



**“Identity Affliction: How Stigma Generation in Schools Results
in Struggles of Identity Formation in Students”**

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The Undergraduate Research Writing Conference

• 2020 •

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey



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OF NEW JERSEY

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Introduction:

The school environment is often a place where students relationships and social groups are formed. Within these social groups social rules are often formed to bring the group closer together and create accepted behaviors for everyone to follow. These social rules create normative behavior within the school, which results in the exclusion of those who do not follow these conforming ideals. Normative behavior within a school affects identity development in both excluded individuals as well as those within the social group. When members of the social group are only adhering to restricted forms of expression as a method of accepted behavior, they are not engaging in the act of identity exploration. This exploration pertains to finding new means of expression through experimenting with different ideas, behaviors, and beliefs. Excluded students will ultimately lack the social bond that is needed to create a well-adjusted identity. When a student lacks these social bonds, he/she will experience social isolation. This isolation creates feelings of low self-esteem that can lead to deeper psychological issues in the future (Hall-Lande, 2007, p. 270).

When one form of expression is praised over another, it reinforces the belief that there is a right and wrong in terms of identity. In high school, these forms of expression relate to the accepted social behaviors in the school community, in contrast to modes of expression that do not fit these accepted norms. These constructs can be described through introduction of the *social identity theory*. Developed by Henri Tajfel, this theory explores how one's identity is tied to a group. Essentially, *social identity theory* explains that we have a social identity and this identity is developed through the social bonds and groups that we build with others. We come to know ourselves better when we feel as though we belong to a certain group or multiple groups

(Tarrant, 2011, p. 111). While this theory is essential in understanding how we relate to others, it also explains the negative impact that can result from forming shared social behaviors and identity with a group. With increased social ties to a group, one may experience behaviors of *intergroup discrimination*. This term is defined by the way we associate members of our group in a more positive light than those outside of the group. In this way, we are more likely to judge people outside of the group in a negative way if they do not possess the same social identity shared within the social community (Tarrant, 2011, p. 111). Viewing outsiders in a negative light due to differences in expression or identity alludes to the concept of *stigma generation*. *Stigmas* refer to negative labels put on a group of people in society based off of certain characteristics that these people portray. These groups can be nonconforming in identity or expression, such as appearance, interests, or identifying with non binary sexual preferences. This can create negative attitudes towards these individuals, and consequently, isolation towards them as well, (116, Crosnoe). In formation of a social group, normative social rules regarding accepted expressions and behaviors are integrated into the system of the group as a whole. Students who express their identity in a different way from this accepted norm will ultimately face discrimination and exclusion for their alternative, nonconforming identity. This rigid structure creates struggles in identity development for both ingroup and outgroup members as students try to inhibit unique expression, for the sake of fitting in, while others struggle with isolation and formation of meaningful relationships with peers.

In Robert Crosnoe's book, "Fitting In, Standing Out: Navigating the Social Challenges of High School to Get an Education," the social groups of Lamar high school in Houston, Texas are explored. In this book, Crosnoe discusses the concept of stigmas and how social groups evolve a group mindset, which leads to exclusion of any individual who does not conform to the beliefs of

the whole. This idea of groupthink exemplifies the ways in which identity formation is restricted in developing adolescents as they adhere to rigid structures enforced by social rules. The exploration in struggles of identity development and discrimination is further portrayed in high schools through the book, “Constructing Sexualities and Gendered Bodies in School Spaces: Nordic Insights on Queer and Transgender Students,” by Nordic author Jón Kjaran. In this work, Kjaran studies how stigmas affect behaviors of the community as a whole. This is done through a recount of multiple case studies of students who attended Hilly high school and Field high school in Reykjavik, Iceland. Kjaran mainly focuses on stigmatized groups such as LGBT students, and brings to light how stigmatization of these groups results in isolation and psychological maladjustment such as low self-esteem and depression. The lack of peer support and love, stemming from association of a negative label, creates deeper issues within these adolescents that affect identity formation overall.

In this paper, I will be discussing how normative social rules become ingrained in school communities, ultimately leading to a disruption in identity formation for students who conform to binary structures and those excluded from the community as well. This heteronormative culture is characterized by an emphasis on binary sexuality and gender schemas, which become ingrained in mainstream society within the school. This culture rejects those who may identify as LGBT or express themselves in a way that transcends gender norms. The question being explored is: how do the social norms within the school community contribute to the delay in personal identity formation in students? How does exclusion from the social community affect identity formation and what groups are targeted in this exclusion? Furthermore, how can schools implement education of differences in gender and sexual identity in curriculums? The formation of social stigmas in school entices students to follow normative social rules in an effort to avoid

rejection by school peers. The rigid structure of these accepted norms consequently hinder the development of unique identity formation. These social rules have the ability to become transformed and expanded through the increased education and awareness about diversity of identity through the advocacy of adult staff in schools. The social identity theory explores the importance of social groups, the potential toxicity generated within, and how its concepts of can introduce alternative ways of thinking.

Social Identity Theory in School: Construct Generation and Its Consequences

Increased bonding with the social group may lead adolescents to forming social constructs that reflect the accepted norms of behavior and expression within the group. The social identity theory exemplifies this development, as students in high school come to form an identity “at the social end of the identity spectrum,” (Beauchamp, et. al, 693). This theory explains the social behaviors that are formed and displayed in social groups. When applying the concept of the “collective” in conjunction with identity formation, one may observe that, “a substantial part of the self-concept is derived from group memberships (our ingroups),” (Tarrant, 111). This impact is due to the social gratification obtained from having a sense of belonging to a certain group. This sense of belonging may cause individuals to enforce certain behaviors upon other members of the group to protect the inclusive bond that has formed. If one-member strays from the norms of the group, he/she may then be excluded. In this way, one’s identity becomes tethered to the normative behaviors and beliefs held within the collective. Normative behaviors form a rigid structure of identification that does not leave much room for personal growth. In this way, one’s social identity to the group may become too attached that he/she does not have the room to develop a unique identity. Instead of expressing oneself in a liberating way, adolescents resolve to behave identically to each other, restricting the space they have to

express their personal identity, rather than the collective, social one. There is no exploration going on here, rather, a stagnant nature has been constructed. One where students are limiting themselves to the standards set up by an external source, rather than their own internal identity.

This creation of social constructs in school friend groups has the power to delay unique identity formation through rigid structure and exclusive properties . The idea of construct generation is portrayed in the social rules groups developed in Robert Crosnoe’s book “Fitting In, Standing Out: Navigating the social challenges of high school to get an education” where he introduces a case study of students from Lamar High School in Houston, TX. In this study, Crosnoe found that teenagers “reluctantly” confessed to the social rules set up in the school community. When these students ever deviated from the normative path “their close friends policed them” in a friendly effort to remind each other of the social rules and constructs that had been developed to keep students on “track socially” (Crosnoe, 2011, p. 145). Those within the friend group enforced behaviors upon other members in an effort to maintain inclusivity. When group members were “at risk of breaking known social rules”, it was the other members of that group that reminded them of the expected behavior and conduct to be exhibited (Crosnoe 2011, p. 145). The social identity theory portrays how this inclusive social identity can easily become oppressive. This “policed” behavior ultimately enforces the social rules created in schools upon other friends in the group. Enforcing the rules upon each other in an effort to create similar identities within the group only forces everyone in the group to compartmentalize certain aspects of their identity. They are only allowed to show various sides of themselves because other sides would not be accepted by the collective group.

Isolation: The Psychological Effects of Exclusion on Identity

Formation of a social binary in school may lead to exclusion of students who do not fit this mold. This exclusion will ultimately hinder proper development of the self as isolated students are not receiving the peer support and friendship they need. A person may experience stigmatization from a certain social group when that individual's "social identity" does not conform to societal norms, (Kurzban et al., 187). This stigmatization is created by other students in school who see this social transcendence as a threat to the social rules that have been generated. Social support is extremely important for developing adolescents. In "navigating their social world," high schools students benefit from the "psychological support and sense of belonging" that fellow peers bring to the developing psyche (Hall-Lande, 2007, p. 266). When a student is not receiving these factors, he/she is not getting what the cognitive mind needs to develop correctly. Without this proper development, the way one's identity is formed will become damaged.

Individuals who do not conform to the norms set up by peers in the school community may experience a rejection from peers that leads to psychological disturbances in identity development. The creation of social stigma, "can psychically separate teenagers from their surroundings, increasing the likelihood that they see themselves, accurately or not, as not fitting in socially at high school," (Crosnoe, 119). This awareness of the stigmas placed against a student, may cause that student to feel alienated by the community, even when no direct harm has been placed on them. The basic knowledge of knowing that others view you as different from the rest, due to a label, is enough to cause psychological damage to an individual. Studies done by Jennifer Hall-Lande on the psychological effects of social isolation in teens found that those who had higher risks of social isolation in adolescence experienced feelings of "low self-esteem, perceptions of social competence, and internalizing problems such as depression," (Hall-

Lande, 2007, p. 267). As the adolescent mind is still developing, it is no wonder that a student would encounter these feelings upon rejection by peers. This type of support is one of the most important parts about adolescence, especially in the high school environment. One cannot reach his/her highest potential if there is no love for the self present. These inner feelings of low self-esteem and depression creates a skewed image of the self. This identity can become twisted, in a sense, portraying an individual who views the world through that lens of rejection.

Some groups are more vulnerable to social rejection at the hands of stigmatization. These vulnerable groups are more likely to experience struggles in identity formation due to the experience of isolation in adolescence. This struggle of true expression is seen in Jón Kjarran's case study of a student named Gunnar at Hilly high school in Reykjavik, Iceland. Gunnar mentions the overwhelming "pressure" to fit in with the heteronormative behavior in school. In the school, kids would "talk very openly about their sex life", which was something that Gunnar could not relate to. This was due to the fear of being outcasted by his peers for identifying as gay. He recounts that this disclosure of intimate information "was expected" in all students. Due to this fear, Gunnar excluded himself from this type of discussion between peers, and therefore felt, "like I was less valued as a man," (Kjarran, 2018, p. 99). Gunnar represents a group of people in society that often have negative stigmas placed upon them. He was aware that his sexual orientation had the power to isolate him from his peers. This consciousness of the negative stigma against him, caused Gunnar to withhold elements of his identity from the community. The sacrifice Gunnar made in regards to his expression was one he was willing to make, even though fellow peers still made him feel "less valued as a man". This community had the ability to instill fear over non-binary expression with the threat of being rejected by one's support system. It was Gunnar's social identity that took precedence over his personal

development. If Gunnar had experienced a social support system that accepted him for his true self, he may have been able to integrate both his social and personal identity into one. This could have been an important growth in Gunnar's self-concept.

Evidence for Deschamps Intergroup Model: The Positive Side of Social Identity

One may argue that identification to social groups will actually help adolescents form a positive attitude towards outgroup members. In an article written by Augusto Palmonari called "Adolescents and their Peer Groups: a study on the significance of peers, social categorization processes and coping with developmental tasks", the Deschamps Intergroup Model was described as, "the greater the distance between the self and the ingroup (that is, the lower members' identification with the group), the greater distance between ingroup and outgroup," (Palmonari, 45). Therefore, the greater one's identification with the members of the social group, the more positive his/her evaluation of others outside the group will be. This contradicts the idea that the social identity theory creates identification within groups that will consequently lead to negative attitudes towards outsiders. In a study done by Mark Tarrant, in an article called "Adolescent Peer Groups and Social Identity", Deschamps intergroup model further portrays how personal identity is strengthened by friendship with others. In this study, 115 male and female adolescents, age 14-15 years were asked to form evaluations of the peer group they belonged to as well as those of other groups in school. From this experiment, Tarrant found that adolescents who had high "levels of group identification" were more likely to "form favorable evaluations of their peers groups," (Tarrant, 2011, p. 120). When group members felt a high identification with other members in the group, they were given the self-esteem to see outer groups in a positive light. This positive evaluation shows that elevating one's sense of belonging with the in-group may actually generate positive outcomes when relating to out-group members.

Instead of viewing other individuals in a negative way, the more one was connected to other peers in the social group, the greater ability he/she had to transfer that inner positivity to others. This contradicts the notion that sharing identity with other members of a group creates toxic behaviors towards outer individuals. Rather than judging other people for not sharing the behaviors of the in-group, those with higher identification to their friends had the confidence to view other types of personalities in a positive way. This information surely complicates the evidence that is presented throughout this paper. It shows that there are instances where discrimination or stigma does not affect student's perceptions of others. It is in these cases where one may see adolescents spreading love to one another. If anything is to be taken from the discussion in this section, it is that stigma generation has the ability to transform positive thought, into negative judgement. In the other cases presented throughout my research, I have found that stigmas result in discrimination against other students. This intergroup discrimination is often generated from the social identity adolescents develop with their respective groups.

Restoring the Balance: How Schools are Eradicating Stigmas Day by Day

In an effort to change the thinking process of students in high school communities, it is important for school staff to introduce new ways of thinking. These new thinking patterns have the ability to transform how students see and treat each other. In 2003 an article was published by the PR Newswire called, *National Youth Advocacy Coalition Hails Harvey Milk High as The First Accredited LGBT Public High School in the US*, which discussed the opening of the first high school in America that was specifically built for LGBT students. This school had initially been run out of a classroom, but expanded to a building that welcomed over 170 students in NYC (Newswire, 2003, p. 1). The creation of a space for LGBT students to flourish without the negativity of stigmas is extremely important in the healthy development of these adolescent's

identities. It is in this open space that students of all identities can come together and learn about each other's differences in a way that does not judge or negatively label any one type of expression. It is through this positive education about identity that students will learn to respect the differences of others and feel confident in their personal self. This confidence and respect of identity is seen in an article by Meredith Worthen called, *The Interactive Impacts of High School Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) on College Student Attitudes Toward LGBT Individuals: An Investigation of High School Characteristics*. In this article Worthen focuses on how the presence of gay-straight alliances in high schools impacted students attitudes in college. Worthen found that in high schools across the country, Gay-Straight Alliances in the school were significant predictors of positive attitudes towards LGBT groups from all students (Worthen, 2014, p. 236). It is through an open environment that educates developing adolescents on all types of identity that one will see a positive change in attitude towards difference. It is through these differences that we find our own unique expression.

Conclusion

Fear of differences in schools creates a heteronormative social environment in which students isolate those who display non binary means of expression from the rest of the community. This type of exclusion can cause delay in the development of identity in the adolescent mind, which hinders overall growth and sense of self. The social identity theory posits that as one increasingly identifies with their social group, behavior and morality melds together to create a group personality, or groupthink situation. In this way, students have the ability to negatively view outsiders who do not identify in the same way as their social group. Deschamps Intergroup Model contradicts this idea, with evidence from Tarrant and Palmonari who argue that increased identification with one's social group will result in the ability to

positively evaluate those outside the group. This concept is derived from the belief that with increased positive relations to a support group, one can further direct that positivity to others outside the inner group in school communities. Despite these claims, evidence from various case studies prove otherwise, that with increased adherence to social norms comes a greater display of judgement to those who continuously display nonconforming, expressive ideals. This type of normative behavior results in fear of the differences that others display, which threatens to disrupt the system of behavior created within the school society. Increased advocacy for the differences of all students, relating to expression or identity, such as LGBT students, will create a more accepting environment in schools. This open environment has the ability to transform relationships between students and educate these adolescents on the importance of genuine expression. With the freedom to truly express oneself, students will be able to truly develop his/her inner identity, and explore their true potential in life.

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