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## Identifying with the Role of “Other”: “The Pink Triangle Experiment” Revisited

### **Abstract**

The present study examines the impact of a politically-charged symbol on the everyday interactions of student-participants. Auto-ethnographic data gathered by undergraduate students donning a pink triangle pin indicates that participants often became identified with a gay/lesbian identity and were subsequently “othered.” Students’ testimonies highlight how the othering process prompted greater understanding of the struggles of gay men and lesbians, as well as other historically disenfranchised groups. Finally, their writings indicate that the experiment served as an exercise in self-reflection and in some cases, produced sentiments of self-empowerment.

### **Keywords**

experiential learning; gay and lesbian; identity; identity management; stigma; self and society; social oppression

### **Introduction**

Used by Nazis to identify homosexuals in concentration camps during the Holocaust, the pink triangle has since been appropriated and embraced by gay men and lesbians. The display of the symbol now demonstrates alliance with lesbian and gay communities. In this current social and political climate, we wondered how the everyday experiences of college students might be affected if they were to don the pink triangle for an extended amount of time? Specifically, how do self-proclaimed heterosexual participants perceive social interactions when aligning and identifying with the stigmatized role of a sexual “Other”? What are the effects of these reactions on students? Do these experiences reportedly transform sense of self?

To address these questions, we revived “The Pink Triangle Experiment” (Chesler and Zuniga, 1991; Rabow, Stein and Conley, 1999). In the current study, heterosexual students volunteered to publicly display a pink triangle for a period of five weeks. Drawing upon the symbolic interactionist tradition and reviewing Goffman’s (1964) work on stigma, identity management, and the connection to the

self, we set the stage for our analysis. According to participants' auto-ethnographic data, identifying with a stigmatized role often resulted in negative reactions from others. In some instances, fearing their well-being and safety, students felt compelled to temporarily relinquish the role and reveal its "experimental" component. Students claim that, taken together, these experiences had a profound impact on their intellectual and emotional understanding of the everyday plights of gay men and lesbians, other historically disenfranchised groups, and their own sense of selves.

## **Relevant Literature**

### **On Stigma**

Goffman defines stigma as "an attribute that makes [one] different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind...He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1964: 3). One often elaborately works to manage her/his identity away from a discreditable standing. Hence, to Goffman, careful attendance to how others treat us, or how we imagine being treated, provides information required for the work of managing our identities away from a stigmatized role.

This identity management, argued Goffman, is a fundamentally reflexive act, designed to maintain credibility in the presence of others. The reflected appraisals of others encourage one to manage her/his own sense of identity in order to avoid feelings of shame and embarrassment (Goffman, 1959: 12). To achieve this, individuals commonly use the strategy of "passing" (Goffman, 1964). In his words, "because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent" (Goffman, *ibidem*: 74). This entails concealing information about who they are so that stigma(s) is not revealed.

Identity management involves the use of words, deeds, and sign equipment for the work of influencing how others come to conceive of him or her (Goffman, 1959). By donning pink triangle pins and therefore aligning themselves with gay men and lesbians, we argue that, at least within the social and political climate in which this study took place, the pins cast participants into stigmatized roles. Instead of attempts at "passing" and managing the stigma, students publicly displayed allegiance to the group in question and in this sense, temporarily turned Goffman's idea of stigma on its head.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to Goffman's work on identity management, the participants of this study openly identified with a stigmatized role.

### **On Identity Management and the Self**

Identity management perspectives seek to understand the ways in which individuals manage, control, and/or manipulate the information that others may receive through employing strategies and techniques in face-to-face interaction. Several precedents forged in the study of the self and identity lie at the foundation of this orientation. Theories of identity management specify an active agent who is able to anticipate and observe her/his image in the eyes of another. This image provides the agent with information to act back on her - or himself in order to shape that image. This feature derives from Charles Cooley (1902) and George H. Mead (1934), who deem all interactions maintain a reflexive component; we are all examining ourselves from the standpoint of another. In their models specifying the social basis of self, Cooley and Mead propose reflexivity as an indispensable process for its

formation. For each, reflexivity denotes the basic process of looking back at one's self from others' points of view.

Each author implies that one's own sense of identity is constructed by seeing one's self from the meanings and definitions that another holds. Cooley (1922) goes further than Mead in suggesting that the reflexive process may lead one to *feel* their own image to be inadequate, and thus provide fertile ground for conscious attempts to transform it. When identifying with an "inadequate" or stigmatized role, participants in our study overwhelmingly reported negative reactions from others. In turn, these served as appraisals of the self, both as one who situationally (and experimentally) identifies with gay men and lesbians, as well as the "authentic", heterosexual individual.

To analyze appraisals on this latter self, we employed the work of Janet Helms (1992). In her piece on racism and White privilege, Helms (*ibidem*) describes the "stage" whereby White individuals grasp the power and scope of their White privilege. In her words, this "stage requires one to assume personal responsibility for racism and to understand one's role in perpetuating it. Perhaps more importantly however, it requires the person to face the feelings of guilt, anger, and anxiety that were pushed out of awareness during earlier stages..." (Helms, *ibidem*: 74). While participants of "The Pink Triangle Experiment" did not proceed through developmental stages *per se*,<sup>ii</sup> our findings are in accord with Helms' in that, by assuming the role of a sexual "Other", students were engaged in an accelerated, very emotion laden process of self reflection that resulted in the recognition of their own social privilege, as well as the insulation that both perpetuates and results from it.

### **Previous Versions of "The Pink Triangle Experiment"**

The current experiment is derived from previous versions of "The Pink Triangle Experiment". The first study originated with Chesler and Zuniga (1991), whereby 25 students were selected to wear the pink triangle symbol for a period of 24 hours. The authors concluded that students endured both internal and external conflicts. Additionally, as a pedagogical contribution, the authors illuminated the ways in which the exercise and subsequent classroom discussions could be utilized to mediate group conflict and foster group resolution. In this present study, we focus less on the potentials of experiential learning and more on the reported effects on the self.

The Chesler and Zuniga study was modified by Rabow, Stein, and Conley (1999) who implemented the experiment in a larger classroom setting and requested that their upper-division social psychology students wear the pink triangle for a duration of 48 hours. Among a total of 103 students, over one-fourth declined to wear the pin (Rabow et al., *ibidem*: 488). Those choosing to partake in the project were required to keep daily notes and write final papers documenting their experiences. Those writings served as the data for the study.

Using Goffman (1964) and Helms (1990) to frame their analyses, Rabow et al. demonstrated the ways in which the experiment influenced students' identity development. They revealed four distinct outcomes:

- 1) Heterosexual students became aware of their "privilege of unawareness" (Rabow et al., 1999: 505),
- 2) Several students displayed a greater consciousness of the ways in which they may be complicit with discrimination,
- 3) Others displayed "attitudinal and behavioral shifts" and then "applied and integrated their new social status into other facets of their overall identity" (Rabow et al., *ibidem*: 506), and 4) A handful of students maintained their positions of "outright

condemnation and rejection” of gay rights (Rabow et al., *ibidem*: 506). With regard to the latter point, the authors elaborate, “White gay and lesbian students had little influence upon White students who were religious, and gay and lesbian students of color had little influence on heterosexual students of color” (Rabow et al., *ibidem*: 506).

Several of the present findings mirror those of Rabow et al. (1999), particularly those self-reflective insights revealing heterosexual privilege. However, by applying the theoretical frameworks of early symbolic interactionists, we shift the discussion to illustrate how the reactions of others provided subjects with a mirror unto the self. Whereas Rabow et al. (1999) presented their data to roughly correspond to specific analytic time frames, we organize our findings according to participants’ perceived reactions to the stigmatized role and the resulting effects on their selves. Finally, our data indicate that, unlike those in Rabow et al. (1999), all participants in this study demonstrated changed attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, the ability to bridge various oppressions, and greater sentiments of self-empowerment.

## Methods

In the current study, undergraduate students in an upper-division sociology class were given several options for a class project. For one of the options, students were asked to wear a pink triangle. Of seventy students, only two White women and two Latinas elected to participate in this project.<sup>iii;iv</sup> Though all four participants maintained the statuses of “student” and “woman,” their other positionalities varied from each other. Consequently, these differing positionalities necessarily impacted what they each garnered from the experiment and hence, multiple effects on selves resulted.

The four students choosing the pink triangle option donned the pink triangle, and were instructed to wear the pin at all times for a duration of *five weeks*. Extending the length of the original exercise could allow students to have various and multiple interactions with others and thus more fully identify with the stigmatized role. Additionally, the extended engagement might lessen reactive effects and superficial reflections. Students were told that, if at any time their safety or well-being were in jeopardy, they could withdraw from the experiment, without penalty.

The four participants were also required to document their experiences by writing weekly fieldnotes. At the end of the term, they compiled their notes as part of an auto-ethnography.<sup>v</sup> Their writings were thus treated as data and coded accordingly. Students’ projects were subjected to two phases of coding:

1) open coding, whereby the data was read line-by-line to “identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995: 143) and

2) focused coding, whereby line-by-line analysis was based on themes of particular interest that have been identified for further investigation (Emerson et al., *ibidem*). By systematically coding students’ writing, loosely related incidents and thematic threads were compiled and woven together to produce a coherent analysis.

## Data and Analysis

In what follows, we outline participants’ experiences using various excerpts of their own words. We begin with students’ reports on their interactions while wearing the pink triangle symbol. It was during these occurrences when students perceived

and reported “Othering,” at times so extreme that some felt the need to temporarily relinquish the stigmatized role. Then, armed with these various encounters, participants go on to bridge the stigma they reportedly endured during the experiment with that of other historically disenfranchised groups. Finally, they utilized the activity as a lens upon themselves, ultimately offering reflective and often, self-empowering accounts.

### **Perceiving and Reporting Stigma**

During the course of the experiment, participants reported confrontations that often challenged their will to continue forward with the project.<sup>vi</sup> Most common among these were mundane encounters whereby students were not directly challenged, but nonetheless *perceived* negative reactions from strangers. Several students cited that, through these instances, they immediately sensed the stigma attached to the pink triangle symbol. As one Latina respondent recounted: „My first day wearing it I felt very insecure and a little silly at times thinking about this little piece of foam paper that was going to change many things about me...I felt like people were staring at me, I was very paranoid”. Another Latina participant described a similar response: „When I did wear it, I saw people staring at me and sometimes giving me disgusting looks. I didn’t know who they were, but I was still embarrassed by their looks and it lowered my self-esteem, because I felt as if I wasn’t as good as them. Even though I didn’t believe they were better than me, I felt intense rejection”. Though understood to be materially insignificant, the “little piece of foam paper” signified a particular, often stigmatized, identity to these students and many of those with whom they came into contact. Interestingly, stigma attached not so much to presenting oneself as gay, but as publicly proclaiming allegiance to a stigmatized group. This speaks to the power of a symbol, as well as the consequences of the presentation of self. These respondents were instantly thwarted with self-described feelings of scrutiny and paranoia.

In the following example, the interaction occurred with a stranger, but was purposeful, not mundane. Once again, though the gay/lesbian identity was not explicitly made clear, the student sensed rejection as a result of the displayed symbol. The White respondent described her encounter with a potential employer and the perceived negative reaction that followed:

I...walk[ed] into a store, wearing the triangle and asked for an application for employment...The lady approached the register and glanced noticeably at my pin labeled ‘Gay Pride’ and responded, ‘No, we’re not hiring.’ I asked, ‘You guys aren’t hiring for summer help?’ She then said, ‘We are out of applications.’ The way she looked at my pin and then answered my question made me feel like I was not good enough, not normal enough to work there. I knew that society was ignorant and intolerable towards homosexuality, but I never got the chance to experience it firsthand...I felt rejected for a moment and wished that I could of done something or said something back to her.

As in the examples above, it remains to be seen if the potential employer was negatively reacting to the student as a result of the reading of the pin. However, it is clear that the student self-reported feelings of rejection. In her own words, she was made to feel as if she was “not good enough” and “not normal enough” to be employed at this particular establishment. Thus, we can conclude that, at the very least, the pin-wearing and self-identification with the sexual “Other” had profound significance for this participant.

## Relinquishing the Stigmatized Identity

In other instances, pejorative responses were much more explicit. On a few occasions, students sensed threat and/or danger and proceeded to subvert the frame or “definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1974: 155) by revealing that the pin-wearing was merely part of a school assignment. By conceding the experimental component of the stigmatized identity, these students temporarily engaged in “breaking frame.” One of the White participants described such an incident:

One time I was with my friend, walking through the mall and I had my pin. She looked at me and said, ‘Oh, you have to wear that for school?’ I replied and answered, ‘Yeah, why?’ In a tone I didn’t care for she said, ‘That’s cool, just don’t wear that around me.’ I felt once again shot down...

Here, upon being asked about “the pin”, the participant acknowledged that she need only wear the symbol ‘for school.’ In response, her friend requested that she not ‘wear that around me.’ By acknowledging the “school” aspect of the pin-wearing, the participant drew on the temporariness of her identification with the role of the “Other” and therefore, “breaks frame”. However, she was not immune to the stigma, feeling “once again shot down.”

In another example, a Latina participant was met with a particularly violent reaction from a group of strangers; as a result, she broke “frame” to maintain her safety. The incident took place in her dormitory, wherein a group of men, all residents of her dorm, confronted her. She described the event in detail:

Finally, they stopped me and unexpectedly pushed me. ‘Hey girl, stand up for your rights now!’ exclaimed one of the guys, after pushing me with enough force for me to fall to the ground. Immediately, I grew afraid that they would beat me up. I remember anxiously looking around, hoping that other students were nearby, but there was none...I boldly asked them why they had pushed me down. One of the guys answered, ‘Because you have the dumb triangle on you.’ I asked them what about my pink triangle has offended them and the same guy who answered before said, ‘Because you’re gay and fags or fagettes are stupid and shouldn’t be walking around, all proud about it!’ In all honesty, I told them that I wasn’t gay and that I was wearing it for a class experiment. It was a defense for me to keep away from further harm, both physical and emotional.

Evaluating the pin as a “dumb triangle” and using pejoratives such as “fags” and “fagettes”, it was apparent that these men targeted the student because of the gay identification signified by the pin. In attempts to protect herself, the student “breaks frame” and asserted her heterosexual identity through her admission of wearing the pin for a “class experiment.” Though she managed to escape the situation, clearly “both physical and emotional” harm was inflicted upon her.

To participants’ credit, many acknowledged the privilege to “break frame” and avoid the more dire consequences facing those who do and/or can not cast off the stigma associated with a gay-identified role. The ability to move back and forth between roles jarred participants into a greater awareness about the everyday struggles of gay men and lesbians, as well as the challenges of the “coming out” process. The aforementioned student confronted by her friend during an excursion to the mall, reflects:

No wonder it is so hard for homosexuals to come out to their parents and friends. Telling those who mean the most to you something that serious

must be difficult. I saw it in my own way when my friend made that comment...The sad part is that mine was just an experiment, others go through this for real.

In another example:

[A Latina student has just been confronted by a friend that disapproves of her wearing the pink triangle pin.]

For a moment, I almost didn't want to sacrifice our friendship for a class experiment. It made me think of how scared it must be for homosexuals to tell their friends and family that their sexual preference was of the same sex. I thought of how difficult it must be for them to withstand threats of losing friendships or ruining family relationships. I thought of how it isn't a joke to them, but their reality.

These participants experienced being rejected by a close friend on the basis of identity. In these instances, they could detect the enormous "threat" and "sacrifice" endured by gay men and lesbians, particularly with regard to relationships with "their parents and friends". And once again, they recognized that their own experience, however painful, was part and parcel of an "experiment" and that indeed, "others go through this for real".

### **Bridging Oppressions**

The participants' daily experiences and understandings garnered during this experiment illuminated some of the everyday struggles endured by gay-identified individuals. Additionally, their responses suggested that a greater sense of empathy was not only fostered toward gay men and lesbians, but other historically disenfranchised groups, as well. Several participants began acknowledging how various forms of oppression overlap. Consider the following excerpt taken from the notes of a White participant:

I work at the bookstore on campus and as a cashier I always get a few rude customers no matter what but because I was wearing the triangle, I assumed that it was because of that. I know that this probably is not true but I realized that must be what a lot of people of color or diversity feel on a daily basis...I also realized that I felt the need to do my job better, to greet the customers with more enthusiasms [*sic*], and to be extra helpful as I might be looked at as being gay.

In this instance, the student reflected how the wearing of the pink triangle and her assumed gay identity might be the source of customers' rudeness. Accordingly, she felt the need to counteract her presumed stigma by doing the "job better", acting more enthusiastically, and being "extra helpful". She related this with experiences of "people of color or diversity", recognizing that this sense of forced compensation might be something they "feel on a daily basis."

Such lived experiences no doubt facilitated students' ability to bridge various oppressions. Linking the homophobia and heterosexism she endured during the experiment with racism, the same student reflected:

I cannot honestly say that I am sad the experiment is over. I was quite relieved to take off the pin and to not fear what the day was going to be like every morning. I hate to think that people cannot escape that sometimes. Someone in class said that you can hide the fact that you're gay or that

you're Jewish but you can't hide the color of your skin. I think that is so true and I have a lot more respect for those people of color.

Because of the pink triangle pin, this particular student feared "what the day was going to be like every morning". The uncertainties she faced by identifying with a stigmatized "Other" fostered her understanding of the differential treatment experienced by "people of color." As a result, she claimed to have developed not only a greater sense of empathy toward those who endure the effects of racism, but "a lot more respect" toward them, as well.

In the following example, we witness how a Latina participant not only acknowledged the intersection between oppressions, but also managed to convey this connection to others:

We were playing a game together...and one of my kids that I have been tutoring for about a year asked me what [the pink triangle] was about. I told them that it was for gay rights; they giggled and laughed then asked well what do you mean. I told them a little story to help them understand. I told them about the slaves and asked them if they know how they were treated and I also asked them how they felt about it. They told me that they were treated bad and unfair and they were not treated like they would want to be treated...we talked about treating people well and getting to know them before we decide not to like them. I told them about how gays had to wear this in the Holocaust and how I am standing up and saying that I won't let people treat gay men and women bad...They said that were good and they thinking it was a good idea.

This participant utilized her students' inquiries for a teachable moment. By drawing upon the kids' prior knowledge of slavery and the "bad" and "unfair" treatment slaves endured, she bridged the experiences of two disenfranchised groups. The participant went on to take a stand and declared that she "won't let people treat gay men and women bad". Seemingly making the connection, the kids transformed their initial giggles into nods of agreement, as they noted that they thought this was "a good idea".

Finally, in some instances, the bridging of oppressions was part of a self-reflective activity. In this regard, learning empathy became a dialectical process with learning about oneself. Several respondents linked the "outsider" status of a gay identity with the "outsider" status(es) located within their own positionality. One Latina student proceeded to link the struggles she faced as gay-identified to her own personal experiences as an individual diagnosed with a learning disability. In her words:

I felt as if I needed this experience to really open up and be honest with myself. Well it is nothing having to do with homosexuality, but rather my learning disability. Ever since I was diagnosed I have felt as though I am less capable of making the difference in others and my own life. I am dyslexic...Since I found out that I do indeed have a learning disability I have felt less of a person...I have felt like I'm different...Even though people cannot see that I have disability, I still feel like they know.

Acknowledging that the experiment permitted her to "really open up" and "be honest" with herself, this participant disclosed that, upon being identified as "dyslexic", she felt "less capable", "less of a person", and "different." Embedded in her response lies overlap; this student reported that wearing the pink triangle pin and subsequently subjecting herself to public scrutiny tapped into many of the same emotional currents she had about her own diagnosis. participant.



## Reflections on the Self and a Means to Empowerment

As the last example illustrated, the bridging of oppressions was often part of a self-reflective activity. In this regard, encounters with others fostered learning about oneself. Several students claimed that experiences with friends and family seemed to be most influential, particularly as students juxtaposed loved ones' reactions prior to and then during the course of the experiment. Reflecting on these interactions often revealed previously taken for granted assumptions. Note the following excerpt:

[Upon learning the meaning of the pink triangle symbol, a White participant's friend responds, 'As long as you don't try anything funny on me or something, okay?']

If I was to be alone in a room with a girl who was openly gay, I would feel uncomfortable. I would be worried they would try something funny on me. But in that moment, I was on the other side experiencing what the gay people must go through with their close friends all the time. I actually felt pissed off at the fact that [my friend] did not just accept me. She accepted me and was normal around me before, why is this any different? For once the tables were turned and I was the outsider feeling crappy because someone feels awkward in my presence.

In this particular interaction, the student noted "feeling crappy" and sensed that she had triggered her friend to feel "awkward in [her] presence". Yet, of particular importance, we witness that a sense of empathy is fostered. Admitting her own prior misgivings of lesbians, this student, having experienced being on "the other side," acknowledged her own outrage. She is "pissed off" at her friend, but in that "the tables were turned", she also recognized her own prior assumptions.

Very much related, the experiment served as a gateway for students to understand their own social privilege. In the following example, a White student compared "Others'" experiences vis-à-vis those of her own. She reflected:

I knew that I was just doing an experiment, but I soon realized that the experiment was more than just getting responses. It was about learning, feeling, and walking in the shoes of someone else. Experiencing firsthand what occurs when you are labeled as an outsider. I am used to always being on the inside. As a white female, I feel I have things pretty well off. For once, I was placed on the outside and I hated it.

Accustomed to "being on the inside" and allotted the privileges that accompany this status, this participant conceded that, by wearing the pink triangle pin, she was better able to comprehend "firsthand" the experiences of "an outsider." Inherent in this understanding was the recognition of social privilege. In having to surrender some of this privilege, she admitted, "For once, I was placed on the outside and I hated it". By assuming the identity of one on the "outside", this student reflected on her own position within.

Through participation in this experiment, the same student tapped into other uncharted territories of the self. For her, this five-week glance revealed a latent homophobia, thus challenging her notion of political tolerance. The following excerpt illustrates this understanding:

I learned that deep down inside of me I had issues with homosexuals. I told myself all the time that homosexuality is not a problem and that I don't care if someone is gay or not. However, like most people do, I lied to myself. I told myself that to feel better about 'me' deep down. I am not okay with it and I learned that...This experiment enabled me to take a deeper look at

myself. Deep down I am a kind person, but some of the comments I make, stereotypes I apply and actions I commit can be fixed.

Though meant to expose the lived reality of an “Other”, the experiment also pushed this particular participant to “take a deeper look” at herself. Reflecting upon her exploration, she confessed that she is “not okay” with many of her words and actions and admitted to subscribing to a naïve liberalism. Armed with this powerful critical consciousness, she was convinced that she can dedicate herself to change; in a hopeful tone, she voiced that her interactions with “Others” “can be fixed”.

By publicly proclaiming to identify with a stigmatized role, participants of this experiment were offered a brief glimpse of “Others” lived realities. Upon reflecting on their encounters, all participants acknowledged to *personally* benefiting a great deal from the experience; the project proved to be a tool for self-empowerment. For several students, participation in this experiment involved the discovery of previously untapped courage. The experiment empowered one of the White women to convey unspoken feelings and thoughts to her lesbian mother. She explained in more detail:

It wasn't until recently that I found the courage in myself, maybe because of wearing the triangle, to tell [my mom] what really went on and how much of a *positive* impact she has had on my life by coming out. Not many people can understand this and they don't have to. So long as my mom understands that my love for her knows no bounds that is all that matters.

For other participants, the project proved to be a means of self-affirmation. The student involved in the aforementioned violent encounter elaborated on her experience:

I knew that I didn't want this incident to stop me from continuing with the experiment and that I had to keep pushing. I couldn't allow myself to quit, because I was too scared. What kind of courage would that be? So I decided to push on and keep wearing [the pink triangle]. I chose to wear it for others who have been persecuted as I was that night. I wore for those who got back up and kept to their beliefs, standing up for what is right in their heart.

Similarly, for the student with dyslexia, wearing the pink triangle pin summoned the confidence that she had lacked since her diagnosis. In her words:

Wearing the triangle made me feel like I am a normal person that I can have the courage just like anyone else. I felt like by standing up and saying to everyone and especially myself I am brave and normal like everyone else I am a real person with feeling and a life like all of you and I can do this cause I am able to believe in myself. I think that wearing the triangle was the greatest way for me to get my courage back...It's true when my professor said, 'If you tell a child they are loved and are capable of making it that's all they need to succeed in life' this is what he taught me about my life and wearing the pink triangle and standing up for who I am inside, making a difference in my life is what came of this experience, and I am grateful for that.

## Conclusion and Implications

In this paper we have outlined the potentially transformative effects of “The Pink Triangle Experiment” on its participants. Students reported that, by donning a pink triangle pin, a symbol of gay men's and lesbians' struggles, they became associated

with a specific stigmatized identity and were subsequently othered. Additionally, participants' indicated that, on a few occasions, this othering process became overtly threatening and/or dangerous, whereby they felt compelled to "break frame". Students claimed that the culmination of these experiences allowed them to gain the ability to be empathetic toward and have sympathy for those in gay and lesbian communities. Moreover, participants utilized their experiences to further their understandings of other historically disenfranchised groups. Finally, through their testimonies, we witnessed how ultimately, the experiment served as a mirror of sorts, whereby participants were effectively able to reflect on their own selves, positionalities, and social privilege.

Though illuminating, this examination has limitations. Additional research should be conducted to assess the generalizability of the outcomes garnered. In particular, future studies should encompass a larger, more diverse sample of students. Further exploration, perhaps in the form of follow-up interviews, is necessary to assess the enduring effects of the experiment. For example, do students continue to utilize the empathetic lens developed during the course of their participation? Did this sense of sympathy that developed and the ability to identify with a sexual "Other" provide a springboard for service as a pro-active ally for gay and lesbian communities? These are all questions best addressed by longitudinal comparisons, as well as additional types of data.

Despite these issues, those participating in "The Pink Triangle Experiment" contended that the exercise was a very illuminating and self-empowering experience. This study draws from a long tradition of experiential education, whereby students are provided the opportunity to engage in experiments in the field so as to further their intellectual and moral understandings of social problems. Students' testimonies demonstrated the potential merits of experiential education as a viable and valuable pedagogical tool. As one student noted, "I...learned that it is through experiments like these that we get the chance to put our lives on halt and think about someone else besides ourselves". Indeed, this experiment demanded active participation, thereby compelling them to "think about someone else" and consequently, garner empathy for stigmatized "Others". At the same time however, their selves were *not* put "on halt" but rather, engaged in a reflexive, transformative process.

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## Endnotes

- i This is not to say that participants did not lapse into and out of their stigmatized role (see below).
- ii Many psychological studies view identity as developing in distinct stages (with regard to racial identity, see, for example, Aboud, 1987; Hughes, 1997; Katz, 1987). We take the position here that the process is dynamic and elusive, dependent on social milieu and interactional context. Additional examples featuring this approach have been written on racial identity (see among many, Conzen et al., 1992; Lopez and Espiritu, 1990; Nagel, 1994), gender identity (among many, Ely, 1995; Thorne, 1993; West and Zimmerman, 1987), and sexual identity (among many, D'Augelli, 1994; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995).
- iii No negative sanctions were imposed on those opting not to participate.
- iv Though not the subject of this paper, we find it interesting (and most likely not mere coincidence) that the students electing to partake in the experiment were all women. Many have made a connection between

hegemonic masculinity, the marginalization of gay men, and homophobia (c.f. Brod and Kaufman 1987; Connell 1990; Kimmel 1994).

v Michael Clarke (1975) once stated that the method in ethnography is the ethnographer. In recent years, especially as ethnographic authority has been called into question (c.f. Clifford and Marcus 1996; Clifford 1998; Denzin 1996), the use of personal narratives and/or personally reflective accounts of fieldwork have become more widespread.

vi Though rare, it is important to note that, upon engaging in the activity, some students received affirming comments and support from others. In three cases, participants were lauded for publicly displaying the pink triangle and “standing up for something”. Additionally, their pin-wearing spawned questions regarding the symbol’s meaning and significance, thus often resulting in constructive dialogue and further affirmation. Participants claimed that these few occasions and gestures of support “meant so much” to them.

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