presented demands" of her social category (Goffman 1963:2).

Finally, perceived exclusion did not occur equally during social and academic discussions and settings. For example, Andy notes that he does not feel comfortable in social interactions with traditional-age students (despite participant observation evidence

that showed him interacting freely with them), but did feel comfortable interacting academically:

It makes me feel accepted...I don't listen to the news too much, but I read my books...I can relate to other people on that level. When they start talking about music and movies, that's when I've had to shut up. [Andy, age 27, sophomore]

Note Andy's use of extreme language when describing what he felt he had to do in social situations in which popular media was discussed with younger students – he had to “shut up.” Andy's reflected appraisals indicate that he felt he had to self-exclude from these situations and imply a feeling of being “shut down” in these situations, which is not a pleasant experience. Andy's reflected appraisals led to a sense of exclusion, one element of stigma.

Perceptions of Others' Negative Evaluations and Rejection

Rejection is a major element of stigma. Nontraditional-age students referred to their reflected appraisals based on the views of the generalized other, and stated that they believed they would be negatively evaluated and/or rejected by others, particularly traditional-age students. Specifically, they worried that others might think they had taken a major misstep in the past that had resulted in educational delay, and worried that others would consider them a failure. Alan discusses what he thinks others might think when he reveals his age on campus:

I worry that there's a stereotype and you know, that students who come back, who return to school when they're older, it's because they did something wrong. It's, you know, like...they spent the last five years in prison...[T]hat might be what's on people's minds when you tell them that, you know, you're older. Sort of like... like 'Oh you loser. What's your problem? Why are you waiting?' ...I had this... fear that, you know, people saw that as being hand-in-hand with the guy who's 35 and still lives in mom's basement...[Alan, age 26, junior]

Alan's fear is that others will believe his reason for delayed college entry is the commission of a major error – a crime - in his past. Note his use of language – “You loser.” Alan fears an extreme value judgment about his motivation and/or abilities. A real interaction in which younger students convey this would be hurtful and stigmatizing indeed.

Debbie believes that others are disappointed that she's not a graduate student. She uses reflected appraisals based on the generalized other to guide her reflected appraisals of graduate students on campus, and uses social comparisons to compare herself against others her age. She believes others her age may be graduate students (but not undergraduates) and evaluates herself as inferior because of this. She believes others expect her to be a graduate student because of her age and that it is when she reveals her undergraduate status that others become disappointed and disinterested in her. However, she is aware that it might only be her perception that this was what was produced the perceived disinterest:

I spend a lot of time at the food co-op and because there's not enough tables there, I always end up sharing and so a lot of times you introduce yourself and you're like “Hey, how are you doing? Are you a student?” ...I meet a lot of grad students down there...They always assume I'm a grad student cause I'm right at that age...[I]t might be something I'm projecting onto people, but... they seem to be disappointed when I'm not a grad student. And they're just like “oh ok” and then they don't really wanna talk as much. [Debbie, age 28, senior]

Debbie's reflected appraisal is that she does not measure up to the expectations of graduate students who are about her age, that they are “disappointed” in her. Her quote suggests that she feels she has been rejected – a key element of stigma - because of her age. This occurs even though she realizes that this disappointment might only be her own perception.

Debbie's age-based reflected appraisals follow her off-campus as well. Note that she does not consider alternate explanations, such as the time constraints of graduate school, for the discontinued contact, but rather attributes it to the intersection of her undergraduate status and age:

I've met a couple of people who are also history majors but history grad students. And you know, they were disappointed that like...I met this one girl at my husband's work. She was like the girlfriend of one his co-workers and we just happened to be sitting near each other at a company party. And we started talking. It's like "Oh you go to [university name]. Oh you're at the history department. Wow great!" And then when she found out I was undergrad...we really hit it off at this party and then she just never would get in contact with me. It was just like "oh ok." Like I always send a couple of e-mails but then after that... She answered them at first and I was like "Oh hey let's get coffee sometime. I'm free these days and these days," [but it] just never... happened. [Debbie, age 28, senior]

Debbie's reflected appraisals are based on a specific other, a person she met at a party. Although Debbie did not report that this person said anything negative about her age or undergraduate status, and in fact the person initially answered her e-mails, she still feels rejected because contact was not maintained. Had she considered alternate explanations, she might not have viewed her age as stigmatizing, but her cognitions about the unreciprocated attempts at friendship created a sense of exclusion rather than the simple knowledge that contact was lost.

Debbie also notes the evaluative component of this reflected appraisal, which she begins to absorb, and attributes her past "failure" to her own actions. This occurs regardless of the fact that conflict with her parents had resulted in the need to move out of her family's home, pay for school herself, and hold two jobs while attending school during her initial attempt at college:

[I]t just seems like there's a path that you're supposed to take. Society defines what you're supposed to do. High school, and then you're

supposed to go into the military and then go to college, or go into college or, you know, maybe go to the peace corps, something like that, but then you gotta go to college like right away while you're still young and you're like early twenties...It makes me feel like I'm wrong or bad because I'm not on that status yet. I'm not on that level of education or..you know, that level of adulthood...I just feel like, you know, like I messed up. Like I was in college and then I dropped out...Yeah. I feel like I messed up. [Debbie, age 28, senior]

Debbie's description of the "path that you're supposed to take" is a good description of the "generalized other." She clearly states that there is an expectation in society that people will be done with college in their early twenties. She uses social comparisons based on that expectation, and self-evaluates on the negative end of the inferiority/superiority axis. Debbie did not report that anyone else made negative comments about her age, but her own cognitions produce in her a sense of inferiority.

Her comments are melancholy - she mentions feeling "wrong" and "bad," like she "messed up." Rather than focusing on pride in her return to school, she blames herself for doing it at the "wrong" age, and negatively evaluates herself against other, younger undergraduates.

Debbie's encounter with a college teacher (likely a teaching assistant) who was younger than her was not negative in and of itself – no one said anything hurtful to her – but after this encounter she negatively evaluated herself:

Oh my God. Last semester I had a teacher who was only 25...[I]t was the very first day of class and he sort of made, he was like lookin' around class and he was like "There's probably some of you in this class who are gonna be older than me. And I'm only 25."...And I was just like "Oh my God." It was the first time that I had a teacher younger than me... A college student is no older than 23...[I]t makes me disappointed in myself. It makes me feel like I'm wrong or bad because I'm not on that status yet. I'm not on that level of education or..you know, that level of adulthood...Like it made me feel like... I should be a teacher. I should have been a teacher four years ago. [I]t was disheartening. [Debbie, age 28, senior]

Debbie's reflected appraisals were based on the generalized other, and led to social comparisons with others her age that produced a negative self-evaluation even when no one said anything negative about her age, and even when she does not directly reference specific others' actual evaluations. Rather than feeling negative as a result of negative interactions, as Goffman (1963) would emphasize, the underdeveloped portion of Goffman's (1963) theory – reflected appraisals - comes to the forefront here.

Men hinted at the reflected appraisal of not meeting the generalized other's expectation of being a provider by the mid-twenties or early thirties. Like Debbie, Rodney hints at others' disappointment, despite their encouraging words, as he attributes his current undergraduate status to his own failings, even though the death of a close family member and a serious physical accident occurred during his earlier enrollment:

I think it's not the age that bothers me...I think for me it's the ratio between age and accomplishment. And I think at 30...though no one's really put any pressure on me, and my friends and family, everybody's been very supportive, and said all the obligatory things they're supposed to say - you know, when I bring up my concern about it, no one, including myself, expected me to be here at this age... [Rodney, age 29, sophomore]

Rodney then uses social comparison to his group of friends, which puts him on the negative side of the inferiority/superiority axis regarding accomplishment. He feels like he shouldn't be a student at his age. Once again, he absorbs the evaluative dimension of the reflected appraisals of his friends and family, citing personal choices as the reasons for his "failings." Rodney continues:

I hear stories about what my classmates are doing and what my friends are doing and recognize that were it not for many of my own choices, I could be much farther along in whatever trajectory I would have been in. [Rodney, age 29, sophomore]

His social comparisons extend to specific others – his classmates from his previous enrollment and his friends. He chides himself for not being further along in his life trajectory. Likewise, Leith hints at the provider role in his discussion of being slightly insecure about the way in which he believes others measure his success. Note that he cites “stereotypes” as a reason for feeling insecure about being an older undergraduate:

I mean to some degree there is some insecurity about being older and not having an undergraduate degree, like... I don't know where that comes from. Just sort of a stereotype or a certain...perceived sort of implication of my...success or whatever. [Leith, age 27, sophomore]

Although Leith recognizes that being older and having an undergraduate degree is a “stereotype”, it does affect him, and is incorporated as the generalized other in his reflected appraisals. He believes that the lack of the degree implies a lack of success.

In summary, participants' reflected appraisals based on specific others and the generalized other led them to believe others would be negatively evaluate and/or reject them, and social comparisons led participants to evaluate themselves negatively. These cognitions occurred both when actual negative interactions were absent, and when some time had passed after a negative interaction, such as with Sarah and the Greek girl.

The Role of Social Comparisons in Maintaining and Moderating Stigma

Results of this study suggest that the cognitive process of social comparisons played a dual role in maintaining elements of stigma. Although one cognitive process – reflected appraisals – generally maintained feelings of stigma even when interactions were positive, another cognitive process – social comparison – at times maintained feelings of stigma, but at other times took a step toward moderating feelings of stigma. In particular, when social comparisons with traditional-age students were made along the

dimensions of academic commitment and passion or maturity, participants evaluated themselves as superior, while social comparisons with traditional-age students based on age stereotypes led to participants' evaluation of themselves as inferior. Social comparisons occurred along the lines of similarity/difference and inferiority/superiority.

Social Comparisons: Similarity/Difference

Nontraditional-age undergraduates noted that they were generally different from, and in fact defined themselves in opposition to, younger undergraduates. Nontraditional-age undergraduates used social comparison to help them find their location along the axis of similarity/difference to traditional-age undergraduates. In my study, participants only rarely reported feeling similar to younger students; rather, participants emphasized their feelings of difference and defined themselves as students in opposition to traditional-age students. Specific areas of difference included maturity, motivation, value placed on social activities, energy level, and memory. Debbie describes the ways in which she differs from traditional-age undergraduates, such as differences in value placed on the social sphere:

INT: What images come to mind when you think of the term "college students?"

DEBBIE: The butt-cracks of girls who is [sic] in front of me and occasionally their thongs...partying and stayin' up late...

INT: And what would you say a college student's values are?

DEBBIE: A college student's values. I think that the things that they value most are their social life...A college student is no older than 23...So I'm not necessarily associating myself with these values...When do I feel most like a student? During midterms and finals...When I'm studying and I have to forego my social activities to stay home and study. [Debbie, age 28, senior]

Although earlier in the paper, I showed that Debbie uses traditional-age students as her reference group when she evaluates herself negatively for being in school at an older age and believes she stands out on campus, here she sets herself apart from them by emphasizing differences in prioritization of the social sphere versus academics. Age, energy level, and memory were other areas in which participants noted their differences from younger students:

“Kids...[T]hey’re all my children’s age...They’re all kids, and I don’t think of myself in that manner.” [Lisa, age 47, junior]

“Energy...They’re half of my age...Their memory still good. They’re young...They have good grade [sic] because their memory still fresh [sic].” [Laura, age 40, sophomore]

Participants often mentioned that they were more motivated than younger students. Andy describes the difference between his motivation in class and that of traditional-age students:

[T]he kids, they’re there [in class] because they have to because there’s going to be a quiz administered. Otherwise they have no higher functions of their brain going on besides walking and breathing. They could all wear the shirt that says “I’m dressed and up and what more do you want?”...I’m going “Come on! Every day’s a test! You gotta impress your TA or teacher!” [Andy, age 27, sophomore]

Social comparisons such as this directly contrast with earlier reflected appraisals in which participants believed others might think they were “losers” for coming to school at a later age. It represents an interesting reversal of their self-evaluations based on cognitions, and perhaps also represents a cognitive compensation for those earlier negative thoughts.

Although participants typically described themselves as different from younger students, they sometimes held mixed views, or noted particular realms in which they

were similar. For example, Mitch believes he is similar to them regarding the realm of what they must do in terms of academic tasks:

I can complain about too much homework and papers and combining all the papers showing up at the same time, and they can all appreciate that kind of pressure...[W]e're all dealing with it. It's not, no one's getting a special consideration because they're older. We've all got the same problems, no matter how old they are. [Mitch, age 53, senior]

Quotes such as this suggest that participants carefully considered the ways in which they were similar to or different from younger students, and were not unilateral in differentiating themselves from them. Rather they noted specific areas in which they were similar or different.

Social Comparisons: Superiority/Inferiority

As noted earlier, participants described themselves in terms of the elements of stigma – feeling excluded, feeling like they stand out, and feeling like others evaluate them negatively and reject them. However, they also used social comparisons in a way that placed them on the positive side of the superiority/inferiority axis regarding particular spheres and areas of evaluation, such as maturity level, passion for learning, and academic knowledge and commitment. For example, Alan notes his maturity, enthusiasm and self-direction and contrasts this with younger students' lack of academic interest as he describes the imagined difference in how he and younger students interacted with academic advisors when school began:

So I'm here I am, walking in. I'm like "Ok. This is what I'm taking. This is my plan for the, you know, 3 semesters"...[as opposed to] 18, 19 year-olds who are like – [in exaggerated affected voice] "Ummm, uhhhh, where's the kegger?" [Alan, age 26, junior]

Here, Alan uses social comparisons to evaluate himself as more mature and academically committed than traditional-age students. This contrasts sharply with his earlier statement in which he believed others would think him a “loser” because of his delayed enrollment. In other words, although Alan is aware of what he believes is the stereotype of what students “should” be, through his own cognitions, he finds dimensions of being a student in which he believes he is superior to those who meet the stereotype (younger students).

In interviews, many participants became visibly annoyed with younger students, spoke louder, and began to talk very quickly as they rattled off a laundry list of ways in which younger students were inferior to them, especially regarding maturity levels. For example, when I asked Toby whether there were ways he felt better than or worse than other students, he gave me a devilish grin, looked up at the ceiling for a moment, placed both arms on the table straight out in front of him, leaned forward, and replied:

Aw man. That was like the question I'd been waiting for... I could rattle off a hundred things. Consideration. Promptness...Group projects are a nightmare because you just get calls all the time – “Hey, you know, went out drinkin' last night. I forgot.”...[Sounding appalled] I mean, you came back when you were 30. Would you ever even consider about doing that to somebody? [Toby, age 27, junior]

Toby uses social comparisons to his advantage, and in referencing my age at return is seemingly confiding to me as one of his “own.” This quote suggests he has cognitively, rather than interactionally, established the group superiority sometimes used by stigmatized groups to which Goffman (1963) referred.

Rob emphasizes academic achievement as a reason for his superiority to younger students, and raises his voice angrily as he describes the way in which he feels the university does not accommodate him, despite the fact that older undergraduates on average have higher grades than traditional-age students. His choice of academic

competence as a dimension for social comparison with traditional-age students leads him to feel superior to them, but his reflected appraisal of staff and faculty and the university is that this perceived superiority is not recognized by others:

[I]t's a four-year college. It's geared for 18-year-old little shits comin' out of high school...This college is not geared for someone like me...In all fairness they should probably coddle to me a little bit more...[P]eople my age...generally tend to do better in school...so why wouldn't you want somebody like me? [Rob, age 26, junior]

Rob's social comparisons are so strong that they produce anger at the reference group of traditional-age students. He feels he has been treated unjustly by the university which does not "coddle to" him despite his superiority.

Finally, these social comparisons sometimes played out during interaction through mentorship of younger students. Andy describes the way in which he views his role as a mentor, stating that the younger students see him as "a god" because he mentors them. Mentorship allows for a power reversal, placing him on the extreme positive end of the superiority/inferiority axis:

I do guided study sessions that are not organized thru learning assistance center, I just do it on my own accord...[Traditional-age students] see me as...umm...a God. As long as you stay one step ahead they look up to ya. [Andy, age 27, sophomore]

Interestingly, Andy's reflected appraisals of the younger students did not always match what occurred during participant observation of Andy in class. Although in lecture, a younger student approached him to schedule a study appointment with him, other students seemed annoyed by him or simply ignored him when he made efforts to help others or show his knowledge before and during discussion group:

7:45 a.m. – I arrive for the 8 a.m. General Physics discussion group. I am the first in the room...[T]he classroom contains about 60 beige plastic deskchairs with gray formica writing pallets on their right arms in rows of 10. They have grey formica writing pallets on the right arm of the

desks...The room has a sterile feel to it – it’s like sitting inside a ledger book. The walls are made of cinder blocks painted white. The light sage-green tile floor looks institutional, like a hospital... Andy is the fourth student to arrive at about 7:50...He announces a broad question to the three students at large – asks if anyone has done their homework yet. He also announces that he has done his homework. (Homework was not due today; he has done it early.) The three students mutter “no”. Then one asks if he can see it – “It’ll give me something to do during discussion.” Another, sounding unimpressed, says “I’ve seen it.” The teaching assistant arrives at 8 a.m., entering through the rear door. He wears a green and blue striped flannel shirt, and walks to the front of the room and asks the class if the problems make sense. At this, Andy states that he “accidentally printed an extra six copies of the homework”, walks to the front of the room and hands these to the teaching assistant...By the end of class, no one else has taken copies of Andy’s homework. [Field Notes, Andy, age 27, sophomore, General Physics]

It appears that it is Andy’s *perception*, not others’ actual appraisals, nor the interaction itself, which produced his feeling of superiority. For example, in his 8 a.m. discussion group, Andy quickly made it clear that he is well-versed in the subject matter and is ready to help other students with their homework. Although visually he blends in, he behaviorally distinguishes himself from the other three students, who appear to be of traditional age, by announcing that he has done his homework and is offering to share the results of this (apparently collaborative) assignment. Only one student asks if he can see it; others ignore him. It is not others’ reactions, but rather Andy’s cognitions about younger students “looking up to him” for his academic ability, that produce in him a feeling of superiority.

Finally, participants did at times note that they did not necessarily feel superior to younger students, but instead held them in rather high regard. Several participants described younger students as mature, responsible and hardworking:

I been [sic] very amazed to see and I’m very glad also that I’ve been involved with these kind of people, that they are very, very into school...Very responsible and very...mature...for their age. [Joan, age 35, junior]

Even Alan, who previously noted that traditional-age students were less mature and less committed than he, noted that this was not necessarily the case for all younger students:

College is not pure hedonism as much as you might think from *Animal House* and stuff like that...They may go crazy on Friday and Saturday night but they're also all working toward something...They work hard, they play hard. [Alan, age 26, junior]

Participants' social comparisons of themselves to traditional-age students were not uniformly negative or positive but, as shown earlier, varied depending on the domain evaluated, as well as varying across individuals, who also recognized that there were intragroup differences among younger students.

In summary, social comparisons typically were made by participants along the lines of difference from, and superiority to, younger students, even though participants also described feeling stigmatized when they considered reflected appraisals. Social comparisons appeared to both maintain and moderate stigma, and serve a different function than reflected appraisals for the stigmatized identity of older student.

Chapter 7: Discussion

Theories of stigma, although noting the role of cognition, emphasize interaction as the mechanism through which stigma is activated (Goffman 1963). Although Goffman (1963) implies that social psychological cognitions, such as reflected appraisals and social comparisons, play a role in producing stigma, he grants a lower priority to these factors and does not go into depth in examining them.

Cognitive theories of the self (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]) emphasize the role of reflected appraisals and social comparisons in producing the self-concept. However, the outcome of interest has often been limited to self-esteem, stigma has not been explicitly considered, and the restriction of data collection to survey methodology has limited our understanding of the nuances of these cognitions. This theory can fruitfully be utilized to examine other areas, such as stigma, and further information may be gained by using qualitative methodology, such as in-person interviews and participant observation.

Accounts of people with stigmatized identities in substantive areas, such as black immigrants (Waters 1999), lower class girls (Bettie 2003), middle class blacks (Feagin 1991), and gay men (Herdt and Boxer 1992), illustrate the use of reflected appraisals and social comparisons by stigmatized individuals as they make meaning of their stigmatized identities. However, these studies do not explicitly use a social psychological framework to systematically analyze the role of social psychological processes in meaning-making for stigmatized people. Explicit use of the concepts of reflected appraisals and social comparisons may elaborate on our understanding of cognition in the process of meaning-making for stigmatized individuals.

This study contributes to stigma literature by specifying what Goffman (1963) implies in his landmark work, that there are three cognitive elements to stigma – feelings

of standing out, feelings of exclusion, and the belief that one is or may be negatively evaluated or rejected by others. This study also fills the gaps in the literature by illustrating the significance of the use of internal cognitive processes, particularly reflected appraisals and social comparisons. It also illustrates the way in which they function to maintain stigma, even when stigmatizing interactions are limited or absent, and even when the stigmatized individual recognizes that the feelings of standing out, exclusion, and others' negative evaluations or rejection may be internally produced.

Participants reported feeling like they stood out, feeling excluded, and thinking that others did or would evaluate them negatively or reject them. I argue that Goffman's (1963) work suggests that all of these are elements of stigma. Further, these cases suggest that these feelings and thoughts were activated by reflected appraisals and social comparisons even when my observations did not indicate negative or stigmatizing interaction. This study expands on Goffman's (1963) emphasis on interaction's role in producing stigma by illustrating the ways in which reflected appraisals and social comparisons support the maintenance of stigma when there has been a past negative interaction. But more importantly, this study illustrates that stigma can arise from reflected appraisals and social comparisons, often based on the generalized other, independently of any negative interactions. These findings expand the focus on stigma maintenance from interaction to cognition, and illustrate their interplay.

Use of these concepts, particularly reflected appraisals based on the generalized other, may help expand our understanding of the ways in which well-known stereotypes might produce self-perceived stigma for minority groups even in the absence of discriminatory environments and interactions. Given this, it is possible that stigma is more common and more pervasive in the self-concept than previously thought. The

internal experience may differ greatly from what is observable, as well as the external reality, and thus is invisible to most people. Therefore, use of these concepts may help us understand why groups generally not considered stigmatized by the general public (such as nontraditional-age students) may still feel stigmatized.

If reflected appraisals affect standing out and lead to self-exclusion, such as in the case of Debbie at the campus' library coffee shop, this may impact stigmatized groups' potential for success. For example, in an extreme example, if a Hispanic woman feels she may stand out on a predominantly white campus, she may choose not to attend college. Additionally, the disconnection between stigma and interaction implied by this study's results regarding reflected appraisals and elements of stigma mean that actual discrimination is quite unnecessary for minority groups to perceive discrimination. Instead, stereotyped messages from, say, mass media may produce a sense of discrimination, regardless of whether this is the way in which others (specific or generalized) actually view or treat them. This is not to say that actual discrimination does not exist, but rather implies an additional layer of problems and challenges associated with stigma and discrimination.

Additionally, this study examines these cognitive processes by using qualitative methods – in-person interviews and participant observation – to get at the meaning of the stigma. Future research attempting to look at meaning-making among members of stigmatized groups may fruitfully use qualitative methods to ask specifically about reflected appraisals. For example, we should ask what they think that specific others think of them as well as about stereotypes they think others hold about their group (the “generalized other”). We should ask separately about social comparisons. For example, we should ask about whether they see themselves as similar or different, and better or

worse, than other particular groups, with a focus on *in what ways* or *in which domains* these comparisons are made to understand more clearly the mental shifts that may occur as stigmatized groups go about making meaning of their identities. Using in-person interviews that focus on these aspects of cognition during meaning-making, in conjunction with participant observation, will help us parcel out the meaning of the identity to oneself as opposed to the way in which they believe others see them as opposed to how others actually treat them or view them. In this way we can more clearly understand the conditions under which others' real and perceived evaluations do or do not matter for stigma maintenance, and which domains are relevant (e.g., academic vs. social) for a group or individual in that process.

Although interaction can produce stigma, and stigma affects interaction, results from this study suggest that cognition is central in each of these processes. Interaction between normals and potentially stigmatized individuals does not consistently produce stigma, but rather sometimes produces and sometimes does not produce stigma, depending on one's cognitions about the interaction. It is even possible that cognitions may produce stigma in the absence of interaction. Additionally, after accurately or inaccurately perceiving stigma, potential behavior is filtered through cognitions before it is acted upon. Finally, as shown with most of these participants' social comparisons, cognition may moderate stigma, and therefore result in further interplay behavior and interactions, such as when older students mentored younger ones.

Results from this study also suggest that social comparisons play a dual role in stigma, sometimes maintaining it, but often moderating it. Social comparisons typically were made by participants along the lines of difference from, and superiority to, younger students, even though participants also described feeling stigmatized when they

considered reflected appraisals. Negative consequences were moderated during particular types of social comparisons, especially those in which the academic, rather than social, aspect of the student role was emphasized. This illustrates the importance of the domain under consideration during social comparisons, and shows that not all domains are evaluated with the same valence when considering superiority/inferiority. In fact, one's internal evaluations about two domains – such as general stereotypes versus academic versus social domains regarding “student” - may oppose one another. Results suggest that social comparisons with the stereotypically “better” group do not always result in a negative self-concept, and may even result in a positive self-evaluation.

Results suggest that, for stigmatized groups, reflected appraisals maintain stigma if the beliefs are that one stands out, could be excluded, or might be rejected or negatively evaluated. However, results also suggest that social comparisons may compensate for the stigmatizing effects of negative reflected appraisals, particularly if specific domains are chosen on which the individual feels superior, since social comparisons are not, by definition, always based on beliefs about others' views while reflected appraisals are. In other words, there is room for a strong, positive self-concept to contradict one's negative reflected appraisals, and thus possibly reduce feelings of stigma. Future work, particularly in the experimental arena, could examine whether negative reflected appraisals may produce or activate compensating positive social comparisons, by inducing negative reflected appraisals via feedback, then asking people to compare themselves to the groups “responsible” for that feedback on a variety of dimensions.

There are interesting implications of these results on social comparisons. On the positive side, the use of social comparisons to increase positive feelings about oneself and one's stigmatized group, particularly comparisons focused on specific domains in which

one sees oneself as “better” than the other group, may be used by advocacy groups and organizers of collective action to solidify group solidarity and pride. These concepts may also be used in psychological counseling of stigmatized people, as well as in supportive organizations for minorities on campus. On the negative side, these types of social comparisons may minimize the perception of the need to challenge negative stereotypes. For example, if the negative stereotypes of delayed college entrants as “losers” were real, and nontraditional-age students effectively ignored them by directing their attention to other dimensions on which they believe they compare positively, no challenge would result in the stereotype. These stereotypes could potentially continue to impact the way in which they are viewed, say, during the admissions process, as well as reinforce the negative treatment they may receive by age peers not currently in college. Additionally, positive social comparisons may complicate intragroup comparisons, disallowing for a challenge to stereotypes. For instance, comparing oneself positively to another group may help reduce feelings of stigma. The pride felt by black immigrants in contrast to the disdain in which they hold American-born blacks (Waters 1999) is one example. However, by doing this, no challenge is presented to stereotypes about *all* blacks that may be held by the majority group, whites.

Finally, just because social comparisons were found to be positive for nontraditional-age students does not mean they are usually positive for other stigmatized groups. They may be negative. Nontraditional-age students’ stigma is temporary, since they are stigmatized only while they remain students, which is a choice. Many stigmatized statuses, such as race/ethnicity and physical disability, may be permanent and not something one may “opt out” of. Future research should endeavor to find out under

which conditions and/or for which groups social comparisons are positive versus negative. For example, could the severity or the mutability of the stigma be a factor?

This study expands on the stigma literature, using cognitive theories of the self-concept (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]) to illustrate that, beyond the role of interaction emphasized by Goffman (1963), cognitions - specifically reflected appraisals and social comparison – play a role in maintaining and moderating stigma. This study also extends the use of these cognitive concepts beyond the examination of self-esteem, and beyond the use of survey methods, and into the realm of the examination of meaning-making on stigma maintenance by using qualitative interviewing and participant observation methods. It adds to existing literature on people with stigmatized identities (Bettie 2003; Feagin 1991; Herdt and Boxer 1992; Waters 1999;) which uses those methods to describe meaning-making, through the explicit use of cognitive theories of the self within a qualitative methodology to look at how that meaning is produced, what it means to stigmatized individuals, and how that connects with stigma. The continued combined use of this method and interactional and cognitive theories of the self to study stigmatized groups can lead to additional discoveries in a wide variety of substantive areas, for example, women in the military, racial and ethnic minorities, and the physically disabled.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

Identity

- Tell me a little about yourself. [Alternate question] Who is [their name]?
 - (Probe on each role mentioned; note order of roles mentioned & amount of elaboration on each role.)
- How would you complete the following sentence: I am _____. (Ask them to name 5 things that “they are” in order to determine 5 most important identities.)
 - (Probe: Which of these things is most important to you? Why? How do you know you are a [name of identity]? What kinds of things do you do that let you know you’re a [name of identity]? What does being a [name of identity] mean to you?)

Social Connections

- Do you have friends on campus?
 - (Probe: How old are they? How many are there? How close are you to them? What kinds of things do you do together? How often do you get together?)
 - (If no) How do you feel about that?
 - (Probe: Is that okay or do you wish it was different?)
- Do you have friends outside of campus?
 - (Probe: How old are they? How many do you have? How close are you to them? How often do you get together? What do you do together?)

Definition of Student - general

- What images come to mind when you think of the term “college students?”
 - (Probes: What do they look like? What are they doing? Where do they spend time? What do they say? What are their values/what do they think and feel?)

Subjective Experience in School – At Start & Now

- What is it like for you being a college student?
 - (Probe: Walk me through your most recent day on campus from start to end. What were you thinking/feeling?)
- Do you feel like a student? (Whether the answer is yes or no...) Tell me about that.
 - (If yes) How do you know you are a student?/What things do you do that let you know you’re a student?
- When do you feel most like a student? Least like a student?
 - (Probes: Where are you? Who is around you? What are you doing? What time of the day is it? What thoughts are you thinking at that time? What feelings are you thinking at that time?)
 - Tell me about a moment when you 1st really felt like a student.
 - Tell me about a moment when you didn’t feel like a student.
- What does being a college student mean to you?

- Walk me through your 1st day of college as an older student. How was it for you?
 - (Probes: Who was there? Where did you go? Did you talk to anyone about your first day, either before or after you started? What thoughts went through your head on your first day? How did you feel? Did you have to interact with others in new ways?)
- Is your college experience different now from when you 1st started?
 - (Probe: If so, how is it different? Who do you spend time with now at school? Off-campus? Walk me through your most recent day on campus from start to end. Is this how most of your days go, or do things usually go differently? How? Who is around you? Where did you go? What did it feel like?)
- How is your college experience similar to or different from what you did with your time before you started college?
 - (Probe: Could you walk me through a typical day in your life before you started college?)
- How do you feel about wearing clothes with the [school name] logo on them? How do you feel about displaying bumper stickers, notebooks or other items with the [school name] logo on them?
 - (Probe: How do you feel about displaying them on campus? How about off-campus?)

Reflected Appraisals/Interactions/Self-Presentation/Social Integration

- What is it like interacting with other students? How about faculty & staff? How about your advisor?
 - (Probe on each category if not brought up by respondent:
 - 18-22 year-old students/usual college age students
 - students age 25 & older/other students
 - faculty & staff)
 - (Probes: Tell me about [category]. Walk me through your most recent interactions with [category]. How do you feel around them? What thoughts go through your head when you're interacting with them? What do you say to other people about [category]?)
- What do you think the 18-22 year-old/usual college age students think of you? How about the older students? How about faculty & staff? How about your advisor?
 - (Probe on each: What is that like for you? Also probe on academic v. social themes - What do they think about your academic abilities? What do they think about you socially?)
- What do you *want* other students to think of you? What do you want faculty & staff to think of you?
 - (Probes: How do you let them know that you have the desired qualities you mentioned? Do you show others that you are a "college student"? Who do you show this to? How do you show this? Also probe on academic v. social themes – What do you want them to think of your academic abilities? What do you want them to think of you socially?)

- When you compare yourself to other students, how do you feel?
 - (Probe: 18-22 year-old/usual age college students; older students)
 - Do you feel like you're better/worse than those students? In what ways? What is that like for you?

Similarity/Difference to Other Students/Peer Group/Social Comparisons/Stigma

- In what ways are you similar to or different from other students?
 - (Probe: differentiate btwn 18-22-year-old v. young nontraditional v. older nontraditional students)
- Some people have painful experiences as a student, and some don't. What's it like for you?
 - Can you tell me about a specific time when you experienced that? (Where were you? Who was with you? What were you doing? What time of day was it? Did you talk to anyone about it later? What thoughts were you thinking at that time? What feelings were you thinking at that time?)
- Do you ever feel out-of-place on campus?
 - (Probes: What is that like for you? What do you do about it? Where are you? Who is around you? What are you doing? What time of the day is it? What thoughts are you thinking at that time? What feelings are you thinking at that time?)

Academic & Social Activities/Integration

- In the classroom, in what ways do you usually participate or not participate? Walk me through your most recent day in class.
 - (Probe: Is this how most of your days go, or do things usually go differently? How? Walk me through your most recent small group work session in class.)
- Tell me about any extracurricular activities, parties or social events in which you're involved.
 - (Probes: Where are they held? What do you do there? What are the other people there like?)

External (non-school) Environment

- How do the people you know outside of college feel about you going to college? What is that like for you?
 - (Probe: What did they say when you first told them you might want to go to college?)

Nontraditional Student Program on Campus

- (If involved in the [campus nontraditional student program]) What is involvement in the [campus nontraditional student program] like for you? What specific activities & services of the program do you participate in?

- (Probe: Tell me about the other people involved in these activities. How do you feel about them?)

Appendix B

Questions re: Demographics/School & Work Hours
(completed by researcher at start of interview)

Participant # _____

Sex M F

Age _____

College standing (e.g., freshman, sophomore): _____

Race: _____

Marital status: _____

children: _____

Current # credit hours: _____

credit hours last 2 semesters: _____

credit hours in first semester of college: _____

Current # hours paid employment per week: _____

hours paid employment last 2 semesters: _____

hours paid employment in first semester of college: _____

Amount of time in college (# years, # months): _____

Involved in [campus nontraditional student] Program? Y N

How did you hear about the study? Recruitment letter
Flyer
Another research participant
Other _____

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