

## Crisis Rhetoric, Stigma Play: The Contested Status of Humanities Majors on an Elite University Campus

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*This article extends symbolic interactionist thought on authenticity and stigma allure into the context of higher education in the United States where the status of the humanities is contested. Our abductive analysis of twenty-nine, semistructured interviews with undergraduates at an elite university reveals that selecting a humanities major has social costs. Yet the students who opt into these majors renegotiate ideologies, practices, and resources in ways that generate meaningful educational experiences. Navigating these problematic situations in which status is threatened enables the social production and personal aesthetic experience of authenticity. These findings add a new evidentiary basis to theory on stigma allure and, in doing so, demonstrate that when rhetorics of crisis collide with the late modern quest for authenticity voluntary stigma can become a powerful, if also unwieldy, resource.*

Keywords: stigma allure, authenticity, sociology of higher education, humanities crisis, crisis rhetoric

### INTRODUCTION

In the 2014–2015 academic year, a team of undergraduate research fellows (URFs) and I interviewed students at an elite university about their experiences with and perceptions of grading practices on campus. Noting the lack of students' voices in the contentious national debate over grade inflation, we wondered what undergraduates thought about the relationship between grading practices and their own learning experiences (Lewis et al. 2015). We did not initially ask about perceived differences between grading standards in STEM fields and humanities departments; our participants, however, repeatedly made claims about these differences. "There's a perception that humanities majors are easier than science majors," noted a sophomore African American Studies major. "I think that has a lot to do with grades. People have

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the idea that it's really easy to get an A in humanities majors."<sup>1</sup> What surprised us most was that these beliefs not only overdetermined the emotional and social value of high marks but also had a significant impact on how humanities majors felt about themselves vis-à-vis peers in STEM fields.

It is important to note at the outset that our empirical site has fewer humanities majors than comparable institutions and does not make its data about departmental grading trends public. On a national level, there is very little comparative data available on grading standards across disciplines. Despite collecting this data internally, universities have chosen to relinquish it to the public only on rare occasions (Yale University 2013). The limited available evidence from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, however, suggests that our participants' assumptions are likely oversimplifications of more complex grading dynamics. After disclosing that the median grade at Harvard is an A — and that the most commonly awarded grade is an A, university officials stated that “that distribution holds true for undergraduates across each of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences's three divisions,” a fact that they argued “challenges the belief held by some that grade inflation is less prevalent in courses in the sciences than in the humanities” (Clarida and Conway 2013). In contrast, reports on Princeton's grade deflation program found that STEM fields offer more large, introductory-level courses that dole out low grades in order to narrow the pool of majors, meanwhile humanities departments offer more small, upper-level courses that include close collaboration with professors (Princeton University 2014; Rampell 2014). Despite this discrepancy in evidence from elite institutions, the humanities majors we interviewed still expressed a deeply felt sense of stigmatization rooted in assumptions they believed that others held about the laxity of grading in and impracticality of the humanities.

These feelings of stigmatization, however, are neither entirely positive nor entirely negative. Given that stigma-normal categories and the meanings and experiences connected to these categories occur within and are shaped by changing historical and cultural contexts (Dovidio et al. 2001; Hacking 2004; Hannem and Bruckert, 2012; Kusow 2004; Lopes 2006; Oyserman and Swim, 2001; Reissman, 2000), the ongoing public discussion over the decline of the humanities colors the context within which today's humanities majors encounter, resist, and eventually embrace stigma. Many prominent humanists take as a given that traditional fields in the humanities are under attack, in a state of crisis or, less apocalyptically, in decline: In a *New York Times* op-ed, Gutting (2013) noted that “‘crisis’ and ‘decline’ are the words of the day in discussions of the humanities.” The American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2013) has described the humanities as “endangered.” Wolin (2011:9) has even posited that we may be “justified in posing the question: does the contemporary crisis of the humanities portend a situation where we are at risk, quite literally, of losing our souls?” The rhetoric of crisis has, in turn, invited dramatic defenses of the humanities and attendant rhetorical opportunities to enumerate the special contributions of humanist inquiry to both higher education and society, and the ability of humanism to invest life with meaning and “soul” (Franke 2009; Harpham

2005; Sitze, Sarat and Wolfson 2015). The humanities majors we interviewed who were troubled by stigma reproduced this rhetoric; claiming disregard for grades, they tended to report reveling in the humanities' presumed unique access to the liberal arts' romantic notion of self-liberation, and spoke of their peers in STEM fields as grade-oriented, market-driven educational consumers.

In this way, students make use of the public rhetoric of crisis to reverse stigma. More than an actual emergency, however, the crisis might be better understood as an unwieldy rhetorical opportunity, and the responses to it as rife with unintended consequences. Yes, the proportion of students choosing to major in traditional humanities disciplines, such as English and history, dropped from 14 to 7% nationally between 1966 and 2012 (Zuckerman and Ehrenberg 2009). But while this figure has been heavily cited, it is often misinterpreted in the absence of several contextual qualifiers.

First, the largest drop in the percentage of humanities majors occurred in the 1970s after an unusual spike during the 1960s (Schmidt 2013; Schuessler 2013; Zuckerman and Ehrenberg 2009). "There is no steady downward spiral," explains Berube. "It is more like the sales of Beatles records — huge in the 60s, then dropping off sharply in the 70s" (Wilson 2013). During this period in the history of higher education, new majors gained popularity, fields traditionally closed to women began to achieve greater gender parity, and, most significantly, the overall number of college students rose dramatically. Students who now choose preprofessional majors with clear career outcomes, such as marketing and health care administration, would likely not have attended college prior to the 1980s (Silver 2013). Finally, there is evidence to suggest that, on average, humanities graduates enjoy an employment rate comparable to that of other graduates (Adams 2015; Terras et al 2013). Conceding that the humanities have "taken their lumps on many fronts recently," Dorfman (2014) observes that their defenders "often respond with appeals to the ways in which the humanities add to the richness of life in nonmonetary ways. That is certainly true, but the humanities have been selling themselves short. In addition to adding invaluable to our culture, humanities majors are a wise financial choice." This means that students like the ones interviewed for this study, who perceive their humanities majors as primarily self-formative and consider their intellectual interests to be ethically enriching "indulgences," miss the potential pragmatism of their educational choices.

Given the available data, it seems likely that changes in humanities enrollment amount not to a crisis, but to a slow sapping of prestige over time on an institutional level. While there is surely negative stigma attached to this phenomenon, the dwindling of prestige itself is romanticized into a rhetorical resource used to both differentiate and elevate the humanities over and above the rest of academia, which, through reverse stigma, is cast as overly and overtly market-driven. As the humanities resist becoming a smaller part of a much bigger entity, the seeming need for legitimation becomes increasingly pronounced (Wilson 2013). This study offers an initial consideration of how undergraduate humanities majors react to this

ongoing, and often noisy, quest for legitimacy. We ask two interconnected questions: Given the dominant public view that the humanities are in a state of ongoing crisis and decline, what is the impact of this cultural climate on (1) the social status of humanities majors on one elite campus and (2) how humanities majors think about themselves in relation to peers in STEM fields? Based on iterative, abductive analysis of twenty-nine in-depth, semistructured, personal interviews conducted by URFs, we find that selecting a humanities major on a campus where the majority of undergraduates major in STEM fields has social costs. Yet the students who opt into these majors renegotiate ideologies, practices, and resources in ways that both add meaning to their course work and also create opportunities to establish new hierarchies over their STEM peers. Navigating these problematic situations in which their status is threatened enables the social production and personal aesthetic experience of authenticity. These findings add a new evidentiary basis to theory on stigma allure and, in doing so, underscore how the concept of stigma, in stretching to accommodate positive dimensions and the travails of self-chosen identity projects, now more meaningfully accounts for agency, temporality, intersectionality, and culture. Ultimately we demonstrate that, when rhetorics of crisis collide with the late modern quest for authenticity, voluntary stigma can become a powerful, if unwieldy, resource.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This article draws on and contributes to ongoing symbolic interactionist inquiry on the relationship between voluntary stigma and authenticity. Part of this work entails reckoning with the place, or perhaps misplacement, of these kinds of considerations within the broader arena of research on stigma, particularly the place of voluntary stigma and stigma allure. Many scholars who write on positive stigma and stigma reversal note that traditional inquiry focuses on defensive identity-management strategies and interventions used by and on behalf of vulnerable actors and groups to mitigate the harm wrought by stigmatization (Espiritu, 2001; Hughey 2012; Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2014; Reissman 2000). This trajectory traces back to Goffman's (1963:9) formative question — “how does the stigmatized person respond to his situation?” — which continues to generate vibrant inquiry decades later (Link and Phelan 2001).

Research on positive stigma, stigma reversal, and stigma allure grows directly out of as well as departing from the field's traditional focus on defensive stigma management strategies. There are a number of important studies that explore the relationship between resisting a concealable negative stigma, self-perception, identity work, and access to similar others and health services (Buseh 2006; Frable, Platt, and Hoey 1998; Morrison and Whitehead 2005; Saguy and Ward 2011; Thoits 2011, 2016). This study, however, is focused more narrowly on three less common dimensions of stigma resistance: (1) “how the ‘margins’ imagine and construct the ‘mainstream’ in order to assert superiority over it” using a range of offensive, others-directed strategies

including ideological reversal, practice reversal, and resource reversal (Espiritu 2001:416; Lamont 1997; Limón 1982); (2) how managing an involuntary negative stigma can ultimately produce positive outcomes – what Shih (2004:175) describes as an “empowering” as opposed to a “depleting” process (Gray, Mendelsohn, and Omoto 2015; Vioque, Cascone and Valle, 2013); and (3) how individuals and groups who voluntarily opt into stigmatized social positions perceive, cope, and even embrace stigma or, as Blee (2009:229) describes, “transform negative stigmas into a matter of pride” (Hughey 2012; Morison et al. 2016; Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee 2014; Wieggers and Chunn 2015). Scholarship in the first two areas has usefully complicated Goffman’s description of the tendency toward a singular normative order in ways that enable the study of stigma to more meaningfully engage with agency, intersectionality, temporality, and culture. Given these contributions, research in these areas can be recognized as central to the ongoing project of analyzing stigma. But, by virtue of the stigmatized’s own agency in soliciting (as opposed to managing or negotiating) stigma, the third research area described here troubles the very definition of stigma.

Extant scholarship in the third area described above has avoided confrontation with the passages from Goffman that most directly disallow the inclusion of voluntary stigma taken on by actors he describes as “social deviants,” “disaffiliates,” and “restless normals.” In distinguishing deviance from stigmatization, Goffman (1963:146) asserts that these kinds of social actors “are all likely on occasion to find themselves functioning as stigmatized individuals ... It should be apparent, however, that a full consideration of any one of these categories leads beyond, and away from, what is necessary to consider in the analysis of stigma.” This distinction matters to Goffman (1963:147) first and foremost because he “argues that stigmatized persons have enough of their situations in life in common to warrant classifying all these persons together for the purposes of analysis.” This point is of heightened significance due to Goffman’s investment in demonstrating how the very concept of stigma dismantles the assumed logic of the traditional fields of inquiry within sociology, revealing them to be held together by the weak glue of “historic and fortuitous unity” as opposed to the deeper analytic coherence that Goffman (1963:147) seeks to achieve by asserting the importance of drawing on multiple analytic perspectives in each substantive area. Beyond Goffman’s project within the subfields of sociology, however, one might opine that he is invested in a more emotive quality of stigmatization.

While he doesn’t speak explicitly of researchers’ own sympathies in regard to the shame of their stigmatized research participants, he does insist that stigma is “by definition” both harmful and dehumanizing: “We believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances” (1963:5). In sharp contrast, Goffman describes the transgressive delights of those who opt into or choose to brush off stigma. When Goffman initially writes about stigma resistance, he does so to somewhat equivocally underscore the “pivotal fact” of a shared *tendency* toward a singular normative order:

It seems possible for an individual to fail to live up to what we effectively demand of him, and yet be relatively untouched by this failure; insulated by his alienation, protected by identity beliefs of his own, he feels that he is a full-fledged normal human being, and that we are the ones who are not quite human. He bears a stigma but does not seem to be impressed or repentant about doing so. This possibility is celebrated in exemplary tales about Mennonites, Gypsies, shameless scoundrels, and very orthodox Jews. In America at present, however, separate systems of honor seem to be on the decline. The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same belief about identity that we do. (1963:6)

By choosing to describe the scoundrel as “shameless” and the Jew as “very Orthodox,” Goffman highlights the role of volition, choice, and agency in how these actors encounter stigma to show how far one must go out into the extreme margins “at present” to find actors eager to depart from society’s normative expectations. Many find this to be less true today (Thornton 1996; Vannini and Williams 2009; Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003).

Later in the text he more directly considers “disaffiliates” who “act irregularly and somewhat rebelliously in connection with our basic institutions” (1963:143). It is important to note that Goffman resists the very premise of the study of deviance, deriding it as one of a set of “categories of persons who are created by students of society, and then studied by them” — the exact opposite of how Goffman conceives of the pure analytic coherence of stigma (Hacking 2004:297). Nonetheless he considers and rejects the place of these kinds of social actors in his framework, arguing that “these are folks who are considered to be engaged in some kind of collective denial of the social order. . . they represent failures in the motivational schemes of society” (1963:144). Goffman further marks the distinction between those who are stigmatized and those who choose to opt out of the social order out of pride or ostentatiousness. “Social deviants,” he observes, “flaunt their refusal to accept their place” and “often feel that they are not merely equal to but better than normals” (1963:145).

Taking these distinctions seriously highlights the many differences between communities that engage in positive stigma and stigma reversal and those that instead engage in voluntary stigma and stigma allure. If we examine the subcultures from which research on voluntary stigma and stigma allure has been generated — including freegans, activist white racists, and activist white antiracists — we can see Goffman’s flaunting and sense of superiority in play. Stigma, for these relatively privileged actors, is a point of pride, an engine of authenticity, and an opportunity for meaningful resistance and identity formation. This fact alone forces a revisit of Goffman’s assertion that research in these areas leads “beyond, and away from, what is necessary” (1963:146). If inquiries into voluntary stigma and stigma allure at first seemed to go “beyond and away” from what was deemed necessary for the study of stigma, this line of inquiry now reveals a powerful social dynamic in its own right, one that has great potential to shed light on how members of relatively empowered social groups seek fulfillment, meaning, and self-affirmation against a manufactured backdrop of adversity. As Hughey (2012:238) avers, a research agenda that links

“the sociology of emotions, stigma and authenticity, and reproductions of social orders remains pregnant with possibilities.”

Research into stigma allure in particular has the potential to shed light on the messy relationship between stigma and authenticity in a late modern fractured, yet still restrictive, social order. Our focus on the contested status of humanities majors on an elite university campus adds to inquiry in this area in two ways. First, we show how institutions and actors who put forth rhetorics of crisis co-opt stigma as a cultural resource. Second, we offer a nuanced case study of stigma reversal that details the manifold travails and pleasures of being a humanities major on a campus where the majority of undergraduates major in STEM fields. Examining the many layers of feeling and action in the lives of these dedicated humanities majors reveals their frustration and even, at times, shame. It is clear that the rhetoric of crisis has at least one negative outcome: faced with negative stigmatization, humanities majors tend to react by exaggerating and identifying with the perceived differences between disciplines. These feelings may also play a role in the ongoing decline in the number of humanities majors on the campus where our study took place. Yet in encountering and adamantly rejecting stigma, humanities majors’ access prized educational experiences. In light of these observations, we wonder under what conditions voluntary stigma functions as a kind of risk-taking behavior.

## METHODS AND DATA

This study adopts a student-centered model in which undergraduates, in collaboration with a Ph.D.-holding principal investigator, learn qualitative research methods while also participating in data collection and analysis on a subject of personal relevance. This model applies three closely related approaches to qualitative sociological inquiry that are described as “interactive” (Maxwell 2013), “grounded” (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser and Strauss 1967), and “abductive” (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). These approaches prioritize reciprocity, recursivity, and abduction — or “organic” — theory making, which is defined as “a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence” (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012:167).

Interested undergraduates applied to participate through a competitive selection process. Once they were selected to join the study, thus becoming URFs, they received training in qualitative research methods and ethics and passed the required Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative’s Group 2 training, titled “IRB Required for Nonmedical Research Investigators and Staff” ([https://www.citiprogram.org/citidocuments/catalogs/HSR\\_Catalog.pdf](https://www.citiprogram.org/citidocuments/catalogs/HSR_Catalog.pdf)). They then completed a comprehensive literature review and participated in drafting interview questions. For the duration of the study, the URFs were compensated through a research award.

From September of 2014 to May of 2015, the URFs conducted twenty-nine in-depth, semistructured personal interviews with students enrolled at the same elite

university. Student participants were recruited by the URFs, who primarily relied on extracurricular listservs. Participants were compensated with \$20 gift cards to the campus bookstore. Each interview lasted between thirty and ninety minutes and was complemented by survey data on each participant's GPA, time spent studying per week, major, and departments in which classes had been taken.

During data collection, the URFs transcribed the interviews they conducted and wrote analytic memos designed to help reveal patterns and divergent perspectives over time. The principal investigator also read transcripts as they were completed and wrote analytic memos. During this phase of the study, the research team met regularly to review emerging findings. These discussions focused on the potential meaning of newly identified themes found in multiple interviews and gave the team an opportunity to ruminate on outlying perspectives.

Our simultaneous data collection and analytic induction occurred out over three iterations. In the pilot, the fellows conducted seven interviews that were followed by open coding and analysis by the principal investigator. During open coding, a number of prominent themes emerged, including what we termed "the fuzzie/techie divide," "negative humanities stigma," "humanities stigma reversal," and "positive humanities stigma." Responding to the robust presence of these themes, we added several new interview questions, after which the fellows conducted a second round of interviews. During this stage of data collection, the principal investigator wrote memos for each new interview immediately following transcription. After all the interviews were gathered, two of the fellows participated in selective coding, during which they traced the main themes found during open coding while also actively noting surprising or significant moments outside the scope of the demarcated themes. The fellows also wrote memos for every second-round interview they coded. The initial themes were again found to be robust. While the second round of interviews reinforced our preliminary findings, it also introduced complications that prompted the addition of several more interview questions and inspired a final capstone round of six interviews that helped push the project from selective, strategic coding toward saturation.

Once data collection was complete, the URFs manually traced and color-coded themes revealed in the initial memos and began to write what Maxwell terms "reflective" memos designed to tease out broader implications and ideas, which are developed in the findings section below.

## FINDINGS: HUMANITIES STIGMA

Many of the humanities majors interviewed describe pushing back against negative perceptions of their chosen majors that have manifested as derogatory assumptions about their intelligence. These negative perceptions were, indeed, evident in the responses of the participants who were STEM majors and were primarily rooted in ideas about grading practices and market relevance: these students believe that humanities classes award what they term "easy As" without teaching professionally applicable skills. "There are just some classes that I think are easier to get a good

grade in,” observed a junior engineering and management science double major, “especially if they’re subjective, like humanities classes.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, as one senior history major explained, grades act as “the currency of success.”<sup>3</sup> Within this value system, the perception of humanities classes as easy makes As in these fields seem less valuable than As in disciplines that are perceived to be more challenging. Many of the nonhumanities students interviewed expressed this sentiment. The following statements are representative examples:

I am in creative writing and it’s like, “I must get an A.” In math, a B is a wonderful grade.<sup>4</sup>

An A means more in a problem set [STEM] class than it does in a humanities class because I work harder for my A in math than for my A in most other classes I take.<sup>5</sup>

In my English class, I would have been really disappointed if I hadn’t gotten an A, but in chemistry I am super happy to get a B.<sup>6</sup>

I would be so proud of an A in a chemistry class. An A in a [required, introductory-level, research-based writing and critical thinking class] doesn’t mean as much. Getting an A in chemistry would put me in that upper echelon of students: That’s something to strive for.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note the connection between rigor and reward expressed here. If a class is deemed easy, the A is a necessity as opposed to an accomplishment. These students feel justified in being proud of their academic achievements only if they and their peers recognize that they have risen to “the upper echelon” of students. The perception that the humanities are easy seems to throw the intelligence of these fields’ majors into question.

Given the competitive, accomplishment-driven nature of elite institutions, including our empirical site, which has fewer humanities majors than comparable universities, it is not surprising that the connection between the humanities and easy As negatively impacts the social status of humanities majors and inspires frustration. One senior humanities major explained that she “never felt proud of a grade [she] received in a lecture class.” She went on to note that, in these kinds of learning environments, she actually felt a certain “pressure not to care” that manifested as embarrassment and “shame” around the inclination to “feel really passionate, to go to office hours a lot, and care deeply about the problems the discipline raises.”<sup>8</sup> A senior philosophy and religion double major explained the connection between “easy As” and negated pride in similar terms:

There’s something that bothers me about having some humanities classes be “easy As.” I, to this point, have not come across a humanities class that was an easy A. I think if I were under the impression that “oh, this is a course that everyone gets an A in,” I’d probably just not pay much attention to it. I’d probably go looking for other things. And I think it’s kind of, uh, pushing back pride issues trying to

prove that the humanities are more than just sitting down and getting good grades for saying nonsense over paper.<sup>9</sup>

Despite disagreeing over the existence, or lack thereof, of easy-A classes in the humanities, both students are still susceptible to the negative emotions bound up with “pushing back pride” that this connection produces. Reflecting on the problem of pride in a course with lax grading, a sophomore explained that “it’s hard to distinguish yourself as a great student in one of these kinds of classes.”<sup>10</sup> Another student noted that these kinds of grading practices aren’t “very satisfying.”<sup>11</sup> Even as humanities majors disagree over the connection between their fields and easy As (some humanities majors insist that easy As are a fiction; others confess to having taken easy-A classes), they complain about being denied access to positive feelings of accomplishment and distinction, including satisfaction, pride and, perhaps most importantly, intellectual drive or “passion.”

While the humanities majors interviewed observe that their chosen fields are “devalued” by peers in STEM fields, they forcefully reject the view of the humanities that propels this devaluation. Here is a representative sample of statements that reveal how humanities majors reject negative stigma:

People who are not humanities people don’t value, or think that humanities classes don’t grade harsh enough. I think that’s not true, but I am partial. My friends in computer science say that “it’s way harder to get an A in a computer science class than to get an A in a humanities class,” but I don’t care about grades in that way. I want to engage with the material. Yes, easy A classes exist more in the humanities. I think that’s why people devalue the humanities departments. It’s frustrating, because I am part of the department. I have to consistently justify my courses, my grades, and my merit to people who feel like I am not deserving.<sup>12</sup>

I’ve definitely met a number of people who say they don’t look down on the humanities, but there’s always a little bit of bias in terms of recognizing the value that discussion-based humanities classes bring, in comparison to math and technical classes. I think there’s a need to continue cultivating the value of humanities discussions in math and science situations.<sup>13</sup>

I think that there are some majors that are inherently easier than others. That doesn’t mean that they’re less worthwhile or less rewarding. People make the false conclusion that if they’re an engineering major and you’re not, then they’re smarter than you ... I think it’s unfortunate that the rigor of the course or department equates to how intelligent the person who takes them is. I disagree with that.<sup>14</sup>

People think that humanities degrees are easy. I think those people are crazy.<sup>15</sup>

These statements demonstrate how humanities majors reverse stigma: They “disagree” with the premises upon which their majors are stigmatized and actively work to defend the “value” of their fields and the “merit” of their accomplishments. While prone to experiencing negative emotions, including “frustration,” ultimately they come to embrace a sense of themselves and their fields as more fulfilling and more

intellectually pure. They value engaging with the course material and the problems raised by their fields over and above “caring about grades in that way.” The “that way” in this statement is an implicit reference to the assumed consumerist orientation toward learning of peers in STEM fields. As one senior philosophy major explained, “It [studying the humanities] is a luxury of sorts. But it’s also a kind of luxury that coincides largely with our definition of humanity. It’s not about being able to buy a billion dollar yacht.”<sup>16</sup> By reversing stigma surrounding their intelligence, humanities majors critique their peers in STEM fields for being fixated on grades and future professional earnings — and applaud themselves for having overcome such a market-driven trap.

These students go one step further to challenge the worldview that they feel devalues their intellectual pursuits. They are quick to note their own lack of investment in grades and emphasize their fascination with course material. They delight in discussion-based learning; actively seek out small seminars characterized by “very intensive engagement with the instructor, the other students, and the texts;” and take great pleasure in “the whole idea of writing a brilliant essay that takes hours to craft and changes your life.”<sup>17</sup> “For the humanities classes I’ve taken,” explained one senior, “they are called liberal arts for a reason. It’s still founded on the tradition that believes that these are studies that liberate the individual.”<sup>18</sup> Another senior explicitly situates argument construction in the humanities against what she considers the linearity of knowledge construction in the sciences:

Unlike science, crafting an argument is not linear. You don’t master it and move on. Argument making applies to every aspect of life. You never stop getting good at it. It’s important for ethical life, humans occupying space together . . . it is socially acceptable to be bad at writing. People are comfortable saying I am not good at writing, but I am good at math because being good at math is code for intelligence. Writing is not foregrounded as something important — an art.<sup>19</sup>

As this statement underscores, humanities majors are quick to describe and identify with the characteristics they assume to distinguish their chosen majors. They also strongly identify with these presumed differences. Like members of a marginalized religious sect or activist group, they seem to think of themselves as initiated into something more authentic and more meaningful than their mainstream, market-driven peers. These statements begin to reveal the secret delights of stigma reversal and stigma allure that we suspect help buoy the self-perception of humanities majors, if also further undermining respect between disciplines.

## HUMANITIES STIGMA ALLURE

Sensing that one is being unjustly denied positive feelings of accomplishment does not inevitably produce negative outcomes. For the humanities students interviewed — who appear adept at transforming negative stigma into positive self-image — stigmatization is a two-way street. The act of rebuffing negative perceptions from peers in STEM fields seems to generate cherished feelings of intellectual

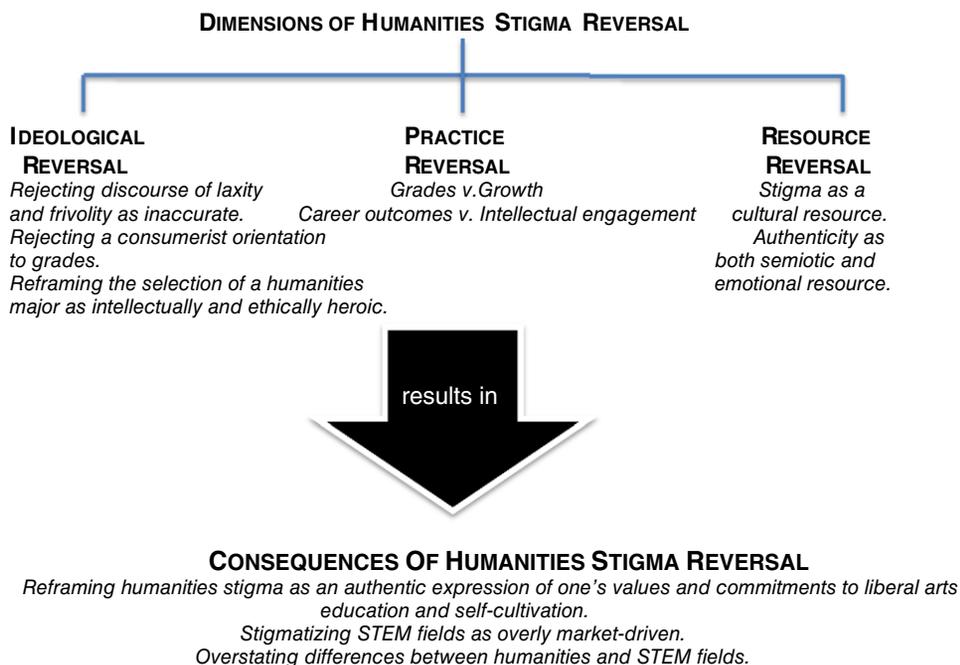


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Model of Reverse Humanities Stigma, adapted from Nguyen, Chen, and Mukherjee's model (2014:1879)

supremacy and personal authenticity (Figure 1). This dynamic supports Shih's (2004:177) claim that "being aware of the negative attitudes and prejudices towards one's group does not inevitably lead one to internalize these judgments." Shih details the importance of stigma's perceived legitimacy: "Individuals who perceive that the stigma has been unjustly forced on them may react with righteous anger and be spurred into action to remove the stigma" (2004:181). The humanities students interviewed find the premises upon which they are stigmatized unjust and react with "righteous anger," but they do not seek to "remove" the stigma. Instead, they embrace it.

In his research on stigma reversal, Kusow (2004:180) notes the centrality of a shared frame of reference in the process of stigmatization: "Stigma as a social object cannot be created when its cultural and structural contexts are disjunctive." When realities misalign, or "mutual incomprehension" prevails, stigma is subject to contestation: "Certain groups or individuals not only disavow dominant perspectives regarding stigma but also impose their own version of stigma on the dominant society" (2004:179). Despite sharing the same physical space of the university, students in the humanities and those in the STEM fields appear separated by a degree of mutual incomprehension.

In his research on “stigma allure,” Hughey (2012:222) observes that “stigma enables, rather than solely constrains, goal attainment.” “Depending on situational context,” he argues, “stigma may serve as an integral mechanism for either utilitarian task performance or advantageous identity formations” (2012:222). Hughey’s research participants, who self-identify as white antiracist activists, “manage self-perceptions of stigma by not only accepting a ‘spoiled’ identity, but by embracing stigma ... as a marking of moral commitment and political authenticity” (2012:220). In much the same way, the students interviewed take pride in choosing an unpopular major. Finding intellectual fulfillment outside of the mainstream, they experience feelings of authenticity that Hughey (2012:237), and many others, find to be a “highly valued ideal in modern Western society” (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Gecas 1994; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Vannini and Williams 2009):

Stigma denotes an authoritative primary experience rooted in a particular institutional setting or situational moments with which few can argue or dispute. Stigmatized selves of this ilk, while spoiled and negatively marked as deviant, can become valuable personas based not only on their infrequency (scarcity is often valued), but from the particular distinctive aura of their individual experiences as deviated from normal and expected routine lives. (Hughey 2012:237)

Hughey’s description of the role of scarcity, “distinctive aura,” and deviation from normative expectations in the creation of authenticity help explain why humanities majors are able to recover from negative stigma. His insights also reveal some of the potential risks accrued by the contemporary university in creating contexts whereby students engage in identity formation and cultivation of emotional well-being through stigma allure. Most relevant for higher education policy is the risk that widespread stigma allure and stigma reversal will routinize overblown perceptions of difference between disciplines, in turn normalizing assumptive differences between students in the humanities and those in STEM fields.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that in situational contexts where rhetorics of crisis prevail, voluntary stigma functions as a kind of self-formative, risk-taking behavior. This kind of identity work has negative consequences for the university, which explicitly values interdisciplinarity and aims to engage the full student body in the ideals of a liberal arts education. Negative humanities stigma invites students in STEM fields to disengage from and devalue humanist inquiry. At the same time, the main consequence of widespread stigma allure among humanities majors is the way in which this dynamic invests perceived differences between the disciplines with added meaning, which then encourages students to overstate these differences and identify with them. Stigma allure plays a role in obscuring for humanities majors both the reality that their peers in STEM fields are equally able to delight in learning for the sake of personal intellectual and ethical growth and that their own chosen fields offer pragmatic professional skills much needed in today’s changing economy. Future research

could usefully examine if and how stigmatization impacts undergraduate enrollment in humanities fields. Those in curriculum design and higher education research might consider policies that require greater introductory-level transdisciplinarity with rigorous grading standards that could decisively set the stage for mutual comprehension between major fields.

While the consequences faced by the university are clear, the causes of humanities stigma among students are murkier. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, one might begin from the premise that stigma management is an adaptive mechanism used to navigate the harm presented by potential social exclusion (Kurzban and Leary 2001). In light of this principle, our findings suggest that, even in situations where the consequences of potential discrimination are minimal, we may still be keenly attuned to perceive and address even the slightest whiff of negative stigmatization in our social environment. Our participants seem drawn to respond to the perception of negative stigmatization, regardless of its role in shaping their life chances. Subculture studies could also illuminate these findings, revealing how college-level humanism, as a form of performative anticonsumerist resistance, takes on a new veneer, albeit geeky, of coolness as youth cultures seek meaning in the midst of pervasive cultural fragmentation, flux, and fluidity (Thornton 1996; Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003). Even the sociology of extreme sports may be relevant here, as today's humanities majors surf stigmatization in the interest of experiencing the freedom found in self-affirmation (Laviolette 2009; Willig 2008). Akin to extreme athletes who find novel self-formative possibilities in playing with risk, it may be that humanities majors play, in serious ways, with stigma. This kind of voluntary stigma play raises a host of new questions about how members of relatively empowered social groups may selectively self-identify with stigmatized social positions in pursuit of fulfillment, meaning, and self-affirmation.

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## NOTES

1. Participant 42. Interviewed by Breanna Della Williams. February 24, 2015. Tresidder Second Floor Lounge.
2. Participant 18. Interviewed by Minkee Kim Sohn. May 1, 2015. Old Union.
3. Participant 5. Interviewed by Clara S. Lewis. October 1, 2014. Campus Writing Center.
4. Participant 41. Interviewed by Breanna Della Williams. May1, 2015. Tresidder Second Floor Lounge.
5. Participant 11. Interviewed by Minkee Kim Sohn. February 19, 2015. Old Union.
6. Participant 16. Interviewed by Erik Holmvik. September 5, 2014. Campus Writing Center.

7. Participant 9. Interviewed by Erik Holmvik. September 5, 2014. Campus Writing Center.
8. Participant 5. Interviewed by Clara S. Lewis. October 1, 2014. Campus Writing Center.
9. Participant 1. Interviewed by Minkee Kim Sohn. October 15, 2015. Campus Food Court.
10. Participant 12. Interviewed by Breanna Della Williams. November 19, 2015. Participant's dorm room.
11. Participant 42. Interviewed by Breanna Della Williams. February 24, 2015. Tresidder Second Floor Lounge.
12. Participant 8. Interviewed by Tamara Chin Loy. February 2015. Campus Writing Center.
13. Participant 17. Interviewed by Tamara Chin Loy. February 26, 2015. Campus Writing Center.
14. Participant 13. Interviewed by Minkee Kim Sohn. February 17, 2015. Old Union.
15. Participant 40. Interviewed by Minkee Kim Sohn. October 20, 2015. Campus Bookstore.
16. Participant 1. Interviewed by Minkee Kim Sohn. October 15, 2015. Campus Food Court.
17. Participant 5. Interviewed by Clara S. Lewis. October 1, 2014. Campus Writing Center.
18. Participant 1. Interviewed by Minkee Kim Sohn. October 15, 2015. Campus Food Court.
19. Participant 5. Interviewed by Clara S. Lewis. October 1, 2014. Campus Writing Center.

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